

# Captain Eddie Rickenbacker



## America's Ace of Aces



Eddie Rickenbacker watched as four Spads taxied across the field, engines revving, as they slowly lifted into the afternoon skies to fly out over the battle lines. Easing his lean frame into the open cockpit of his own airplane, he increased fuel to the powerful engine and listened to it hum. Moments later the commander of the 94th Aero Squadron was himself airborne and following his other four planes at a leisurely pace. It was Rickenbacker's third flight of the day on this 30th day of October. Before noon he had flown two uneventful patrols.

Now he tagged along behind a flight led by Lieutenant Kaye, who was filling in as flight leader for the hospitalized Reed Chambers. Two of the young American pilots in Kaye's flight were *rookies*, and Rickenbacker had elected to tag along to watch how Kaye fared as a new flight leader.

On this mission Lieutenant Kaye's flight was assigned to patrol the lines between Grand Pre and Brioules at the unusually low level of just 2,000 feet. Rickenbacker kept well to the rear and about a thousand feet higher. This gave him an unobstructed view to gauge Kaye's tactics, and an advantageous point from which to spot any enemy aircraft that might try to slip in behind the four Spads below.

After two uneventful passes between the two towns, Lieutenant Kaye maneuvered his flight for a third pass when Rickenbacker noticed two enemy Fokkers flying low from inside Germany, as if to slip in on the unsuspecting American patrol. From his higher elevation, Rickenbacker had so far gone unnoticed. Kaye's patrol was flying west across their sector with the two Fokkers creeping up on their tail. The combat-wise squadron commander turned his own Spad eastward, winging well into Germany to angle back in behind the hunters.

The attack came more quickly than Rickenbacker had anticipated, the Fokkers slipping in behind the formation to open fire. Rickenbacker was now well inside German air space, too far from the attack at this point to intervene. Fortunately, as the enemy pilots pulled the triggers of their machineguns, Kaye spotted the threat and turned his flight south towards the aerodrome and home.

Enemy tracers flew past the rear airplane piloted by Lieutenant Evitt, one of the two rookies. Rickenbacker could only trust the flight commander to quickly evade and bring his patrol safely home. There was also some comfort in the fact that the other experienced pilot in the group was Lieutenant Harvey Cook, one of the few remaining aces in the 94th Aero Squadron.

The German pilots were good; Rickenbacker had to admit to himself from his distant vantage point. In a daring display of aerial prowess and courage, the two enemy pilots flew directly into the flight that out-numbered them two to one. Lieutenant Kaye remained focused, refusing to break up his formation and continuing to lead a beeline deeper into France and the landing field. After that first attack, the German pilots broke off and turned towards Grand Pre. Rickenbacker smiled. His pilots were safe and the German pilots were flying in a path that might well lead them directly into his own gun sights.



But for the two distant Fokkers, Captain Rickenbacker had the skies to himself as afternoon turned into evening. Well inside Germany, he continued his own *lone-wolf* patrol, a habit that had served him well. Early on he had learned from a great leader of the 94th Aero Squadron, the legendary Ace Raoul Lufbery, that solo flights relieved a commander of the distractions of responsibility for his other pilots. Lufbery put it this way:

*"There's a hell of a lot of difference in going out alone, no matter what the odds are against you, and in going out as a member or a leader of a group of pilots who may or may not be as good as you are. It's a great responsibility to shepherd these pilots out and get back home safe. I prefer to fight alone, on my own."*

Flying solo missions had enabled Major Lufbery to achieve an incredible record of victories and made him one of the most famous pilots of World War I, as it also had for Lieutenant Frank Luke of the 27th Aero Squadron. Both of those great pilots were gone now, and it seemed their mantle had fallen on the shoulders of Eddie Rickenbacker.

Rickenbacker had known both men, loved one and grudgingly admired the other despite his personal flaws. The differences between two of the greatest American pilots of the war were both obvious and blatant. Lufbery had come to the 1st Pursuit Group as one of the few experienced combat veterans, having flown with the Lafayette Escadrille. Already an Ace, he was worshipped by his men and treated with great respect. Luke had come to the Group a rookie, loud and irreverent, and quickly made himself the most hated man in his squadron. About the only thing the two legendary fliers had in common was the tendency to fly highly successful, lone-wolf missions over enemy territory. Strangely, another difference between them was that Lufbery had been admired for his courage in these missions; Luke had been criticized for not being a "team player."

There were however, a few other similarities between the two men:

- Both men had achieved far beyond any other American pilot, Lufbery netting 17 victories and Luke 18. (The closest any pilot other than Rickenbacker would come to their impressive tally was Lieutenant George Vaughn with 13.)
- Both men had ventured repeatedly beyond the lines to engage the enemy often; Luke had earned only one victory over friendly lines and Lufbery claimed none. All other destroyed aircraft had landed behind the lines, and one could only estimate how many similar victories had gone unverified because they had not been witnessed by other pilots or allied forces on the ground.
- Both Lufbery and Luke had held, for a time, the title Ace of Aces, and
- Each had bequeathed that title to another when they died in action.

Rickenbacker shifted in the seat of his Spad, now well inside the German lines, and tried to make himself comfortable as the cool evening wind whipped through his open cockpit. Captain Eddie Vernon Rickenbacker was now America's Ace of Aces, a title that had historically brought with it two things: worldwide fame, and death. The title was one the young man from Columbus, Ohio, had accepted after the loss of Frank Luke exactly one month earlier—with some reservation: *"I wanted it and yet I feared to learn that it was mine."*

The history of all previous men who held that title had certainly been deadly. Of the seven pilots who had earned the distinction, only Rickenbacker and Lieutenant Edgar Tobin (who held the title for two days after the death of Lieutenant David Putnam and before Rickenbacker pulled ahead of him), were gone, three of them in deadly aerial combat and Frank Luke as a result of his death on the ground after being shot down.

World War I American Ace of Aces				
From: (1918)	To: (1918)	Name Hometown	Victories	
	May 19	Maj. Raoul Lufbery Wallingford, CT	17	KIA
May 19	May 22	1Lt. Paul Baer Fort Wayne, IN	9	WIA/POW
May 22	Jun 17	Lt. Frank Bayliss New Bedford, MA	13	KIA
Jun 17	Sep 12	1Lt. David Putnam Jamaica Plains, MA	12	KIA
Sep 12	Sep 15	1Lt. Edgar Tobin San Antonio, TX	6	
Sep 15	Sep 18	1Lt. Eddie Rickenbacker Columbus, OH	7	
Sep 18	Sep 29	1Lt. Frank Luke Phoenix, AZ	18	KIA
Sep 29	WWII	Capt. Eddie Rickenbacker Columbus, OH	26	

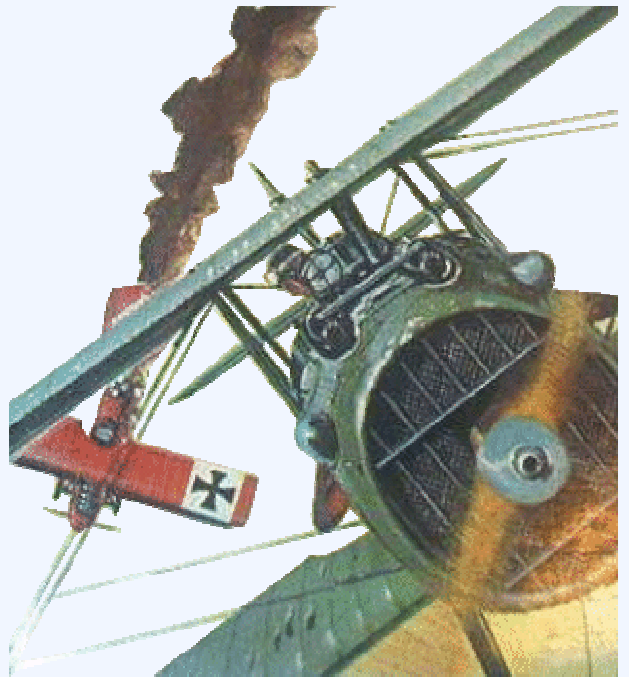
On this next-to-the-last-day of October, Eddie Rickenbacker's claim to the title *Ace of Aces* was beyond dispute, based on an incredible record of 24 victories in the air. As squadron commander, he could have further protected that role by staying at the aerodrome and fighting the war from a desk. It was a practice he refused to adopt. Captain Eddie, as he preferred to be called, wouldn't ask any of his pilots to do anything he wouldn't do. *"Never did I permit any pilot in my squadron,"* he later wrote, *"to exceed the number of hours flying over the lines that was credited to me in the flight sheets."*

None did!

Nor was the intrepid squadron commander content to sit on his record of victories, despite the fact that no other American pilot was even close. He was keeping a cautious eye on the two Fokkers that had earlier attacked Lieutenant Kaye's flight and plotting yet another aerial dogfight.

This one almost looked too easy. Skimming along over their own friendly lines at barely 1,000 feet, the Fokkers were heading directly towards Rickenbacker, who watched them from a slightly higher elevation. They passed him less than half a mile to the east, never noticing the American Spad with the now famous "Hat in the Ring" emblem painted on the side, lying in wait.

Rickenbacker watched the two enemy airplanes pass leisurely beyond him in the distance, then dipped over, swung around, and opened his engine wide as he zoomed in from their rear. The pilot in the trailing Fokker didn't even know he was under attack until a stream of twenty rounds slammed broadside full into the center of the fuselage. After that single burst, Rickenbacker released the trigger. It had been enough, and he watched as the German airplane began spiraling slowly to the ground 1,000 feet below. As he watched Victory #25 plummet from the sky he noticed for the first time the brilliant, bright-red nosepiece on the enemy Fokker. There was increased satisfaction in the realization he had just outwitted a pilot from the famed von Richthofen *Flying Circus*.



Before the American Ace could turn his guns on the remaining enemy plane it had dived for the protection of the enemy held terrain below. To follow him to the ground so deep in Germany would be suicide, and Eddie Rickenbacker, though seemingly fearless, had a zest for life. Content with one more victory, he nosed upward to escape the hail of Archie (anti-aircraft fire) he was sure would follow and headed his Spad for home.

It was already getting dark as Rickenbacker neared the small village of St. George. Two more miles and he would cross the lines and be inside friendly territory for what would certainly be a quick and relatively safe flight to the aerodrome. Passing high over the town he looked down and was surprised to see a Drachen, one of the dreaded enemy observation balloons that had been the death of all too many American pilots, including Frank Luke. This balloon was still in its nest, which meant Allied observers probably were not even aware of its presence at St. George. With dawn the enemy would allow the balloon to rise into the sky to spy across the lines and direct deadly artillery fire on advancing American infantrymen.

In what he later described as a *sudden impulse*, Rickenbacker kicked over his rudder and aimed his nose-mounted machineguns into the side of the Drachen by flying directly at it. As he flew within 100 feet of the large gas-filled bag, he stitched it from nose to tail with his guns, pulling away

to climb for another pass only at the last moment. The second pass wasn't necessary. As he nosed upward for altitude, a sudden flash of heat chased him upward, illuminated in the darkening skies by brilliant flashes of yellow and orange. It was victory #26 for America's *Ace of Aces*.

It would be his last, not because another man would replace him after a deadly crash, but because twelve days later World War I came to an end.

As a pilot Captain Rickenbacker embodied all of the best to be found in men like Raoul Lufbery and Frank Luke, then blended it into his own unique character. During World War I he possessed all of the fierce independence and unorthodox military bearing that marked fighter pilots as a *different breed*. In the years after the war he came to illustrate the maturity and stability those young fighters could grow into as our Nation's young Army Air Service matured to become the U.S. Air Force.

**If ever there lived the epitome of the term "*All-American Hero*," it surely would have been .....**



**E d w a r d V e r n o n R i c k e n b a c k e r**



*"It is not old-fashioned to wave and love the flag of our country or to worship God in heaven. Let us acknowledge and be grateful for the blessings of freedom that God has given us. Let us dedicate our lives to the perpetuation of the American principles of freedom with confidence. Let us stop and analyze ourselves to find out what life means to us.*

*"Let us therefore pray every night for the strength and guidance to inspire in others the gratitude, the love, the dedication that we owe our beloved country for the sake of our posterity.*

*"Then, and only then, can we say when the candle of life burns low*

*"--Thank God, I have given my best to the land that has given so much to me."*



## Little Eddie

When Eddie Rickenbacker wrote at the close of his 1967 autobiography how much his country had given him—he was a hero, a successful entrepreneur, and a wealthy man. It was not these things to which he referred, however. Rickenbacker was a self-made man, working hard to achieve everything he came to do or possess. The United States of America had afforded him very little beyond the one thing that made all the difference. Eddie Rickenbacker had been given OPPORTUNITY.



Born Edward Rickenbacher on October 8, 1890, in Columbus, Ohio, he was the third of eight children (one child died) of William and Elizabeth Rickenbacher who had immigrated to the United States from Switzerland. William built his own construction company working hard to support his growing family, but there was never a surplus of anything in the Rickenbacher household. William constructed the family home himself on the outskirts of Columbus, but there was no electricity, indoor plumbing, or heat. Young Eddie grew up in poverty, helping his mother and siblings to tend the garden that surrounded the house to provide the basic necessities of life.

There was little in young Eddie's early days to indicate he would some day become one of our Nation's all-time great Americans. He later admitted that he smoked at the age of 5, and started his own neighborhood gang shortly thereafter...called The Horsehead Gang. Of course a neighborhood gang in 1890s Columbus, Ohio, was not the same kind of organization one finds today. While the mischievous group of youngsters did engage in some nefarious activities such as breaking all the globes of the gas-burning street lamps along Miller Avenue, the organization was more of a loose-knit fraternity of young boys seeking to find their own brand of adventure.

Eddie later often recounted how, at the age of eight, he and his Horsehead Gang had improvised their own "roller coaster" by riding a steel cart down the 100-foot incline of a local gravel pit. Quickly Eddie learned that adventure comes with danger and often pain. The cart flipped, then rolled over the young boy, bruising him from head to toe. One wheel cut his leg to the bone. It was Eddie's first scar and his first brush with death.

Eddie's entrepreneurial prowess also emerged at an early age. He entered the world of business even before he started school, primarily, he later admitted, to earn money to buy Bull Durham tobacco so he could smoke like his older brother William. His first job consisted of selling bones (they were ground up for fertilizer) and other *junk* to a neighborhood collector. Eddie approached his first job with the same critical eye and capitalistic nature that years later enabled him to build an airline. As his business grew he enlisted other neighborhood kids, paying them a percentage to bring him the collectibles and then selling them to his own middleman.

As the collection grew, Eddie pondered ways to more easily move his stock from place to place. At the age of 9 he saw his first automobile, which set in motion the search for his own vehicle. He found the solution one day while watching a lady push her infant around in a stroller. Shortly thereafter Eddie developed his own pushcart, a wide board that moved easily over a frame containing four rubber-tired baby-carriage wheels. With this he could easily cover large areas to find and collect bones for the business. Years later when a more mature Rickenbacker shared the story of this early vehicle with businessmen from the Chevrolet Company, the idea was revived and America's Soap Box Derby was born.

*"What a wonderful childhood we had! Of far greater value than mere riches was the opportunity to work together, play together, learn together and produce together, all under the loving yet strict Old World guidance of our parents.*

*"How many children in America today, I wonder, are blessed with the opportunity to see the food they eat develop from tiny seeds placed in the moist spring earth? We little Rickenbachers enjoyed that privilege to the fullest extent."*

*"My father died when I was twelve years old.*

*"I didn't have to be told what we were up against. The day after my father's funeral I didn't go to school--I went to work.*

*"The night he passed I changed from a boy to a man."*

## **Becoming a Man**

The last words Eddie had heard from his father were, *"Eddie, you're a lucky boy to be born when you were. There are a lot of new things in the making, and you ought to be ready to have a hand in them."* On the following day William Rickenbacher suffered the accident that put him in a coma and caused his death a few days later. He was buried in an unmarked grave at a local church cemetery.

Young Eddie was determined to have a hand in things, beginning with the support of his large family. The problem, he realized, would be getting his mother to consent to his leaving school to take a job. The solution was one that would serve him well throughout his life: "The only answer to that was to get a job first, THEN to ask for permission."

In 1904 child labor laws forbade the employment of children unless they were 14 years old and had finished the eighth grade. Eddie lied about his age and school experience, and went to work. It

was six 12-hour night shifts at the Federal Glass Factory, but after one week Eddie came home with his pay...three dollars, and handed it intact to his mother. He later said it was the proudest moment of his life.

The frugality that marked Rickenbacher's later life was evident in his early days. Every evening he walked two miles to work at 4:30 p.m., then walked home after his twelve-hour shift. To have ridden the street car would have cost a nickel, and the Rickenbacher household needed every penny. During his lunch breaks, young Eddie learned the art of intricate glass blowing from other employees and used his time to create glass flowers to take home for his mother.

After a few weeks of night work, Eddie left the glass factory for a day job at the Buckeye Steel Casting Company. His workday lessened by one hour and his pay increased to six dollars a week, every penny of which went home. Quickly young Eddie matured, losing interest in the Horsehead Gang and spending his free hours fixing up the family home. And though the family income came almost exclusively from the weekly paychecks he earned, Eddie never thought of it as his own money. He was thrilled every Sunday during the summer when his mother gave him a quarter of his own, hard-earned money to enjoy a street car fare to Olentangy Park where the remaining 20 cents would buy him three amusement rides and a box of Cracker Jacks.

Eddie worked for three months at the casting company, and then moved on to a job capping bottles at the local brewery, and then a job putting heels on shoes. The latter position not only provided the family income, but gave the fourteen-year old boy a new trade that enabled him to improve the repairs he had been making for years on the shoes of his brothers and sisters.

When winter weather halted Eddie's Sunday trips to the park, he began using his free Sunday afternoons and twenty-five cent allowance for a more personal purpose. Eddie had always been interested in art, but the small allowance wasn't sufficient for any real art training. So Eddie turned towards sculpture, working for a local cemetery monument maker. At first all he did was polish the stones with water and sandstone, but along the way he learned some of the techniques in the process of engraving. Of all the accomplishments in his long life, the one that he said gave him the most pride, came during this period. Eddie carved out a large, white marble stone with the image of a Bible on it, the word "FATHER" at the top and an inscription below. Today in a small church cemetery in Columbus, Ohio, visitors to the grave of William Rickenbacher can still see the greatest accomplishment of our Nation's greatest aviator of all time.

In his first two years of manhood Eddie Rickenbacher matured rapidly through hard work, frugal living, and a deep sense of personal responsibility. Along the way he developed an inner character that would enable him to become the All-American hero. His philosophy was simple:

- If it needs to be done, do it **FIRST**, and then ask for permission.
- Success comes through hard work.
- When you don't enjoy your work, find something else to do. *"If I didn't like what I was doing or if another pursuit offered greater challenge or advantages, I acted immediately, without fear of the future. I have never been afraid to quit."*
- No one owes you anything. Eddie, despite the family's poverty, the tragic loss of his father, and the difficulties of his day, never felt his family, his community or his country, owed him anything.



*"I have worked hard and lived under pressure since I was a boy; I always have, and I always will.*

*"Procedures do not make the man. Only the man himself can make himself what he is, by taking full advantage of the excellent raw material supplied to him by God."*

## **Fast Eddie**

Eddie Rickenbacker is often remembered as a man with a fascination for fast cars and airplanes. The view is rather shortsighted. Eddie's interest wasn't in the vehicle so much as it was with the power that propelled it. Perhaps this should serve those who remember Eddie as an example to remember the man, not so much for what he did, but for the character that drove him to become all that he became, and to achieve all that he accomplished.

By the time Eddie was fifteen years old the internal combustion engine had become the focus of his attention. A serious accident laid Eddie up for several weeks, a period without work and without pay that might have caused a lesser man to pity his misfortune and fall into despair. For Rickenbacher, by his own admission, it was the most fortunate accident of his life. During those long weeks of introspection, Eddie Rickenbacker began putting direction to his future. When he had recovered enough to return to work, it was with a pay cut. For seventy-five cents a day he became an employee of Evans Garage, one of the city's first automotive repair businesses.



That same year Eddie enrolled in the International Correspondence School in Scranton, Pennsylvania, rising at 4 a.m. to complete his studies before going off to work. He wrangled a job at the nearby Frayer-Miller auto factory that was turning out one car a month, and soon a chain of events was set in motion that would make Eddie Rickenbacher a household name.

In 1906 Eddie rode with Lee Frayer in the Vanderbilt Cup Race on Long Island. By the time he was nineteen years old he was a full-fledged racing driver, facing off against some of the most famous drivers of his day. In 1910 Rickenbacher placed first in eight races in Omaha. The same year he experienced his first racing accident at Red Oak, Iowa. In the years to follow, he would survive many more. In 1911 Eddie was a relief driver for Lee Frayer at a 500-mile race being held at Indianapolis, a track to which he would return again and again; a track he would one day own.

When Eddie wasn't racing he was tinkering with engines and selling cars. By 1914, 20 miles an hour was considered fast and dangerous on the highways. That same year Eddie Rickenbacher was driving a Blitzen Benz over the sands of Daytona Beach to set a world record 134 miles per hour.

From 1906 until he ended his career as a race driver in 1916, Rickenbacker was the frontrunner against names like Ralph De Palma and Barney Oldfield. He attributed that success to his knowledge of engines, an understanding that helped him coax the very best out of each. Eddie could simply listen to an engine and diagnose its problems or gauge its potential. It was an ability that served him well not only as a driver, but later, as a pilot.

The flashy young race driver found two new elements in his sport. The first was a middle name. Eddie had always thought the name "Edward Rickenbacher" was a little plain. He liked the look of the letter "V" and inserted it as a middle initial, then coined the name "Vernon" to go with it.

The other thing racing gave Eddie was a great sense of sportsmanship. Despite his enviable record, he quickly realized he couldn't win EVERY time. Rather than lose his temper when things went wrong, he came to grips with the reality that you win some times, you lose some times. But whatever the outcome, you continued to smile.

*"Try like hell to win, but don't cry if you lose."*

*"Who does not prefer to meet a person who is smiling?"*

*"Always conduct yourself as a gentleman. If you do not, you not only reflect discredit upon yourself, but also upon automobile racing, the means by which you earn a livelihood."*

*"Here in America failure is not the end of the world. If you have the determination, you can come back from failure and succeed."*

*"I have often been asked how I managed to maintain my sanity, much less resist a feeling of bitterness and vengefulness during the ridiculous and frustrating experience that befell me in the winter of 1916-1917. All I can say is that the good Lord gave me a sense of humor, and somehow I held onto it."*

## The German Spy

The summer racing season of 1916 ended with the advent of winter, and the poor son of Swiss immigrants had enjoyed his best year yet, earning an incredible salary of \$35,000 a year. The name "Rickenbacher" was recognized in virtually every home in America. As the 26-year old racing celebrity boarded the *St. Louis* for an Atlantic crossing to England, he had no idea just how many problems his famous name could create abroad.



On the uneventful voyage he met two friendly men who went to great lengths to engage Eddie in conversation, a pleasant diversion from the long crossing. The unsuspecting racecar driver was totally unprepared for the conversation that would engage him upon debarking at Liverpool.

"*Rickenbacher*," groused an English sergeant at customs. "*What's your name?*" Eddie was caught totally off guard, especially since the sergeant had just called him by name, but he patiently repeated it for the man. "*What is your purpose in England?*" the interrogation continued.

Rickenbacher started to explain his trip was for the purpose of purchasing British racing cars, but was interrupted. After a fiery battery of questions, the American tourist was taken to a nearby cabin where he found the two gentlemen who had engaged him in so much conversation during the voyage. The British agents had a dossier on the American race car hero with the Germanic sounding name, that traced his ancestry all the way back to Germany. Rickenbacher was forced to remove all his clothing, which was then searched thoroughly. When at last the agents were convinced he carried nothing dangerous, he was allowed to dress and then was returned to the ship. He was being denied entry into England, which was by now very much at war with Germany.

Rickenbacher was allowed to leave the ship on Christmas Day, but only under the watchful eyes of two British agents. It was the beginning of a "cat and mouse" game that marked his entire visit to England, and then followed him home.

Before Rickenbacher came home when the United States entered the war early in 1917, he spent most of his time watching the airplanes of the Royal Air Force flying past his hotel window from their field near the Brooklands Speedway. During these days of inactivity, Rickenbacher became increasingly fascinated with the concept of aerial combat, and wished he could himself mount an airplane to fight among this new breed of warrior.

On February 3, 1917, Germany declared unrestricted submarine warfare on the high seas, and all American citizens abroad were given five days to leave. Rickenbacher, who had already been repeatedly interrogated, strip-searched, fingerprinted and registered by British Intelligence, submitted himself to another two-hour interrogation before he was finally allowed to sail for home.

Upon boarding the ship he encountered an old friend who asked him, *"Eddie, have you heard the news? We've got a big German spy on board. That's why the boat is delayed."*

*"Yes,"* Rickenbacher said with a laugh that was not entirely sincere, *"That big German spy--that's ME!"*

Despite his shoddy treatment by the British, Rickenbacher firmly believed that the United States had ample reason and responsibility to commit itself to the war in Europe. On the return voyage home he developed the political position he would espouse upon arrival: "The Three M's--Men, Money, Munitions," for the liberation of Europe.

He also thought often of the airmen of the RAF he'd seen in London, and developed his own philosophy on the importance of air power. Racecar drivers knew engines better than anyone, and were well acquainted with risk. Rickenbacher's idea was to suggest an American squadron of combat aviators, composed of volunteer racecar drivers. He was sure his circle of friends would quickly fill every available slot.

In the weeks before the United States declared war on Germany on April 6, 1917, Eddie Rickenbacher was quick to urge his country to action in speeches wherever he went. Ironically, everywhere he traveled, he was followed by a shadow. The British government was still concerned about their *German spy*. The cat and mouse game became increasingly annoying, and Eddie was rapidly losing his sense of humor with the situation. He traveled to Cleveland. So did his shadow. Returning home to Columbus, Eddie would walk down the street, only to see the reflection of the not-too-distant Intelligence agent in the store windows. On to Dayton, Chicago, and then out to the West Coast the man and his tail traveled. While in Los Angeles Rickenbacher had finally had enough.

While walking down the street one afternoon, Rickenbacher deliberately baited his tail into close proximity, and then ducked into an alley. The agent followed too close on Eddie's heels to duck when the *German spy* stopped suddenly and turned on him. *"When is your government going to learn that I'm not the Crown Prince of Germany?"* Rickenbacher demanded.

*"I was just going to tell you,"* the agent responded, *"my government is now satisfied that you are all right. Thank you for the ocean voyage and the wonderful trip across your continent."* And with that, the agent bowed and faded in the distance.

If the British government was frustrating to Eddie Rickenbacher, so too could be the military establishment of his own country. Eddie was excited about the prospects of an American aero squadron composed of former racecar drivers. Already he had found a list of eager volunteers that included a Who's Who of the race track, men as well known and widely respected as the famous Ralph DePalma. Rickenbacher took his idea to the top, Brigadier General George D. Squier who

commanded the Army's Signal Corps, the branch responsible for aviation. Rickenbacher laid out his case for the squadron, and then was stunned by the response.

*"We don't believe," stated one officer, "that it would be wise for a pilot to have any knowledge of engines and mechanics. Airplane engines are always breaking down, and a man who knew a great deal about engines would know if his engine wasn't functioning correctly and be hesitant about going into combat." It was typical of the strange and twisted logic traditional Army officers would employ for the next two decades as military aviation fought for its place in the affairs of the world.*



For his own part, Rickenbacher was determined to become an American fighter pilot; despite the fact that he had also learned in his meetings with the Signal Corps that the Army only recruited college graduates twenty-five years old or younger. (Rickenbacher had only attended school through the 7th grade, and was now nearly twenty-seven years old.) Never in his distinguished lifetime could such obstacles hold back Edward Vernon Rickenbacher. Somehow, we would find a way.

*"Opportunities? They are stored in abundance wherever we look. They are waiting to be tapped by anyone with imagination, imagination backed by faith in our freedom of enterprise and fortified by the courage to try."*

## **Rickenbacher, the Pilot**

Eddie Rickenbacher was ready for opportunity when in May he got the call informing him of the secret sailing of the first American soldiers for the shores of France. With only 24 hours to make his decision he turned his back on a \$35,000 a year racing career to be among the first American force that would comprise the Three M's he'd spent weeks promoting. He sailed from New York as a Sergeant, assigned to duties as a driver, not the flier he longed to become. But he also knew that opportunities often started with a small door, which opened to greater entrances. With the same brash determination that motivated him to seek a promotion to Sergeant First Class on his first day, he would find a way to get into Army aviation.

John J. Pershing's Expeditionary Force arrived in France on June 26th, and Eddie Rickenbacher dutifully performed his role as a glorified chauffeur. Contrary to the colorful media reports of the day, he never drove for General Pershing himself. He did meet and drive for another American officer that Eddie came to love and respect, and whose influence certainly helped Eddie achieve his goals. The first time Rickenbacher met Colonel William *Billy* Mitchell who commanded the Army's Air Service, the officer's car had broken down. Quickly the engine-wise Rickenbacher had the Colonel back on the road; and thereafter, Mitchell frequently requested Rickenbacher as a driver. When the time was ripe, Rickenbacher approached the Colonel with the subject of his desire to be a pilot.





