Mason Patrick's Inside Game

In World War I and after, this lifelong Army engineer kept the Air Service moving forward.

Maj. Gen. Mason Patrick argued for reorganizing the air arm of the War Department as an Air Corps.

By Herman S. Wolk

Maj. Gen. Mason M. Patrick is little known or celebrated today—but he should be. He served as head of the Air Service, American Expeditionary Force, in World War I and then went on to become Chief of the Air Service in the period 1921-27. During his career, Patrick played a key role in creation of the Army Air Corps and helped give impetus to its drive to become an independent service.

Patrick had to contend with severe financial turmoil at a time when the nation saw little reason to spend on defense or to build up an Air Force. Temperamentally reserved and disciplined, Patrick maneuvered well and effectively within his organization and, in the 1920s, succeeded in stabilizing and expanding the fledgling Air Service.

In 1926, Congress enacted legislation creating the Air Corps, marking a pivotal first step in the interwar years toward independence for the air service. It was, in effect, a tribute to Mason Patrick, whose foresight and dedication to the cause made it possible for lawmakers to make that bold move.

The future air leader was born during the Civil War, to a surgeon in the Confederate Army. Patrick graduated second in the West Point Class of 1886 and set his course toward becoming an

Army engineer. For most of the next 31 years, he labored in the engineering field, first as a graduate student, then as a West Point faculty member and commander of engineering units at home and abroad.

The war that broke out in Europe in 1914, however, would greatly alter the trajectory of Patrick's career. The US entered the conflict in April 1917, and Patrick that same year arrived in Europe to direct major US military construction projects. Though he had put together a distinguished record in engineering, he was about to become an airman, and the proximate cause was an old West Point classmate—Gen. John J. Pershing.

Black Jack Pershing, commander of the American Expeditionary Force in France, desperately needed someone to, as he put it, "whip the Air Service into shape." Pershing was beset by personal and professional tensions between two top air officers, Brig. Gen. Benjamin D. Foulois and Col. William Mitchell. At Pershing's request, Foulois in November 1917 came to Europe and took the post of chief of Air Service, AEF. Mitchell, however, already was the chief of the Air Service Zone of Advance, and he regarded Foulois and his staff members as "carpetbaggers."

In May 1918, Pershing turned to Patrick, whom he trusted as a disciplinarian. He also knew that his old classmate knew how to work well within the organization. With Patrick established as the new AEF Air Service chief, Foulois was named chief of the Air Service, First Army.

Patrick restored order and discipline, but did not want to remain as Air Service chief. He stayed in Paris for a short time after the war, helping demobilize combat air units, and returned to Army engineering, serving in Washington as special assistant to the chief of engineers and subsequently commanding the engineering school.

In 1921, Patrick's hopes of finishing out his career as an engineer were dashed. The Air Service was reeling. Due to postwar demobilization, by 1921 the Air Service counted fewer than 1,000 officers and its budget had been halved. Simultaneously, some believed that Billy Mitchell needed to be reined in. Mitchell's outbursts against the Navy and its "obsolete" battleships, and his sinking of the German battleship *Ostfriesland* off the Virginia Capes, were bringing considerable attention to the Air Service—and not always for the better. (See "The Real Billy Mitchell," February 2001, p. 64.)

Mitchell's public campaign, through magazine articles, Congressional testimony, and lectures, characterized airpower as the nation's first line of defense. His approach alienated the leadership of both the War Department and Navy Department.

At this point, Pershing again called on Patrick. Patrick reluctantly agreed to take the post of top airman in September 1921, realizing that at age 57 he faced an especially difficult challenge—especially with Mitchell as his assistant chief.

Mitchell Makes His Move

Mitchell was a likable fellow, Patrick said, but had "a desire to be in the public eye." On the other hand, he realized that Mitchell "had a better knowledge of the tactics of air fighting than any man in this country." Mitchell knew how to organize and employ air forces, a skill he showed masterfully in his superb command of airpower during the September 1918 Battle of St. Mihiel in France.

Mitchell, however, immediately attempted to usurp Patrick's authority by recommending an Air Service organization that would have, in effect, put himself in charge and left Patrick with little to do except attend ceremonial functions. Patrick turned him down flat. Mitchell threatened to resign, but ultimately backed down and accepted Patrick's authority. Mitchell may have been an outspoken self-promoter, but he and Patrick agreed on the long-term objective—an independent air arm.

Many Air Service officers agreed with Mitchell on the need for an air arm, distinct from the Army and Navy. They also agreed with him on the potential of strategic bombing and the importance of putting airmen in charge of developing aviation. However, Mitchell's incessant public declarations that airpower had replaced sea power as the nation's first line of defense alienated Army and Navy officers alike. Many opposed establishment of a separate air defense force, arguing that, in the 1920s no country could launch an air attack on the United States. Mitchell's constant barrage eventually resulted in his removal as assistant chief of the Air Service and his conviction at court-martial in 1925.

