Billy Mitchell's Parachute Plan

By Phillip S. Meilinger

In April 1940, as part of Hitler's plan to invade Norway, 24 Ju 52 transport aircraft, escorted by two twin-engine fighters, dropped 130 German paratroopers near Sola airfield at Stavanger. Dropped from an altitude of just 400 feet, the paratroopers landed and secured the valuable airfield in an hour. German reinforcements began flooding in by air; Norway fell in days.

The operation was the first major combat paratroop drop in history. Many would follow, and paratroop forces—quite a bit larger than the relatively small contingent at Stavanger—came to be fielded by all the great powers of that war.

This new concept—vertical envelopment—didn't originate in World War II, however, but in World War I. Brig. Gen. Billy Mitchell, the top American air commander of that war, devised a plan for dropping a division of American infantrymen behind German lines. The war ended before the plan could be executed, but it was startlingly original and clearly visionary.

For most of World War I, the Western Front was a stagnant and bloody trench war. Frontal assaults were common because outflanking maneuvers were impossible—the front stretched in an unbroken line from the North Sea to Switzerland. Generals on both sides made numerous attempts to break the stalemate, using rolling artillery barrages, poison gas, flamethrowers, new penetration tactics, tanks, and attack aircraft. They hoped to break through the lines and create flanks, thus restoring mobility to the battlefield.

These tactics were at best only moderately successful and then only at certain times and places. Even the huge influx of fresh American infantrymen in early 1918 made little difference. It appeared the bloodbath would continue.

Mitchell thought in the third dimension, however, and parachutes came to his mind.

Parachutes weren't a new idea; they'd been used by daredevils jumping out of balloons at fairgrounds for a century. The first successful military jump from an airplane occurred in March 1912, made by a US soldier at Jefferson Barracks, Mo. During World War I, soldiers in tethered observation balloons deployed along the Western Front wore parachutes because the balloons came under frequent attacks from enemy pursuit (fighter) aircraft.

A Deadly Vise

A downed balloon was counted as an aerial victory, and some pilots became aces based on their ability to "flame sausages." Frank Luke received the Medal of Honor for such actions—downing 14 German balloons in less than three weeks. When an attack came, it was standard procedure for winch operators below to rapidly lower the balloon, but not before the observer in the basket quickly jumped out and deployed his parachute.

Italy began parachuting spies into enemy territory during the war, and the French dropped two-man demolition crews behind German lines in

Airborne operations were vital in World War II, but Billy Mitchell had devised a credible plan in the late days of World War I.

National Archives photo

At left: US paratroopers land in the Philippines in 1945. Here: C-47s drop paratroopers into the Netherlands during Operation Market Garden in 1944. Brig. Gen. Billy Mitchell had proposed such attempts at "vertical envelopment" more than two decades earlier.

early 1918. Mitchell knew of these activities. He had already employed aircraft in mass formations to clear the skies of enemy aircraft and to strafe and bomb enemy troop positions and supply lines. In September 1918, he had commanded more than 1,400 Allied aircraft, an unprecedented total, during the Meuse-Argonne offensive. The next month he approached Gen. John J. Pershing, commander of the American Expeditionary Forces, with an idea to break the trench stalemate.

Mitchell proposed using British-made Handley Page bombers, as well as Italian-built Capronis, to drop infantrymen plus medium-size machine guns behind enemy lines. He argued that such a surprise attack would catch the Germans manning the trenches in a deadly vise—Allied infantry would attack from the front while the paratroopers would attack from the rear. The Germans would undoubtedly break and flee, and mobility would finally be restored to the battlefield after nearly four years of stalemate.

In his war memoirs, Mitchell wrote that he'd suggested to Pershing that the entire 1st Infantry Division be assigned permanently to the Air Service. Pershing mulled the idea for a few minutes and then told him to go ahead and begin planning. He would decide if the plan looked feasible after he saw more details.

Delighted, Mitchell hurried back to his headquarters at Ligny-en-Barrois to lay the idea before his staff. He directed his operations officer, Maj. Lewis H. Brereton, to begin planning for a major airborne operation to take place the following spring. In his own memoirs, Brereton wrote that Mitchell "dumped plans in my lap" and told him to get busy.

The war ended three weeks later, however, so the drop would not go into action, and planning did not get very far. Nonetheless, Mitchell spoke and wrote about the idea after the war was over.

In March 1919, Mitchell gave a speech to the Society of Automobile Engineers in New York. This group was one of the most prestigious organizations of scientists and engineers in the country, and Mitchell revealed the idea he'd pitched to Pershing five months previously. Mitchell said, "We had a plan, which we were going to try this spring if the war had not stopped, and it would have worked, too. We were going to send our men over the German lines in airplanes and drop them down in parachutes and let them attack the enemy in the rear, while our men were attacking the front."

He said he planned to use the 1st Infantry Division—12,000 men—to be dropped at Metz. His plan was superior to those being drawn for a major ground offensive against Metz, because that city was guarded by "division after division of the crack troops of the German army, anticipating our move." Using the ground plan, Metz would eventually have fallen, Mitchell argued, but at tremendous cost—yet another bloodbath for which the Western Front had become infamous.