*"Eddie," Mitchell asked him, "do you really want to fly?"*

*"Yes, sir," Rickenbacher responded. "Anybody can drive this car. I'd appreciate the opportunity to learn to fly."*

*"I'll see what I can do," the great pioneer of American aviation promised.*

A few days later Rickenbacher received orders to report for the physical exam required for pilot training. The doctor who examined Eddie was an old friend who not only pronounced him physically fit to fly, but wrote down Rickenbacher's birth date as October 8, 1892. On paper at least, the would-be pilot was now under the Army's age limit of twenty-five. It was a magic number for Eddie. Seventeen days of training and twenty-five hours in the air netted him pilot's wings and a commission as a first lieutenant in the U.S. Army's Signal Corps.

With shiny wings on his chest and a silver bar on his collar, Lieutenant Rickenbacher now had to keep his part of a bargain that had helped him get into pilot training. In September he reported for duty as the engineering officer at Issoudun under the command of his old friend, Jim Miller.

The German spy suspicions never completely faded away. Indeed, shortly after arriving in France, Rickenbacher returned to his billets one day to find his roommate rifling through his belongings in search of anything that would expose the American soldier's loyalty to the Kaiser. At Issoudun Rickenbacher recruited a transportation officer with the surname Spiegel. Ray Miller's adjutant was a man named Wiedenbach, and Wiedenbach's assistant was named Tittel. The Germanization of the field was complete when a new commander was assigned to the field to replace Miller, a Major named Carl Tooley Spaatz.

Rickenbacher took great joy in the fact that the field at Issoudun was run by five American officers named: Spaatz, Wiedenbach, Tittel, Rickenbacher and Spiegel. A few months later Eddie wrote a letter to a friend back home; wherein, in a joking manner, he replaced the "h" in his name with a "k." When word of that letter reached the American media, headlines proclaimed that the now famous American Ace had changed the Germanic spelling of his name to snub the Kaiser. As a result, the name Rickenbacher was forever changed to Rickenbacker...not only for himself but also for all the other members of the Rickenbacher clan.

The shiny pilot's wings and duty as the Issoudun Field's engineering officer were not fulfillment of Eddie's dream, but a stepping-stone to his ultimate goal of becoming a fighter pilot. Throughout the fall of 1917, he watched the new pilots arrive at the field for training and longed to be one of them. These pilots themselves had little use for the engineering officer, and Eddie Rickenbacker endured to some degree the snobbish deference later experienced by Frank Luke. Behind his back these young Ivy Leaguers joked about their Swiss-German engineering officer who spoke with a thick accent and who had only a grammar school education. The five top officers at the field were often referred to as *"the five German spies,"* though certainly not to their faces.

Unlike Frank Luke who withdrew when he underwent such acrimony, Lieutenant Rickenbacker took it in stride and maintained considerable respect for these young men who would soon be going into battle. His respect for them, however, couldn't prevent a little revenge now and then. The muddy airfield was strewn with rocks that often flew up to break the wooden propellers of airplanes as they taxied across the field. One day Lieutenant Rickenbacker requisitioned a hundred buckets and soon thereafter the field was filled with bright young college graduates bent over in the mud to pick up rocks. The chore did little to further endear Rickenbacker to his young charges, but their complaints were, in his own words, "music to my ears."



## **The Hat In The Ring Squadron**



In January 1918 the first group of American pilots at Issoudun completed their training and headed for gunnery school. Their departure was a sad moment for Lieutenant Rickenbacker, not because he realized that this was the last step before they would be thrust into combat, but because he was not going to be going with them.

His pleas to Major Spaatz were fruitless. The commander of the field at Issoudun felt Rickenbacker was too important to the work being done to train these new pilots. Once again the impetuous Eddie Rickenbacker found his own means of creating opportunity. Battling a cold and fatigued from his recent work, he was able to convince the school's surgeon that he was ill. After two weeks of recuperation at the hospital, Rickenbacker returned to point out to Major Spaatz that the field had run perfectly well without him.

*"I'm onto your little game, Rickenbacher," Spaatz said bluntly. Then he paused, smiled and continued, "If your heart's set on going to Cazeau (the location of aerial gunnery school), you're no damn good to be around here. So good luck."*

Two months later Rickenbacker reported for duty at the new 94th Aero Squadron under the command of Major John Huffner. The 94th and 95th were the first all-American fighter squadrons to reach the front lines and would certainly be the first to see combat action. Joining Rickenbacker as a charter member of the group were pilots Douglas Campbell, James Meissner, Edgar Tobin, Edwin Green, Hobart Baker, and Joseph Eastman. The excitement of the group was heightened by the presence of one more officer, the legendary Major Raoul Lufbery.

On the morning of March 6, Major Lufbery announced the first flight and selected two eager pilots to join him: Lieutenants Rickenbacker and Campbell. It was the first mission by American pilots of an all-American fighter squadron over enemy lines. Fortunately, the mission was flown without incident or combat...fortunate because the French Nieuport airplanes that took off from the aerodrome at Villeneuve 15 miles from enemy lines were unarmed. The American fighter squadrons had airplanes, but their guns hadn't yet arrived.

When the mission was complete and Rickenbacker and Campbell shared their experience with the other excited pilots, they talked of all the German Archie they had seen, but not a single airplane had shared the skies with them that morning.

"You sure there weren't any other airplanes up there today, Rick?" Lufbery asked with a chuckle.

"Not a one!" Eddie replied.

"Listen," Lufbery said, not in contradiction but more like a father preparing his son for the future, "one formation of five Spads crossed under us before we passed the lines. Another flight of five Spads went by about fifteen minutes later, 500 yards away. Damn good thing they weren't Boches. And there were four German Albatroses ahead of us when we turned back and another enemy two-seater closer to us than that. You must learn to look around." Then Lufbery walked over to Rickenbacker's plane and poked his finger through a hole in the canvas of a wing, then another in the tail, and yet another that had been punched through both wings only a foot from the cockpit. The

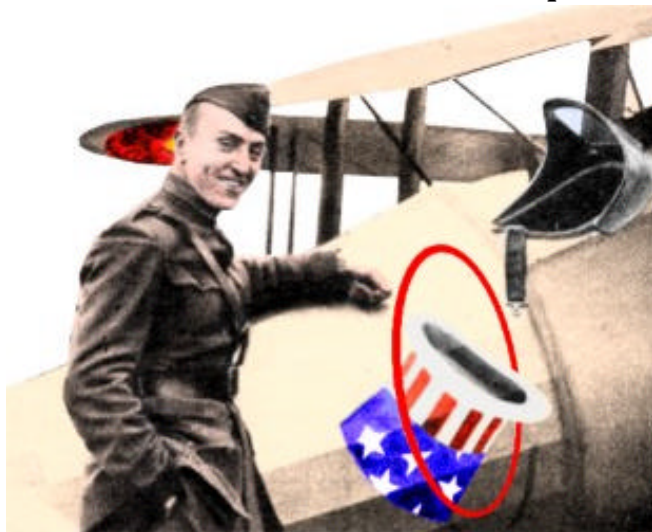
lesson was not wasted on Rickenbacker or any of the other young pilots. They were fortunate to learn from a veteran like Lufbery, and over the following weeks they continued to hang on his every word.

Two days later Rickenbacker's old friend Captain James Miller, commander now of the 95th Aero Squadron, led the first full squadron patrol over enemy lines...again albeit, without armament. Miller was forced by engine problems to land at Coincy and hitch a ride back to the aerodrome. Returning on March 10 to Coincy, he picked up his repaired Nieuport and flew to Coligny to replace it with one of the newer Spads. Flying his new airplane over the Rheims sector, he was attacked by two German planes and shot down behind the lines, the first American casualty.

The following day Lieutenant Paul Baer of the 103rd, who would hold the title Ace of Aces following Major Lufbery and before being shot down himself, shot down an enemy aircraft in the same vicinity, giving the new American 1st Pursuit Group its first victory.

During this period while the men of the squadron were awaiting arrival of machine guns for their Nieuports, the pilots often flew with their French counterparts just to gain experience. They chaffed at the bit for the armament that would allow them to engage enemy planes and hid their lack of weapons from the French who would have been horrified to learn the American aviators who accompanied them couldn't fire a shot in combat. It was also during this period that the men of the squadrons sought ways to distinguish themselves from each other.

As the men of the 94th Aero Squadron kicked about ideas for a Squadron logo or insignia,



Major Huffner suggested using the quickly recognizable red, white, and blue stovepipe hat of Uncle Sam. Flight Surgeon Lieutenant Walters reminded the men of the custom of throwing ones hat into a ring as a call to battle. Thus was born the famous "Hat in the Ring" emblem, and former architect Lieutenant Johnny Wentworth was tasked with drawing it. Over the following days the new logo began appearing on each of the airplanes of the 94th Aero Squadron. In late March and the early days of April, the Hat In The Ring challenge gained some teeth with the arrival, at last, of machine guns. Armed and ready for war on April 7, the squadron was moved to Toul, 18 miles from the scene of the ground war.

For years American pilots had flown with the French as members of the *Escadrille*. Some of them even became Aces. After the formation of the 1st Pursuit Group its pilots had flown all-American patrols scoring both victories and losses. But the first OFFICIAL COMBAT patrol ever flown by the precursor to the United States Air Force occurred on April 14 when the newly armed Nieuports of the 94th Aero Squadron took off from the aerodrome at Toul.

At 6 a.m. that morning Captain Peterson and Lieutenants Eddie Rickenbacker and Reed Chambers took off for a two-hour patrol. Standing by at the field were Lieutenants Douglas Campbell and Alan Winslow. Rickenbacker prowled the fog-shrouded skies looking for trouble, the bright red, white, and blue emblem shining from the fuselage of his own Newport. To his disappointment, no German pilot accepted the challenge, and he returned empty-handed. He was writing his after-action report when the field phone rang. Two enemy airplanes were approaching Toul. Before he could don his own flight suit and climb into the cockpit, Campbell and Winslow were airborne. Minutes later a

single-seat Pfalz crashed in flames near the aerodrome, victim to Lieutenant Campbell's guns. Lieutenant Winslow drove the other enemy craft, an albatross, out of control and down to the ground. They were the first two victories scored by an ALL-American Squadron and set the pace for the historic events of the following months of the war.

The success of that day was further highlighted the following morning when Brigadier General Liggett, Commander of the A.E.F.'s First Army, personally visited the men of the 94th Aero Squadron. Joining him was the Chief of Army Air Service, Colonel William Billy Mitchell.



The excitement of that first combat patrol, coupled with the double victory of Lieutenants Campbell and Winslow was quickly tempered by two weeks of frustration for Eddie Rickenbacker and the other would-be aces of the 94th Aero Squadron. In the weeks before that first *Hat In The Ring* victory, impatient weeks of waiting for machine guns for the squadron's Nieuports, Lieutenant Paul Baer of the 103rd Aero Squadron claimed four victories. On May 21 the famed *Red Baron* was shot down and killed, and two days later Lieutenant Baer got his fifth victory to become the first ace of the American Army Air Service. (This distinction is often erroneously credited to Eddie Rickenbacker.)

In the matter of intra-squadron rivalry, the 103rd now had 14 victories compared to the 94th Aero Squadron's two. Besides Lieutenant Baer's role as the first American Ace, Major William Thaw of the 103rd had three victories and Captain James Hall had two.

On the same day Baer became an ace, Major Lufbery did his best to raise the score for his squadron when he attacked an enemy bi-plane, only to return empty handed after firing just five rounds. The 94th Aero Squadron's Nieuports had received their guns, but all too often the pilots still found themselves flying unarmed. Time after time the guns jammed at the most inopportune moments. This mechanical failure was second in severity only to the tendency of the canvas covering the Newport's wings to shred when the plane was put into a steep dive. Both equipment handicaps were frustrating; either could be fatal.

## First Blood

April 29

The pilots of the *Hat In The Ring* Squadron poked their heads out the door of their quarters at 6:00 a.m. to check the weather. Since Major Lufbery's aborted mission six days earlier, it had rained almost incessantly. For several days not a single mission had been mounted. Once again, disappointment hushed the normal banter of the eager pilots over breakfast.

Shortly after noon the sun finally broke through the clouds, and hope mounted for some activity. Rickenbacker was scheduled for an afternoon flight with Captain Hall who had been transferred from the 103rd shortly after his second victory. The captain's experience and combat record had impressed Rickenbacker, and he was excited to be teamed with the man who had become a friend and mentor. They were standing by in their flight suits when, at five o'clock, a call came through from French headquarters at Beaumont to alert the pilots at the aerodrome that an enemy two-seater was heading their way. Five minutes later the two American pilots were airborne and weaving among the scattered clouds looking for the intruder.

Rickenbacker spotted it first, a small moving speck in the distance. He dipped his wings towards Captain Hall to get his attention, and then darted back and forth towards the enemy aircraft to point his flight leader in the proper direction. The frustration continued to mount as Captain Hall kept flying straight ahead towards enemy lines, instead of breaking off to pursue the distant invader. Finally Rickenbacker broke away. He'd go after the enemy airplane alone.

Coaxing his engine to maximum speed, Rickenbacker sped closer towards the distant airplane, carefully maneuvering his own bi-plane for maximum tactical advantage in the attack. The enemy plane stayed its course, apparently unaware that it was now practically in the gun sights of the American pilot. Rickenbacker smiled to himself. The French observers who had phoned in the report had been wrong; it wasn't a two-seater. It was a large, three-seat plane with big guns pointing in all directions.

Rickenbacker closed in, zooming upwards for the kill, his finger tensing on the triggers of his own guns. The fuselage was directly in front of him. This was going to be all too easy. Squinting across the nose of his Nieuport he prepared to release a deadly volley when his eyes noticed the circular cocard painted under each wing. There was no wonder now why the big airplane hadn't been concerned about his presence. It was a FRENCH airplane!

Rickenbacker cursed his folly as he veered away. No wonder he couldn't get Captain Hall to break away. The veteran pilot must have realized the distant speck was an ally. Now he probably was laughing his head off at Rickenbacker's *rookie* mistake.

Scanning the distant skies over the German lines, Rickenbacker searched for Captain Hall. In the distance he could see the unmistakable puffs indicating Archie beyond the lines. The German ground forces were shooting at something in the air, and that something could only be Captain Hall. Rickenbacker quickly sped that direction. As the range closed he found his mentor calmly doing acrobatic maneuvers over the German batteries, dodging their sharpshooters and taunting them to waste even more ammunition. Captain Hall was, in Rickenbacker's opinion, the epitome of the American fighter pilot.



As Rickenbacker's Nieuport approached, Hall veered away from the enemy fire to join his partner. Apparently he had been waiting for Rick to realize the error of his earlier zeal and had been amusing himself more than a mile inside enemy territory with his loops, barrels, side-slips and spins directly over the heads of the gunners on the ground. Now Captain Hall changed direction and began climbing into the sun. Rickenbacker followed close behind, surmising that the veteran had a good reason for the maneuver. Minutes later he realized his assumption was indeed correct. An enemy scout was flying towards the duo's position, and this time the sleek lines of a German Pfalz were unmistakable.

The enemy plane was on a course that would take it directly into the path of the two Americans and Rickenbacker hung close to Hall, hidden by the fading sun to the west. When Captain Hall put his plane into a dive on the Pfalz below, Rickenbacker wisely stayed above to cut off any attempted retreat.

The enemy pilot saw Rickenbacker first and pulled back on the stick to begin a rapid climb for battle. Suddenly Hall opened up with his own guns, and the German pilot realized for the first time that the odds were two-to-one against him. He lost all heart for the fight and started to turn for home.



It was exactly what Rickenbacker expected—the move he had positioned his Nieuport to prevent. As the Pfalz went into a steep dive, Rickenbacker was on his tail and lining up his guns. When he was within 150 yards he pulled the triggers, sending a stream of deadly bullets into the enemy airplane's tail. This time there were no jams as the machine gun hammered the Pfalz. Rickenbacker pulled out of his dive and leveled to watch as the doomed enemy circled slowly out of control and crashed into the forest below. Captain Hall had his third victory, Rickenbacker his first. More importantly, the 94th Aero Squadron had moved two notches closer to the 103rd Squadron's impressive tally.

World War I aerial victories were counted differently, depending upon which allied nation a pilot flew for. The earliest pilots flew either for the French or the British. British pilots used a fractionalized counting system (if two pilots shot down one airplane or balloon, each got a half of the victory); while the French counted a downed airplane or balloon as a full victory for each person involved. If two, 2-seater French airplanes (with both a pilot and observer in each) combined to shoot down one enemy aircraft, each man in each plane was credited with the victory (4 credits for one downed enemy).

When the U.S. Army Air Service began operation, its squadrons opted for the more liberal French count. Under this method, the Pfalz shot down by Captain Hall and Lieutenant Rickenbacker on April 29th counted as one victory for each. By extension then, it also counted as TWO victories for their squadron.

During World War II the Army Air Corps reverted to the WWI British model of fractionalizing each victory. Under that system, two pilots involved in a single shoot-down would each get credited with a HALF victory.

## ***In Pursuit of First Place***

At the beginning of May 1918, all but one of the 19 American aerial victories had been scored by either the 103rd Aero Squadron (14 victories) or the 94th Aero Squadron (4 victories). The only Ace among them remained Paul Baer. Over the following thirty-one days the pilots of the *Hat In The Ring* were determined to try to become the leading squadron in the new Army Air Service.

The month started on an ominous note when Major Lufbery and Lieutenant Rickenbacker teamed up for the first mission of the new month. The only victory scored that day would be the loss of an American airplane, not that of an enemy. When the engine on Lufbery's Nieuport failed, the American Ace of Aces (he had achieved 16 victories with the Lafayette Escadrille), crashed and rolled. Fortunately, the Major survived unscathed.

The following day Lieutenant James Meissner was flying with a three-plane patrol when he and his comrades attacked three enemy bi-planes. Meissner netted the fifth victory for the 94th Aero Squadron, but almost at the loss of his own life. Following his vanquished foe in a steep dive, the entire left, upper wing of his Nieuport was stripped of its canvas while he was well beyond friendly lines. Only Meissner's skill as a pilot enabled him to carefully nurse his airplane across the lines to crash in friendly territory.

On May 3 Captain David Peterson and Lieutenants Chapman and Loomis engaged five enemy scout planes. Loomis' machine guns jammed; though the intrepid pilot continued to engage the enemy as if he were still armed in order to render some confusion to the dogfight. Captain Peterson scored one victory, as did Lieutenant Chapman, though the latter victory was unconfirmed. Worse, before the battle ended, Chapman was himself shot down. Later that same day, Lieutenant Winslow was



taking off for a mission when his engine failed causing him to crash. In the first three days of the month, the 94th had scored two confirmed victories while losing two aircraft to mechanical failure and a third to enemy bullets.

On May 5 the 1st Pursuit Group headquarters was established at Gengault, France where the 95th Pursuit Squadron arrived after aerial gunnery school, and the 94th Aero Squadron was moved to the new aerodrome. From that date on the two squadrons remained together throughout the war, and the competition for first place became a 3-way race between the two squadrons of the 1st Pursuit Group and the 103rd Aero Squadron (3rd Pursuit Group).

Calamity continued to detract from the *Hat In The Ring* Squadron's efforts to overtake the 103rd for first place. Two days after moving to the aerodrome at Gengault, Captain Hall and Lieutenants Rickenbacker and Eddie Green attacked three enemy scouts near Preny. Rickenbacker destroyed a Fokker monoplane, though it wasn't confirmed or credited until six months later, and Green shot down an enemy Pfalz that was never confirmed or credited. Captain Hall dove on an enemy Fokker so intent on victory he did not notice the fabric stripping away from his wings. The problem was compounded when a dud anti-aircraft shell further damaged his wing, and the popular pilot and well-known American author crashed behind the lines. Wounded, he was taken prisoner. He survived the war to write again, penning the popular book *Mutiny on the Bounty*, among others.

During yet another flight that same afternoon, Major Lufbery shot down an enemy scout plane (unconfirmed). Returning from a mission, Lieutenant James Meissner hit a hole while taxiing across the field and flipped his Nieuport over. By the day's end, none of the 94th's three victories had been confirmed or credited, and the squadron had lost two aircraft and one veteran pilot. The 1st Pursuit Group's 147th Aero Squadron also suffered its first casualty on this day when Private Henry Black, a member of the ground crew, was struck by lightning and killed.

On May 8 Lieutenant Paul Baer of the 103d had a double victory, destroying two enemy airplanes after a ten-minute dogfight and boosting his tally to seven victories. The next day the 94th Aero Squadron destroyed two more aircraft, but once again it was THEIR OWN. Captain Kenneth Marr and Lieutenant Thorne Taylor landed at the field from opposite directions and in the confusion, collided head-on sending both airplanes spinning. Fortunately both pilots walked away from their shattered Nieuports.



The *comedy of errors* was not confined to the 94th. On May 10 the 147th squadron, which had suffered its first casualty less than a week earlier to lightning, received its first type XXVIII Nieuports. Upon landing, one of the new airplanes sank in a mud hole, destroying the undercarriage. Two days later Lieutenant James Healy crashed on landing, destroying another of the new Nieuports. Though injured, once again the pilot survived.

During that second week of May, many missions were flown; and enemy aircraft attacked. Rickenbacker and two other pilots of the 94th engaged an enemy Fokker near Thiaucourt on May 11, but the results were inconclusive. On May 13 Lieutenant Campbell shot down an enemy single-seater while well inside German territory. The victory went unconfirmed. Finally on May 15, things began to improve. Captain David Peterson shot down two German bi-planes raising the 94th's tally to eight (not counting Rickenbacker's unconfirmed victory of May 6), and becoming the first pilot in the 94th to get a double victory in a single day. In the afternoon Captain Peterson, Captain Hall (MIA), and Lieutenants Rickenbacker, Meissner, and Charles Chapman (KIA) were presented the French

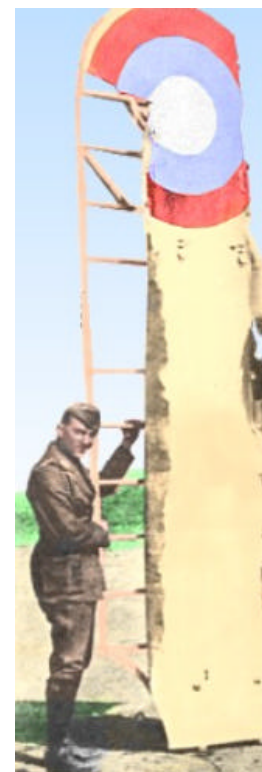
*Croix-De-Guerre* for their earlier victories. After an impressive ceremony Rickenbacker joined Major Lufbery and Colonel Billy Mitchell in a twenty-minute air show for the crowd. After the ceremony the new *hero* of the 94th, Captain Peterson, was transferred to the 147th Aero Squadron. Two days later he gave his new command its first aerial victory.

If the awards ceremony had been intended as an incentive, it certainly worked. When the ceremony was over Lieutenant Meissner grinned at Rickenbacker and said, *"I feel that 'Hate-the-Hun' feeling creeping over me. What do you say to going up and getting a Boche?"* Rickenbacker was more than ready, and the two took off shortly thereafter. They even found and attempted to engage two enemy aircraft but returned empty handed at the end of the day.

On May 17 Rick went hunting enemy airplanes with a vengeance. Climbing to a chilly 18,000 feet he shook off his discomfort to circle the skies well inside the enemy lines, crossing into Germany as far east as Metz. Patiently he clung to the ceiling as he scanned for a target. As the morning wore on, so too wore Eddie's deliberate patience. Down to less than an hour of fuel, disappointment began creeping in when at last he noted three German Albatrosses take off for a reconnaissance over the French lines. Rick remained high above as the three aircraft spread out, then pushed the stick forward to begin his dive on the trailing airplane. Without even checking his speed, he estimated that the dive had granted him as much as 200 miles per hour (top speed for the Nieuports was close to 120 mph). Without wavering he kept the nose pointed at his enemy and, when at last the quarry noted the hunter and went into his own steep dive, Rickenbacker stayed his course. Closing within 50 yards, Rickenbacker pulled the trigger and watched a stream of flaming bullets pierce the enemy airplane's back seat. The German pilot slumped over the controls and continued his dive to its conclusion on the ground.

Determined to follow his victim towards the ground, Rickenbacker maintained his own dive to the last minute, and then pulled back on the stick. There was a loud crash and for the first time he became aware of his own precarious situation. Looking to his right he was horrified to see that all the fabric of his upper wing had been ripped away. The Nieuport rolled to its side, and then began its own tailspin to doom. The other two German airplanes dove in to apply the coup de grace. Bullets whined around the cockpit as Rick fought the controls. He didn't begrudge the enemy for attacking his already wounded airplane, though he later said he was critical of their bad judgment in wasting ammunition on a plane that was already destroyed. Perhaps at last the enemy pilots recovered their good judgment, for with the Nieuport continuing to spin earthward, they at last broke off contact to continue their mission.

Having dropped 15,000 feet in a matter of minutes, Lieutenant Rickenbacker watched the ground spin dizzily towards him and wondered if he would survive the crash only to have his broken body imprisoned by the Germans waiting below. From less than 3,000 feet he could see people on the ground, watching his certain demise. The stick fought his hand as he tried to control the floundering Nieuport when, with a total disregard for the consequences, he pulled open the throttle. The sudden burst of speed leveled the airplane, and the rudder began responding to the stick. The enemy airplanes had vanished in the distance. Now it was only Rickenbacker and his desperate attempts to climb. It proved useless; with wind whipping through the barren right wing he could only manage a semi level flight at low altitude. Then the German Archie began, and explosions burst around him.



At less than 1,000 feet the Nieuport slipped across no man's land and into allied territory. With the engine running wide open, Rick came in for a landing. The Nieuport pancaked to the soft mud, destroyed beyond repair, but miraculously, Eddie Rickenbacker walked away. Almost as amazing, the dead pilot of the Albatross he had nearly given his life to destroy had fallen across the stick of his own in such a way that the doomed enemy plane had also glided across the lines to crash in France. Eddie's victory was verified, his third downed airplane (his second confirmed kill).

Despite such problems, the tide was turning for the young American pilots. The day after Rickenbacker's near-fatal combat mission, Lieutenant Doug Campbell attacked an enemy bi-plane near Verdun. When the *Hat In The Ring* pilot's guns jammed after a few bursts, the intrepid airman bluffed his way through a series of aerial maneuvers until he had cleared his guns to score his own second victory. Campbell caught up to his friend Rick the next day when he scored his third, again only after his guns jammed on the first assault and he had made a series of courageous maneuvers while working to free up his weapons.

Unreliable engines, fragile wings, and temperamental machine guns made fighting the German pilots difficult. The Nieuport 28 was fast and maneuverable, but its other drawbacks had caused the French and British air services to reject it. The fact that these airplanes were then passed off on the new United States Air Service reflects much of the greatest battle the early American combat pilots faced, not aerial combat against armed Germans, but a political war for recognition in the traditional halls of the U.S. military. American military war planners did not see air power as an important factor. A squadron would be formed on paper, then wait for weeks for the arrival of airplanes cast off by other air services, and then have to fly unarmed while awaiting a requisition of armament.

The French, the British, and the Germans worked hard to improve their airplanes, their weapons, and their aerial tactics. American pilots were assigned to squadrons, provided cast-off machines and materials, and expected to survive on their intrepid spirit alone. Before the war Rickenbacker had been stunned by the Army's response to his attempt to build a squadron from the ranks of racecar drivers. It had been scoffed at, largely because the Army felt a knowledge of engines would be detrimental to a pilot and temper their zeal in battle or make them hesitant to fly if an engine sounded less than up-to-par. Such sheer idiocy went even further and was more deadly. Rickenbacker always claimed he was happy to see a parachute unfurl beneath one of his victims. His war was against machines, not men. French and British pilots were also often known to have parachuted to safety from a shot up airplane. American pilots didn't even HAVE parachutes.

*"We air-fighters cannot understand why we cannot have parachutes fitted on our aeroplanes to give the doomed pilot one possible means of escape from this terrible death. Pilots sometimes laugh over the comic end of a comrade shot down in course of a combat. It is a callousness made possible by the continuous horrors of war. If he dies from an attack by an enemy it is taken as a matter of course. But to be killed through a stupid and preventable mistake puts the matter in a very different light."*

Eddie Rickenbacker  
Fighting the Flying Circus

The tragedy that befell the 94th Pursuit Squadron on May 19 brought Rickenbacker face to face with the parachute issue. While Doug Campbell was bagging his third victory, two German 2-seaters were engaged in a dogfight near the aerodrome with two green American pilots. When it

appeared that the enemy aircraft would escape the novice Americans, it was more than Major Lufbery could stand. The now famous pilot jumped into a nearby airplane and gave chase.

Lufbery made one round of the two machines as the ground crews watched from the distant American aerodrome. Suddenly he veered away as if to clear a jamb in his guns. Looping back into battle, enemy rounds raked his airplane, puncturing the fuel tank. The ground crews watched in horror as the flames spread, and Major Lufbery slid back along the fuselage of his burning plane towards the tail. Moments later, from a height of about 1,000 feet, America's first Ace of Aces leaped from his nearly incinerated Nieuport. The plane crashed in a field near a river, and it was later speculated that Lufbery was trying to leap into the water from that height himself. Instead his body plummeted to earth to fall on a picket fence. If the great Ace had possessed a parachute, he might well have survived that day. The following morning he was buried in the Aviators Cemetery at Sebastapol, France, with full military honors.



