

Statement of William Mitchell Concerning the Recent Air Accidents

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I have been asked from all parts of the country to give my opinion about the reasons for the frightful aeronautical accidents and loss of life, equipment and treasure that has occurred during the last few days. This statement therefore is given out publicly by me after mature deliberation and after a sufficient time has elapsed since the terrible accidents to our naval aircraft, to find out something about what happened.

My opinion is as follows:

These accidents are the direct result of the incompetency, criminal negligence and almost treasonable administration of the national defense by the Navy and War departments. In their attempts to keep down the development of aviation into an independent department, separate from the Army and Navy and handled by aeronautical experts, and to maintain the existing systems, they have gone to the utmost lengths to carry their point. All aviation policies, schemes and systems are dictated by the non-flying officers of the Army or Navy who know practically nothing about it. The lives of the airmen are being used merely as pawns in their hands.

The great Congress of the United States, that makes laws for the organization and use of our air, land and water forces, is treated by these two departments as if it were an organization created for their benefit, to which evidence of any kind, whether true or not, can be given without restraint. Officers and agents sent by the War and Navy departments to Congress have almost always given incomplete, misleading or false information about aeronautics, which either they knew to be false when given or was the result of such gross ignorance of the question that they should not be allowed to appear before a legislative body.

The airmen themselves are bluffed and bulldozed so that they dare not tell the truth in the majority of cases, knowing full well that if they do, they will be deprived of their future career, sent to the most out-of-the-way places to prevent their telling the truth and deprived of any chance for advancement unless they subscribe to the dictates of their non-flying bureaucratic superiors. These either distort facts or openly tell falsehoods about aviation to the people and to the Congress.

Both the War and Navy departments maintain public propaganda agencies which are supposed to publish truthful facts about our national defense to the American people. These departments, remember, are supported by the taxes of the people and were created for the purpose of protecting us from invasion from abroad and from domestic disturbances from within. What has actually happened in these departments is that they have formed a sort of a union to perpetuate their own existence, largely irrespective of the public welfare—and acting, as we might say about a commercial organization that had entire control of a public necessity, "as an illegal combination in restraint of trade."

The conduct of affairs by these two departments, as far as aviation is concerned, has been so disgusting in the last few years as to make any self-respecting person ashamed of the cloth he

wears. Were it not for the great patriotism of our air officers and their absolute confidence in the institutions of the United States, knowing that sooner or later existing conditions would be changed, I doubt if one of them would remain with the colors—certainly not, if he were a real man.

The story is a long one, beginning practically with the inception of aviation in this country, so I shall mention only a few things in connection with the disgraceful performances which have occurred this summer.

Seeing no progress in our efforts, which had been continued for years, to convince or even seriously interest the governing bodies of the War and Navy departments to better our aeronautical conditions, we were stirred to further action by the killing of Lieut. Pierson and Capt. Skeel in the dilapidated racing airplanes, during last October's air meet. This was caused by an arrangement between the Navy and Army, that the Navy should take the racers one year and the Army should take them in the next year, thereby equalizing propaganda, not service. Instead of building new airplanes, our men were given the old crates to fly at those terrific speeds. Of course, they came to pieces as they were designed for only one rate two years before. This was done in spite of the fact that we had sufficient money to build new ships according to entirely advanced patterns and new safety factors. We, in the air fraternity, then and there decided to put the issue squarely up to Congress and the people. We received an immediate response from the people and the Congress, because they saw the right of our proposition, which was to make a single department of national defense with sub-secretaries for the land, the air and the water, each to have an equal voice in our national defense system. The general scheme, by the way, has been adopted by practically every civilized country in the world. Had this measure reached the floor of the House of Representatives last winter, it probably would have passed by a large majority.

Congress also provided that not less than \$50,000 out of monies already appropriated, could be spent for the aerial bombardment of battleships and shipping board vessels while under their own steam and moving, so as to set at rest any doubt of aircraft's ability to destroy and sink any seacraft which floats on the water.