Patrick's methods were the polar opposite of Mitchell's. This methodical engineer proved to be the consummate insider. Trusted and respected by the War Department leadership, Patrick was a top-notch organization man who could navigate the Army's difficult bureaucratic terrain. He faced heavy odds attempting to build up the air arm and move it toward independence. In the 1920s, Presidents Harding and Coolidge opposed air independence, as did the most important Congressional committees.

Nonetheless, Patrick, while leaving Mitchell to catch the public's attention, readied plans to move forward within the Army organization. He decided to learn how to fly at age 59, a move that earned the respect of his fellow airmen.

AP photo

Army Gen. John Pershing (center, inspecting French troops in France during World War I) held Patrick in high regard.

Ad Space

Underwood & Underwood/Corbis photo

Brig. Gen. Benjamin Foulois (left) was the chief of Air Service for the American Expeditionary Force in France. Col. Billy Mitchell viewed him as a "carpetbagger."

He moved slowly and deliberately, knowing that any sudden, all-out burst toward real independence would be certain to fail.

He decided that the first major step would be to win autonomy within the War Department itself. Patrick informed the department that demobilization had left the Air Service unable even to meet its peacetime responsibilities. Confronted with this unappealing fact, the Army leadership asked Patrick to make recommendations.

Patrick recommended a tactical reorganization with the Air Service into two components. One element would consist of observation squadrons and balloon companies serving with ground units. The other would comprise attack, pursuit, and bombardment squadrons, operating independently of the ground Army, and under command of a General Headquarters commander. A balanced air arm should have 20 percent of its strength in observation units and 80 percent assigned to combat aviation, he said. The postwar Air Service had been operating with a 40/60 ratio. Not only was Army aviation unbalanced, but its combat air forces were fragmented and planning was unsatisfactory.

In March 1923, Patrick's reorganization plan spurred War Secretary John W. Weeks to convene a War Department board to consider the proposals. The board recommended a 10-year program to build up the Air Service, including a minimum peacetime force of 4,000 officers, 25,000 enlisted men, 2,500 aviation cadets, and 2,500 aircraft.

In addition, the board supported Patrick's proposal that "an Air Force of bombardment and pursuit aviation and airships should be directly under General Headquarters for assignment to special and strategical missions ... either in connection with the operation of ground forces or entirely independent of them." Nonetheless, the board supported assigning some pursuit and attack aviation to each field army.

Thwarted Again

Unfortunately for the Air Service, the board's recommendations were not carried out. Although Weeks had approved the report, the Navy objected, thinking its own aviation funding would be cut.

During this period, Patrick attempted to derail Mitchell's public fusillades by sending the controversial airman on special assignments. These included attending the Washington naval conference as part of the aviation committee; a trip to France to ascertain the status of European aeronautics; a nationwide inspection tour of Air Service operations; an assignment in command of bombing tests against surplus warships; and a six-month appraisal of the nation's defenses in the Pacific.

Mitchell's tour of the Pacific and east Asia resulted in a voluminous report detailing what needed to be done to improve America's Pacific defenses, especially air base defense. Some of his recommendations proved prescient.

Mitchell warned that a war between Japan and the US seemed inevitable. Moreover, he emphasized the vulnerability of Japan's urban areas to bombing. He also stressed the defense of the Hawaiian islands, noting the importance of installing a single commander for the entire territory. Mitchell advanced specific proposals for island air base defense.

Patrick called Mitchell's 1924 report a "theoretical treatise on employment of airpower in the Pacific, which, in all probability undoubtedly will be of extreme value some 10 or 15 years hence." The fact remained, Patrick added, "that aviation was not developed as yet to the point of employment outlined in General Mitchell's report."

Patrick continued to fight quietly for an independent air mission as Billy Mitchell kept up his drumbeat. In late 1924, a House committee convened an inquiry into the operations of the Air

USAF photo

Brig. Gen. Billy Mitchell (shown at a Bolling Air Field tournament in 1920) was determined to produce an independent air arm.

Service. Patrick and Mitchell appeared before the committee.

Their testimony reflected their divergent tactics. Mitchell attacked the War Department for failing to expand the air arm and advocated a Department of Aeronautics coequal with the War and Navy Departments.

Patrick, aiming for autonomy within the War Department, argued for granting the Air Service freedom from control of the General Staff. He proposed legislation to reorganize the air arm as an Air Corps, distinct from the War Department, under the Secretary of War. Patrick wanted the coast defense mission given to an autonomous Air Corps.