At one point during the summer, Rickenbacker confronted a major at Air Service headquarters in Paris regarding the parachute matter. He was told that the parachutes were too large and heavy for the small fighters. Rickenbacker knew this was not true, the Germans had developed parachutes small enough for THEIR pilots. "Rickenbacker," the Major finally stated coldly, "if all you pilots had parachutes, then you'd be inclined to use them on the slightest pretext, and the Air Service would lose planes that might otherwise have been brought down safely." It took all of Rick's will power to keep his temper from exploding at that.

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The death of Major Lufbery was a severe blow to the psyche of the men of all three active American pursuit squadrons. Somehow the intrepid young men rose above it. To Lieutenant Paul Baer of the 103rd was bequeathed the title *American Ace of Aces*, and on the day they buried an aerial legend, Baer added to his own enviable record by achieving his eighth victory. The next day, Rickenbacker got his fourth (third confirmed) and Baer shot down his ninth...and last, enemy plane. Baer had been *Ace of Aces* for but two days before he was shot down, wounded, and captured. His title, a deadly one to be sure, passed on to Lieutenant Frank Bayliss, an American pilot with the French Escadrille of the Cigognes, Spad 3. Bayliss would achieve a total of 13 victories before he was killed on June 17.

By the end of May the two squadrons of the 1st Pursuit Group were competing fiercely for first place. The 95th Pursuit Squadron ended the month with fourteen victories, the 94th with eighteen. On the next-to-the-last day of the month Rickenbacker got his fifth confirmed victory to become the second American Ace of the war, and the following day Lieutenant Campbell got his fifth, making the *Hat In The Ring* Squadron the only American squadron with two Aces. The 103rd Pursuit Squadron of the 3rd Pursuit Group still held first place in the victory category with 21.

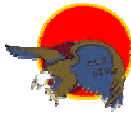




Despite all the problems with airplanes, guns and weather, in the first ten weeks on the front, the three American Aero Squadrons had claimed 53 victories over the enemy.

During the month of June the action slowed down somewhat. For Rickenbacker, his sixth victory (fifth confirmed) achieved on May 30 would be his last for three and a half months. The 103rd kept its lead intact though only achieving three victories for the month. The 94th crept closer after



four victories though the 95th managed to muster only one. The new *pretender* for the crown appeared to be the newly arrived 27th Aero Squadron. Recognizable for the eagle with spread wings painted on the side of their Nieuports (claimed to have originated on the side of an Annhauser Busch Beer Wagon), the *Eagle Squadron* managed thirteen victories.

By July 1 the 1st Pursuit Group's fourth squadron, the 147th, was ready for action. The tally of aerial credits was as follows:

1st Pursuit Group				3rd P.G.
27th Aero 	94th Aero 	95th Aero 	147th Aero 	103rd Aero 
6	23	15	0	24
<b>NOTE:</b> The numbers used in this and successive tables reflect the victory credits based upon Historical Study 133, which was prepared by the US Air Force in 1966. As such, it lists victory credits for a given month that includes victories not verified until later months, or after the war had ended. Historical records therefore, may show one squadron having led all others on a particular date, when in fact on that date the pilots themselves may have been aware of a different set of numbers.				

On July 2 a patrol of nine planes from the 27th Aero Squadron attacked nine planes of the infamous Richthofen Flying Circus. Six pilots contributed to two downed aircraft, raising the *Eagle Squadron's* tally by a dozen. The same day pilots from the 147th engaged in two separate actions, netting six victories for the new arrival.

For more than three months the *Hat In The Ring* Squadron had been trying hard to overtake the 103d, and trailed by only one victory going into July (since Rickenbacker's May 7 victory still hadn't been confirmed, the recognizable difference on that date was actually a two-victory margin on the books). On July 7 the 94th added five more victories to its tally, pulling into the lead for the first time. It was the event the pilots of the squadron had worked so hard to achieve for months. The 95th Aero Squadron had ambitions of its own, raising its tally to 18 on July 5, and then scoring two more victories the following day.

The single victory scored by the 95th on July 10 still left the *Kicking Mule Squadron* seven victories behind the 95th, but it was notable for a different reason. The Fokker that was destroyed near Chateau-Thierry that day fell victim to one of the most popular and well-known flight leaders in the squadron. Lieutenant Quentin Roosevelt was the youngest son of former President Theodore Roosevelt.

Quentin had arrived with the 95th Aero Squadron on May 6 when it had joined the 94th at the forward aerodrome. Due to his famous name, the squadron commander had made the young pilot a flight leader, even before he had ever made a flight over the lines. Quentin protested, advising that his lack of experience could be a danger to his men, but the squadron commander insisted. It was a novelty to have the son of an American president leading a flight of experienced fighter pilots.








The next morning Quentin and three of his men prepared to take off for their first mission. Quentin called his pilots together and inquired who among them had the most experience. "As soon as



*we leave the ground,"* Lieutenant Roosevelt informed his men, *"the man with the most experience will take the lead, and I will fall back into his position. They may be able to make me Flight Commander in name, but the best pilot in my group is going to lead it in fact."* And that was exactly how Quentin Roosevelt operated until his death on July 14. During his tenure on the front, though ordered to the role of flight leader by his superiors, not once did Quentin occupy that role in the air. His death, like that of Lufbery, was a heart-rending tragedy for the entire American Air Service.

On the last day of July the 95th had a great day, earning seven victories and taking first place among the squadrons. On the morning of August 1 the tally sheet read:

1st Pursuit Group				3rd P.G.
27th Aero 	94th Aero 	95th Aero 	147th Aero 	103rd Aero 
29	28	31	26	27

The 95th's tenure in first place was short lived. August 1 was a disastrous day for the pilots of the 27th. Six pilots were shot down in an action that made it one of the deadliest days in the air of the war. Though the loss of six pilots demoralized the survivors and halted missions for nearly a week, pilots of the *Eagle Squadron* did claim six victories of their own, eclipsing the lead of the 95th. For nearly 2 1/2 months the 27th would continue to be the front-runner in victories, much of that time thanks to Frank Luke. When at last the 94th would regain the lead it held for most of the month of July, it would be primarily because of Eddie Rickenbacker.



For his own part Lieutenant Rickenbacker was quickly becoming the most popular pilot in his squadron. From his first mission on March 6 until his last flight over the lines on November 11, he logged more hours in the air than perhaps any other American pilot, certainly more than any pilot in the 1st Pursuit Group. Through the period he engaged in 134 air battles by his own count, shot down 26 enemy planes, held the title *Ace of Aces* in two separate periods...and earned an unprecedented NINE Distinguished Service Crosses.

In those months of combat he survived engine failures, shredded wings, sheets of flaming Archie, and thousands of enemy bullets. He flew dozens of one-man volunteer missions behind enemy lines, single-handedly engaged enemy flights that outnumbered him as much as seven-to-one, and returned to the aerodrome repeatedly in aircraft so full of bullet holes and shrapnel punctures that the aircraft was beyond repair. Amazingly, through it all, the intrepid airman was not even slightly wounded one time. That amazing record is what made his series of hospital confinements during the summer of 1918 so incongruous.

During June, Rickenbacker missed much of the action when a fever sent him to the hospital in Paris. It was while writing a letter from his hospital bed that he innocently enough made the change in the spelling of his name that made headlines and forever marked him as Rickenbacker instead of Rickenbacher. He was finally released from the hospital on July 4 and went into Paris to celebrate. The following day before returning to his squadron, he decided to visit the American experimental supply aerodrome at Orly. It was a most fortunate decision.

For several weeks the American pilots had heard reports of a new French airplane capable of speeds faster than their Nieuports. These were purportedly aircraft that could climb to higher altitudes yet were durable enough to survive fast dives or tricky aerial maneuvers. Built by the Societe pour L'Aviation et ses Derives, it became known as the SPAD; and sitting on the field at Orly were three brand new ones. Rick noticed one had the numeral "1" painted on its side.

*"Is this one of the new planes meant for the 94th Aero Squadron?"* he asked a mechanic, who affirmed that indeed it was. *"Well, I'm with the 94th,"* Rick told him and, in his characteristic style of doing what needed to be done first, then asking permission, he strapped himself in and flew it back to his aerodrome at Touquin. To his delight upon his return, Major Kenneth Marr who was now commanding the squadron congratulated him for acquiring the sleek new airplane. He then assigned it to Rickenbacker. Rick knew he could have perhaps, been court-martialed for his impulsive actions that day. It had been worth the risk!



Returning to the air, Rick was thrilled with his new SPAD and its capabilities; but one old problem and one new problem began to plague his efforts. The old problem was the continuing tendency of the aircraft's machine guns to jamb. Much of this was due to improper sized shell casings. Rickenbacker did his best to alleviate this by creating a die to measure each shell, and then personally loaded his guns before each mission. As a fail-safe measure, he had his mechanic attach a leather strap to a large wooden mallet, which he then hung around his wrist. Thereafter, when a shell hung in his guns, he cleared it with a quick rap from the mallet. Most of the time it worked.

The new problem was more personal. Upon his return to the air Rick, began experiencing a sharp pain in his ear. On July 10 he was sent back to Paris where it was lanced and didn't fly again until the end of the month. Even then, the pain persisted and became worse. For days he continued to ignore the pain, an often-difficult effort when it was compounded by the chill and pressure of high altitudes.

On August 8 Rickenbacker shot down a Fokker but the victory was never confirmed. The one piece of good news during the otherwise dismal month was that at last the entire squadron was finally outfitted with the new SPADs. Ten days later the Mastoiditis in Rick's ear was so bad he couldn't get out of bed. He was quickly sent back to the hospital and Eddie Green replaced him as flight leader for that day's scheduled mission, flying SPAD number 1. Eddie regained his consciousness on Sunday enough to recognize Captain Marr standing by his bed. Marr came to bring the sad news that Green and Walter Smythe, perhaps Rick's closest friend in the squadron, had collided in the air and plummeted to their deaths. It was yet another sad moment for Rick, more so in the knowledge that had the men been allowed parachutes, both would probably have survived to fly again.

The tragedy of such needless losses, coupled with mechanical failures, lack of proper supplies and support at the top, all made worse by the fact that during the month of August the entire 1st Pursuit Group had only achieved ten victories, was driving morale low. During the last week of August, Rickenbacker was recovering from his second ear operation when his friends from the squadron came to visit him in the hospital. They shared with Rick how badly things were deteriorating among the pilots and wished him a speedy recovery. They also told Eddie that when he returned, they wished he would return as the commander of the 94th Aero Squadron. Eddie informed that that if ordered to command the squadron, he would accept the position; but they might not like the results. As commander he would be tough, demanding, and determined to make the squadron the best in the American Air Service. It was the news his friends were hoping to hear.

## **St. Mihiel Offensive**

The new Army Air Service had indeed been vastly overlooked by most of the American Army's higher command. There was, however, one highly placed ally, the commander of the Air Service and Rick's friend Colonel William *Billy* Mitchell. Mitchell had been the first American to fly over enemy lines. Though never credited with a combat victory, he'd also spent his share of time away from a desk and on the field at the aerodromes throughout France or in the cockpit of an airplane.



During the last week of August while Rick was recovering in the hospital, Colonel Mitchell was eagerly trying to give his pilots a fighting chance to prove their full worth. Germany's spring offensive had been crushed and the enemy routed. Now Allied war planners were setting the stage for the first major offensive of the war involving the American Expeditionary Force. Mitchell had earnestly promoted a campaign that would involve a combined air-ground assault, the first in history. Ultimately the plan was approved and the flamboyant Air Service commander began assembling the largest aerial armada in history: 700 fighters, 400 observation planes and 400 bombers. It was a gamble, which, if it failed, would have confirmed the attitude of the traditional military commanders that airplanes provided only a minor and insignificant role in the process of war. The ultimate success of Mitchell's intrepid airmen during the months of September and October 1918 indisputably proved the value of the Army Air Service.

Plans for the campaign that became known as the St. Mihiel Offensive were made with great secrecy, but the men of the A.E.F. could sense that something big was in the offing. When all the squadrons of the 1st Pursuit Group, now called the 1st Pursuit Wing, were moved to a forward aerodrome at Rembercourt on September 3, everyone knew the tone of the war was about to change. Learning of his squadron's move to the Verdun sector, Rickenbacker pronounced himself cured and requested permission to rejoin the squadron. His ear was indeed cured, and never bothered him again. Rick headed for Aviation Headquarters in Paris, from which he drove the staff car of Colonel Mitchell to the aerodrome at Rembercourt. He arrived back in the field on September 11, the day before the St. Mihiel Offensive was to begin.

Much had changed during Rick's brief absence. Major Carl Spaatz had transferred from the 94th to a new job as Chief of Staff for the 1st Pursuit Wing, now commanded by Major Harold Hartney of the 27th. Lieutenant Alfred "Ack" Grant had assumed command of the 27th and had his hands full with a boisterous young pilot named Frank Luke. Rick's good friend Jim Meissner had assumed command of the 147th Aero Squadron.

The offensive began right on schedule at 5 a.m. the following day, the American artillery and infantry hampered but not precluded from action by the rainy weather. The pilots, eager to enter the fray and prove their value to the offensive, were not so lucky. One flight of eight airplanes from the 27th managed to get airborne after daylight, but most planes were grounded until afternoon. Lieutenant Luke of the 27th managed to shoot down a German observation balloon, the first confirmed victory of his soon-to-be impressive streak, but it was the only victory scored by any member of the 1st Pursuit Wing.

Elsewhere American pilots fared somewhat better on the first day of the offensive, knocking down 12 airplanes in addition to Luke's balloon. Lieutenant David Putnam of the 139th had held the

title *American Ace of Aces* since the death back in June of Frank Bayless. On September 12 Putnam shot down his 12th enemy aircraft to increase his tally. It was his last victory, for before the day ended Putnam was himself shot down and killed. Rickenbacker's tally stood at five confirmed victories so Lieutenant Edgar Tobin of the 103rd Aero Squadron, 3rd Pursuit Wing who had six, temporarily held the title *Ace of Aces*.

On Day 2 of the offensive the 103rd, operating under the 1st Pursuit Wing, destroyed seven enemy planes, five of which were confirmed. They were the only victories of the day, but on September 14 things began to happen quickly. The brash Frank Luke of the 27th knocked down two more balloons while Eddie Rickenbacker pulled even with *Ace of Aces* Lieutenant Tobin when he shot down a Fokker near Villey Waiville. It was Rick's sixth confirmed victory.

On September 15 Rickenbacker shot down his second Fokker in two days, becoming the leading American Ace with seven victories. It was the same day the incredible Frank Luke shot down three balloons to become an Ace in just four days, but no one would ever have expected such a run of "luck" to continue. To the amazement of all, and to some degree to the chagrin of Ack Grant who had to exercise authority over the free-thinking and sometimes rebellious Luke, Luke went out the very next day to bag two more balloons and tie his record with that of the Air Service's leading ace.

Shortly after Rickenbacker was acclaimed the new *Ace of Aces* he had told his good friend Reed Chambers: *"Any other fellow can have the title any time he wants it, so far as I am concerned."*

*"Mingled with this natural desire to become the leading fighting Ace of America was a haunting superstition that did not leave my mind until the very end of the war. It was that the very possession of this title - Ace of Aces - brought with it unavoidable doom that had overtaken all of its previous holders. I wanted it and yet I feared to learn that it was mine! In later days I began to feel that this superstition was almost the heaviest burden that I carried with me into the air. Perhaps it served to redouble my caution and sharpened my fighting senses. But I never was able to forget that the life of a title-holder is short."*

Eddie Rickenbacker  
Fighting the Flying Circus

Rick bore that *burden*, or at least shared that burden with Frank Luke, for one more day. The St. Mihiel offensive ended on September 16, the day after Rick became America's leading Ace and the same day on which Luke pulled even with him. American forces, well supported by Colonel Mitchell's Air Service, pushed the German army more than 10 miles backward, leaving the enemy forces in disarray. Mitchell himself was rewarded with promotion to Brigadier General.

Meanwhile, aerial action began to slow down in and around Verdun, but not enough to slow the rampage of the intrepid Frank Luke. On September 18 Luke did something seldom accomplished by any pilot in WWI or any war since...FIVE victories (three planes and two balloons) in a single day. After destroying 12 aircraft in seven days he was the undisputed leading American Ace, a title Rickenbacker was more than happy to pass on to him.

What did bother Rickenbacker was that, thanks to Frank Luke, the 27th Pursuit Squadron was the leader among all of the Air Service's squadrons; a position Rick had always expected his own *Hat In the Ring Squadron* to hold. While not necessarily sorry to see the burden of the *Ace of Aces* title pass to another, Rick was determined to do whatever it took to see his squadron reclaim its role as America's leading fighter squadron. By the unofficial tally at the time, the 27th lead the 94th by SIX victories.



On September 24 Major Marr returned from Air Service Headquarters in Paris to advise the men of his squadron that he had been ordered to the 2nd Pursuit Group as its commander. That evening Lieutenant Rickenbacker called the 19 pilots of the *Hat In The Ring* Squadron together to address them for the first time as their new commander. *"I want no saluting,"* he told them, *"no unnecessary deference to rank. What I want is VICTORIES! We're all in this together, pilots and mechanics. We need each other; and we're going to work together as equals, each man doing his job."* Rickenbacker further assured his pilots that he would lead them from the cockpit of an airplane, not from a desk. He would lead by example.

Returning to his billets after similarly addressing his mechanics and ground crews, he wrote in his personal diary:

*"Just been promoted to command of 94th squadron. I shall never ask a pilot to go on any mission I won't go on.*

*"I must work now harder than I did before."*

## Seven-To-One

September 25, 1918

Lieutenant Rickenbacker had the early morning skies to himself as he winged his way on a solo, volunteer flight east of the lines at Verdun. Foremost on his mind was his speech the night before, and the responsibility he had set for himself to lead by example. After patrolling among the clouds for a time, he suddenly noticed two large specks in the distance. Maneuvering his SPAD closer, the specks became recognizable as large, German Halberstadt photographic planes. Flying protection for them were five German Fokkers. Rick was outnumbered seven-to-one.

Heedless of the odds, Rickenbacker remained high above, hidden by the sun, until the enemy formation had passed below. Then he pushed the stick forward and nosed down in a steep dive, directly into the trailing Fokker. He noticed the enemy pilot turn his head as SPAD 1 closed the distance but it was too late. Rick's finger was on the trigger, his aim true, and the Fokker was soon spiraling towards the ground trailing black smoke.

The other four Fokkers panicked and the formation was immediately splintered, allowing Rickenbacker to continue his dive unfettered until he was on the tail of one of the Halberstadts. Noses down, the pilots of the photographic planes were diving for safety as SPAD 1 followed them relentlessly. From their seats behind the pilots, the observers of the Halberstadts were firing backward at the American. Rickenbacker dived beneath the nearest airplane, and then zoomed up under its belly.

The enemy pilot appeared to be a wise veteran, for he kicked his tail around to give his gunner a good position from which to rain fire on the attacker. Rickenbacker broke off to dive, only to find the second Halberstadt on his tail and a stream of bullets streaking past his face.





The three pilots dodged and weaved in their aerial joust, but Rick knew his time was running out. Fuel was low and the four Fokkers were recovering from the initial shock and turning back towards the battle. Rickenbacker maneuvered until the Halberstadts were only about 50 yards apart and directly below him, and then side slipped to the right. The nearer Halberstadt shielded him from the second, making the contest of the gunners a one-on-one battle. Rick leveled out, kicked his nose to the left, and pulled the trigger. The nearer photographic plane passed directly through the stream of bullets, and in minutes burst into flames and plummeted to earth like a falling comet.

With the four recovered Fokkers now diving on top of him, Rick opened his engine and began a mad dash for home. The other pilots of the *Hat In The Ring* squadron had just finished eating when SPAD 1 taxied to a stop. Their new commander had demonstrated his promise to lead by example and earned a double victory before many of them had finished breakfast.

## Scourge of the Sky

When the successful St. Mihiel offensive had ended weeks earlier, the German forces had been pushed 10 miles back to their last line of fortifications along the Hindenburg Line and the Argonne Forest. On the morning of September 26 the Allies launched the Meuse-Argonne Offensive to dislodge the German forces from this last region. In six weeks the success of this final campaign was so successful that Germany was crushed to its knees, and the war was ended. The role of the Army Air Service in the success of that offensive cannot be understated. Much of the credit for swiftly ending the war must be given to the brave pilots who flew deep into Germany to bomb its cities and destroy its war machine. The Kaiser committed much of his own air power to the task of shooting down these bombers before they could reach their targets. The fighter pilots of the US Army Air Service met them head-to-head, flying protection for the bomber pilots.



On the first day of the Argonne Offensive the 94th Aero Squadron was assigned its first-ever balloon patrol mission. Rickenbacker himself led the six-plane flight that lifted off at 5:20 a.m. to attack two different Drachens. To Rick's delight, despite the difficulty of bagging the large, well-protected observation balloons, his pilots succeeded in destroying both. Returning to the field as dawn was breaking, he was so absorbed in thoughts of pride in his pilots, he didn't notice the German Fokker that shadowed him until the distance between the two was less than 100 yards. The German pilot angled towards Rickenbacker as his machine guns opened up, and for a moment it appeared that if neither pilot hit the other with his bullets, the two airplanes would certainly crash together. At the last minute the German pilot dove and Rick was on top of him. A stream of flaming incendiary bullets, loaded that morning for the balloon attack, quickly destroyed the Fokker. Meanwhile, Rick's own SPAD began to shudder and shake from the effects of its own wounds. Carefully the *Hat In The Ring* commander nursed his vibrating craft back to the aerodrome. Upon landing it was found that one blade of the propeller had been completely severed by the Fokker's machinegun rounds. Once again however, Rick walked away from a shot-up airplane without a scratch.

Lieutenant Frank Luke returned early from his well-earned leave in Paris to fly again on the first day of the new offensive. On that day his wingman was shot down, the second such tragedy that had befallen the great American Ace, and one that prompted his decision to fly strictly lone-wolf missions.

On September 28 Luke had another double victory, flaming his eleventh balloon and his fourth airplane. On the same day, Eddie Rickenbacker bagged his FIRST balloon, his eleventh confirmed aerial victory.

On September 29 Luke flew a voluntary night mission against three enemy balloons along the Marne River. By the time he was done, his victory score stood at 18. In the eighteen days from September 12 to 29, despite the fact that there was one week therein when he didn't fly, Luke had claimed more victories than even the great Raoul Lufbery had in the entire war.

Those last three balloons were costly. Luke never returned, and once again Lieutenant Eddie Rickenbacker had to deal with the inherent danger of being America's *Ace of Aces*.



The month of October was a good month for *Hun hunting* all across the Western Front. On October 1 Rick got his second balloon and on October 2 he had a double victory, first destroying an enemy Rumpler near Clery-le-Grand, then teaming with his good friend Lieutenant Reed Chambers to shoot down a large Hanover. It was the first enemy airplane among Rickenbacker's fourteen confirmed victories to land inside friendly lines, and Rick and Reed were quick to claim it as a war trophy, painting their names on its side.

The following day Rickenbacker shot down a Fokker and then teamed with Lieutenant Coolidge to destroy a large Halberstadt. The official tally was up to 16. Like the famed Red Baron whose presence in the sky had instantly generated both fear and challenge in his adversaries, Eddie Rickenbacker and his now famous SPAD 1 had become the American response to a German legend. But, though SPAD 1 was proving unstoppable to the Germans, the autumn weather of northern France did



what nothing else could do. After the double victory of October 3 the *Hat In The Ring* Squadron was stymied for five days. As the weather improved slightly on October 9, SPAD 1 was back at work and the night skies were brilliantly lit by a burning Drachen, Rickenbacker's third balloon and his seventeenth official victory. Captain Eddie Rickenbacker had finally equaled the record of his own personal hero, Major Raoul Lufbery.

## October 10 was notable for many developments:

- On that day Eddie Rickenbacker claimed two more victories, surpassing both Lufbery and Luke to become the most victorious airman of the war.
- It was a day during which he learned a vivid lesson about the responsibilities of command from the 147th's Lieutenant Wilburt White.
- It was a day on which he witnessed an act about which he later wrote: *"For sheer nerve and bravery, I believe this heroic feat was never surpassed."*

It was the day of ....

## **The BIG Dog Fight**

The day's mission began as an effort to destroy two German balloons at Dun-sur-Meuse. The 94th Squadron fielded 14 SPADs from the aerodrome, taking off at 3:30 in the afternoon. To fly protection for the pilots of the *Hat In The Ring* who were assigned the task of shooting down the two Drachen, eight planes of the 147th flew on one flank with seven planes from the 27th covering the other. It was one of the largest aerial armadas Captain Rickenbacker had ever seen as he climbed several thousand feet above his pilots to observe the mission.

As quickly as the 30 airplanes passed the lines, they were met with heavy Archie; but the flight leaders maintained their formations flying deeper into Germany until the first of the two balloons could be seen floating in the distance.

Captain Rickenbacker scanned the distance and soon noted the approach of 11 German Fokkers bearing down on the seven planes of the 147th, now separated somewhat from the rest of the flight. Rick dipped his wings and dove to warn the pilots, noting as he did, the approach of another eight Fokkers from the direction of Metz. He halted his dive to keep his altitude while he assessed the situation and planned the best avenue of attack. When the first enemy flight passed beneath him he noted the bright red noses that marked them as airplanes of the infamous *Flying Circus*.

When the enemy formation had passed Rick dipped over and dove on the trailing Fokker. His first burst of machinegun fire ripped into the gas tank and the enemy airplane burst into flames to plunge earthward. Rick noticed the German pilot leap from the inferno and, moments later, float safely earthward beneath the canopy of his parachute. The American pilots had heard reports of German pilots parachuting safely from destroyed aircraft on the Italian front, but this was the first time it had ever been witnessed on the Western Front. Rickenbacker watched the amazing escape for a moment, even wondered pensively, *"Why the Huns had all these*

*humane contrivances and why our own country could not at least copy them to save American pilots from being burned to a crisp!"* Then he resisted the temptation to watch the miraculous escape to its conclusion, wished the enemy pilot well, and turned back into the foray below. There, an equally incredible display was unfolding.





Nearly two-dozen aircraft dodged and weaved through the skies over Germany in a classic jousting match by the *Knights of a new generation*, while an almost equal number was poised in the distance for similar combat. What he saw next he later described as an *"extraordinary spectacle in midair...which in all my life at the front I have never seen equaled in horror and awfulness. The picture of it has haunted my dreams during many nights since."*

Lieutenant White was the perfect man to lead his planes of the 147th in this unprecedented aerial battle. He was experienced, an Ace with 7 victories, and a well-liked and admired leader. The mission this day would be his last before returning to the United States to visit his wife and two small children. Before going home however, he had to see his young pilots safely through one more battle.

The lead Fokker was lining up behind the trailing SPAD in White's formation even as Rickenbacker turned away from the scene of his recent victory. White noted the threat to one of his pilots, came out of his own swoop, and dove on the enemy. It looked to be too late as the German prepared to open fire on the trailing SPAD. White's airplane continued its course, two airplanes approaching each other at more than 100 miles an hour. Before the German could pull the trigger to flame the young pilot of the 147th, Lieutenant White intervened. Never wavering, his own airplane slammed into the German machine, telescoping both in a grinding crunch of fabric and metal. As the spared young pilot flew out of harms way, Lieutenant white and his German counterpart crashed together in the forest below.



Rickenbacker was not the only pilot in the air stirred and stunned by Lieutenant White's heroic sacrifice to save a comrade. The horrible scene took all desire for the fight from the Germans, and the remaining Fokkers broke away and headed for home. Rickenbacker banked and headed to the other flank where the seven SPADs of the 27th Squadron were tangling with the eight Fokkers from Metz. As he did, he noted one of his own airplanes had been hit as it dove on the targeted Drachen. Rick raced to the rescue but it was too late. The hapless American did his best to control his flaming airplane and somehow managed to make a rough landing in German territory.

Rick looked around briefly; and as he did, he noted another SPAD diving past him with two enemy Fokkers on its tail. It was his good friend and Ace pilot Jim Meissner. For the third time in nearly as many months, Rick came to the rescue of his old protégé, flaming one of the Fokkers and forcing the other to turn away.

By the time the great dogfight over Germany concluded the pilots of the 1st Pursuit Wing scored more than a dozen victories. For Rickenbacker the tally was now up to 19 confirmed victories, more than any other American pilot of the entire war.







On October 19 Rickenbacker and several other pilots of the Wing were ordered to Souilly for a grand and impressive ceremony. As a list of names was read Major General Mason Patrick, Chief of Air Service, presented nearly two dozen awards of the Distinguished Service Cross. Lieutenants James Meissner and Ralph O'Neill each received two awards. When Captain Rickenbacker's name was called he was presented a Distinguished Service Cross with 4 Oak Leaf Clusters. Each oak leaf represented an additional award of this distinguished honor--one award for each of his first five confirmed victories in April and May. (The Fokker Rick had destroyed on May 7 remained unconfirmed until November 16, 1918 so was still not counted among his list of victories.)