It was evidence then that the American people were awakening to the necessity for a change and that if this change were to be prevented by the War and Navy departments, that they must act at once. What was the result? Steam was gotten up by the Navy on the one hand to disprove and deprecate the value of air power and show the value of the surface vessels and battleships, and on the part of the Army to fool the public as to the value of anti-aircraft, cannon and machine guns. Any operations by the air service to sink the ships, as provided for by the law of the land, were stopped. Now, what have the Army and Navy done to show that the existing obsolete systems should be maintained?

First, the great Pacific naval maneuvers—the main features of these were the assembling of a fleet of some 148 surface vessels in the Pacific, the parade up our Pacific coast and entrance into San Francisco Harbor and then the trip to Honolulu. Press representatives and Congressional committees galore were handled, fed and entertained according to the good old Navy's propaganda system. It was heralded that the Navy had taken the Hawaiian Islands. Now, let us see what actually would have happened had there been war. Suppose that we had been at war with a Pacific power and this fleet of surface vessels had been in San Francisco Harbor. Instantly the Pacific power's submarines would have planted all entrances to the harbor with mines, would have covered all the approaches with these death-dealing engines. If the surface vessels ever got through these, the whole Pacific Ocean would be districted off into

squares and to each of these districts submarines would be assigned for the purpose of tracking the surface ships and attacking them. These ships would be under constant attack by gun fire from the submarines, that can carry any size cannon and use projectiles containing gas, high explosives or armor piercing, they use under-water torpedoes which not only will hit the side of the ships but will hit their bottom, and can produce gas clouds which will completely envelop any fleet.

If any vessels of the fleet survived the submarine attacks, crossed the sea and came within hundreds of miles of the hostile coast, they would be sent to the bottom forthwith, by aircraft. If the Pacific maneuvers showed anything conclusively, it was that aircraft acting from land bases can destroy any surface fleet, coming within its radius of operations. This already had been amply proved by our bombardment tests in 1921. As far as Honolulu is concerned, it is not a position of decisive influence in the control of the Pacific. Its value consists in being an excellent submarine base to act against hostile surface seacraft and submarines. The control position of the Pacific is our own territory of Alaska and the peninsula of Kamchatka opposite. It is reported that from fifty million to eighty million dollars has been spent just for this Pacific parade of our Navy—more properly, the vessels belonging to the United States, because in fact it is not a Navy in the modern conception of the term. What would this amount, applied to the development of airplanes and submarines, have meant?

Next, to get publicity and make a note about what it was doing with aircraft, this so-called Hawaiian flight was arranged for. Even if it had been made successfully to Honolulu, it would have meant little, either commercially or strategically, compared to what a flight to Europe or Asia would. Three airplanes were built to participate in it. These showed nothing novel in design and were untried for this kind of work. One never got away from the Pacific coast, another flew a few miles out and was forced to land in the water, and one was lost on account of being out of gas, somewhere on the high seas. Patrol vessels were stationed every 200 miles, a distance entirely too far apart for an experimental flight of this kind, with such primitive flying machines as the PN-9s are. Double or triple this number of vessels should have been there, instead of joyriding around the Antipodes. As it was, when these slow moving airplanes, going about 75 miles an hour, were first sighted from the destroyers, the destroyers should have steamed out full speed in the direction the airplane was going. This would not only indicate the proper course to the plane, but would place the destroyer closer to it in case of accident. As the airplanes were only moving at about 75 miles an hour, a destroyer could have been speeded up to within 30 miles of that speed. Why, if they expected to run short of fuel, as indeed they might, did they not make arrangements for refueling the airplane while it was in the air, by another airplane, as we have repeatedly done? Why did they carry a crew of five, when the weight of two men in fuel might have carried the ship through?

What happened to this really good-for-nothing big, lumbering flying boat, when its brave navigators began to run short of gas, over a heavy sea? As they neared the water caught by a sudden gust, she might have been thrown into a stall and spun down and gone straight under the waves. We hope that some passing fisherman may have picked them up as our Lieutenant Wade was picked up in the North Sea. Our Navy did not find him either; all they did was to smash his plane when it was turned over to them by the fisherman. After all, the Hawaiian Islands are not a vital area with our present methods of national defense.