AP photo

Writing in a May 1926 newspaper article, Mitchell stated that he'd been promised the use of 60 squadrons of Handley Page bombers—1,200 aircraft—and that he would also be given the services of a top infantry division. The Handley Page O/400 was a heavy bomber used by the Royal Air Force to strike German positions, airfields, and industrial facilities. Mitchell calculated that each aircraft would be able to carry 10 fully loaded paratroopers as well as two medium-size machine guns.

The Handley Page was a big aircraft, but even so, at 10 men per airplane, it would take a huge air fleet to transport an entire division. By war's end, the RAF had some 250 Handley Pages operational, with another 1,500 on order. Moreover, the Handley Page V/1500 was also entering production. This four-engine behemoth would be able to carry up to 20 paratroopers.

Paratroopers on each aircraft would carry extra bandoliers of ammunition plus machine guns. This mighty air armada would be escorted by hundreds of pursuit and attack airplanes. Three miles from the front lines these escorts would break to the left and right, and "at a predetermined moment, those attack planes ... were to wheel and make flank attacks on the enemy's front-, second-, and third-line trenches in that sector, turning their machine guns and light cannon on the foot troops."

The converted bombers would then swoop low and deploy their paratroopers. Pursuit aircraft would be orbiting close by to protect the descending soldiers from enemy fire. Once the troops were on the ground, the pursuit and attack airplanes would continue to attack the enemy positions and prevent counterattacks while the paratroopers assembled and took up defensive positions. The pursuit aircraft would then join up with the bombers and escort them back to friendly territory.

Mitchell continued that once the paratroopers were on the ground, the converted bombers would be able to resupply them with ammunition, food, and other supplies with little difficulty.

Men would be lost during the drop, Mitchell admitted, and those on the ground would be somewhat vulnerable, but he noted that those soldiers would have a potential strength of 2,400 machine guns.

"If we could have only got 10 percent in action against the enemy's rear, we should have been successful. One machine gun, properly placed, can hold up a battalion at times," Mitchell asserted in the May 1926 article. He added that the Germans would have been subjected "to the most withering fire ever known. ... The pathway would have been thrown open for the American Army to advance into Metz."

WOULD IT HAVE WORKED?

By this time, Mitchell had already been court-martialed, found guilty, and resigned. Undoubtedly he was a bit more exuberant about his plan's chances than was warranted. Indeed, one of his purposes was to complain about the sorry state of American airpower. He made the case that revolutionary operations should be continually tried and tested—but were not.

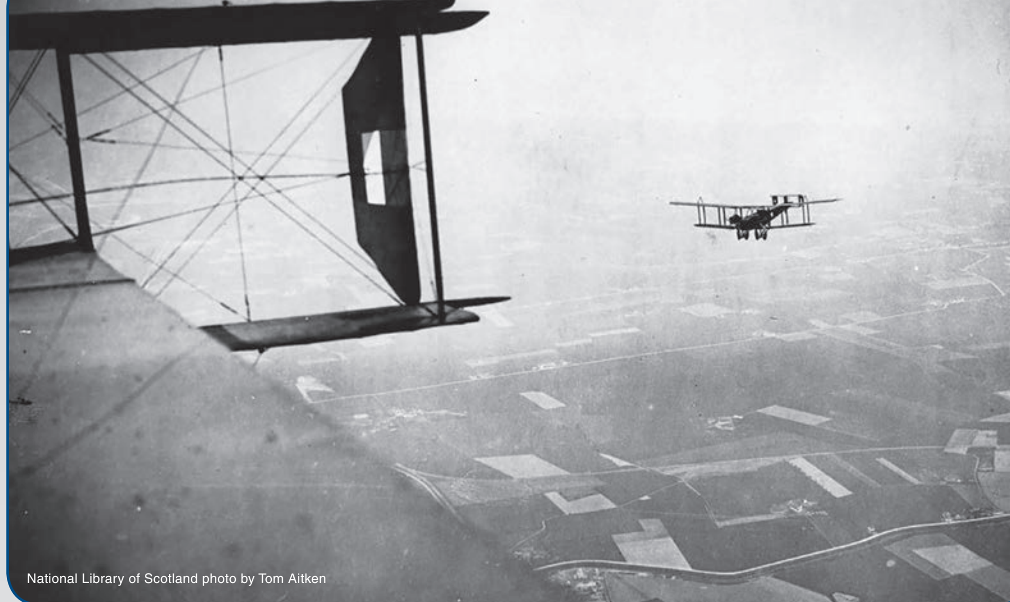
Mitchell further argued that it is the duty of planners to prepare for such contingencies in peacetime so that they can be quickly put into action if war occurs. Alas, "we have no general staff today and no aerial army." While he voiced his hope that God would have mercy on America, he insisted the Air Corps must be expanded, saying, "Almighty God helps those who first help themselves."