By the time World War I ended, Captain Rickenbacker would earn an unprecedented NINE awards of the Distinguished Service Cross, a record that has never been equaled in U.S. military history.

The ceremony of October 19 was inspiring, impressive, and moving. For Rick it was a moment of great pride in his squadron, his personal record, and the new United States Air Service. It was also a time of reflection and some sadness:

*"I could not help thinking of the absent pilots whose names were being read out but who did not answer, and for whom decorations were waiting for deeds of heroism that had ended with their death. There was White, for whom the whole Group mourned. What a puny recognition was a simple ribbon for heroism such as his! There was Luke--the most intrepid air fighter that ever sat in an aeroplane. What possible honor could be given him by his country that would accord him the distinction he deserved.*

*"One thing was certain. The reputation of these great American airmen would live as long as the comrades who knew them survived. Perhaps none of us would ever live to see our homeland again. I glanced down the line of honor men who were standing immobile in their tracks, listening to the last notes of 'The Star Spangled Banner'! Who will be the next to go, I wondered, knowing only too well that with ever fresh honor that was conferred came a corresponding degree of responsibility and obligation to continue to serve comrade and country so long as life endured."*

Eddie Rickenbacker  
Fighting the Flying Circus

## **The Finish Line**

Rick returned to the air as the war quickly wound to a close. On the ground American Doughboys were pushing the German forces steadily backward, buying each yard of gained territory with their blood, but emerging from each battle victorious. In the air the U.S. Army Air Service ruled the skies, but not without casualties themselves. Like the men on the ground, every step forward came at a great price.

On October 22 Captain Rickenbacker shot down an enemy Fokker near Clery-le-Petit, then repeated that success the very next day over LeGrande Carre Farme. Four days later he flamed two more Fokkers bringing his official record at the time to 22 victories (with two more that had not yet been confirmed). On October 30 he engaged the two Fokkers of the famed *Flying Circus* over St. Juvin, destroying one and sending the other scurrying home. Returning home he destroyed the Drachen at Remonville to achieve his last aerial victory. It was enough...a valiant record by one man of firm conviction and dedication to service.

On November 10 Captain Rickenbacker was awarded two more Oak Leaf Clusters for his Distinguished Service Cross, these for his victories of September 14 and the following day. Two more Oak Leaf Clusters would follow, one for his September 25 double-victory when he attacked alone against seven-to-one odds, the last for his victory the next day.

Apprehension and some sadness hung over the ceremony that day that also saw DSCs awarded to Reed Chambers, Douglas Campbell and others of Rick's friends. Four planes from the 94th Pursuit Squadron had been missing for nearly twenty-four hours, and Rick feared he had made one of his worst errors as a squadron commander.



The weather during those early days of November had been terrible, continuous rain and heavy fog that made flying difficult. Everyone knew that the war was quickly coming to a close, and pilots were frustrated at their inability to get their flight time before the war ended. The previous day three of Rick's pilots had virtually begged him to allow them to take off into a heavy fog to attack a Drachen. Rick resisted at first, but their eagerness and their arguments finally persuaded him to consent. As the three prepared to take off, Major Maxwell Kirby, a newcomer on the scene, approached Rick. Major Kirby had never flown over enemy lines, but was scheduled to assume command of a new group of Squadrons. Kirby wanted experience before taking his new position, and requested permission to join the other three pilots. Rickenbacker grudgingly consented, then watched with intrepidation as the four took off into the fog. That night he cursed himself when none of them returned to the aerodrome. He was certain he had, at a time when peace was imminent, needlessly sent four men to their doom.

Up to and immediately after the 10 a.m. decorations ceremony, no word had arrived regarding the fate of the four Americans. Not until after lunch did Rick note SPAD 3, belonging to one of the missing pilots, on the field. Optimism returned when he learned its pilot had been forced to land in friendly territory to spend the night, but had managed to return home that morning. One of the other missing pilots had phoned in with a similar story. Lieutenant Dewitt had crashed inside allied lines the previous evening, but walked away safely and would return by car later in the day.

A short time later Major Kirby phoned in. His first flight over the lines had left him lost in the fog, and he was forced to land at the first field he saw. That very morning, while Rick was receiving his sixth and seventh awards of the DSC, Kirby had taken off from the distant field to return home. En route he had again become lost in the fog. While searching for his way back he suddenly noticed a Fokker flying almost beside him. Both pilots were surprised by the presence of each other and simply stared for a moment. Then the German put his airplane into a dive and Major Kirby dove in behind him, firing all the way. The Fokker crashed in the fog, and Kirby pulled up within 50 feet of the ground to avoid the same fate. Later he claimed he "had scared the (enemy) pilot to his death."

Alan Winslow and Douglas Campbell of the 94th Aero Squadron claimed the first American aerial victory of World War I on April 14. Major Kirby's victory on November 10 was to be the last of The Great War. The *Hat In The Ring* Squadron had started the fight...and finished it.



On the morning of November 11 only one plane could be found in the skies near Verdun. All flights had been grounded for weather, and the previous evening the word had reached the men in the field that an armistice had been reached to end The War to End All Wars. Rickenbacker couldn't resist one last flight however, and left the aerodrome at 10 a.m. Shortly before 11 a.m. he was over the lines, looking below at German and American infantrymen huddled in their foxholes and trenches, weapons poised and ready to fire on anyone foolish enough to encroach. As he winged over the German troops at only 500 feet, some dared to shoot his way, but the fire was half-hearted.

*"I glanced at my watch. One minute to 11:00, thirty-seconds, fifteen. And then it was 11:00 a.m., the eleventh hour of the eleventh day of the eleventh month. I was the only audience for the greatest show ever presented. On both sides of no-man's-land, the trenches erupted. Brown-uniformed men pour out of the American trenches, gray-green uniforms out of the German. From my observer's seat overhead, I watched them throw their helmets in the air, discard their guns, wave their hands. Then all up and down the front, the two groups of men began edging toward each other across no-man's-land. Seconds before they had been willing to shoot each other; now they came forward. Hesitantly at first, then more quickly, each group approached the other.*

*"Suddenly gray uniforms mixed with brown. I could see them hugging each other, dancing, jumping. Americans were passing out cigarettes and chocolate. I flew up to the French sector. There it was even more incredible. After four years of slaughter and hatred, they were not only hugging each other but kissing each other on both cheeks as well.*

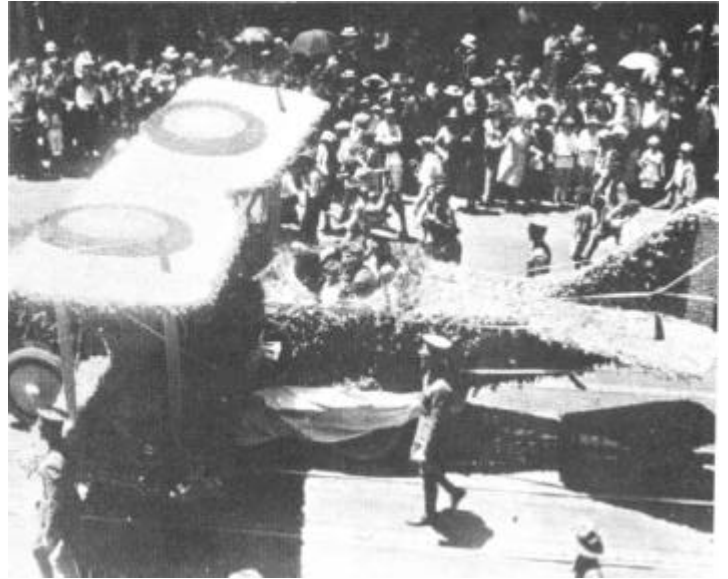
*"Star shells, rockets and flares began to go up, and I turned my ship toward the field.*

***"The war was over."***

Eddie Rickenbacker  
Rickenbacker, An Autobiography

When the American Expeditionary Force returned victoriously from France it came home to an adoring public with a plethora of admirable heroes like John J. Pershing, Douglas MacArthur, Billy Mitchell, Charles Whittlesey, Sergeant York and Eddie Rickenbacker. During the war only FOUR Medals of Honor were awarded. General Pershing ordered a review of lesser awards and ultimately more than 100 Medals of Honor were presented over the next five years. On May 29, 1919, in Phoenix, Arizona, Brigadier General Howard R. Hickok presented the posthumous award of the Medal of Honor to the father of Lieutenant Frank Luke, making him the first Army airman to receive the award. Three years later posthumous Medals of Honor were awarded to Erwin Bleckley and Harold Goettler for their sacrifice on behalf of *The Lost Battalion*.

Captain Eddie Rickenbacker remained perhaps the most decorated American in history with NINE Distinguished Service Crosses. Two years earlier he had left for war as America's fastest and favorite racecar driver. He returned home its most beloved and successful fighter pilot, with 26 confirmed victories. He was feted in parades, lauded in the news, and hailed for his wartime success. For the kid who dropped out of school in the seventh grade to work for three dollars a week to support his mother and siblings, it was a unique example of the American Dream in action. But Rick was never one to ask for a free ride, or to settle for the success of the present. New challenges beckoned.



Rick's immense popularity resulted in many offers with financial considerations beyond his wildest dreams. He could be a movie star, an executive, a politician...just about anything he wanted; and he could command any salary he requested. Humbly, Rick declined each offer, opting instead to write an account of his war days in Fighting the Flying Circus, and speak on a lecture tour. In 1920 he returned to the automotive world, joining with partners in founding The Rickenbacker Automobile Company and development of the first car in history with both front and rear brakes. "It was too good a car," Rick later explained. "It introduced vibration dampers and four-wheel brakes to America. But there was too little difference between what it cost us to build and the price for which we had to sell it. So we folded up."

*Folded up* was putting it mildly. By 1927 Eddie Rickenbacker was 37 years old, flat broke, unemployed and a quarter-million dollars in debt. Friends suggested Rick declare bankruptcy, but he refused. He determined he would pay back his debts, no matter how hard he had to work.

*"I was not ashamed and not afraid. Failure was something I had faced before and might well face again. I have said it over and over: 'Failure' is the greatest word in the English language. Here in America failure is not the end of the world. If you have the determination, you can come back from failure and succeed."*



Rick's hard work consisted of returning to the racing world, this time to own and build a speedway on a track he had once visited as a driver. Under Eddie Rickenbacker the Indianapolis Speedway and its Memorial Day 500-mile race became as American as the man who owned it and made it an icon. And, true to his word, Eddie Rickenbacker paid back every penny lost by the Rickenbacker Automobile Company.

It may seem ironic that the greatest flying Ace of World War I would come home to spend the next decade pursuing a life on the ground, largely beyond aviation. In 1930 Rick's skill in the air was once again remembered by a grateful nation. On November 6 at Bolling Field near Washington, DC, President Herbert Hoover read a citation detailing the day when Rickenbacker had single-handedly attacked a German flight despite seven-to-one odds. The citation was for the Medal of Honor, at last being presented to America's Ace of Aces.



Rick's famous seven-to-one battle had occurred on September 25, 1918...four days before Lieutenant Frank Luke's Medal of Honor action, making Rick the first American aviator to receive our Nation's highest award, and the last of four World War I Army aviators to actually receive it. He was also the only one of the four to survive to wear it. (Two Marine Corps aviators, Gunnery Sergeant Robert Robinson and 2nd Lieutenant Ralph Talbot also received Medals of Honor during World War I. Talbot was killed in his heroic actions, but Robinson survived to wear his own well-earned Medal of Honor.)



Indeed if ever the United States produced a young man that defined the words *Duty, Honor, Country* and who became a living example of *The American Dream*, it was Edward Vernon Rickenbacker. When his Medal of Honor was presented in 1930, the forty-year old American hero had lived more life, and escaped more deadly situations, than could be imagined. He had overcome unimaginable failures and accomplished the kind of success most men only dream of. Perhaps what made Captain Eddie even more remarkable, however, were some of the accomplishments of his life after the Medal of Honor. Eddie Rickenbacker was a man who believed he owed his country everything he could give, and he never stopped giving.

# Colonel Billy Mitchell

## *Building* An Aerial Armada



World War I had been over for three months when the Cunard liner *Aquitania* steamed for New York City. Joining the hundreds of returning soldiers aboard was the famous industrialist J. Pierpont Morgan and his family, the new British ambassador to Washington, the sister of victorious General John J. *Black Jack* Pershing, and other well known dignitaries. In this distinguished crowd, however, the man who seemed to stand out was little known beyond the recent battlefields of France, a thirty-nine-year old brigadier general named William Mitchell.

Despite the fact he was authorized numerous medals, the breast of his tailored uniform was empty but for a pair of silver aviator's wings. Peter Hammon of the *Chicago Tribune* wrote of him:

*"With the air of a conqueror, he personified war in much of its pristine grandeur. He was better dressed than Pershing--a plumed fellow with the aura of banner, spear and shield. No one ever had a better time being a general."*

By the time World War I ended General Mitchell had:

- Spent twenty-one years in the Army,
- Become the youngest officer in one war,
- The highest ranking flier in another, and
- Had established an enviable record of success. In France:
  - He had been the first American officer under enemy fire,
  - The first American pilot to fly over enemy lines,
  - The first American to be awarded the French Croix de Guerre, and
  - Commanded the largest aerial armada in history.

But in Mitchell's mind the war had ended a few months too soon!

*Germany gave in too quickly and the Allies have been too eager to agree to Armistice, he argued. Allied air power should have pressed its advantage, continued its destruction of the German factories and war machine until it was destroyed beyond repair. Because the war had ended a couple of months too soon, Germany would rebuild and, in time, the United States would have to return to finish the job. When they did, the coup de grace would be delivered by American air power.*

Amid the hoopla of the great American victory in France, General Mitchell's words echoed a sentiment few wanted to believe. The Great War had been the costliest conflict in world history. More than four million Americans had been called to service, many of them conscripted under the new Selective Service Act of 1917, with more than two million of them enduring the most bitter combat since the Civil War. American casualties had numbered more than a quarter-million with a death toll exceeding 100,000. The prevailing hope was that this war that had engulfed the world and introduced some of the most devastating weapons in history, would indeed be the LAST war in world history...*the war to end all wars*.

Who then, was the brash young general who dared to speak of a second world war even before the corpse of the First World War had been laid to rest? In hindsight, biographers and historians would ultimately chronicle him as:

- A prophet without honor,
- An antagonist at odds with military authority,
- A man born before his time,
- An egomaniac with a penchant for the sensational.

Nearly a century after the seven-week trial that stripped him of his uniform, a trial that might be accurately characterized as the first *Trial of the Century* of the 20th Century, the man convicted of violating the 96th Article of War for his outspoken criticism of the post-World War I military leadership is still as controversial as he was in his lifetime.

Was he a thorn-in-the-flesh or a guiding light to the future?

Perhaps the man best characterized himself in a letter home to his father in 1902 after four years of military service when he wrote: *"If I ever get a chance in the field, I think I can do something...."*

*"I am naturally a sort of soldier."*

## William **Billy** Mitchell

If Billy Mitchell's greatest flaw was a defiance of authority when he believed he was right, he came by that naturally. His Scottish grandfather, Alexander Mitchell, had combined hard work and determination to leave a bank teller's job in 1839 to build one of the largest fortunes in the state of Wisconsin. By the time civil war broke out, Alexander Mitchell owned the world's largest rail system and was worth millions of dollars. He was also a man of intense principle.



Later, when the Wisconsin legislature tried to fix railroad rates that Mitchell thought were too low, he petitioned no one. Rather, he NOTIFIED the governor that the existing rates would remain in

effect until the courts settled the case...a case that he ultimately won. Senator Bob La Follette characterized the incident by saying: "A more brazen defiance of law could scarcely be conceived."

But Alexander Mitchell DID have great respect for the law, and numbered among his closest friends the esteemed Judge MacArthur of Milwaukee. Judge MacArthur's son was an acquaintance of Mitchell's son John Lendrum Mitchell, and both young men had served with Wisconsin Volunteers in the Civil War. John Mitchell's war experience was of little note, serving for a time as chief of ordnance on the staff of a Union general before an eye ailment ended his military career. MacArthur's son Arthur, on the other hand, went on to earn the Medal of Honor and become the *Boy Colonel* of the Civil War. Both families remained close over the years so it was natural that their grandchildren too would become friends. They did, despite the fact that the nature of the careers of John Mitchell and Arthur MacArthur would often place them in opposite sides of the globe.

William *Billy* Mitchell was born in Nice, France, on December 29, 1879, the first son of John Lendrum Mitchell and his second wife Harriet. (Some authors still list Billy as William Lendrum Mitchell, though in fact, William Mitchell had no middle name.) The following month Arthur MacArthur's wife Mary gave birth to her second son in Little Rock, Arkansas, on January 26. The couple named this child Douglas.

The Mitchell's remained in France for three years before returning to Milwaukee with a toddler who spoke French better than English. Young Billy took a lot of teasing for his preference to his native French when he entered school, causing him to abandon the language (as well as the German, Spanish, and Italian he also spoke) for nearly forty years. He revived it when he needed it, and could use it to his best advantage.

At home in Milwaukee Billy Mitchell and Douglas MacArthur not only had occasion to meet, but to become childhood friends. It was a friendship that would follow them all their lives, and years later present Douglas MacArthur with one of his most painful duties.

Mitchell was privy to a lifestyle without want: education at an Episcopal prep school, learning to ride carefully bred horses on the 400-acre family estate at Meadowmere, polo, and marksmanship. In 1891 John Mitchell was elected to the United States Congress, then entered the Senate two years later. The elder Mitchell's duties provided Willy, as the family called him at that time, opportunity to live in the Nation's capitol where he enrolled in Washington's Columbian School (later George Washington University). It also gave him opportunity to study the workings and machinations of American politics.

Mitchell money and political clout (Grandpa Mitchell had also served in the United States Congress and turned down a bid to run for governor of Wisconsin) meant that neither Billy nor his nine siblings would ever have to settle for common labor. The greatest problem for the growing young Mitchells seemed to be simply deciding on what private vocational endeavors to embark. When the USS Maine exploded in Havana, Cuba, in 1898 and the United States declared war on Spain, Billy Mitchell decided perhaps the military would provide an answer to his own active personality.

"You're not going to let this little boy go to war, John?" asked General Fighting Joe Wheeler while he was in Washington before departing for Cuba as part of General Shafter's invasion force. "Especially as he's your oldest child."

"*He's eighteen,*" replied the Senator, one of the leading opponents to the war in the early days leading up to the loss of the Maine. Then with a wit that was typical he noted, "*I'd rather have them (soldiers) under twenty than over forty, if I were running a war.*"



## **Lieutenant Billy Mitchell**



Despite the rumblings and calls for war against Spain that had been growing in the United States for years, when at last that war was declared, our nation was totally unprepared to field an army, or supply it. The manpower problem was solved by raising an army of volunteers in the various states, usually a gathering of hometown boys who knew each other and were enamored with a potential adventure. Officers were elected within the group, usually based on popularity rather than military training, experience, or ability...qualities almost none of the volunteers possessed. It was in such a group, the First Wisconsin Volunteers, that Billy Mitchell gained his first military experience commission.

One week after joining the Army Billy Mitchell was a second lieutenant. It was now just a few months after his eighteenth birthday which made him the youngest officer in the American military. It was a position for which Mitchell was well suited. Among a motley group of citizen-soldiers with almost no military bearing, Lieutenant Mitchell seemed almost *naturally, a sort of soldier*. As an officer he was adept at bringing some order to the chaos.

In May 1898 the First Wisconsin Volunteers were sent to Florida where 30,000 troops were being staged for the invasion of Cuba. Here the confusion and lack of preparedness for war was so bad that the assistant commander of the First United States Cavalry, arriving from Arizona, later wrote: *"We disembarked in a perfect welter of confusion. Everything connected with both military and railroad matters was in an almost inextricable tangle."* Throughout the brief Spanish-American War, and for years afterwards, that same officer, Lieutenant Colonel Theodore Roosevelt, continued his castigation of military and political leaders for their lack of foresight and preparation for the war.

Mitchell, as were most of the other young volunteers waiting in Florida, was excitedly anticipating action in Cuba. His hopes were dashed when he was called to Washington, DC for assignment to the Army's Signal Corps under General Adolphus Greely, a friend of Senator Mitchell. Perhaps the elder Mitchell was not as enthused about his young son's military service as he had echoed to General Wheeler. Whatever affected the transfer, a protesting Second Lieutenant Mitchell found himself deprived of his chance for combat action. In one of those unusual twists of fate, the transfer gave the young officer a chance to demonstrate his natural leadership abilities.

### **A Police Action**

The young men who had volunteered for excitement and adventure in the Volunteer Army of the Spanish-American war quickly learned that the adventure would consist of trying to survive their assimilation into a poorly fed, under-equipped, and poorly organized Army. They would have to CREATE their own excitement. En route to Florida, seventy-five members of a New York regiment did just that, deserting their train in the Capitol City to scrounge for food and fun. Their officers, traveling in a separate car and lax in supervision, continued the journey unaware they had lost their command.

On their own, the seventy-five AWOL soldiers *captured* a hotel and began treating themselves to all the free food, fun and booze they could find. When the Capitol police sent word to Mitchell's barracks for help, Lieutenant Mitchell volunteered for the assignment.

Mitchell arrived with only 14 men to quell a riot that had frightened local officials. The proprietor, obviously none too confident in the redemption of his establishment by so young an officer with such a small rescue force, advised him not to enter the hotel. "The soldiers are all drunk and dangerous, and anybody who goes in there will probably be killed," he warned.

In the first *impossible mission* of his long military career, Billy Mitchell demonstrated his keen perception and unusual abilities in a manner far beyond his youth and military inexperience. He stationed his two largest soldiers at either entrance to the hotel, and then ordered them to remove the bullets from their rifles. Should the weapons be required, they were ordered to use only the butts...no American soldier would be killed on Lieutenant Mitchell's watch.

With but one man, Lieutenant Mitchell entered the room which was indeed filled with extremely drunken young soldiers...and then he did the unimaginable. He called them to "Attention".

Despite their inebriated condition, seventy-two men jumped to their feet and fell into order. The three who did not comply, could not--they were passed out cold. Mitchell then marched the lot for 3 miles, during which they carried their three comrades. Along the march the remainder of Mitchell's squad stopped at fire hydrants to douse the motley formation with cold water. By the march's end, all had been sufficiently sobered, sorry for what they had done, and returned to service.

Mitchell's handling of this incident gained the attention of General Greely and marked him for future service under the Signal Corps' commander. Before summer ended, Mitchell returned to Florida in hopes of seeing action in Cuba. By the time he did reach the Caribbean Island in the fall however, the war had ended. When he did reach Cuba he proved his abilities during a brief foray to the interior of the island where he and his 40-man contingent strung 140 miles of telegraph wire. His mission completed, he wrote and submitted a detailed report, a custom that marked his entire military career. One of his commanders noted, *"I have seen few reports giving so much information in clear-cut form on a technical subject of such range."*

The two personal traits that marked the life and service of Billy Mitchell seem to have been:

- Keen observation and
- Detailed reporting on what he had observed.

Not always were his observations, however, as discretionary as his superiors might have wished. In the Spanish-American war Mitchell was aware of the rivalry between the Army and Navy commanders at Santiago that had prevented a unified American response to the Spanish presence in the harbor. In Florida he had seen a confusion that bordered on criminal ineptness in the use and deployment of U.S. military resources. In a manner that reflected yet a third personal trait that marked the life of Billy Mitchell, he voiced his opinion based upon his observations. Of the war in Cuba he wrote,

*"I really do believe that if we had been up against a first-rate power, they would have whaled the mischief right out of us."*

Mitchell's status as the son of a United States Senator certainly enhanced the success of his early military career, but as young Lieutenant Mitchell pursued his duties well, he made his own mark through diligent and detailed effort. At the turn of the century as Douglas MacArthur was entering the military academy at West Point, First Lieutenant Mitchell debarked for the Philippines for seven months of duty under his boyhood friend's father. It was ironic as Senator Mitchell was one of the leading opponents of American expansionism. Billy on the other hand, seemed to support the concept of the United States' *Manifest Destiny* with a patriotic fervor.

Mitchell arrived in the Philippines in November 1899 and saw action during the Philippine Insurrection where he proved both his courage and his initiative. He strung miles of communication wire through the jungles despite the ever-present threat of danger from the native insurgents. The job was made nearly impossible because there were no supplies. Mitchell accomplished his job by using wire unwound from captured cannon, fashioning insulators from bamboo or broken glass, and even creating his own batteries using common salt. In a daring night raid he also led a small patrol of Black soldiers to capture Captain Mendoza, adjutant to the insurgent leader Aguinaldo. His departure was hastened when he contracted Malaria, and Lieutenant Mitchell returned home after a six month tour of both the Orient and Europe, expecting to resign his commission, leave the Army, and pursue other as yet undefined interests. But for the intervention of General Adolphus Greely, Billy Mitchell's military career might have ended at the turn of the century.



The grizzled commander of the Army's Signal Corps was by now legendary, not only for his ill-fated adventure at the polar ice cap in 1882 and the unsubstantiated but sensational rumors of cannibalism, but also as one of the Army's forward thinking commanders. Since 1887 he had held the role as the Army's chief Signal Officer, responsible for communications, photography, and observation balloons. He had also developed a sincere interest in the immense northwest territory of Alaska, purchased from Russia by the United States in 1867. Alaska had remained secluded from American interest until 1997 when gold was discovered in the Klondike, sparking a furor reminiscent of the California Gold Rush of 1849. Life in Alaska was full of the potential for riches...and also for death. So many visitors were lost in the vastness of the region that the US Government was forced to send soldiers.

These soldiers needed a means of maintaining communications back to the contiguous United States, and a concerted effort had been directed by private contractors to accomplish this. The efforts had failed and the possibility of completing WAMCATS (Washington-Alaska Military Cable and Telegraph Systems) was deemed impossible.

With American expansion into the Pacific at the turn of the century, Greely had the foresight to see that one day Alaska would hold a great strategic position in world affairs. In 1900 at the age of fifty-six, he personally went to Alaska to prove the job could be done. Returning home convinced that the right person could build WAMCATS, he knew just the man to accomplish it. When Billy Mitchell returned to Fort Meyer in 1901, General Greely asked him to take the Alaskan assignment. Always open to adventure and a chance to take on the odds, Mitchell elected to remain in the Army and go north, departing Seattle for Alaska in July.

From July to October, summer in Alaska, Mitchell observed both the terrain and the poor progress on the communications system. His orders were to observe, then report back to Greely why all efforts on the project to date had failed.

*"I submitted a report of my observations in Alaska to General Greely...to the effect that the people trying to build telegraph lines stayed in the house too much in the winter, and that if they got out and worked when it was cold, the lines could be built. Whereupon Gen. Greely ordered me to return to Alaska and build them and I was delighted with the prospect."*



Over the next two winters the young Lieutenant strung wire to connect the farthest outposts of territorial Alaska to Washington State. By the time he finished, WAMCATS linked military posts from Sitka to Seattle with more than 1,000 miles of undersea cable, and a 210-foot antenna provided wireless communications across Norton Sound to Nome. For the most part the mission had been hampered, as had his earlier mission, by lack of proper supply and equipment. As he had in the jungles of the Philippines, in Alaska Mitchell improvised where he could, skirted the boundaries of procedure where he couldn't improvise. He had been authorized \$5,000 for completion of the task that ultimately cost \$50,000, but in his typically pragmatic fashion, he bypassed the system and spent the necessary funds even without contracting an officer's warrant. Under ordinary circumstances such a budget over-run might have ruined a career, but Mitchell had accomplished a task that the military had struggled for years without success to do. The end not only justified the means, it exonerated the pragmatist.

When Mitchell returned home in 1903 it was to yet another promotion. At age 23 he was the youngest Captain in the Army and a rising star in the Signal Corps. That same year he married a young socialite from Rochester and honeymooned in Mexico. New ideas played at Mitchell's ever-inquiring mind, and military innovation was never far removed from his thought-process, taking precedence over home and family.

During the cold winter of 1902-03, Mitchell had developed interest in a new innovation while spending long weeks snowed in by 40-foot Alaskan drifts. In his lonely cabin he had spent hours reading up on engineering and aeronautics with special interests in the experiments of Professor Samuel P. Langley. Before 1903 came to an end, two brothers named Orville and Wilbur Wright gave the world the first successful airplane flight, and from that moment on, life would never be the same for Billy Mitchell.

The following year Senator Mitchell died. Meanwhile Captain Mitchell continued to build his own resume while experimenting with new ideas for military communication and photography at Fort Leavenworth, Kansas. His naturally inquisitive mind was constantly seeking to *push the envelope*, including one experiment in which he sent a kite nearly two miles into the air attached to a wire, which enabled him to receive a radio transmission from Puerto Rico nearly two thousand miles away. With the birth of heavier than air flight, Mitchell was in the right place (Army Signal Corps) at the right time. The Signal Corps was responsible for radio transmissions through the air, the use of lighter-than-air observation balloons, and similar projects all linked to the skies.

In 1906 when the airplane was less than three years old and the first military aircraft was still three years from delivery to the Army, Mitchell wrote an article for the *Cavalry Journal*. In it he stated:

*"Conflicts no doubt will be carried on in the future in the air, on the surface of the earth and water, and under the water."*

It was the kind of essay one would have expected from someone like Jules Verne, certainly not a bright young Army officer. The airplane was exciting but too infantile to even be considered as a weapon of war. As he would be throughout his brief life, Mitchell's foresight was well ahead of his time.