Then, the disaster to the *Shenandoah*—killing Captain Lansdowne, the last of our really experienced airship captains, a splendid man, with his companions, following in the wake of Captain Mabry and Captain Maxfield, our airship commanders who have gone before. I do not know exactly what happened to the poor *Shenandoah*. She was an experimental ship,

built in this country. I believe she was about 50 percent overweight in her structure. She had broken away from her mooring mast—an inefficient way of handling airships, anyway—last spring, and her whole structure was badly strained. I believe that the number of valves in the gas bags containing the helium had been diminished so as to save helium gas, which is expensive in money, but which made the ship more dangerous to the crew. The *Shenandoah* was going west on a propaganda mission for the Navy department to offset the adverse publicity caused by the failures in the Pacific and the Arctic. Note: Propaganda and not services is the keynote in these undertakings.

What business has the Navy over the mountains, anyway? Their mission is out in the water not only out in the water but under the water, out of sight, away from the land—that is why we have the Navy.

No accurate meteorological arrangements are available for aircraft in this country. The weather bureau is under the department of agriculture, and primarily organized to turn out weather reports affecting onions, cabbage and other crops. While this is very necessary, it is a complete failure as far as we are concerned. I say this after having flown across mountains and bucked their storms hundreds of times.

The *Shenandoah*, 50 percent overweight in her structure, her members strained last spring, possibly some of them disintegrated from the action of the non-freezing compound in the radiators of her engines, wherever this liquid dropped on them, and with the valves in her helium gas bags reduced, strikes a storm. She is caught in an up-current of air. Due to her excessive weight, her reserve buoyancy is low. She is carried high up by this current and her gas bags begin to expand, due to the altitude. The crew valves reduced in number do not allow the gas to escape fast enough; the pressure of the expanding gas on the structure tears the ship to pieces. Some of her crew go to eternity. Those that do not, escape by miraculously good fortune. No notice of the storm was received in time to avoid it. Her survivors are muzzled by the Navy department, pending a whitewash board. Are these things so, or are they not? I am down here in Texas and have not all the data at hand, but I am sure the facts are practically as stated.

What results?

The Navy department announces that this shows that America cannot be reached by hostile aircraft. What has time to do with it? The way that America will be reached from Asia is by way of Alaska. The water that has to be crossed is scarcely wider than the English Channel. The route from Europe is by the same course that the round-the-world flyers took, to Iceland, Greenland and North America, whenever a country gets powerful enough to undertake the operation. What has the loss of a seaplane near Honolulu and an airship over the mountains to do with it?

The impression is given to the public at large that the *Shenandoah* was a modern ship, properly constructed, properly operated and completely equipped. This was not the case. It shakes the faith of the people in airship transportation because they are not given the exact facts on the subject. This is not an argument necessarily for the maintenance of many airships by the Government but it is a demand for the facts in the case, so that we will not be hindered in the commercial development of this splendid aircraft on account of the accident to an airship due to incompetence in the Navy department, and the criminal negligence in the ordering of this trip. If we took the safety valve of a locomotive off to save water in the desert and it blew up, killing the engineer and passengers, would we say that railways were no good in deserts and go back to camels?

An interesting sidelight might be thrown out on the development of airships in this country. When I came back from the war in 1919, I attempted to get airships for the purpose of making them into airplane carriers. That is, having airplanes take off from them and land on them, so that they could get out in the middle of the ocean if necessary and attack hostile vessels, in case of war. I obtained permission immediately from the then chief of staff, General March, and the then Secretary of War, Secretary Baker. I sent Major Hennley to Europe with money to get the ship. We had even gone so far as to order the gasoline in Germany for the voyage of the ship to this country. Mysteriously the order was rescinded—all work was stopped—it was said at the time that it was against the provisions of the treaty, which I do not believe was the case.

Work had already been begun on the frames by the Germans. This was the ZR-2, rechristened the *Los Angeles*, which the Navy obtained recently, six years after I ordered it. What has it been used for? Nothing but parading around the country. It is evidence that whenever an airship is developed as an airplane carrier the necessity for any naval surface airplane carrier may be done away with. Is this the reason the Navy has the *Los Angeles*?

The Germans are the only people who have had real experience with airships. They had many a disaster before they learned how to handle them. I have seen German Zeppelins years ago in terrific storms. A storm has little effect on an airship properly constructed and ably handled.

What other thing has the Navy done this summer?