Clearly, Mitchell's concept for an airborne operation was visionary, but was it feasible? When he proposed the idea in October 1918, there were nowhere near the 1,200 bombers available that Mitchell said would be necessary. Yet, orders had been placed for more, and it is likely such a number of Handley Pages and Capronis would have been in service by the spring of 1919. Would that many aircraft have been entrusted to a young brigadier general? Some 1,400 combat aircraft, consisting of units from the French and British air arms besides the Air Service, had been under his command at the Meuse-Argonne, so the notion of Mitchell leading an airborne air armada is not far-fetched.

The bombers would have needed to be modified. Although the British and Italian aircraft would have been large enough to carry 10 to 20 men plus their equipment and extra machine guns, the airplanes were not designed for such a purpose. In addition, some provision would have had to have been made for the paratroopers to exit the aircraft—simply jumping out of the observer's cockpit opening would have been cumbersome at best. Even so, adding seats or benches and providing a side door for the paratroopers to exit would not have been difficult.

Training would have been the critical factor. An entire infantry division would have had to go through the training necessary to become paratroopers. This would require even more aircraft and a great number of parachutes. There would have been accidents, and all of this would have taken time.

In addition, Mitchell prefaced his plan by stressing that a main advantage to an airdrop operation would be the ele-



National Library of Scotland photo by Tom Aitken

Left: Mitchell (seventh from left), with air service members from various European nations in Rome in 1922. Center: German paratroopers at Narvik, Norway, during the June 1940 occupation of the Scandinavian country. Above: British Handley Page bombers in World War I. Mitchell proposed using the light bombers to drop troops and machine guns behind enemy lines.

ment of surprise. The Germans would be dumbfounded to find large numbers of enemy troops both in front of and behind them. But surely the Germans would have been aware of the massive training program underway and known of the proposed airdrop. Strategic surprise may not have been possible, but the exact time and place of such an operation could perhaps have been kept secret.

It will never be known if these challenges could have been overcome by the spring of 1919, as Mitchell believed. But his vision certainly did not die. He continued to allude to airborne operations in his writing and speeches thereafter.

In a tactical manual written in 1922, Mitchell expounded on his original idea: "Daring attempts should be made to drop personnel by parachute during dark nights to actually set fire to [supply] dumps." He maintained that these troops could then be resupplied by air, stating that one bombardment group could transport more than 50 tons of supplies in one mission; he suggested these supplies also be dropped by parachute, to eliminate the need for nearby airfields. The Ordnance Department was already working on this issue, and he expected "far superior methods will be devised soon" to airdrop such essentials. (In 1928, emergency supplies were parachuted by Italian aircraft to the crew of a dirigible that went down at the North Pole.)

In his book, *Winged Defense,* Mitchell argued that paratroopers could be dropped to hold small pockets of resistance behind enemy lines. These units could then be supplied by air "with everything that is necessary." Perhaps reacting to emerging Marine Corps doctrine, he even proposed that paratroopers could be dropped on small islands in the Pacific to seize territory. These forces could also be resupplied by air or by submarine, he said.

After the war, the Air Service established an office at McCook Field in Ohio under Maj. E. L. Hoffman to study the matter of airborne operations. It was this office that developed the Type S parachute that became standard issue in both the Army and Navy in 1924.

In October 1929, the Air Corps parachuted a machine gun crew out of aircraft at Kelly Field in Texas. Within three minutes of hitting the ground the paratroopers had set up and were in firing position.

In 1932, Capt. George C. Kenney (later a general and commander of Far East Air Forces during World War II) would astound his superiors and observers by using a variation of Mitchell's idea: He air-landed an infantry unit behind "enemy lines" during Army maneuvers at Fort DuPont in Delaware. During World War II, the concept was further augmented by using gliders, towed over enemy territory, carrying infantrymen who would land and unload their troops and equipment.

The US Army and its Air Corps were not alone in such experimentation. Italy led the way by establishing small parachute teams by the late 1920s. Not far behind was Russia, which began serious development of large-scale paratroop units by the mid-1930s. Early 1932 saw the Red Army publish the first doctrine manual on the employment of airborne forces. The Germans followed around the same time, incorporating airborne regiments into the Luftwaffe as early as 1936. By the time war broke out in Europe in September 1939, nearly all the belligerents had formed airborne units.

After the German operation at Stavanger, Russia followed up two months later by dropping troops in Bessarabia during its Romanian campaign. Such operations would continue throughout the war in all theaters.

German paratroopers were successful on Crete in May 1941, but suffered such high casualties that Hitler was loath to use them again afterward. The Allies had no such qualms, and airborne troops were an integral part of the Normandy invasion.

One of the most famous paratroop assaults carried out by the Allies during the war occurred in September 1944 when the First Allied Airborne Army—consisting of British and American paratroop divisions—was dropped into the Netherlands during Operation Market Garden. The operation wasn't a success, due not to the concept but to intelligence and leadership failures.

The commander of the First Allied Airborne Army for Market Garden was Lt. Gen. Lewis H. Brereton—the same man who had had plans "dumped" in his lap by Billy Mitchell in October 1918.

In his memoirs, Brereton recalled Mitchell's idea: "The armistice cut short General Mitchell's plans. Now, 26 years later, we had the same thing in mind."

As usual, Billy Mitchell was years ahead of his time. ■

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