## **Billy Mitchell, American Spy**

In the following three years the Mitchell family grew with the birth of two daughters, and Billy saw his career continue its impressive course when he was selected as the first Signal Corps officer to attend the Army's School of the Line, graduating with distinction. By 1909 the Army had received its first airplane and trained its pilots...TWO of them. Mitchell's own growing interest in aviation had to be placed on hold with assignment back to the Philippines however. During the slightly more than three years that followed, Mitchell became interested, or some would say "obsessed," with what was seemingly his only other interest in later life...a potential enemy to be faced in a future war.

The movements and activities of American troops in the Philippines were carefully monitored and reported on by the Japanese, certainly suspicious of the American presence in the Pacific. During his first year in The Islands, Mitchell made it a practice to watch the watchers, noting with detail what THEY were doing and diligently transferring these notes to voluminous reports back to Washington. For a time he moved casually around the islands posing as a naturalist, observing birds and wildlife, while photographing or sketching Japanese activities. By his own admission, he often purchased his way into the confidence of these Oriental *spies*, for the most part alone, isolated and far from home, with conversation, beer and cigarettes. Mitchell was an engaging guy who made friends easily, and was difficult to dislike. It allowed him to get his way in most situations.

In the fall of 1911 Captain Mitchell toured Japan, Manchuria and China. It was NOT a pleasure tour but a hard look at what was happening in these countries. Mitchell was especially interested in Japan, its military training and weaponry and particularly the Japanese interest in the budding field of aviation. Again he took copious notes, photographed when he could and sketched when he could not photograph, and then compiled his observations in reports to Washington.

As early as 1913 he wrote:

*"Increasing friction between Japan and the United States will take place in the future there can be little doubt, and that this will lead to war sooner or later seems quite certain."*

The original of the report containing this prophetic observation is a part of the War College papers in the National Archives. Exactly how much attention was paid to Mitchell's reports on the Japanese in the period before World War I is quickly evident. Penciled in the column next to the above paragraph is the word: "Arse."

While Mitchell's predictions raised little attention in a military establishment that might sometimes be characterized as prioritizing paperwork over bullets, Mitchell's diligence and hard work was not unnoticed. His first fifteen years of military service had been filled with glowing reports by superiors, successes in Alaska and Fort Leavenworth, and a drive to duty that was uncommon even among the most dedicated of Americans. Mitchell returned home with a selection to the General Staff. At the age of thirty-two he was the youngest man every selected to this most prestigious of military assignments.

In 1912 he was assigned to Intelligence, a suitable position for a man who had just spied out the Orient like few Americans had ever been privileged to do and an opportunistic place to be with the brewing troubles in Europe. His new role also returned him to Washington, DC, a city where the Mitchell name was well known and remembered and where the budding young officer had many friends. The location also placed him close to Newport News, Virginia, where Glenn Curtiss operated a flying school.

## **Billy Mitchell, The Pilot**

Three things dominated the following three years of Mitchell's life and career:

- A continued interest in aviation,
- Intelligence reports of the growing crisis in Europe, and
- Giving voice to his strong personal opinions about the first two of these interests.

In Washington Captain Mitchell became friends with a budding young pilot who had been one of the first military aviators trained at the Wright Brothers' flying school in 1911, an officer named Lieutenant Henry Arnold. A 1907 West Point Graduate, Arnold was known as "Hap" at the point. He had hoped to become a Cavalry officer, but his poor performance as a cadet stymied that dream and sent him to serve as an Infantry officer in the Philippines. After that tour of duty, he again applied for service with the Cavalry. When he was again turned down he opted for the Signal Corps as at least a better place to serve than in the Infantry. It was a fortunate assignment both for Hap Arnold and for the future of American air power.

Mitchell and Arnold spent many hours discussing the developing airplane, Mitchell saturating his mind with knowledge during these sessions. Arnold later recalled: "His questions about the air were intelligent and to the point; in fact, it was he who did most of the talking—asking questions only to get concrete facts." So immersed in the subject was Captain Mitchell that, three years before he ever sat in a cockpit, he was recognized in Washington as an authority on the airplane. In 1913 Mitchell, Arnold, and Ben Foulois (who had taught himself to fly in 1909 through correspondence with the Wright Brothers) were called to testify on the future of the airplane before a Congressional committee. At that time military use of aircraft was assigned to the Aviation Section of the Signal Corps, and the question had arisen about a separate air arm. Though it was this very concept that twelve years later would make Mitchell a thorn in the flesh of the Army, Navy and War Department, in 1913 Mitchell argued against removing aeronautics from the Signal Corps. Perhaps remembering well how Army/Navy rivalries had led to tactical problems during the Spanish-American War, Mitchell admonished:

*"If we are going to try to build up aviation in this country, what's the use of trying to create a separate branch...causing all sorts of complications? I believe it would set aviation back to create a separate organization."*

It was a proclamation that would one day come back to haunt air power's greatest advocate. When the hearings concluded the committee agreed with the policy advocated by Mitchell, Arnold and Foulois. Army aviation would remain within the Signal Corps. That the congressmen were impressed with Mitchell's understanding of the Army's air arm was further illustrated when the young Captain was asked to author the legislation himself.

It is of note that in 1913, the airplane was still thought of as a tool to be used by ground commanders. The airplane could be used to observe, to photograph, and to transmit communications--hence it was suitably placed within the Signal Corps. Mitchell did have the foresight, even then however, to recognize the potential beyond the traditional role, stating:

*"Some people think of the aeroplane being an adjunct of the lines of information, the lines of information may grow to be an adjunct to the aeroplane, and very probably will."*



Mitchell's second passion developed almost unexpectedly, though quite naturally. Throughout his military career, Mitchell had been recognized as an officer who was thorough in reporting and drafting pages of detailed reports of his various observations for submission through the channels. When the budding young officer was bedridden due to a severe case of rheumatism (the result of his service in Alaska a decade earlier), he used his time to write. Now, however, his words were penned for distribution beyond military channels. Under a pseudonym he authored articles for the *Chicago Tribune* and penned an anonymous piece on the brewing war in Europe for *World's Work*. In July 1915 he wrote a controversial paper in which he advocated reorganizing the War Department with the creation of a Council of National Defense that would have authority over BOTH the Army and Navy stating: *"We would then have the whole national defense brains, so to speak, under one roof."*

The diatribe was titled *"Our Faulty Military Policy,"* and spoke to the threat of war looming on America's horizon with an eye to preparedness. Mitchell urged compulsory military service to raise an Army, an unpopular concept, two years before passage of the Selective Service Act that did become necessary to raise an army AFTER the United States did enter the war. Mitchell's premise, for the most part was more historically observant than prophetic, stated:

*"The military policy of the United States is and has been to prepare for war after such war has actually broken out."*

This doctrine may well explain Mitchell's actions at the end of World War I. In 1898 and again just nineteen years later he had seen his nation enter two different wars, totally unprepared to field an effective army. From history he developed a sincere and compelling drive to convince the United States to prepare for the NEXT war, which, no one wanted to believe, would ever come. Indeed, the fact that history repeats itself coupled with Billy Mitchell's interest in American history and past wars, may reveal the man to have been less of a prophet and more of an astute historian.

By the time Mitchell's duty on the General Staff concluded late in 1915, the radically thinking young officer was already raising eyebrows and wearing out his welcome. His assignment to the Aviation Section of the Signal Corps was welcomed by most of his superiors who saw him as more suited to field duty than staff duty. Again Mitchell received promotion, attaining the rank of Major.

For three months Mitchell was totally confined by his rheumatism to bed rest, and the illness weakened his heart and nearly claimed his life. Fighting back, he regained gradual movement and slowly recovered. By mid-1916 he was able to travel and began to fulfill his dream of flying. Every weekend for nearly six months he drove to Newport News, Virginia, for flight lessons until he soloed. Mitchell himself paid for two thirds of the \$1,470 bill for flight lessons, as Army regulations allowed payment of no more than \$500 to a civilian agency for services to one of its officers.

## **Billy Mitchell, Firsts**

Billy Mitchell's fifteen years of military service were marked by his youth--youngest officer in the Spanish-American Army, youngest officer selected for the General Staff. In 1917, two years past the middle-age milestone, his career became marked by a series of *firsts*. The catalyst for the new phase of his life was provided by the war in Europe, a war that had engulfed the *old world* and one that the United States was doing its best to ignore and stay out of.



Mitchell was convinced that eventually the United States would be dragged reluctantly into the conflict, and in 1917 began requesting duty in Europe. On March 3, 1917, he joined a group of five observers heading to France. His orders called for him to report to the American ambassador in Paris "for the specific purpose of observing the manufacture and development of aircraft." Major Mitchell arrived in Spain in March and was making his way to France when, on April 6, the United States indeed entered the war. The three-year old war in Europe had at last, as Mitchell expected, become a WORLD war.

Returning to his native French tongue for the first time since his youth, Mitchell was quickly welcomed in France. The three years of bitter warfare had left the French with dour pessimism and a hopeless outlook. That had now been brightened by the anticipated arrival of millions of American soldiers, and Billy Mitchell became the symbol of the relief that was to come.

Months before the first soldiers of General Pershing's American Expeditionary Force (A.E.F.) arrived; Billy Mitchell became representative of a new phase in the war. His character, his courage, and his sincere interest in the prosecution of the war were more than welcomed.

- ❖ Even before the A.E.F. arrived, Major Mitchell toured the front lines with French soldiers, taking up a position in a trench beneath the guns in the distance and participating in an infantry attack. He was the first American soldier under enemy fire in World War I. (Several US citizens had prior combat experience flying with the British or in the Lafayette Escadrille or fighting in the French Foreign Legion, but Mitchell was the *first under fire* in the uniform of the United States.)
- ❖ Mitchell's orders had been for him to observe and report on the manufacture and development of aircraft for the war in Europe. With a French pilot he winged his way over the battlefields, becoming the *first American officer to fly over the enemy lines*.
- ❖ For his foray into the front lines, the French government honored Mitchell. He became the first American of World War I to be awarded the French *Croix de Guerre*.



All the while the Major continued his job of observation and reporting. During the day he traveled the countryside, at night in his hotel room he typed pages of reports back to Washington. In those early months Major Mitchell learned much of what would a year later contribute to his success. French pilots echoed complaints of their own government's lack of understanding tactical aerial warfare. At the time the French were flying regularly but in a scattergun approach to warfare...an occasional dog fight here or there, but no tactical organization. These early pilots dreamed of massive air strikes, hundreds of airplanes, in a concerted attack on the German forces.

Mitchell quickly grasped the concept. His flights over the lines had showed him the smallness of the area in which two armies had slugged it out to a bloody, stalemated trench war for three years. The strip of land was no larger than 60 miles long, a mere bump in the terrain from the air, but real estate that that swallowed up ground soldiers of both sides without compromise. He observed:

*"It looked as though the war would keep up indefinitely until either the airplanes brought an end to the war or the contending nations dropped from sheer exhaustion."*



Major Mitchell didn't limit his observations to the French alone, however. While awaiting the arrival of reinforcements from the United States, he took time to visit the Royal Flying Corps (R.F.C.) at the British compound. Arriving unannounced, he wasted no time seeking the attention of Sir Hugh Boom Trenchard, already legendary for building the R.F.C. into an effective flying arm of 2,000 airplanes. A no-nonsense general officer, Trenchard was initially brusque at the young American officer's request to see his organization.

*"How many weeks have you got?" he asked with no small display of impatience.*

*"We could take in the equipment and supply today," Mitchell responded. "Tomorrow we could start..."*

*"Just a moment here, young man. Do you think I've nothing more to do than chaperon you and answer questions?"*

Mitchell's response reflects a tactful nature that many of his later detractors claimed he never possessed: *"Sir, I know you've got such an excellent organization that it shouldn't need your leadership for a day or so."*

To the surprise of those who knew the explosive nature of the flying legend, Trenchard did not toss the upstart young Major out of his office. Instead, with a laugh, he responded: "Come along young man. I can see you're the sort who usually gets what he wants in the end."

The three days that Mitchell spent with Trenchard may have been some of the most important days of his life. Mitchell bombarded the British commander, who had himself been a pilot; in the same manner he had queried his friend Hap Arnold for information on flying. In Trenchard, Mitchell found not only a mentor, but also a kindred spirit. In later years detractors would claim Mitchell's concepts of aerial combat, strategic bombing, and military aviation had been stolen from Trenchard. For his own part, Mitchell never denied his close association with the British pioneer and their impact on his thinking. The two remained friends and collaborated on aerial theory even after the war.

Mitchell returned to Paris with dreams beyond the current use of aircraft for observation and an occasional dogfight. Trenchard had boasted 2,000 aircraft, the French nearly as many, and with American forces on their way to France it was easy to dream that the skies over the front lines might soon be darkened by the wings of massive aerial formations. In Mitchell's developing dream of tactical aircraft deployment he envisioned two separate but coordinated approaches to the air war:

1. Organizing fighter squadrons for offensive use against enemy aircraft and ground troops,
2. Systematic, strategic bombing of the enemy behind his own lines.

*"This," he stated, "is the proper way to use air power and I am sure the future will see operations conducted this way by thousands of airplanes."*

In May Mitchell received promotion to Lieutenant Colonel. He spent his nights continuing to report back to Washington on his ideas for the use of air power once the American forces arrived. Sir Trenchard followed his progress with a mix of feelings:

- ❖ The uneasy hope that somehow the upstart American officer would succeed in convincing his own government of aerial concepts the airmen of other countries had failed to convince their own to adopt, and

❖ The belief that *"Mitchell is a man after my own heart...if only he can break his habit of trying to convert opponents by killing them."*

When General Pershing arrived in Paris on June 13, 1917, with the first elements of the A.E.F., Lieutenant Colonel Billy Mitchell was there to greet him. In just a few short months Mitchell had observed the progress, or rather the lack of progress, of the war from both the ground and the air. He had built important liaisons with French and the British airmen and commanders, established himself well in the Paris social circles that could be all important to a Staff officer, and had developed his own ideas about how the newly arrived American forces could best be used. Of course, his primary interest was in the deployment of American air power.

Pershing had brought with him Major Townsend F. Dodd, a veteran pilot, to head the Aviation Section of the Army's Signal Corps. Upon meeting Mitchell however, Pershing recognized the Lieutenant Colonel's superior rank and assigned Major Dodd to other duty. The first American airmen of World War I would work under Lieutenant Colonel Billy Mitchell, new Chief of Aviation for the Signal Corps, American Expeditionary Forces.

**For Mitchell it was time to *"Put up or shut up!"***



## **The U.S. Army Air Service**

The Aviation Section over which Lieutenant Colonel Mitchell was placed was a military unit in name only. In May while en route to France, General Pershing had noted the condition of America's air assets as the country entered war. In his diary the general wrote:

*"The situation as to aviation was such that every American ought to feel mortified to hear it mentioned. Out of 65 officers and 1,000 men in the Air Service Section of the Signal Corps, there were 35 officers who could fly. With the exception of five or six officers, none of them could have met the requirement of modern battle conditions..."*

*"We could boast 55 training planes...all...valueless for service at the front. Of these 55 planes the National Advisory Committee for Aeronautics advised that 51 were obsolete and the other 4 obsolescent. We could not have put a single squadron in the field."*

With but one airplane, Mitchell's own French Nieuport, the task facing the air chief was as formidable as had been his previous missions in the Philippines and Alaska. With the same ingenuity that had brought him success in both places, Mitchell tried to cut around the red tape and find a way to get the job done.

In August Mitchell's personal Mercedes, a vehicle in which he was known to travel through France at speeds in excess of 90 miles per hour, broke down along the road. Behind Mitchell were Major Dodd and his driver. Dodd's driver raised the hood on Mitchell's car and had it running a few moments later. The chauffeur was a former race driver and mechanic, another forward thinking fellow who months earlier had suggested that the Army create a flying squadron composed of racecar

drivers. The army had scoffed at the concept stating that it felt men who knew much about engines would be poor as pilots, fearful to fly when their engines didn't sound right. Mitchell believed otherwise, and proved so months later when he helped young Eddie Rickenbacker become a flier in one of the first American aero squadrons.

As the summer turned to fall, the French became impatient with General Pershing's failure to commit American troops to the bloody stalemate that had existed along the Western Front for three years. As had been the case in previous wars however, the United States was totally unprepared for this new conflict, and Pershing patiently tried to establish his command in the field while awaiting the arrival of additional forces.

The Aviation Section of the A.E.F. was a confusing one in the fall of 1917. To try to bring some order, General Pershing made Major General William Kenly Chief of the Air Service, (effectively removing the Aviation Section from Signal Corps control nearly a year before the U.S. Army Air Service was officially established in Washington, D.C.). General Kenly gave Mitchell the title of Chief of the Air Service Zone of Advance. In essence, it meant that Kenly would command from the rear, coordinating logistics and supplies, while Mitchell commanded from the front. It would have probably been a workable solution but for the arrival in November of a large group of Aviation officers. Mitchell's own words reflect the internal battle that was about to begin:

*"Just as our organization began to work smoothly, a shipload of Aviation officers arrived under Brigadier General (Benjamin) Foulois. There were over one hundred of them, almost none of them had even seen an airplane...A more incompetent lot of air warriors had never arrived in the zone of active military operations...Foulois, I am told, has orders from the President to General Pershing to put him in charge of Aviation in Europe."*

When General Foulois replaced General Kenly, civil war erupted in the Air Service. Foulois was one of the Army's earliest pilots and had known Mitchell for years. In 1916 Foulois went with the 1st Aero Squadron to Mexico in the unsuccessful effort to capture Pancho Villa. During his absence from the Capitol, the chief of the Army's Signal Corps was forced to resign because of financial improprieties. The vacancy temporarily made Mitchell chief of the Signal Corps, and when the blame for the ill-fated effort in Mexico "rolled down hill" it fermented to become a rift between the two great proponents of air power that never healed. In Mitchell's memoirs he referred to Foulois as an incompetent "carpetbagger" who "no longer flew." In 1986 Foulois published his own story, referring to Mitchell as an inept braggart who was all talk and no action, a lousy pilot, and a *prima donna* who did more harm than good.

Almost immediately the two men clashed, and General Pershing found himself caught in the middle between two bitter enemies. Foulois complained to Pershing about Mitchell's extremely childish attitude and advised "(Mitchell is) incapable of working in harmony with myself."

Mitchell for his own part had more than one heated discussion with Pershing about the internal problems in the Air Service. The strong-willed aviator pushed hard for a single American air commander, unfettered by the interference of the incoming staff officers. Pershing lost patience with Mitchell, even threatened to send him back to the United States.

With the impetuosity that marked this older Mitchell, he met the General eye-to-eye and threatened: "If you do, you'll soon come after me."

Surprisingly, the sometimes ill-tempered General laughed and the two men parted amicably. Despite Mitchell's tendency to be a thorn in the side of General Pershing, the two men generally had a mutual respect for each other. More than once in the months that followed Pershing would go out on a limb for Billy Mitchell, and Mitchell seemed to always come through for his commander. But Pershing also understood authority, and had a sincere respect for General Foulois who had been placed in his position by the President. He summed up his predicament by saying: "In all of this Army, there is but one thing causing me real anxiety, and that's the Air Service. There are a lot of good men in it, but they're running around in circles. Somebody has got to make them go straight."

That "somebody" was a surprising choice, and one of Pershing's great decisions. He called upon an old friend and fellow West Point classmate, Major General Mason Patrick.

Early in 1918 the man who had been an Army engineer for thirty years became the first real commander of the American Air Service, a post he would hold until after the war ended, and a role to which he would return in 1921 when once again Billy Mitchell clashed with a superior. Though he had never flown and was even dubious at first about the field of aviation, General Patrick was a well-qualified organizer and administrator. He was also a quick learner and a man willing to change his views. In the end he became one of the great advocates for a separate American Air Force, influenced in no small degree by Billy Mitchell's own ideas, but possessed with a patience and tact his protégé seemed not to understand.

Over the years that followed, Mitchell and General Patrick had their own share of harsh disagreements, but Patrick became the one person it seemed, that could control Billy Mitchell. Without Patrick's stern guidance, Mitchell seemed to self-destruct; under Patrick's control Mitchell seemed capable of achieving almost anything. Patrick recognized Mitchell's tactical genius as well as his unique foresight for machines and events that were too distant for others to deem believable. For the next year Patrick became the glue that held the factions of the new Air Service together, administrating from the rear where General Foulois was in charge of equipment and supply. In the field, Mitchell began building a combat arm and promoting aerial tactics designed to win a world war. His diary gives a glimpse of the observations, made in flights over the trenches of the Western Front, which ultimately pushed him to prove his own theories for aerial warfare:

*"(The World War) is a slaughterhouse performance from beginning to end on the ground. Maybe one side makes a few yards or maybe a mile and thousands of men are killed.*

*"It is not war, it is simply slaughter.*

*"War is decided by getting at the vitals of the enemy, that is, to shoot him in the heart. This kind of war is like clipping off one finger, then a toe, then an ear, then his nose and gradually eating into his vitals."*

As morbid as it sounded, Billy Mitchell's observation had been borne out by three years of deadly warfare along a narrow 60-mile strip of land separating France from Germany near St. Mihiel. (Similarly stalemated warfare had stretched north through the Argonne Forrest and then further north along the nearly impregnable Hindenburg Line.) This was a true war of attrition, each side pushing the other backward until thrown back themselves; and then the seesaw *tug-of-war* would repeat itself. Both sides suffered great loss of life, but neither made any significant progress. Mitchell saw relief possible only if he could field an armada of airplanes to attack behind the German lines and to bomb and destroy supply depots, isolating enemy ground troops.



To accomplish this goal, early in 1918 Mitchell brought over to his Air Service some of the experienced American pilots who had flown with the Lafayette Escadrille, organizing them with newly arriving fliers from the U.S. into effective fighter squadrons. Throughout the winter months combat had slowed along the front, but with the melting snows of spring the bloodshed would resume in earnest and Mitchell wanted to be ready. Even General Foulis grudgingly spoke of Mitchell's *"Most efficient service...in the organization, battle training, general supervision and guidance of the Air Service units."*

In the early spring the new American Air Service combat arm was ready for its first test; it was well organized and led at last by a cohesive command structure. The only things the young pilots needed were airplanes. After weeks of waiting the first airplanes began arriving...not American planes but cast-off French Nieuports. Though eagerly welcomed by the American pilots, the wait was not over. It would be yet weeks before any of the airplanes were fitted with machine guns.

On March 21 the Germans were the first to strike, pushing a line forward along the Western Front. Behind a massive force of artillery the German army broke through the British Fifth Army to push within 56 miles of Paris. Though it had been nearly a year since the United States had entered the war, fewer than 300,000 American troops had arrived in France and few of them were in combat positions. Germany's spring offensive, an all-or-nothing gamble to end the stalemate in Europe, had all the markings of a huge success. Paris trembled in fear and military commanders could foresee a second Battle of the Marne in the offing.

On May 28 the green American ground forces got their first taste of a major battle. Amazingly they threw back the German advance at Montdidier, and then pushed forward to capture the strategically located town of Cantigny. On June 6 nearly 30,000 Americans launched a counter-offensive at Belleau Wood driving the Germans from the square mile stronghold. American soldiers were pursuing the war as men of battle had for years, personal combat in a slugfest that saw an American casualty rate of more than 50 per cent. Mitchell's earlier observation of this kind of warfare as being nothing more than a *slaughterhouse performance* appeared on the mark.

The German infantry struck again in mid June, delivering a smashing blow along the 27-mile front between Montdidier and Noyon northeast of Paris. Again the Allied line held, setting the stage for Germany's last great drive of the war. On July 6, in desperation, the enemy struck on both sides of Rheims in the Second Battle of the Marne. Allied positions were bombarded with artillery as the Kaiser poured all of his reserves into the effort. By July 18 the offensive was over, and the German advance turned into a retreat.

The failure of Germany's spring offensive can only be credited to the sheer determination and valor of the doughboys and the other Allies on the ground in those fateful and bloody months. Airmen flew, shot down German planes, and lost planes of their own. In May Mitchell was crushed at the loss of two in particular. The death of the great ace Raoul Lufbery, one of Mitchell's closest



friends, was a bitter loss. Mitchell fully believed that had his pilots been supplied with parachutes, Lufbery would have survived.

Less than a week after admiring and mourning comrades laid Lufbery to rest, Mitchell received word of another fatal crash. This time it was a young pilot, fifteen years his junior, named John Mitchell after his father. It was two months before Billy could bring himself to break the news to his family back home. When he did, he wrote:

*"John's loss I suppose was the hardest thing that ever happened to me. To begin with he was my only brother, he was so much younger that he was like a son, and in addition he was the same as a great friend. He had every quality that I wanted in a brother and admired in a man. I suppose he was very nearly the dearest living thing in the world to me."*

Throughout the summer Mitchell continued to visit his squadrons, watch their progress, and ponder the limited role his airmen had played in the earlier German offensive. Early in the offensive Mitchell had flown over enemy-held territory and observed the ground movements as the enemy broke through the British lines. *"The hole in the British Army is twenty or thirty miles broad,"* he noted. More importantly, the mission gave him a full realization of what could happen if airmen and infantry could work together, communicate, and assist each other. But the problem in achieving such a coordinated effort lay not only in convincing infantry officers, but also in winning over the foot soldier himself. *"It is practically impossible to impress the men in the ranks, through their own officers, as to the value of aviation,"* he noted in his diary.

To remedy this, Mitchell prepared a letter addressed to the men on the ground. Without consulting anyone, the pragmatic Billy Mitchell had thousands of the letters printed, then had his pilots fly over Allied camps and trenches along the Western Front to deliver his message.

Mitchell's other key observation coming out of the failed German spring offensive was the substantiation of his belief that "War is decided by getting at the vitals of the enemy, that is, to shoot him in the heart."

During the battle at Chateau Thierry Mitchell had commanded a small contingent of British as well as American airmen. As the infantry fought it out on the ground, British bombers hit German supply depots in the rear, cutting off needed supplies for the advancing Germans, and forcing ground commanders to pull needed soldiers from the front lines to guard their rear.

**From the American Scrappers in the Air  
To the American Scrappers on the Ground  
DOUGHBOYS**

While you are giving the Boche hell on the ground, we are helping you to the limit in the air.

Headquarters is trying to keep in touch with you and to render aid whenever you are checked or outnumbered.

Keep us posted at all times as to where your front lines are, either with Bengal lights, panels, or--if nothing else is available--wave a white towel or any white cloth.

Your signals will enable us:

To take news of your location to the rear.

To report if the attack is successful.

To call for help if needed.

To enable the artillery to put their shells over your head into the enemy...

Do not think that we are not on the job when you cannot see us--most of our planes work so far to the front that they cannot be seen from the lines.

Some of the enemy planes may break through our airplane barrage in front of you, and may sometimes bomb and machinegun you, but in the last month we have dropped ten tons of bombs for every one the Boche has dropped. For every Boche plane that you see over you, the Boche sees ten Allied planes over him.

After reading this, pass it on to your buddie (sic).

As the German army retreated back to the St. Mihiel salient in August of 1918, Allied war planners were preparing the first major American offensive. Colonel Billy Mitchell had ideas of his own, concepts nurtured through a year of observing the tactics of others and substantiated in a limited way by the successes of his pilots in their first months of combat.

## **St. Mihiel and an Aerial Armada**

World War I ended on August 18, 1918, with the failed final German push at the Marne. The Kaiser's chancellor later remarked, "On the 18th even the most optimistic among us knew that all was lost." It is doubly tragic then, that combat continued for another ninety days. Those last three months would prove to be among the bloodiest of the war—for both sides.

By mid August more than a million American doughboys had reached the front lines, and General Pershing was plotting an assault on the formidable St. Mihiel salient. In their retreat the Germans themselves tried to straighten the line, fully aware that it would be more defensible than the horseshoe shaped bulge they now held. As Pershing and the other Allied general's plotted an offensive that would throw more than a half-million doughboys against the salient, Mitchell was quick to lay out his own blueprints for the aerial side of the battle.

The St. Mihiel offensive was more than the greatest success of Mitchell's distinguished career, it was perhaps, his finest moment as a *politician/commander*. It was the one time that he tempered his strong will and firm beliefs with a taciturn diplomacy that kept the long meetings from turning hostile. With the confidence of General Pershing, the glowing support of First Army commander General Hunter Liggett (one of the few who truly appreciated air power), and the sympathy of the air-minded French, Billy Mitchell got the chance he wanted.

The first week of September was filled with secret movements, Mitchell's airmen moving forward to advance aerodromes from which their commander would direct the first-ever, united aerial attack on an enemy force. The armada included American, French, and British aircraft--both fighters and bombers--all at the direction of a single commander. Mitchell would coordinate the effort with the commanders on the ground leading the infantry advance, another historical first overshadowed perhaps only by the sheer number of aircraft involved--nearly 1,500 in all. It was the largest aerial armada in history.