After borrowing some airplanes from the Army, that were entirely inadequate to the work in hand, they went on the MacMillan trip to the Arctic. More propaganda! As far as can be learned, from a distance, they had a cat and dog fight all the way up and back, between MacMillan, the pilots and the Navy department, and, of course, got nowhere and did nothing. Is there an airman who does not know that with the little jitneys they took up there the pole could not be reached? Another example, says the Navy department, of the incapacity of aircraft.

At last the great anti-aircraft tests took place. A battleship goes out into the sea. She takes the airship *Shenandoah* and has her tow a target at 33 miles an hour, at a known altitude, in broad daylight and on a certain course. Some officers have told me that the dirigible was heading into the wind of an intensity of many miles an hour and that therefore the target really was almost standing still in the air. The Navy shoots at it all day long in this position and hits it a few times and publishes to the people of the United States the wonderful results obtained, to impress them with the fact that battleships can be protected by anti-aircraft guns, which is absolutely and entirely false.

What is our Navy for? Presumably it is to control lines of sea communication on the high seas. What is it actually? It is entirely and completely outpointed by Great Britain in the Atlantic. What can it do across the Pacific as at present organized? Nothing—against an insular Asiatic power, whom you all know.

The Navy has about one billion, five hundred million dollars invested in Navy yards. The upkeep and depreciation of these amounts to about one hundred and fifty million dollars a year. How many of these are useless and how many of them are of any benefit? Probably not many. Suppose we took fifty million of this and applied it to the development of aircraft and submarines under competent airmen and submarine men? What could we do with it?

Every time a battleship is built, the ship itself, when it is completed, may cost from fifty million to

seventy million dollars. It has to be protected by submarines, destroyers, cruisers and aircraft, the total cost of which is around or over one hundred million dollars, so that every time a battleship is built, the expenditure of one hundred million dollars is necessary. I believe a battleship today is a useless element in the national defense armament of the United States. Suppose we had even one half of the cost of a battleship to use in the development of our aircraft and submarines.

These are only a few of the things which must be brought up before the people and the coming Congress.

The Navy, to maintain its position, keeps asking for more aircraft, which it cannot use legally, because the legal defense of the land is entrusted to armies. In spite of the legal restrictions, however, but to keep control of aviation and not let it get away, the Navy department continually gets more money from Congress by its Washington lobby so as to keep the political support of the aircraft manufacturers, and, possibly, some others interested in them. This year, the Navy's estimate for the aircraft amounts to \$37,360,248. They only have one aircraft carrier, the *Langley*, which can go about half as fast as the battleship, and which is an obsolete carrier. It can hold 36 small airplanes. They are building two aircraft carriers which can hold 60 to 70 planes. These are practically obsolete before they are completed.

Where is the thirty-seven million for aircraft going? It is going into land aircraft which have nothing to do with the Navy's operation on the seas and which will be used as a political lever for the maintenance of their existing system.

The War Department, that now is entrusted by law with the aerial defense over the land areas of the United States and its possessions, including the protection of Navy yards, asks for \$24,582,000. Consider how foolish it is. The Navy, an organization charged with going to sea and which must operate from surface vessels, which as a matter of fact are practically obsolete now, and which will afford no real protection to the country in case of an air attack, asking for two-thirds more than the Army does, which acts from land bases and is specifically charged with the defense of the land areas. The amount allotted to the Navy for the new aircraft is three times as much as the Army.

Now, let us turn to the War department. The War department has done nothing this summer to develop air power and has undertaken to prove by tests that anti-aircraft guns can protect cities, which is known everywhere to be false. They have fixed up a scheme to give constructive hits when the guns firing do not hit the targets at all. The firing has been at targets towed at a constant altitude, over courses which have now been flown hundreds of times, at greatly reduced speeds and never in excess of 75 miles an hour. Even this was only because the wind was helping the plane along and under weather conditions that have been ideal. In spite of all this preparation, the results have been laughable. As an example of one of these performances, the War department has taken the lid off for publicity in the 2d Corps area—that means around New York—with the result that the coast artillery tells the papers the story in greatly exaggerated terms, whereas the chief of air service has been completely muzzled. An interesting example of some of the anti-aircraft target practice was the testing of the listening devices for aircraft at Camp Dix, July 27. The umpire had told Captain Hall, commanding the airplane bombers at Mitchell Field, that is the next anti-aircraft test he was at liberty to fly under conditions which would be used in war. Captain Hall informed the umpire ahead of time that he would glide into the target. Before this, the coast artillery had had all their practice with planes that had flown over at a fairly constant altitude and with their motors open. The night of the test the planes got their proper altitude, played around a little just out of range of the searchlights