Then, in September 1925, the dirigible *Shenandoah* crashed during an Ohio thunderstorm, killing 14. Mitchell charged that the *Shenandoah* disaster and others like it were "the direct result of incompetency, criminal negligence, and almost treasonable administration of the national defense by the Navy and War Departments," charges that made headlines and led directly to Mitchell's court-martial. (See "The Keeper File: The Blast From Billy Mitchell," July 2006, p. 28.)

Nonetheless, in the autumn of 1925, President Coolidge ordered still another investigation of military aviation. Coolidge wanted Dwight W. Morrow to have a report completed quickly, before Mitchell's court-martial verdict.

Mitchell appeared before the Morrow board, arguing for a single Department of National Defense with coequal status among the military services. Patrick more realistically championed establishment of an autonomous Air Corps directly under the Secretary of War.

Though the board generally sided with the War Department against the idea of separating the air arm from the Army, it did recommend increased recognition for the air arm by designating it the Air Corps and giving it two additional brigadier generals and special representation on the War Department General Staff. The Morrow panel also proposed creation of the position of assistant secretary of war for air and called for consideration of an air arm expansion program.

Congress passed the Air Corps Act of July 2, 1926. Although it failed to remove Army aviation from General Staff control, it marked an important step forward toward autonomy, increasing the air arm's military strength and its position within the War Department.

Hap Arnold's Close Call With Mason Patrick

A sidelight to the interwar battle over air arm legislation involved Maj. Gen. Mason M. Patrick, Chief of Air Service, and Maj. Henry H. "Hap" Arnold—long before Arnold became a five-star general.

In February 1926, Arnold, chief of Patrick's information division, and Maj. Herbert A. Dargue—who had taught Patrick to fly—distributed letters in favor of legislation that Patrick helped develop.

Arnold had written the letter anonymously, however, and it was sent to many Air Service personnel, in violation of War Department policy. The mailing elicited the Army inspector general's attention and Patrick's ire.

Patrick had considered Arnold a promising officer and even pushed his career along. However, this episode, terribly timed, occurred during a legislative battle and in the wake of Brig. Gen. William Mitchell's court-martial.

Still worse, Arnold initially denied his involvement in the incident.

Furious, Patrick presented Arnold with the choice of court-martial or resignation. When Arnold chose court-martial, Patrick relented and instead sent Arnold to Ft. Riley, Kan., where he remained until after Patrick retired. This close call could have ended the career of the officer who built up and commanded the mighty Army Air Forces of World War II.

Specifically, the act changed the name of the Air Service to the Air Corps; gave it representation, in the person of a flying officer, in each General Staff division; authorized a five-year expansion to 1,650 officers, 15,000 enlisted men, and 1,800 aircraft; provided two brigadier general assistants to the major general Chief of the Air Corps; and authorized an assistant secretary of war for air. Also, the act directed that the Air Corps general officer leadership—and 90 percent of the officers in each grade below brigadier general—had to be fliers.

Independence Acknowledged

This legislation gave Patrick and his airmen some important advances. The authorized increases in personnel and aircraft were critical. Moreover, establishment of the Air Corps reflected that the War Department at least acknowledged the independent air mission.

In a relatively few years, Patrick was able to stabilize the Air Service, set a vision for the Army air arm, and set it on the road to independence with passage of the Air Corps Act.

Gen. Ira C. Eaker, who as a captain in 1924 was an executive assistant to Patrick in Washington, noted that Patrick "chose to work through the established organization, not over or around it." He understood the problems of airmen, Eaker emphasized, and "he had the great faculty of being able to talk to military leaders, the Chief of Staff of the Army, the Chiefs of the other services, the Secretary of War, and senior members of the Congress."

Although after World War I Patrick opposed immediate independence, he came to believe, like Mitchell, that air independence was the appropriate goal. In the maelstrom of air issues in the 1920s, Patrick and Mitchell complemented each other. Unwittingly, they formed an inside-outside tandem of great effectiveness.

While some tend to regard Patrick as a transitional figure in the history of the air arm, he was a great deal more than that. He rescued the Air Service when it was down-and-out, and proceeded to advance it toward autonomy with great skill.

Patrick retired in December 1927. He died at Walter Reed Army Hospital, Washington, D.C., in January 1942, at the age of 78. Patrick AFB, Fla., is named in honor of the man who believed the US should gather its air forces together, "under one air commander, and strike at the strategic points of our enemy—cripple him even before the ground forces can come in contact." He had emphasized that "airpower is coordinate with land and sea power, and the air commander should sit in councils on an equal footing with the commanders of the land and sea forces."

It was a message that would resonate again, more than 20 years later, in the struggle to create a separate Air Force, and is still relevant today. ■

Herman S. Wolk retired as senior historian in the Air Force History Support Office. He is the author of Fulcrum of Airpower *(2003). His most recent article for* Air Force *Magazine, "A Soldier for Airpower," appeared in the January issue.*