Mitchell was proud of his airmen, men who loved him and would fly through hell for him. Now he called upon them to accomplish what had never been done before. These were a rare breed of fighting men, brash young cowboys like Frank Luke from Arizona, daring race drivers like Eddie Rickenbacker, West Point graduates like Major Carl Tooeey Spaatz, efficient squadron commanders who had sat in a cockpit and traded bullets with the *Flying Circus* like Harold Hartney. With the addition of the British air assets, even the legendary Sir Hugh Trenchard would fly his pilots at the direction of Billy Mitchell. It was a defining moment in military history, perhaps the exact moment in time for which Billy Mitchell was born...until the weather intervened.

During the weeks of preparation Colonel Mitchell averaged only three hours of sleep each night. When night fell he read reports of the day's activities until 2 A.M., rested his eyes briefly, and then arose to personally observe practice maneuvers and preparations at 5 A.M. Running on sheer adrenaline, Mitchell was in no mood to hear news on September 11 that *the generals* wanted to postpone the anticipated next-day launch of the St. Mihiel offensive because of the rain and the fog that had set in early. The previous day Mitchell had flown over the German lines with his French

friend Paul Armengaud as an observer, and witnessed lines of enemy infantry pulling back in retreat. The enemy was anticipating an offensive push against the salient and were withdrawing quickly.

As promptly as news of the postponement reached Colonel Mitchell he headed for Pershing's Headquarters, where a meeting of the generals was already in progress. Colonel Mitchell was the youngest, and lowest ranking man in a room that was about to decide the fate of his *moment in time*.

*"Pretty bad weather we're facing,"* stated an engineering officer. Around the room heads nodded in ascent...engineers usually knew what could and could not be accomplished.

*"What's the weather got to do with it?"* Snapped Colonel Mitchell.

*"The rain always holds up our light railways that we use to get ammunition to our artillery. That goes for our water supply too. I think it's best if we hold off on this thing for a few days."* Again heads nodded in agreement around the table, and Mitchell could see his moment slipping away.

Earnestly, but with a patience and uncharacteristic demeanor for the man Boom Trenchard had once said would go far if he could "break his habit of trying to convert opponents by killing them," Colonel Mitchell pleaded his case. He told of his flights over the salient, of witnessing columns of German soldiers in full retreat. He predicted that the battle for the St. Mihiel salient wouldn't be much of a battle.

*"We must jump the Germans now!"* He admonished. *"I've seen their movement to the rear with my own eyes. Forget the artillery if it means delay. If we advance fast, the artillery would probably shoot a lot of our own men anyway."*

Colonel Mitchell's words seemed to fall on deaf ears, and around the room all eyes were on the engineering officer who was calling for a postponement. Mitchell had lost his most important debate with everyone in the room...except for the one man that mattered. General John J. Pershing looked up at his staff and pronounced:

***"We will attack, without delay!"***

Prior to the St. Mihiel offensive American pilots had indeed been fair-weather fliers. With the decision to proceed on September 12, brave young men took to the air in spite of fog and rain.

Mitchell organized his assets into two attack brigades of 400 or more planes each, one assigned to attack the right side of the salient while the other penetrated to the enemy rear to cut off all communication and supply. It was an impressive air show that inspired men on the ground and amazed even the airmen themselves. Pilot Kenneth Littauer spoke of the massive formation and said: *"I didn't believe my eyes, because we'd never seen such a thing before. I happened to be standing on the airfield when this damned thing started to go over. Then it went and it went...it was awfully impressive."*

The ground war was over on the first day, and the air war became almost nonexistent. Mitchell's pilots swept the skies over the Western Front clean almost immediately, and then patrolled them continuously to demonstrate their mastery of the heavens. In three days the combined forces took back a formidable enemy redoubt that had been held for four years, captured 16,000 Germans, 443 artillery pieces, and created a new threat to the enemy stronghold at Metz. General Pershing couldn't have been more pleased and wrote Colonel Mitchell:



*"Please accept my sincere congratulations on the successful and very important part taken by the Air Force under your command in the first offensive of the American Army. The organization and control of the tremendous concentration of air forces...is as fine a tribute to you personally as is the courage and nerve shown by your officers a signal proof of the high morale, which permeates the service under your command.  
"I am proud of you all!"*

Mitchell was elated, not so much in the praise but in the validation of everything he had argued for over the previous year. At last he was convinced that his Air Service would be recognized for what it was, the powerful war-winning military arm of the future. Mitchell himself was a hero in France, both among his own men and among the populace. His favor with General Pershing was evident in October when he received promotion to the temporary rank of Brigadier General. (Temporary promotions such as this during wartime had a long history in the Army, and it was expected that after the war Mitchell would return to his earlier rank of Colonel. When the return to his permanent rank occurred a few years later, it was misinterpreted by many as a disciplinary move. In fact, Mitchell maintained his rank much longer than most other officers who received temporary promotions during the war.)

Following his tremendous success in the St. Mihiel offensive, Mitchell committed his forces to a nearly independent role in the Argonne Offensive. His fighter pilots flew daily and, as Mitchell reported, "There is nothing to beat them in the world!" Meanwhile he pursued his theories of tactical bombing, raining tons of explosives on German bridges, airdromes, railroads and supply depots. The psychological impact of the Air Service's supremacy on the German morale demonstrated just one more powerful advantage of a massive air force.

Mitchell's men further endeared themselves to the weary infantrymen by continuing to coordinate their efforts with the ground war. Big two-seat DeHavillands dropped supplies to beleaguered units and pursuit airplanes flew low over infantrymen to shield them from German airplanes. As the advance turned into a rout, the quick pace could lead to confusion and dangerous situations. Once Mitchell became aware of a large congestion of trucks at a village crossroads that could have become instantly susceptible to a damaging attack from the German Air Force. Without pause he sent a flight of 320 Allied aircraft to patrol the area and protect the forces on the ground until the traffic jamb could be cleared.

Ever looking to the future, in late October General Mitchell came to General Pershing with a bold new idea. The Allied advance would certainly slow with the onset of winter, but an Allied offensive was already being planned for the spring of 1919 to finish the job started at St. Mihiel and at last end the war. Mitchell's idea was preposterous at the time to all who heard it, yet General Pershing gave it an attentive ear. He had learned that when Billy Mitchell saw the future, he had a habit of making it come to pass. Mitchell's new concept was never employed because the war ended long before anyone would have believed possible the previous summer, and there would be no spring offensive necessary.

Mitchell's last great scheme of World War I is however of note, despite the fact that he would not see it employed in his lifetime.

In the fall of 1918 there were a few big Handley-Page airplanes in the Allied arsenal that were capable of carrying a dozen or more men. Mitchell hoped to build up this part of his command throughout the winter so that during the spring offensive that never came, they could fly deep into Germany to drop American soldiers behind enemy lines by parachute. It was indeed a preposterous idea, but now when Billy Mitchell had an idea, nobody ruled it out.

World War I ended with the Armistice of November 11, 1918, and weary doughboys and airmen were anxious to return home. In the months that followed a steady stream of victorious young soldiers passed through New York to a hearty, patriotic welcome. Heroes like Eddie Rickenbacker, Charles Whittlesey, Sergeant Alvin York, Samuel Woodfill, and the impressive General John J. Pershing were feted with parades, festivals, banquets, and media requests.

General Billy Mitchell chose to see Germany first, despite the insistence of his friend Major Hap Arnold that his presence was needed at home—that *"we needed him back in Washington."*

In Major Arnold's own vision of the future, General Pershing would return a great American hero to become the Army's Chief of Staff. (He did, serving from July 1, 1921, to September 13, 1924).

He could also foresee General Billy Mitchell, *"clearly the Prince of the Air now,"* assuming an important role as the new Air Chief. (He didn't.)

This was important to Major Arnold because he honestly believed that the wartime success of the Army Air Service could not secure its future; but that a new war was brewing at home. (It was.)



*For Major Arnold, two out of three when predicting the future wasn't too bad.  
It would almost however, not be enough for the new war brewing at home.*

# Fight For Survival

## *The Battle at Home & The Court Martial Of Billy Mitchell*



When *The Great War* ended on November 11, 1918, there was a great rush to bring America's soldiers home in time for Christmas. Despite the admonition of Major Henry *Hap* Arnold to General William *Billy* Mitchell to join the quick exodus from Europe to build an American air force, Mitchell opted to go into Germany with the Allied occupation forces. There he remained throughout the rest of the year, speeding across Europe's highways in his Mercedes and luxuriating in the tremendous success of his Air Service in helping to end the war. He almost waited too long to return home.

As a new year dawned in 1919, the patriotic fervor that welcomed the returning doughboys with parades, dances and other celebrations began to dim. Thousands of conscripted soldiers from around the nation were quickly discharged to return to civilian life, the wartime army and navy dwindling rapidly to a small, peacetime force.

When General Mitchell returned to the United States late in February to assume his assigned position as Director of Military Aeronautics, it was to find that the title and the office specified in his orders no longer existed. In fact, the American Air Service that during the war had numbered 20,000 officers and 150,000 enlisted men had shrunk dramatically. By the end of the year it numbered only 1,300 officers and 11,000 men--a meager 7 per cent of the force that had served during the war. It was certainly NOT the Air Service Mitchell expected to find.

En route from Germany to New York, Mitchell had obtained orders sending him home through England in order to visit with General Hugh *Boom* Trenchard and to observe what Great Britain was doing with its new peace-time air forces and, according to the communiqué to Washington from General John J. Pershing, "*To see what the result of creating a separate branch of aeronautics has been.*" The British again impressed General Mitchell, who reported:

*"Everywhere the British are, there is system and this is shown distinctly in their air force. It is the best-organized force of its kind in the world.*

*"If we could have the air organization in the U.S. that the British have, we would be so far ahead of the rest of the world that there would be no comparison."*

While still in London collaborating with General Trenchard, Mitchell took some spare time to visit his sister Ruth who was living in the city at that time. Her account of that visit gives an unusual

insight into her brother, often not found in the detractors of Billy Mitchell who saw him as a grandstanding egotist.

The most frequently recognized photographs of Billy Mitchell are usually those showing him in uniform with a chest full of medals. Certainly, though he did not earn *the big one*...he received more than his share of high awards--and from virtually all Allied nations. Aboard the *Aquitania* during the voyage home, however, this was not the General Mitchell other passengers saw. His tailored uniform sported only the silver star of his temporary rank as a brigadier general, the extra *hash marks* on his sleeve that marked him as one of the longest-serving American soldiers in Europe during World War I, and distinctive wings on his chest that marked him as an aviator. Mitchell was thus attired when he visited Ruth in England. She asked, "*Where are all those medals we've been hearing about?*"

Mitchell looked sheepishly at Ruth, and then dug into his pocket and pulled out the Legion of Honor he had received. "*Is that all?*" asked Ruth. Again Mitchell reached into his pocket to pull out a *Croix de Guerre* with Palm (the first of the war awarded to an American soldier), followed by the Italian Order of Sts. Maurice and Lazarus, the Distinguished Service Cross, and the Victory Medal with clasps for campaigns at Cambrai, the Somme, Meuse-Argonne, and Champagne-Marne.

General Mitchell certainly had every right to be proud of his achievements throughout a long and distinguished career, but his uniform on the return home should have served notice to any who met him that but one thing really mattered--aviation.

## S.N.A.F.U.

The acronym "SNAFU" is one of the military's most recognized terms; roughly translated it means "*Situation Normal, All Fouled Up!*" It has come to be used to define a sudden mistake, but traditionally it meant that the errors in process were not new, but simply part of a TRADITION of errors. The post-World War I army returned to its pre war *modus operandi*, operating on tradition and with little view of the lessons learned in the war or the prospects of the future. Colonel Thomas Milling, one of the early Army aviators who also rose to the rank of General, once summed up the traditional philosophy of the *old soldiers* that ran the military by saying:

*"Their minds went only as far as their men could go. The infantry officer's horizon was at the end of a day's march. The cavalryman saw a little further, a little faster. The artilleryman could see to the end of his trajectories. But none of them could see into the air."*

So it was that the new Chief of the now nearly nonexistent Army Air Service came from the camp of the *old soldiers*. He was General Charles Menoher, former commander of the famous Rainbow Division in France, hero of the Infantry, and a stern disciplinarian in the traditional sense. He had never flown and was destined to become Air Chief in title only--Colonel Billy Mitchell, now having reverted back to his permanent rank, became the visible symbol of America's military aviators. It would make for some troublesome years for both men.

Initially, Mitchell seemed to accept the role dealt him to serve as Menoher's G-3 officer. His area of responsibility was primarily the training





and operations of the few remaining American pilots, and he approached his task with vigor. He surrounded himself with like-minded men, World War I aces and commanders like Reed Chambers, Harold Hartney, Tom Milling, and Carl Tooey Spaatz. America's top ace of the war Eddie Rickenbacker took leave of military duty upon his return home to first build a racetrack at Indianapolis and later to build an airline.

The exploits of these early Army aviators and the publicity surrounding them makes it easy to forget that the Navy too, had its own aeronautics section. (One Naval and one Marine Corps aviator had each earned Medals of Honor during World War I.) In the first decade of military aviation, the Navy had already successfully fitted airplanes with pontoons for take-offs and landings from water, as well as designed airplanes to take off and land on ships at sea. In the peacetime Navy of 1919, it seemed only natural to compare notes with the Army's air forces. Early in the year Acting Secretary of the Navy Franklin D. Roosevelt extended an invitation for an Army Air Service representative to speak to the Navy General Board about future air policy. The invitation went not to the Army's Chief of Aviation, but his G-3 officer and the man considered the foremost authority on Army aviation, Colonel Billy Mitchell.

Colonel Mitchell's first meeting with the Navy was a cordial one despite the fact that he said little of what the Navy anticipated, and much of what it would later resist. The Navy, like the Army's old-line command, still considered aviation to be an adjunct of the service--an asset to be utilized but a small portion of the whole. By now Colonel Mitchell was beginning to advocate a pivotal role for aviation, one that would make it America's first line of defense and a leader in offensive actions. Such a role would, he argued, necessitate that aviation be formed as a separate branch of service, equal to that of the Army and Navy.

*"You have to have a combination of the three," he stated. Then he displayed the degree to which his thinking had already progressed. "If we look forward, there will be a Ministry of Defense, combining Army, Navy and Air Force under one direction."*

Colonel Mitchell, perhaps encouraged by occasional nods and the serious interest of the Board's spokesman Admiral Albert Winterhalter, pulled no punches. He advised the Navy to arm its fleets against the aircraft of a potential enemy. *"My opinion is," he announced boldly, "that you can make a direct attack on ships from the air in the future."* He told how a powerful American air force could protect our nation's shores from invasion by sea.

How?

*By destroying the enemy's warships and transports before they could reach the coast.*

The idea of an airplane attacking a ship was ominous--one that could cause serious casualties. Of course, no one in the Navy at that time believed that aircraft could sink a battleship, but the threat of serious damage alone was worth consideration.

After listening to Mitchell for three hours Admiral Winterhalter announced,

*"We shall have to tackle both sides of the question. We shall have to find out what your methods of attack are so that we can find a means to meet them. There isn't anything that has appeared to me more important than cooperation in this new service."*

For Billy Mitchell it had been a good day...until the doors were closed and the impact of what he had said fully sank in and raised the barnacles on the backs of the Naval high command.

There was nothing in that meeting that, in reflection, can be seen as a *declaration of war* that would pit Billy Mitchell against the Navy, or the Army Air Service against its own higher command in the coming years. If indeed war began on the home front in the spring of 1919, it was started at a level in the military structure far above the G-3 officer that spoke to the Navy's General Board, and would claim as its first victim a man other than the aviation hero of the First World War.

The great aerial success of the United States during World War I can be attributed only to the brave young men who fought in the air. They flew without parachutes, dueled with temperamental machine guns that frequently jammed, and performed their duty with valor until they fell in battle--or as the result of their own faulty airplanes. The United States, most industrialized nation in the world in 1918, had promised 100,000 airplanes for the war effort. In fact, only 740 American-made aircraft ever reached the front lines of France. Less than one third of these flew in combat, and almost all were DH-4s, commonly called "Flaming Coffins." These were more dangerous to the men who piloted them than they were to the enemy. The United States of America had been totally unprepared for war, and vastly unsupportive of a new means of combat—and it showed!

It was such history that motivated Colonel Mitchell to come home and try to build a viable air force for the next war--the war no one wanted to believe would ever happen. Following his presentation to the Navy General Board, Colonel Mitchell carried his message around the country in stirring speeches that did not yet contain the volatile remarks that would come to mark the last years of his career. He waged most of his campaign on paper, sending hundreds of requests and recommendations to General Menoher:

- ❖ Foot soldiers should be trained to parachute behind enemy lines to wage war.
- ❖ Bombers were needed, capable of carrying explosive ordnance across the ocean.
- ❖ The US needed Aircraft carriers with 900-foot decks to deploy flights of airplanes.
- ❖ Pilots needed torpedoes and armor piercing bombs in order to attack ships at sea.
- ❖ Air raid protection should be established in American cities.
- ❖ Air routes should be set up across America, Canada and Mexico.
- ❖ Commercial aviation should be expanded to provide a pool of trained pilots.

Few of Mitchell's *crazy ideas* drew more than a chuckle from the Army command. There was said to have been an unofficial opinion that the war had deranged Colonel Mitchell's mind--filled his head with a multitude of strange ideas. But Billy Mitchell was a war hero and a popular man with veterans groups and the general public. Thus in the spring of 1919, the Army adopted a tolerant attitude of these strange requests, many marked "Emergency Measures," and filed them away in a special cabinet at the War Department called *The Flying Trash Pile*. The fact is; few of these ideas were original. Billy Mitchell had learned well from men like General Trenchard from observing the emphasis on aviation in other nations, and by directing combat air operations in the Great War.

## **The Crowell Report**

What the War Department couldn't ignore was the outcry from Congress over the expenditure of a billion dollars during the war to produce a small number of defective DH-4s that saw little use. In response, Secretary of War Newton Baker dispatched his Assistant Secretary Benedict Crowell to lead an eight-man fact-finding mission. The panel was assigned to study the problems confronting aviation, to observe European programs, and report their findings. Secretary Baker specified that the mission of the project was to observe three things: organization, technical development, and commercial development. Under no circumstances was the committee to recommend policy.

The well-rounded Crowell commission included three aircraft manufacturers, a Navy captain, and two Army colonels. Two months later on July 19, 1919, they turned in their findings. Almost immediately the report seemed to mysteriously become lost somewhere between the trash bin and *The Flying Trash Pile*.

The following month, almost as mysteriously, Naval aviation vanished. Upon submission of the Crowell Report, the Assistant Secretary and Howard Coffin who had been one of the eight men assigned to observe and report for it, visited the Chief of Naval Operations. Admiral Charles Benson had seen the report and was visibly hostile. *"I cannot conceive of any use that the fleet will ever have for aircraft,"* he told the two men. *"The Navy doesn't need airplanes. Aviation is just a lot of noise."*

To emphasize this belief, on August 1 Admiral Benson issued a confidential order abolishing the Navy's Aviation Division. The edict was so confidential, in fact, that word of the move never reached the office of Assistant Secretary of the Navy Roosevelt. It was NOT so confidential that it did not reach the ears of Colonel William Mitchell. (It is suspected that some unknown Naval aviator, upon being removed from his cockpit and assigned to a traditional Navy job, leaked word of this move to Mitchell.)

Colonel Mitchell was still highly regarded on Capitol Hill and spent much of that fall testifying before Congress as it probed the problems of aviation and considered legislation that would impact the new peace-time military called the "Army Reorganization Act." At his next appearance before the Senate Military Affairs Committee Colonel Mitchell testified with the demeanor that would mark most of his speeches in the years to follow:

*"In this country, our Army aviation is shot to pieces and our naval aviation does not exist as an arm, under their new organization. They are even worse off than they were." Colonel Mitchell paused for the impact of what he had just said to sink in, then met the startled gaze of the senators to announce, "They have stopped having a separate bureau for aviation and have distributed those duties among six or seven different departments."*

Perhaps it was in that moment that war broke out between Billy Mitchell and the United States Navy. He had certainly not endeared himself to the CNO, who was already openly hostile to airmen in general. A few days later Assistant Secretary of the Navy Franklin Roosevelt refuted Mitchell's testimony, leaving the senators confused as to whom was telling the truth. Mitchell responded by producing a copy of Admiral Benson's order which was specifically titled: *Discontinuance of Aviation Division*". Mitchell explained to his boss General Menoher, *"It is believed that Mr. Roosevelt has been hoodwinked in his own office and that naval aviation has been disintegrated without his knowledge or consent."*

While the battle was going on in the Senate, in the U.S. House of Representatives the young Congressman from New York began to wonder what had happened to the Crowell Report that had vanished the previous summer. Fiorello H. LaGuardia had a personal interest in military aviation, having served as an air officer on the Italian front during the war. Congressman LaGuardia opened hearings on December 4, calling Assistant Secretary of War Crowell himself to testify. *"What,"* the congressman wanted to know, *"did your report conclude?"*

*"It recommended," the Assistant Secretary replied, "the concentration of the air activities of the United States--military, naval, and civilian--within the scope of a single government agency, coequal in importance with the Departments of the Army, Navy, and Commerce."*

Perhaps the most impressive thing about the Crowell Commission's report was that all eight members, privately conducting separate investigations in France, England, and Italy, came to the same conclusion. Their unanimous opinion was diametrically opposed to the policy being advocated by the leadership of the War Department and the Navy Department, and had actually been rendered in violation of Secretary Baker's implicit instructions that the report not contain any conclusions dealing with air policy. (While some historians accuse Secretary Baker of intentionally keeping the report from Congress, this is a basically false accusation. Secretary Baker DID refuse to endorse the report and withheld it from public dissemination, but the report was already common knowledge on Capitol Hill. Secretary Baker also did nothing to prevent Crowell's testimony before Congress.

There were indeed some heated words before the LaGuardia hearings, directed at the old traditionalists who were doing all in their power to keep the upstart Air Service from taking the limelight. One daring airman threw caution to the winds to speak his mind:

*"The General Staff, either through lack of vision, lack of practical knowledge, or deliberate intention to subordinate the Air Service...has utterly failed to appreciate the full military value of this new weapon (air power)."*

*"I can frankly say that in my opinion the War Department has earned no right or title to claim future control over aviation or the aircraft industries of the United States."*

*"Is it any wonder that a few of us dare to risk the charge of insubordination?"*

*"I am ready to stand before any military court in the land...to take my chances of punishment in a cause which, in my opinion, will develop and go ahead in spite of every effort to impede its progress."*

So testified, not Colonel William Mitchell, but old foe and former boss Benjamin Foulois. For his own part, Mitchell's testimony in December 1919 was quite tame, despite some earnest prompting from his friend Hap Arnold regarding the need for an independent air force. Years later Foulois recalled, *"Mitchell very carefully avoided the controversial issues on this. I opened up all the way through on this stuff and they wanted to court-martial me. They could, all right, but I had the facts."*

The spirited debate of 1919 may have saved the Army Air Service. Certainly, for a time, its future was so tenuous that even General Menoher became incensed and joined in the battle to preserve his command. It was, perhaps, the only time he and Billy Mitchell agreed on anything. The upshot of it all ended with the National Defense Act of 1920, establishing a peace time Army of 280,000 and a National Guard of nearly half a million men. The victory for air power was quite small--allocation of 1,516 officers and 16,000 men--all to be retained under the command of the Army. Though there would be no separate air force, and though what remained was a barebones organization, it was better than NO air force at all. In protest against the meager budget allotted to the Army's air arm, Secretary Crowell resigned, becoming the first casualty of the hotly brewing war for air power's place in the American military.

Perhaps of equal importance to events over the coming years, these hearings gave Colonel William *Billy* Mitchell, son of a former Congressman and Senator from Wisconsin, high visibility on Capitol Hill. In all, Mitchell testified in uniform 27 times before various committees of the Congress in those early days. Through these he formed friendships that would be critical in the years to come.



## **The Transcontinental Reliability Test**

Colonel Mitchell's unusually patient demeanor in his testimony before the LaGuardia hearings may have been prompted more by his activity in the months preceding it, than in any change in personality. During the summer of 1919, Mitchell had been brainstorming ways to put the new peacetime Air Service more in the public eye. Aviation was still less than two decades old, and most of America still saw flight as a spectator sport, not a way of life. Colonel Mitchell saw some positive political advantage to be obtained by playing into that. It was officially called the "Transcontinental Reliability And Endurance Test" but the *New York Times* more accurately described it as: "the greatest air race ever attempted."

Through the race, Colonel Mitchell hoped to demonstrate how quickly America's military pilots could be mobilized. The race would feature some of aviation's best-known names, heroes of the war just one year past. Lieutenant Colonel Harold Hartney, who had commanded the 1st Pursuit Group on the Western Front, was one of the early favorites. So too was Captain Field Kindley who, with 12 victories, had emerged as America's fourth-ranking ace of the Great War. These would fly out of New York, pass through Cleveland, Chicago, and then arrive in Omaha. From Omaha the pilots would navigate their way to San Francisco by following the route of railroad tracks, called the *iron compass*. Twenty refueling points were established along the 2,701-mile route and contestants were required to make a thirty-minute stop at each point.

Meanwhile, another group of pilots, a group that included Major Carl Spaatz, would fly east out of San Francisco. Initially it was planned as a one-way race but, with contestants flying in opposite directions, it was felt that one group might benefit from prevailing winds. The rules were changed to require a round trip.

The race began on October 8 as Assistant Secretary of War saw the westbound group of pilots off from Long Island after pronouncing this "the greatest aerial contest in the world." Nevertheless, the race almost ended the day it began. Eighteen of the westbound pilots never got beyond Buffalo. On the west coast, of the 15 pilots that left San Francisco the same morning, only 11 reached Salt Lake City.

The first three days of the race, projected to see each group reach the opposite coast, were plagued with mishap and tragedy. There was at least one fatal crash each day, the American landscape was littered with the wreckage of other nonfatal crashes, and not a single contestant had reached their destination. On the fourth day of the race Lieutenant Belvin W. Maynard, who had earlier won the New York-to-Toronto air race, landed in San Francisco at 1:12 in the afternoon to become the first to complete the first leg of the journey. Dubbed "the flying parson" by the media because he had left the ministry to join the Army Air Service in 1917, Maynard flew with an impromptu passenger. As he had prepared to take off from New York on October 8 his dog Trixie ran onto the field. Without missing a beat and to the delight of the crowd of spectators, Lieutenant Maynard scooped up his Belgian police dog and the two of them took off into the wind.

Later that same day, October 12, the first pilots from the eastbound group began landing at Roosevelt field in New York. Lieutenant Emil Kiel was first, beating Major Spaatz by a mere twenty seconds.

Contest rules called for each pilot to rest for forty-eight hours before resuming his return leg of the contest. Lieutenant Kiel had already had enough, proclaiming,

*"No one can make me race back to California...the train will be good enough for me."*

Major Spaatz responded to a reporter's question about how he felt with a blunt, *"I feel like a drink of whiskey!"*

The *New York Times* made note of the heavy toll exacted in just the first leg of the race, a tragic record that included five deaths, and editorialized:

*"Man is compelled to pay the toll to a nature which is jealous of his progress."*

Despite proclamations like that made by Lieutenant Kiel, and other admonitions to end the race with the completion of the first leg, the War Department insisted that the second leg be completed. On Tuesday, October 14, Lieutenant Maynard departed San Francisco to return home the eventual winner of the contest when he arrived at Roosevelt Field on October 18.

Major Spaatz lead the now westbound competitors on the return trip on October 15, a day that saw two more pilots die in a crash near Evanston, Wyoming. The Chicago Tribune finally spoke honestly about the race, referring to it as "rank stupidity." The greatest air race of all time had, in the minds of all too many Americans, turned into a great air disaster. Congressman LaGuardia stated:

*"The same gang that disregarded war in order to develop their own industries now sends boys across the continent with an obsolete, discarded machine (the DH-4 Flaming Coffins) in a vain hope to save their face."*

Like LaGuardia, Billy Mitchell tried to blame the tragedies of the race on the aged DeHavillands. Certainly the race had failed to demonstrate the reliability of the American air force, which suffered only one fewer American fatality in the course of the race than the *Lafayette Escadrille* had suffered during twenty-two months of World War I combat. Years later however, Hap Arnold who had been at San Francisco to see the first pilots off and to welcome Lieutenant Maynard's arrival, saw the positive side of the effort. *"It was the foundation of commercial aviation in the United States,"* Arnold wrote. In establishing the racecourse and creating refueling points, Mitchell had almost inadvertently established the same air routes that would later be flown by mail carriers and eventually, commercial airlines.

The great air race of 1919 was not the only military competition of the first postwar year. Sandwiched in between the official ending date of the air race on October 31 and the beginning of the LaGuardia hearings of December 7 was the November 29 Army-Navy football game. It was the first time the rival Academies had met since the prewar days of 1916. (During 1918, when more than a million soldiers were facing combat in Europe, West Point had engaged in only one gridiron match up--against Mitchell Field.)

In 1919, Navy avenged their 1916 loss, defeating Army 6 - 0, and setting up a three-year string of defeats for the West Point team. Not until November 25, 1922, would Army rebound to beat their rivals from Annapolis. Before that welcomed victory on the football field, Billy Mitchell would score one for the Army in the Navy's own territory—in the waters off Chesapeake Bay.

## Army vs. Navy

February 7, 1921

An unusual Army/Navy match up had been brewing on Capitol Hill. Colonel Billy Mitchell had tossed the Army's hat in the ring a year earlier during a January 1920 Congressional hearing. Finally now, after a month of hearings in this new year, the Navy had finally accepted the challenge.