and just within range of the listening devices on the ground. The coast artillery thought that this was easy because they picked up the planes far off and plotted their course absolutely; but all of a sudden sounds from the airplanes stopped. Five or ten minutes later, the bombers dropped their bombs directly on the target. All around not a sound had been heard before this. The fury of the ground officers, artillery officers and others were tremendous. The air service had not acted fair and had fooled them—all of which a kind enemy of course in war would never do. Discussion even went so far that it had to be pointed out that it was provided in our bombardment manual to attack a place in this fashion. This is just one little instance of this ridiculous performance. So far, practically the only bombardment airplanes we have in this country have been used for towing these targets for ground shooting which other airplanes could just as well have done. The actual cost out of air service funds appropriated will be approximately \$200,000 by the time they are completed this fall.

Why are things done this way? The coast artillery sees that it is bound to be greatly reduced on account of the fact that aircraft are a positive coast protection. The coast artillery now has about 92 stations. For the years prior to 1920, about two billion dollars was spent on coast defense—not two million, but two billions. What good are these coast defenses? None—except those in the immediate vicinity of large cities where a submarine might emerge at close range and plant a few shells in the city. What could the saving do, on these useless expenditures, if used by the troops of the mobile Army stationed in Texas and other frontier points, living in shacks, unequipped with modern conveniences, cut down on every activity and rendered almost incapable, in case the Constitution is menaced, of putting down insurrection, or executing the laws when all other means fail, and patrolling our frontiers and holding our insular possessions? What would only a small part of this tremendous expenditure mean in the development of aircraft?

Not one heavy bomb has been dropped by the air service line units in target practice for two years. Only about four or five modern sights are on hand with the bombing groups; and today, I, who know war personnel better than any living man, can only put my hand on two perfectly capable bombardment crews to handle our aircraft in case we are attacked.

The other thing that the War department has done this summer is to study how the flyers' pay could be reduced or taken away from them. Think of it, the whole effort of the War department during the summer has been to fool the people into thinking that anti-aircraft cannon are a protection and to keep the rightful flying pay away from the pilots.

To make a long story short, we are utterly disgusted with the conduct of our military affairs applying to aviation. Our pilots know they are going to be killed if they stay in the service, on account of the methods employed, in the old flaming coffins that we are still flying. Those that still remain have held on so long that if they get out they would starve. They don't dare open their mouths and tell the truth, because they and their families might be booted out to some obscure place. No finer body ever existed in the makeup of our country than these men. There are many able men in the Army—these should be developing the grand Army in accordance with the needs of the nation. There are many able men in the Navy—but the bureaucracies that both of these national services maintain in Washington have passed all bounds of national decency. They are deluding the public, sacrificing our national defense and not only wasting the money of our citizens but the lives of its ablest men, our flying officers.

This condition must be remedied. It is not in the field of partisan politics, it concerns us all. The American people must know the facts, and with their unfailing common sense and ability, they will surely remedy it.

As far as I am personally concerned, I am looking for no advancement in the service. I have had the finest career that any man could have in the armed service of our United States. I have had the great pleasure of serving in all our campaigns from the Spanish War to the present and of commanding the greatest air forces ever brought together on the planet. I owe the Government everything—the Government owes me nothing. As a patriotic American citizen, I can stand by no longer and see these disgusting performances by the Navy and War departments, at the expense of the lives of our people, and the delusion of the American public.

The bodies of my former companions in the air molder under the soil in America, and Asia, and Europe and Africa—many, yes, a great many, sent there directly by official stupidity. We all may make mistakes but the criminal mistakes made by armies and navies, whenever they have been allowed to handle aeronautics, show their incompetence. We would not be keeping our trust with our departed comrades were we longer to conceal these facts.

This, then, is what I have to say on this subject and I hope that every American will hear it.