Readers of the *New York Times* chuckled as they read the response of Secretary of the Navy Josephus Daniels:

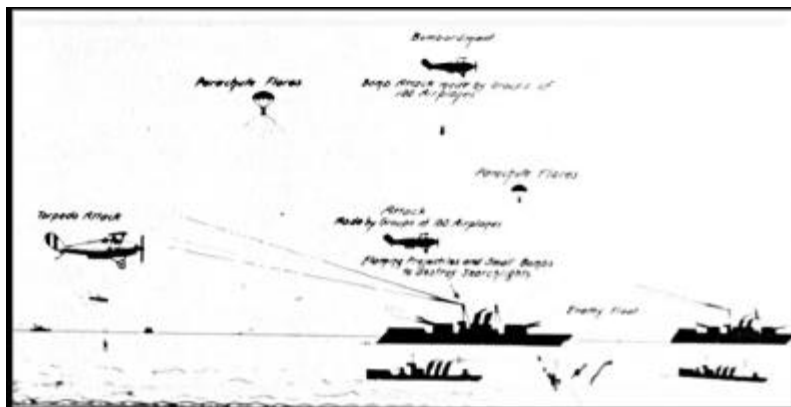
*"I'm so confident that neither Army nor Navy aviators can hit the Iowa when she is under way that I would be perfectly willing to be on board her when they bomb her!"*



This was the kind of talk Billy Mitchell had been seeking to hear from the Navy for a year!

It had all started the previous year when, in January 1920, Mitchell visited West Point. The invitation came from his old friend Douglas MacArthur, now also a General and superintendent of the Academy. For more than an hour Mitchell spoke to the cadets about his experiences in France and his predictions for the future of air power. Young future leaders like Maxwell Taylor and Hoyt Vandenberg hung interestingly on his every word; then they thanked him with a standing ovation. It was an encouraging sign from the Army's leaders of the future.

The following month Mitchell appeared before a committee of the U.S. House of Representatives ready to lay down the gauntlet. He laid out a possible invasion of the United States by a potential enemy, and vividly illustrated how aircraft instead of ships could best defend America's shores. With sketches, diagrams, and charts he laid out a visual war game wherein airplanes and dirigibles would locate and destroy an invading navy before they could reach the coastline of the United States. His diagrams were interesting, his scenarios unique but for one major problem. Mitchell's hypothesis was based upon the implication that airplanes could sink war ships. The old Admirals laughed in scorn--until some of the congressmen began taking Mitchell seriously.



Mitchell added fuel to the brewing war with flamboyant and inflammatory proclamations that made him the Navy's most hated enemy:

- ❖ *A few Army pilots could destroy the most powerful Naval fleet afloat!*
- ❖ *A moving ship at sea was easier to detect from the air than an object on land!*
- ❖ *Advancements in aerial warfare would one day render the battleship obsolete!*

It is understandable that Mitchell's claims, despite their preposterousness, would resonate with some on Capitol Hill. Every Congress since the birth of the United States has been inundated with funding requests from the military. When Colonel Mitchell claimed, "*One thousand bombardment airplanes can be built and operated for about the price of one battleship,*" it certainly raised eyebrows.

It is also understandable that Mitchell's message would be perceived as a major threat to the admirals who struggled each budget cycle to obtain the millions of dollars they needed for new warships. Mitchell had placed the Navy in its own battle for survival. But Mitchell's charges were more than just a threat to the funds needed by the Navy; they were a threat to some of its long-esteemed traditions. Every Naval commander dreamed of commanding a battleship, the *Queens of the Seas*. The claim that such powerful creations could be sunk by an airplane bordered on blasphemy.

Secretary of the Navy Daniels sent a vehement letter of protest to Secretary of War Newton Baker claiming, "*It would seem most unfortunate that the efforts of the great majority of the officers of the Army and Navy should be interfered with by an individual (Mitchell).*" Baker in turn gave Mitchell a strong warning against interfering in the affairs of the Navy.

Despite the fact that the Army had recently returned Mitchell's star and given him the new title Assistant Chief of the Air Service, Mitchell was falling out of favor with the War Department as well as that of the Navy. In 1920 his campaign began turning into a lone-wolf struggle, fighting the traditionalists of both the Army and the Navy. Mitchell began turning his attention to the one arena where his message seemed to capture the imagination, the American public. As he had before the war, Mitchell began writing for publications and taking his message to veterans groups and the people. The media covered his every move...Billy Mitchell was NEWS!

The other news in 1920 was a presidential election that pitted Senator Warren G. Harding and Calvin Coolidge against Democrat Jerry Cox and his vice presidential running mate, former Assistant Secretary of the Navy Franklin D. Roosevelt. The old admirals knew that, following the election and before a new Congress in 1921, General Mitchell was sure to return in his bid to gain an independent air force, even at the cost of scuttling the Navy. It was time for some preemptive damage control.

In the fall of 1920 Captain Chester Nimitz was tasked with overseeing some bombing tests on the old Spanish-American War ship, the *U.S.S. Indiana*. The Navy wanted to learn just how much damage bombs dropped from the air could cause to its warships. An ancillary benefit would be the ultimate rebuttal of any claims that these bombs could sink warships. Few military men beyond Mitchell and a few old admirals like Admiral Winterhalter believed such a feat possible.

The tests were conducted under the most secret of conditions...no media coverage, and results would be divulged only as necessary. Navy airplanes attacked the old vessel with dummy bombs while Naval technicians assessed the *probable* damage real bombs might have inflicted. Then underwater charges were exploded near the ship's hull. The concussion split seams and ruptured the old ship's hull, giving evidence to a concept in bombardment that would later become important to Mitchell--near misses could wreak more damage than a direct hit. As the testing neared its completion, the still floating *Indiana* was run aground where bombs were affixed to her deck to finish the destruction.

When the testing was done the Navy released an innocuous statement, not widely publicized, that it was *improbable* that a modern battleship could be sunk from the air. With that, the admirals hoped the question would go away.

Unfortunately for the Navy, somehow two pictures of the ruptured deck of the *Indiana* found their way into the London *Illustrated News*. Still the Navy tried to downplay the results of their tests--until Billy Mitchell showed up to testify before Congress in January 1921.



Mitchell brought with him charts, diagrams and even photographs of the Navy's secret tests on the *Indiana*, information that raised the interest of a committee friendly to Mitchell. (The Navy had enlisted the aid of armament specialist Captain C.H.M. Roberts for the tests. Roberts was an early proponent of air power, and he managed to get these documents into the hands of the man he believed could use them to their best advantage, General Billy Mitchell.) In the testimony that followed, Mitchell pulled few punches...though even at this point his remarks were spoken with some restraint or at least respect.

*MITCHELL: "(Our airplanes) can destroy or sink any ship in existence!"*

*CONGRESSMAN BASCOM SLEMP (VA): "If that's true, why aren't you able to convince high-ranking officers of the Army who have the consideration of these problems?"*

*MITCHELL: "We are presenting the situation to you, and we're ready to demonstrate this thing. If you allow no air force, not only will an opposing fleet land at will, but their aircraft will fly all over our country."*

*SLEMP: "What do you mean? They're intelligent individuals, and they want to get the best defense they can for their country."*

*REPRESENTATIVE LOUIS CRAMTON (MI): "Isn't it for the same reason that confronted Ericsson, in that after he had demonstrated the success of the Monitor, still he couldn't get the ear of the high-ranking officers of the War Department?"*

*MITCHELL: "We can show right straight down through the beginning how this thing has been held down."*

*REPRESENTATIVE THOMAS SISSON (MS): "Should the British example in carriers and a unified air force serve as a model for our country?"*

*MITCHELL: "Yes Sir...I do not consider that the air force is to be considered as in any means supplanting the Army. You have always got to come to manpower as the ultimate thing, but we do believe that the air force will control all communications, that it will have a very great effect on land troops and a decisive one against a navy."*

*SLEMP: "Your argument really leads up to the advocacy of a combined air service."*

*MITCHELL: "There is no other efficient solution of the air problem. If you scatter the air force around it leads to double overhead, and to a double system of command, and many other difficulties. It has been proven wrong everywhere."*

*SLEMP: "It seems to me that the principal problem is to demonstrate the certainty of your conclusions."*

*MITCHELL:*

*"Give us the warships to attack and come and watch it!"*

Mitchell's challenge to the Navy captured the attention of both Congress and the media much like his earlier transcontinental air race. Before Mitchell was called to testify before the House Naval Affairs Committee, Congress had passed two resolutions urging the Navy Department to provide Mitchell with battleships to use as targets. The moment had at last arrived and Mitchell wrote:

*"We are going to smoke these people out that do not believe in the air business and either make them 'fish or cut bait'."*

When General Mitchell appeared before the House Naval Affairs Committee, he found some surprising allies. One of the most impressive was the President of the Naval War College, Admiral William S. Sims. Sims was a man as blunt as Mitchell, perhaps even as unconventional. In earlier battles to improve Naval gunnery he had taken on the high command, and even turned Congress against him by stating that Britain was so far ahead of the United States Navy in gunnery, one of their ships could outshoot four or five American ships. A grizzled Naval veteran who won a Pulitzer Prize in history in 1920, he embodied the modern term, *politically incorrect*. When told he would be awarded the Distinguished Service Cross by the U.S. Army, Admiral Sims advised Secretary Daniels that he would refuse the award because it had been diminished by *being over-awarded, largely to men who didn't deserve it*.



Admiral Sims wasn't afraid to go against the grain of his own high command, or to speak his mind. Before the Naval Affairs Committee, he did both. After a series of war games at the Naval War College, he told committee members,

*"It was easy to see that the question of the passing of the battleship was not an agreeable one to various members."*

Sims' testimony set the stage for Mitchell who, despite common misconceptions about the events of 1920s aviation, never had to wage his war alone. Throughout his six-year battle to preserve and build an American air force, Mitchell had many allies, friends and admirers. Despite this, old ways die hard, and Admiral Sims may well have summed up the opposition best when he wrote:

*"It is a singular thing that you can present irrefutable arguments to officers on this subject and they will still defend the old methods and the old surface ships. I know, of course, something of the psychology of opinion, but this seems to go beyond the theories of psychological experts."*

*"Can it be that the Navy is reluctant to give up the big ships to live in?"*

The ships that were finally granted were already slated for destruction, so in the final analysis the *Mitchell Experiment* gave the United States government a means of fulfilling its post-war obligations to the world. In the treaty that ended the Great War, Germany had been stripped of much of its military machinery. Several German warships had been confiscated by the United States at the Armistice. In that act however, the United States agreed that these ships would be destroyed. (No other world power wanted the United States Navy to build up its own war machine with the captured spoils of the Great War.)

The deadline for destruction, agreed to by President Wilson, was July 24, 1921. With pressure from Congress, the Navy finally agreed to provide a German submarine, a destroyer, a light cruiser, and finally the huge German battleship *Ostfriesland*. Additional tests would be conducted using the *USS Iowa*, a moving target under radio control to see if aircraft could find the ship at sea, and hit it with dummy bombs. It was this latter test that prompted the remark, reported in the *New York Times* but never fully verified (though he also did not deny it), by Secretary Baker that:

*"I would be perfectly willing to be on board her when they bomb her!"*

## The Pre-Game

If the Army/Navy *War Games* of the summer of 1921 were viewed in the parlance of the gridiron, one would have to say that the Navy provided the playbook for both sides, and then enlisted its own referees to insure the outcome. While grudgingly acquiescing to the call for targets to prove or refute the theory that airplanes could sink ships, the Navy set strict guidelines according to its own standards. These rules were justified by the Navy's claim that the tests be conducted under a clinical setting that would enable proper documentation of each attack, each bombardment, and every step of the process. While Mitchell vehemently protested many of these without success, during the spring of 1921 he absorbed himself with a few *trick plays* of his own.

Mitchell began preparations by putting his team together. Nearly stripping the Army Air Service, he pulled pilots from all over the country into Langley Field, Virginia, a short distance from the Chesapeake Bay area destined for the bombing tests. Almost overnight the small field that boasted only about a dozen airmen, mostly either trainers or trainees, into a bustling air base with 250 airplanes and nearly 1,000 men. His long-time friend Clayton Bissell was already working at Langley as an instructor, and the World War I combat pilot become one of Mitchell's key *assistant coaches*. His team was the newly organized First Provisional Air Brigade.



In the months that followed, all activity at Langley Field operated under a great cloud of secrecy that only added to the hype for the coming event. General Mitchell knew that sinking a battleship would be difficult, though not impossible, under ideal circumstances. The Navy's rules were making the conditions far from ideal. Though he continued his complaints to no avail, he proceeded with an air of confidence and a foresight previously unseen in any air war.

- ✓ Though funds had not yet been allocated, Mitchell constructed a battleship target by February and had his airmen practicing for the main event. His actions drew a nasty response from General Menoher, but Mitchell ignored the memorandum that pointed to his unauthorized actions and continued to prepare.
- ✓ He sat up throughout one long night with his chief draftsman to design the largest bombs ever made, 2,000 and 4,000-pound monsters, and then ordered Captain C.H.M. Roberts (who had witnessed the test bombings of the *Indiana*) to have them built by June.
- ✓ Mitchell brought in George Goddard, a photographic expert, to handle the public relations when the tests got underway. "*I need you to handle the newsreel and movie people,*" he told Goddard. "*They're temperamental, and we've got to get all we can out of them. I want newsreels of those sinking ships in every theater in the country, just as soon as we can get them there.*"
- ✓ Down to the smallest detail, every issue was addressed. Those four months of preparation may well have been the most important in the history of combat aviation and aerial bombardment. Bombsights were designed, refined, tested and installed. The largest bombs ever built were manufactured, fitted with a foolproof detonation system, and then tested. The first *artificial horizon* was installed on airplanes utilizing a gyroscope to help pilots orient themselves in the endless blue where sky and water meet.

The Army *team* itself was a dedicated and eager group of fliers. For months the preparations for the tests consumed their every waking moment. While the rest of the country, in fact the entire world, wondered if Mitchell's airman had even the smallest chance, they honestly believed they would succeed. Their esprit de corps almost ended the *game* before it began.

Following practice bombings on targets in the swamps near Langley Field, Mitchell had his pilots begin practice bombings on the rusting hulk of the old *USS Indiana*. Somehow, a canister of film made its way to the hands of the Fox Newsreel Company. Shortly thereafter the public was amused to see pictures of the Army airmen in a bombing run on the old *Indiana*. What upset the Navy more than the fact that the film leaked out (of course they blamed General Mitchell) was a series of frames showing one airman's bomb with the words "Regards to the Navy" printed on the side.



To counter the challenge mounted by General Mitchell, the Navy turned to Admiral William Moffett. (Some later accounts of the *Mitchell Experiment* erroneously attribute to him the quote printed by the *New York Times*, purportedly by Secretary Daniels.) Moffett was something of an air enthusiast, though his interest lay primarily in the big airships.

Admiral Moffett was as close to the mold of Billy Mitchell as the Navy could find at the time. The veteran had commanded the battleship *Mississippi* from 1918 to 1920 and had earned a Medal of Honor during the Vera Cruz campaign in 1914. Though Moffett was the Navy's antidote to Billy Mitchell during the bombing tests of 1921, Moffett himself would play an important role in developing Naval aviation until his death, ironically in the crash of an airship, in 1933.

The trend continued throughout the spring with all the traditional exchanges of a pre game locker room. It got especially nasty towards the end of May when a large Curtiss Eagle plane crashed in a thunderstorm en route from Langley to Washington. General Mitchell called a press conference and pointed to the disaster and resulting loss of seven lives to support his calls for a unified air service. He pointed to the disaster as an example of why aviation should have routes, weather reports, and proper landing fields. The only way to achieve this, he stated, would be to unify all the air services under one roof.

Admiral Moffett *took off the gloves* and quickly and publicly rebuked Mitchell with the statement that: "*General Mitchell used the recent disaster which resulted in the deaths of five brother officers and two civilians as an argument in favor of a unified air service.*"

Mitchell's fight with the Navy began hitting too close to home. Incidents like the leaked newsreel, his press conference after the fatal crash at the end of May, skirting authority to spend money before it was authorized, and the release of his first book titled *Our Air Force* began taking its toll on General Menoher. To the outside observer it certainly seemed that the Air Chief could not control his own subordinate. Only weeks before the bombing was to commence, General Menoher reached the end of his patience and wrote to Secretary of War John Weeks:

*"It is recommended and requested that Brigadier General William Mitchell be relieved of duty as Assistant Chief of the Air Service.*

*"Unfortunate and undesirable publicity given to his individual exploits at the time immediately following the fatal accident of the Curtiss Eagle ambulance plane has caused a very great revulsion of feelings.*



*"He has given serious offense to the Navy Department by his public utterances and publicity. He has enhanced his own prestige at the expense of and to the detriment of the prestige of his immediate commanding officer. This publicity, if not carried on by him personally, is at least known to him and subject to his control."*

The situation presented a major dilemma to Secretary Weeks. Protocol dictated that he side the Air Chief and fire the Assistant who could not get on the same page as his supervisor. Mitchell's popularity in the public, however, made this a dangerous decision. To complicate matters, while Weeks struggled to find a course of action, word of the rift between Mitchell and Menoher leaked to the press. At last Secretary Weeks met with both men to work out a solution. A short time later Weeks called a press conference to announce that the problem was resolved, and the two men would continue to work together.

The media hailed the decision amid comments that Mitchell had received little more than a *slap on the wrist*. It was, in fact, the first real reprimand of the General's distinguished career. The incident would never truly heal between the two men. The *Detroit Free Press* summed up the resolution by saying: *"Menoher is advised to go way back and sit down, while Mitchell will get a chance to show whether a dreadnought is obsolete in the presence of a modern bombing plane."*

## Kickoff

June 21, 1921

Billy Mitchell had his own distinctive airplane from which to observe and direct his portion of the bombing tests that began in the summer of 1921. His old but reliable DH4B was called *Osprey* and it trailed a blue pennant to mark the presence of General Mitchell over the site of the action.



As the tests began, more than a dozen planes and three blimps hovered over the field to watch the opening *plays*. The Navy won the *coin toss* to see who would go first. They had the home field advantage and the tests would be conducted according to the Navy's rulebook and under the watchful gaze of the Navy's referees. It didn't seem fair but then, the Navy owned the *football* so it was left to the Army to accept the situation or *call the game*.

The first target was the U-117, a German submarine that had been surrendered to the United States ten days after the Armistice. Under the command of Otto Droscher the 1,200-ton U-boat had patrolled the Atlantic coastline after its December 10, 1917, launching. In its sole patrol of the war, the U-117 sank 24 Allied ships. Now, according to the dictates of International Law and the agreement with the Allied nations of World War I, the sub would be destroyed in peacetime—anchored not far from where it had patrolled in war.

According to the *playbook*, the Navy would get first shot. Three waves of Navy F-5-Ls would pound the small submarine with 165-pound bombs. These would be followed by attacks from Navy Martins and Marine Corps De Havillands. If, after all that the U-117 was still afloat, the Army would get its chance. Mitchell loaded his bombers and told his pilots to stand by at Langley just in case.

The Navy's pilots opened the show with great enthusiasm. Indeed, though General Billy Mitchell was perceived to be the Navy's most dangerous enemy, in saving Army aviation from extinction he might well be saving the Navy's airmen as well. It took only two waves to score direct hits on the small, 267-foot submarine. Two 165-pound bombs fell from 1,000 feet to split the hull of the U-117 and send her to the bottom.

The transport ship *Henderson*, which had served as the reviewing stand for a small party of dignitaries, headed back to Washington after an all-too-brief opening day. There was some surprise that the submarine had succumbed to the aerial bombardment so quickly, but any implication that a modern warship would suffer the same fate was quickly scoffed at. The U-117 was unarmored and quite small. By no stretch of the imagination could its durability be compared to a battleship.

Though Mitchell's pilots missed the entire *first quarter of the game*, they used the planned one-week interim before the next test to continue training. The day after the sinking of the U-117, General Mitchell led a flight of 53 airplanes in a bombing run on the ruins of the old *U.S.S. Texas*. Tragedy struck when two of Mitchell's pilots collided over the Chesapeake and fell to their deaths into the waters below. On June 23 Mitchell led three flights over the same spot to drop flowers where their comrades had died. Then each pilot saluted his fallen friends by dropping 25-pound bombs.

If one was to consider the opening plays of the game a score for the Navy, it must be remembered that the U-117 became the first ship in history to be sunk from the air. It was, despite the disclaimers relating to its size and lack of armor, a small victory for air power. The *second play of the game* would also be the Navy's, not by design but by default.

On June 29 the *USS Iowa* began movement across a 25,000 square mile area between Cape Henlopen and Cape Hatteras to test the ability of aerial observation in detecting a moving ship at sea. The American veteran of the Spanish-American War was being remotely controlled in its movements from the *USS Ohio*, five miles behind it.

In May General Mitchell had declined to participate in this test, citing the fact that the Navy had moved the test at a distance so far from his base at Langley that his airplanes would face dangerous fuel shortages. He would commit only three air ships to the hunt for the *Iowa*. At the last minute Mitchell changed his mind and tried to get his airplanes back into the game. The Navy refused. Even so, in the end it was the Army dirigibles that first sighted the *Iowa*. One hour later the Navy seaplanes caught up to drop eighty dummy bombs on the *Iowa*. The Navy was not dismayed when only two of these hit their target. Such lack of accuracy served only to reinforce their belief that when the Army pilots finally got their chance, they too would find it difficult to hit their own targets.

The Army's last chance *before half time* came two weeks later. The target was only slightly larger than the small U-117 submarine. The G-102 had been an Argentine destroyer, commandeered by the German Navy during the war. This time the Army had an unrestricted opportunity to demonstrate its ability, and General Mitchell attacked the 312-foot destroyer like he had attacked the salient at St. Mihiel. Eighteen pursuit planes led the way in three flights, followed by DeHavillands with 100-pound bombs, and then the heavy Martin bombers with their 300-pound orbs. The sky seemed to be filled with aircraft as the pursuit planes swept the deck with machinegun fire and dove within 200 feet of the deck to drop their light bombs. In minutes the deck had been swept from stern to stern...had it been a combat situation any ability a crew aboard the G-102 had to fight back would have been crushed.

Mitchell waved off the light bombers and brought in his Martins. Twenty minutes later the destroyer had completely disappeared from the surface of the ocean. General Mitchell recorded:

*"In less time than it takes to tell, their bombs began churning the water around the destroyer. They hit close in front of it, behind it, opposite its side and directly in its center. Columns of water rose hundreds of feet into the air. For a few minutes the vessel looked as if it were on fire. Smoke came out of its funnels and vapors along its deck. Then it broke completely in two in the middle and sank out of sight."*

*"Their (Mitchell's pilots) rejoicing was tremendous. They knew now that unless something most unusual happened it would be proved for all time that aircraft dominated the sea craft."*

Half time lasted but five brief days, and then the competition began again in earnest. This time the target would be the 5,100-ton light cruiser *Frankfurt*, shielded with armor plating and built with numerous watertight steel compartments. To simulate battle conditions and determine the effectiveness of the firepower from above, numerous small cages littered the *Frankfurt's* deck, filled with goats and other small animals.

The Navy, Marine, and Army aviators attacked in ten waves that comprised nearly five-dozen planes, each wave dropping increasingly larger bombs. Between each wave there would be an intermission during which inspectors would board the ship from the tender *Shawmut* to view, photograph, and report on the damage. The first waves with their 100-pound, then 250-pound, and finally the 300-pound bombs attacked the *Frankfurt*. The deadly explosions proved fatal to the small animals on the deck, and the light cruiser suffered some visible damage topside, but below the decks she remained watertight and capable of steaming away from the battle under wartime conditions.

By the time the last wave of six Martins carrying 600-pound bombs departed Langley, Naval inspectors had already concluded that the *Frankfurt* would survive destruction from the air and called for the *South Dakota* to prepare a time bomb to finish the job. Flight leader Captain W. R. Lawson was forced to circle for half an hour as the inspectors finished their work. With fuel running low, the first aerial defeat of the project seemed imminent.

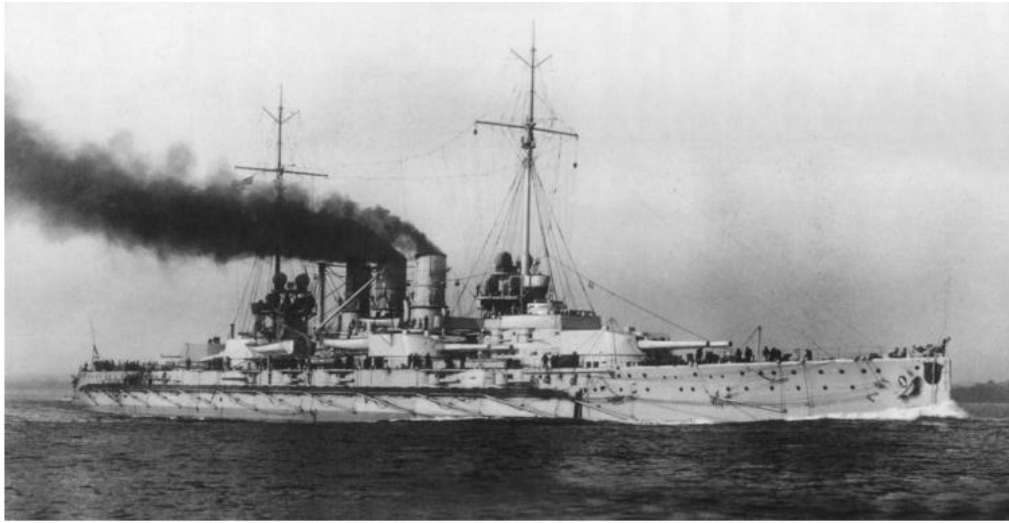
When the "clear" signal was finally given, Lawson and his pilots wasted no time going to work. Mitchell described the scene.

*"The bombs fell so fast that the attack could not be stopped before mortal damage had been done to the ship."*

The Naval control ship signaled for the bombardment to stop so the inspectors could go aboard to assess the damage from this last wave of bombers. It was too late; the 600-pound bombs had opened gaping holes in the cruiser including one from a direct hit on the forward compartment. Soon afterward the *Frankfurt* sank beneath the waves and George Goddard's photographic planes were heading for Bolling Field with the canisters of photographic evidence.

The fourth quarter opened with the outcome of the *Army/Navy War Game of 1921* still very much in doubt. While indeed the airmen had proven they could sink small ships, the real test lay ahead. After one day of rest the attacks would commence on the German battleship *Ostfriesland*. The mighty warship displaced 27,000 tons in comparison to the *Frankfurt's* 5,100 tons, or the U-117's 1,200 tons. Here indeed was a warship worthy of an Admiral's praise and a Navy's pride. During the Great War the *Ostfriesland* had taken 18 hits from big shells at Jutland, even struck a mine, yet remained afloat to return home proudly for repair. With a four-layer hull and scores of watertight compartments, the great battleship was considered unsinkable.

General Mitchell fully realized what was riding on this last attack. If his airmen failed to sink the *Ostfriesland*, the mighty battleship's victory would make all of the other small victories of the summer meaningless and: "*The development of air power might be arrested....*"



*"We had to kill, lay out and bury this great ship!"*

## July 20, 1921

It seemed the entire United States Navy was in the grandstands to watch the *fourth quarter* of this great war game. Surrounding the anchored *Ostfriesland* some 70 miles east of Cape Charles Lightship was the pride of the Navy's Atlantic fleet, more than a half-dozen of the Navy's great battleships. The fleet's flagship *U.S.S. Pennsylvania*, provided a vantage point for many important dignitaries: Commandant of the Marine Corps Major General John Lejeune, Assistant Secretary of the Navy Theodore Roosevelt, Jr., Admiral Richard Byrd, eight Senators, twice as many members of the U.S. House of Representatives, and the Secretaries of the Navy, War, and Agriculture.

Literally scores of reporters stood at the railings of the *Pennsylvania* and *Henderson*, joined by observers from other nations of the world. They came from England, Italy, France, Spain, Portugal, and Brazil. All knew their history, knew how Naval dynasties through the centuries had risen and fallen. Every time preeminence in sea power had shifted in the past however; the dominant armada had fallen to an opposing seagoing fleet. This time the battle for preeminence was different—waged on the great *Queens of the Seas* by upstart and puny pests from the sky.

Among those who watched and waited were two foreign dignitaries who absorbed themselves in the process, contemplating all that was happening around them and making copious notes while recording every action with four different cameras. They were Captain Nagano, House of Peers statesman G. Katsuda, and Kobe Chamber of Commerce representative G. Shibuta, all of Japan.

Billy Mitchell's bombers stood by throughout the morning at Langley Field, awaiting the order to begin. The Navy's *playbook* called for the first bombs to be dropped by her own pilots in successive runs after each of which inspectors would board the *Ostfriesland* to observe and record the damage inflicted. General Mitchell stood by at the radio, requesting information and wondering what was happening. Finally, when by one o'clock his bombers hadn't been ordered into the air, he took off in the *Osprey* to find out what was happening. He was surprised and angered by what he found. Even as



he approached the test site, the Navy ships were returning to shore with its host of reporters and dignitaries. Not a single bomb had been dropped.

Early morning brought 20-knot winds and high seas; and the Navy had determined that the airplanes would be unable to deliver their payload in the adverse weather. General Mitchell believed it was instead, a *trick play* to end the war game prematurely. He later wrote: *"I believe to this day that the officer controlling the air attacks had orders from the Admiral not to let us sink the Ostfriesland."*

Mitchell signaled the Navy that he intended to proceed; and the fleet turned back towards the targets. For more than an hour thereafter, Navy and Marine pilots bombarded the *Ostfriesland* with salvos of 250-pound bombs. The effort showed little effect and the admirals began to sigh with relief.

At three o'clock Lieutenant Clayton Bissell arrived with his flight of Martin bombers. The appearance caught the Navy by surprise...the Air Service pilots had left Langley without orders and were thus unanticipated. Mitchell contacted the control ship to advise that Bissell's bombers would have to attack within forty minutes because they were low on fuel. The test controllers advised Mitchell to return his airplanes to Langley if they were low on fuel. Mitchell refused and Lt. Bissell and his airplanes circled until 3:30 p.m. when the inspection crews were clear and permission to attack was given. Mitchell was elated by what he saw:

*"Lt. Bissell's flight of five planes deployed into column and fired five (600-pound) bombs in extremely rapid succession. It looked as if two or three bombs were in the air at the same time. Two hits alongside and three on the deck or on the side, causing terrific detonations, and serious damage....."*

"SERIOUS DAMAGE" — if that said it all, it wasn't enough. As Lieutenant Bissell's Martins headed back to Langley the *Ostfriesland* bore evidence of the heavy pounding it had sustained from the air for more than two hours. But the mighty battleship still rode the crest of the waves, and under wartime conditions, certainly would have returned to port for repairs so that it would sail--and fight once again. The Navy's umpires pronounced the great warship "absolutely intact and undamaged," and reporters began filing their stories indicating the battleship's victory. The *New York Times* wrote poignantly that the *Ostfriesland* was still *"riding smugly at anchor on the high seas tonight."*

With the *game* down to its last day of tests the outcome seemed so certain that many of the dignitaries, including Secretary of War Weeks and General John J. Pershing, *left the stadium early*. In the minds of almost everyone, the *game was over*.

## Two-Minute Warning

### July 21, 1921

General Mitchell was up before dawn to inspect his bombers and give one last pep talk to his men. He reminded them that the greatest damage would be inflicted, not by direct hits on the *Ostfriesland*, but by near misses.

Early in the planning when Mitchell had assigned Captain Roberts to create the largest bombs ever manufactured, the ordnanceman took great pains to help Mitchell understand what he called a *hammer effect*. A bomb hitting a target would rip metal and spread shrapnel, he explained, but do very little damage to the all-important watertight ships hull. A bomb that exploded in the water near the ship, he continued, would be intensified by the compressed expansion of and rip the ships hull

apart. The scientific process was simply much like putting your head underwater, then clicking two rocks together beneath the surface. The sound exploded with the underwater magnification.

It was a hard theory to sell to the airmen, many of who were World War I fighter pilots who had been trained to hit what they aimed at. Major Alexander de Seversky, one of the great pioneers in aerial engineering, helped to convince General Mitchell of the concept. Mitchell in turn, pressed the matter to his men. Before taking off from Langley field at 7 a.m. General Mitchell again reminded his pilots to try for near misses in addition to direct hits.

Behind Mitchell was a flight of Martins loaded with 1,000-pound bombs and led by Lieutenant Bissell. As the pilots circled over the *Ostfriesland*, it was obvious the previous day's bombs had in fact, caused more damage than the Navy referees had reported. The battleship was sitting lower in the water and during the night the Navy had flooded enough compartments to level the giant warship.

At 8:30 the *Shawmut* deployed the white panel with a red cross on it that signaled "All Clear." Five minutes later Lieutenant Bissell dropped the first 1,000-pound bomb, a direct hit on the forecastle. Quickly the referees on the *Shawmut* removed the "All Clear" panel and headed towards the *Ostfriesland* to assess the damage. The *Shawmut* was within a mile of the stricken battleship when the next of Bissell's flight began dropping bombs. Four fell around the *Ostfriesland* before the attack was halted. The Navy was livid...certain that Bissell's men had ignored the call to cease the attack and endangering the *Shawmut* without regard for the consequences. Bissell later claimed that the attack had commenced so quickly that his men did not see the signal. The pilots of the last planes in the flight returned to Langley equally upset, having been denied their chance.

En route to Langley, Bissell ordered his men to jettison the remaining bombs, as the huge Martins could not safely land with their deadly payload. His seething pilots dutifully obeyed, with a twist of their own choosing. Returning to Langley they sought out and found a line of Naval destroyers at seven-mile intervals. One by one they jettisoned their bombs, some falling within a half-mile of the ships to rattle sailors and cascade them with tons of salt water.

The inspection crew spent an hour combing the ruined deck of the *Ostfriesland*. The damage was apparent and considerable, but the German warship still floated and was pronounced seaworthy. While the inspectors did their work, Mitchell returned to the *huddle* at Langley to call his final *play of the game*. The airmen were loading six Martins and two Handley Page bombers with the big 2,000-pound bombs Mitchell had designed and ordered built under Captain Roberts.

At sea there was still an air of skepticism, not only at the ability of these airmen to sink the big battleship, but also at their very ability to deliver the payload. No one had ever seen a 2,000-pound bomb before, and the idea that an airplane could even take off with one nestled beneath it stretched the 1921 concept of aerodynamics. Still, the Navy would take no chances and threw up a quick *prevent defense*. When Captain Johnson radioed Mitchell to begin his last attack in the series of tests, he threw in an unexpected new rule. The bombers would be allowed to bring out only three of the large bombs.

General Mitchell exploded but it was to no avail. He protested that the Navy had promised his pilots they would be allowed to make at least two direct hits on the *Ostfriesland's* deck with his heaviest bombs. Finally, in complete disregard for this new order, he waved all eight bombers off the field at Langley. As he took off behind them he radioed the *Shawmut*:

"Martin bomber and Handley Page formation with 2,000-pound bombs have taken off."

*"In case of failure to secure two direct hits, subsequent attacks will be made until we have secured the two hits the Army is authorized to make."*

It was near noon when the observers more than a mile from the target heard the drone of airplane engines. The last flight of bombers began its approach and everyone could see the distinctive *Osprey* with its trailing blue pennant signaling the presence of General Billy Mitchell. Minutes later someone shouted and pointed as an airplane approached the *Ostfriesland* to drop a dark object from its belly. A ripple of laughter followed when it plunked harmlessly into the water 150 feet from the big warship, raising little more than a small fountain of water.

While admirals, dignitaries and reporters smiled and laughed, in the darkening skies high above, Captain Lawson noted the trajectory of the sand-loaded marking bomb and ordered his airplanes into the attack. Again someone pointed to the sky as one of the big bombers came in high over the *Ostfriesland*. It was now seventeen minutes past noon. This time the object that dropped from its belly was unlike anything any of them had seen. The sparse sunshine glinted off the long, seamless steel tube as it plummeted downward. Its ascent alone hushed the crowd.

Suddenly it hit the water, sending a small geyser upward and a ripple of waves outward in a circular pattern. A millisecond later the geyser became a roaring fountain of smoke, steam and 30,000 tons of salt water. Even at its distance, the *Henderson* shook under the water-hammer effect causing the distinguished crowd to grip the rails with nervous fingers. The *Ostfriesland* momentarily disappeared in the wall of water, only its masks and funnels visible. Then, as the torrent settled, the gallant old battleship settled to rest still riding the waves. The admirals breathed a sigh of relief.

Within minutes sunlight was glinting off a second steel orb as it fell from the sky, followed by another explosion. The seas seventy miles east of Cape Charles Lightship shook like no natural storm of nature had ever shaken them. A third explosion erupted as the bombs rained down on two-minute intervals; the fourth making a direct hit on the forecastle at 12:21. The fifth big bomb bathed the battleship in a cascade of seawater one reporter later likened to Niagara Falls, and water began to rush across the stern. Minutes later the sixth and final bomb exploded only fifty feet from the ruptured stern, and the battle was over.



- At 12:33 p.m. the *Ostfriesland's* stern sank beneath the waters.
- Four minutes later she rolled completely over on her port side.
- At 12:38 the mighty German battleship was nearly perpendicular in the water, standing abnormally erect for nearly two minutes.
- At 12:40 p.m. the mighty *Ostfriesland* disappeared from the surface of the ocean.



*At 12:41 p.m. the Navy wept!*

Four months later on November 26, 1921, the Navy eked out a 7-0 win over Army in its string of three-straight Army/Navy Game wins since World War I. It was of little comfort. Thanks to General Billy Mitchell and a handful of dedicated pilots, Army had already won *The Big One!*

Though Billy Mitchell's crusade is often viewed as a war against the Navy, it was more a campaign for an air force. The old generals of the Army were no more open to this new means of warfare than were their counterparts of the seagoing persuasion. The rift between Mitchell and General Menoher led to the Air Chief's resignation in 1925 and there was considerable speculation that at last, General Mitchell would be assigned the top air post.

In a surprising move General Pershing once again turned to his old West Point comrade, General Mason Patrick. Though like Menoher, Patrick had never sat in a cockpit, the man who had commanded the Air Service in France had a unique ability to both control Billy Mitchell, and yet allow him enough room to get the job done. General Mitchell accepted the decision with considerable aplomb, though his friend Eddie Rickenbacker characterized the decision with the comment:

*"General Patrick is a capable soldier but he knows nothing of the Air Service. His appointment is as sensible as making General Pershing Admiral of the Swiss Navy!"*

In September Mitchell conducted more tests, bombing the old *USS Alabama* in a spectacular, though almost anticlimactic series of attacks. In November, amid a brewing new series of problems on the domestic front, Mitchell was dispatched to Europe for an inspection tour. His travels not only gave him opportunity to witness the progression of aviation in England, France and Italy, but to also visit his foe from the previous war, the German war machine. Due his celebrity and the great respect with which airmen of all nations viewed General Mitchell, he got the kind of comprehensive pre World War II respect afforded to only one other American, Eddie Rickenbacker (in 1933).

Mitchell's last stop was in Holland where he met with the great airplane designer Anthony Fokker. The man who had built the great airplanes used by Baron von Richthofen and his *Flying Circus* during World War I spoke to Mitchell of moving to the United States. Mitchell encouraged the move and became instrumental in bringing the great aviation pioneer to America.



General Mitchell came home in March 1922 to report on his tour. As was the case in any Mitchell report, it was detailed and lengthy. But Mitchell's observations could be summed up in two brief points:

1. The United States lagged far behind the rest of the world in developing an air force, and
2. Germany was building an air force capable of giving it tremendous advantage in the rematch Mitchell, but few other Americans, believed would come in the not-too-distant future.

*"All the great nations have assigned definite missions to their air forces, to their armies, and to their navies. In the United States we have not done this, and, at this time, if we should be attacked, no one can tell what (would be) the duties of these three arms."*



That philosophy would dominate the theme of Billy Mitchell for the remaining years of his life. To meet the challenge he would become what many claimed was unnaturally obsessed with two goals: development of a separate air arm of the United States military, and preparations for a second world war that would most probably come from either or both Germany and Japan.

During that same year Billy Mitchell's marriage collapsed, and he consumed himself with his work and his friendships. He spent much time with his close friends the Arnolds, continued to write about air theory, speak before various groups, and continued to testify before Congress.

His relationship with General Patrick was amicable, the Air Chief keeping the reins on his assistant while Mitchell pushed the boundaries, but with some restraint. The man who had served more than three decades as an Army Engineer found himself increasingly interested in the airplane, and though now in his 60s, took flying lessons.



Those who record the life of Billy Mitchell often categorize those around the indefatigable general as either friends or bitter enemies. General Patrick is often unfairly listed among the latter. Such historians overlook a third category of Mitchell acquaintance—the critics. These were those men who grudgingly respected, perhaps even admired the boisterous airman but believed he could have found a more acceptable way of accomplishing his goals. General Patrick, the first REAL Air Chief of today's United State's Air Force would perhaps be better numbered among this third group. Certainly he and Mitchell clashed repeatedly, in France in 1918 and in Washington from 1922 to 1925. But General Patrick also had a way of bringing out the best in General Billy Mitchell.

General Patrick himself stated:

*"Little or nothing was known of what aircraft or airmen could do. This lack of understanding was most notable in the War Department itself, where a certain jealousy of the Air Service was markedly in evidence."*

During the summer of 1923 a much-needed *ray of sunshine* smiled on Billy Mitchell when he met Elizabeth (Betty) Trumbull Miller, daughter of a prominent Detroit attorney. The two courted for a year that friend Hap Arnold would later describe as perhaps the happiest year of Billy Mitchell's life. If anyone thought, however, that love would damper the spirit of the tireless aviation pioneer, they would have been sorely disappointed. Miss Miller was a unique woman, strong of will yet understanding in a way that made Billy her own personal hero. The two of them rode horses together, flew in the sky together, and later even hunted tigers in India together.

In the fall of 1923, Mitchell received orders to make an inspection tour of the Pacific. There were those who believed it was the Army's way of getting the bothersome American hero with his now-constant demands for an independent air force *out of their hair* at least for a while. General Pershing's 1923 efficiency report on General Mitchell stated:

*"This officer is an exceptionally able one, enthusiastic, energetic and full of initiative (but) he is fond of publicity, more or less indiscreet as to speech, and rather difficult to control as a subordinate."*

For Mitchell the timing was perfect. He and Betty were married in October and would use the trip to mix work with a honeymoon.

## **The First Exile**

It was General Mitchell's six-week end-of-the-year inspection of both Army and Naval aviation in Hawaii that would later cause much of his problems, and create powerful enemies in his own branch of service. At the same time he told reporters that Wheeler Field was the finest airfield he had inspected in a long time, he was writing pages of critical observations in the report he would submit on his return home. In that report he would criticize the preparedness of both services in Hawaii, noting that there was no cooperation or coordination between the services.

*"Our defense is based on a land army, coast defense guns and battleships, all of which are uncoordinated. A modern boy fifteen years old, who knows about air power and had a simple military training in high school, could work out a better system."*

The stinging critique would not sit well with the Army commander at Schofield Barracks, General Charles P. Summerall, and would net General Mitchell a powerful antagonist in the years to come. Even as the Mitchell's departed Hawaii to visit Guam, General Summerall wrote General Patrick that Mitchell's *"assumptions as to the action of the enemy"* were unsound and preposterous.

As the *Thomas* carried the Mitchells through the Pacific, Billy sketched the layout of the islands, plotted potential strategic airfields, and tried to anticipate the tactics of any potential enemy. He took note of one small island 200 miles outside his course, previously ignored as having any strategic importance, to note in his report:

*"Before coming to this conclusion (of no strategic value), a careful reconnaissance should be made of it. Wake Island lies about 300 miles north by west of Taongi Island of the Marshall group, which is now in the hands of the Japanese. From the vicinity of Wake Island westward our course everywhere lay within aircraft operation of Japanese Islands."*

The notation indicated Mitchell's newest obsession, the potential threat of attack from Japan. Though the insightful officer had recognized it, even written of the threat in 1913, his Pacific tour in 1923-24 brought it to the foreground of his reporting and eventually his public speaking.

When the Mitchells arrived in Manila on New Year's Eve, Billy's old friend, General Douglas MacArthur, met them. During the two-week tour of the Philippine Islands that followed, Mitchell flew frequently and, as was always true of him, was quick to provide others their first flight above the ground. In the Philippines Mitchell's passenger was none other than the now elderly but still spry former guerilla commander, Emilio Aguinaldo. As Mitchell flew over the village where the revered Philippine hero had been born, Aguinaldo dropped his calling cards to the crowds below to the delight of all.

From the Philippines the Mitchells sailed to India, this time at their own expense as that portion of the trip had not been included in Billy's orders. While they were there they saw historic sites and played well the role of honeymooning tourists. The newlyweds also went on a tiger hunt as guests of the maharajah. Billy recorded the adventure and sold an article on it to the *National Geographic Magazine*. Amid the fun and frolic, however, and despite the fact that India was not included in the list of countries he was to report on, General Mitchell still took time to view India's progress in aviation and note the nature of its military operations.

Mitchell's love for China was evident in his remarks after the visit there when he wrote:

*"The Chinese themselves are extremely virile, democratic, industrious and very strong physically. Biologically they are undoubtedly superior to any people living. They are extremely intelligent and capable of carrying out any development that is desired."*

His praise was tempered with an observation on Chinese military preparedness:

*"From being a nation that dominated everything around them, as was the case about a century ago, the Chinese have lost their military and political power and are an easy mark for the European nations and the Japanese."*

The great Asian nation, in Mitchell's opinion, had misplaced its emphasis for the future, and was now vulnerable. It was a lesson he earnestly hoped his own country would recognize and learn from.

The last stop on the Mitchell honeymoon was Japan, General Mitchell's primary interest in the tour. He found the Japanese far more secretive than Germany had been, and most restrictive of his movements during the tour. Even so, when he departed the Island for the voyage home, he had seen enough to raise deep concerns. En route to San Francisco, he used the long trip to compile all of his notes into what would be a 323-page treatise on the Pacific situation:

### July, 1924

*"Japan knows full well that the United States will probably enter the next war with the methods and weapons of the former war...It also knows full well that the defense of the Hawaiian group is based on the island of Oahu and not on the defense of the whole group."*

*"The Japanese bombardment, (would be) 100 (air) ships organized into four squadrons of 25 (air) ships each. The objectives for attack are:*

- 1. Ford Island, airdrome, hangers, storehouses and ammunition dumps;*
- 2. Navy fuel oil tanks;*
- 3. Water supply of Honolulu;*
- 4. Water supply of Schofield;*
- 5. Schofield Barracks airdrome and troop establishments;*
- 6. Naval submarine station;*
- 7. City and wharves of Honolulu."*

*"Attack will be launched as follows:*

*"Bombardment, attack to be made on Ford Island at 7:30 a.m.*

*"Attack to be made on Clark Field (Philippine Islands) at 10:40 a.m."*

*"Japanese pursuit aviation will meet bombardment over Clark Field, proceeding by squadrons, one at 3,000 feet to Clark Field from the southeast and with the sun at their back, one at 5,000 feet from the north and one at 10,000 feet from the west. Should U.S. pursuit be destroyed or fail to appear, airdrome would be attacked with machine guns."*

*"The (Japanese) air force would then carry out a systematic siege against Corregidor."*

*"The United States must not render herself completely defenseless on the one hand thinking that a war with Japan is an impossibility, and on the other by sticking to methods and means of making war as obsolete as the bow and arrow is for the military rifle."*



Perhaps the most striking quote was one that was not in Billy Mitchell's 1924 report:

*"Our people will cheer your great Mitchell and, you may be sure, will study his experiments."*

*"Should there be such a war America would have to fight it a long way from home...It would be gravely embarrassing to the American people if the ideas of your General Mitchell were more appreciated in Japan than in the United States."*

Such were the words of Japan's House of Peers statesman Messr. G. Katsuda to a correspondent for the *Hartford Courant*, after witnessing the sinking of the *Ostfriesland* in 1921.

Nothing could have been closer to the truth...or more tragic for the United States of America. Mitchell's report disappeared somewhere near the *Flying Trash Bin* and General Patrick later claimed he did not see it until a year after Mitchell submitted it. Not until seventeen years later would anyone put any credence in the scenario it played out. Then a shattered Nation desperately seeking to find out what the predominant Japanese forces would do next in their Pacific War would studiously reexamine it.

## **Kill the Messenger**

After nine months abroad General Mitchell returned to find the situation at home was normal-all fouled up. The old admirals had done their best to contrive arguments to explain away the sinking of battleships by airplanes. Assistant Secretary of the Navy Theodore Roosevelt, Jr. pointed out: *"I once saw a man kill a lion with a 30-30 caliber rifle under certain conditions, but that doesn't mean that a 30-30 rifle is a lion gun."*

To the credit of Admiral Moffett, the Navy was now looking seriously at the construction of aircraft carriers. General Patrick too was advocating fiercely for increases in his small Air Service. Calvin Coolidge now sat in the Oval Office after the untimely death of President Harding, and the new President was concentrating on domestic policy and pushing the United States further and further into an isolationist view of world events. While a future war might be possible, once again it would be a foreign affair and this time the United States would stay out of it and let the chips fall where they may. It was a time of frustration for the forward-thinking Billy Mitchell.

Mitchell fought back through speeches and open criticism of the higher command. He was unabashed in his pronouncement that Japan could quickly take the Philippines and Hawaii in a military attack, and then stunned even his own believers by saying the Japanese would also attack Alaska. *"Alaska is far more important than the Philippines or Hawaii,"* he announced, *"and should be protected by air as well as on land."*

Close friends like Hap Arnold tried to reason with Mitchell. *"We need you,"* he admonished towards the end of 1924 as Mitchell's antics had almost pushed his career to certain doom. *"Don't throw away everything just to beat out some guy who doesn't understand. Air power IS coming!"*

*"I'm doing it for the good of the air force, for the future air force, for the good of you fellows. I can afford to do it. You can't!"*

What General Mitchell implied with this statement was the very thing that he had denied before Congress in prior testimony, that the line-soldiers of the military were afraid to speak the truth for fear of reprisal from the superior officers in the command structure. When this charge was printed in the *Saturday Evening Post*, Mitchell had all but sealed his own fate.



The generals, of course, denied that soldiers under their command were muzzled under threat of assignment to some forlorn post for speaking the truth. Yet the following March when Mitchell's term as Assistant Air Chief expired, he was not reappointed. Secretary Weeks wrote:

*"General Mitchell's whole course has been so lawless, so contrary to the building up of an efficient organization, so lacking in any reasonable team work, so indicative of a personal desire for publicity at the expense of everyone with whom he is associated, that his actions render him unfit for a high administrative position."*

With those words and the loss of his position, Mitchell gave up his single star and reverted again to his regular rank of Colonel. Mitchell asked General Patrick to assign him to Chicago where he could oversee the work of the engineers at McCook Field. Patrick refused, sending Colonel Mitchell about as far from Washington as he could--to the small outpost at Fort Sam Houston, Texas.

While the departure of Mitchell was greeted with joy among those he had offended, he still had a strong circle of friends in Congress, in the media, and in the general public. His transfer was preceded by much ado, including a visit by Mitchell friend, Will Rogers, who asked Billy to give him an aerial tour of the Capitol. Mitchell was happy to oblige, providing the renowned humorist with his first adventure above the earth. *"Have you got cotton in your ears?"* Billy asked his friend as he climbed into the cockpit.

Despite his nervousness at his first flight, Rogers smiled back and answered, *"I only use that in the Senate gallery."*



Later remarks by Rogers further reflected his opinion of the matter:

*"France gave Mitchell the Croix de Guerre, England the Order of the King, and the Republican Administration gave him the Order of the Tin Can."*

*"(Billy Mitchell) is the only man ever connected with high-up- aviation in Washington to use the air for anything but exhaling purposes."*

Before Colonel Mitchell departed, a group of his pilots surprised him with a farewell party at Bolling Field. The group elected one man to speak for the group and he advised the colonel, still addressing him by his previous rank: *"General, we're all going to apply for transfer to go with you. If they deny the applications, and of course they will, we're all going to resign."*

*"Sit down, every damn one of you," Mitchell ordered. "This is insurrection. Not one of you will resign...and that's an order!"*

Recalled one of the officers there that day, *"We obeyed him. We obeyed him the rest of our lives--and long after he was dead."*

As the defiant man who saw the future and spoke incredible things, then defended them regardless of the consequences departed for Texas, the *Cleveland Press* noted:

***"We may wait a hundred years before another such display of Courage!"***

## Perhaps an Explosion

While the Texas transfer removed Mitchell from his platform and his crowds, it couldn't still his voice. In the spring his newest book titled *Winged Defense* was published. Quickly discounted by Mitchell's adversaries, and criticized for the inclusion of cartoons lampooning the now gravely ill Secretary Weeks, the publisher described the book as *"a bomb in the lap of American complacency."*

The cartoons, Mitchell tried to explain, had been added by the publisher and *"Made Secretary Weeks laugh as much as anybody else. I think they made everybody laugh."*

Any levity in the Navy quickly vanished in the wake of two tragedies in September.

The first was a highly publicized attempt by the Navy to fly three PN-9 airboats from California to Hawaii. The previous year Army pilots had captured the nation's attention with a flight around the world (a project Mitchell had urged years before). In response, the Navy tackled the Pacific only to confront multiplied disaster. One airplane never made it off the ground, the second landed in the ocean not long after take-off, and all hopes of success hinged on the remaining PN-9.

Mitchell was no fan of the experiment, believing the Navy pilots lacked the training, did not possess adequate equipment to safely accomplish the mission, and had poorly planned the route and its support. Still, when it was announced on September 1 that the last radio call from the remaining PN-9 had announced it was running out of gas 300 miles from Hawaii, Mitchell was respectful. That night in a radio broadcast he urged all who heard his voice to remember the Navy airmen in their prayers. *"They are just as much martyrs to the progress of civilization as Columbus would have been had he perished in his voyage to America."* (On September 10 Commander John Rodgers and his crew of the missing PN-9 were rescued at sea after nine days helplessly drifting in their out-of-gas airplane. Before the welcomed happy ending to the Navy's first disaster that September, an even greater tragedy would occur...and there would be no happy ending.)

That tragedy involved one of the Navy's newest and largest ships--689 feet long from stem to stern and numbered "ZR-1". It was one of the few ships not measured in tonnage for it was lighter than air. It was christened the...



## USS Shenandoah

In 1925 the Navy had two of the big airships, one of which was the USS Los Angeles (ZR-3) that was built at the Zeppelin works in Friedrichshafen, Germany, and appropriated after the war as part of the war-debt compensation. The *USS Shenandoah* was home grown, christened on October 10, 1923, and assigned to the Naval Air Station at Lakehurst, New Jersey.

Admiral Moffett was partial to the airships and considered them among the pride of Naval aviation. The huge Shenandoah had also become the darling of the media, despite its high price tag. In the summer of 1925, the Navy decided to show off their wonderful new asset. August and September marked the traditional state fair season in the Midwest, and the airship's captain,

Commander Zachary Lansdowne was ordered to prepare his ship for a tour of these fairs. The Navy hoped that the sight of the two-block-long balloon floating over fair crowds would impress the public with the military might purchased with their dollars, and add positive publicity to the annual winter lobby for appropriations from Congress the following year.

Commander Lansdowne was regular Navy and was not too happy with his orders. He envisioned his airship working at sea in cooperation with the fleet, not flying over inland fairgrounds as part of a propaganda sideshow. In Texas Colonel Billy Mitchell, who was a friend of the Lansdownes agreed, and expressed his opinion bluntly: *"What business has the Navy over the mountains anyway."*

The Navy couldn't care less was Billy Mitchell's thought, and Commander Lansdowne was a good officer the admirals knew would accept and fulfill his orders regardless of his opinion regarding them. On September 2 as the Navy prayed and searched for the crew of the missing PN-9 in the Pacific, Commander Lansdowne was piloting his large airship inland towards Des Moines, Iowa, where it would hover above the crowds the following day. He comforted himself with the knowledge that this was his last mission in the airship. In two more weeks he would return to sea duty on a traditional Navy vessel.

In the darkness of night the Shenandoah rose over the Alleghenies into the plains, and into the face of an approaching storm. At three in the morning the edges of the storm were buffeting the slow moving airship and Lieutenant Joseph Anderson advised Commander Lansdowne that he might wish to change course further south to skirt the high winds and building lightening. Lansdowne was unshaken. He had weathered storms before at sea and replied, *"We've been ordered to fly over a certain course, and I want to keep that course as long as I can."*

At 5 a.m. two of the airships engines began sputtering and the airship began to climb and roll, unable to fend off the heavy winds. Forty-five minutes of furious activity followed as all hands struggled to regain control. Two engines failed completely and the airship continued to rise. After crossing the Alleghenies, Lansdowne had cruised over Ohio at 2,000 feet. By 5:45 the storm had pushed the large balloon up to 6,200 feet, where it suddenly began to come apart--then broke into three pieces.

The tail section drifted away and began to fall to earth. It contained eighteen men, all but three of whom survived. Four more crewmen safely descended in the ruptured midsection, while the bow section climbed as high as 10,000 feet before the navigator, Charles Rosendahl, slashed the gas cells. Slowly the last section of the *Shenandoah* drifted earthward, some of the crew including Rosendahl surviving. Among the dead was Commander Lansdowne. The *USS Shenandoah* went to its demise joined by fourteen of her crew, including the captain.



As the story broke, the media became quickly aware of Commander Lansdowne's opposition to this mission, and began speaking of the Navy's misuse of the great airship for public relations, not military purposes. Reporters eagerly sought for opinions, focusing particularly on two men, the top man in the Navy and the foremost authority in the world on aerial matters.

The first to respond was Secretary of the Navy, Dwight Wilbur. His comments may have been the final straw for the man who would respond second. Said the Secretary:

*"In view of...the failure of the Hawaiian flight and the Shenandoah disaster we have come to the conclusion that the Atlantic and the Pacific are still our best defenses. We have nothing to fear from enemy aircraft that is not on this continent."*

Back in Houston, Colonel Billy Mitchell did not immediately respond to the calls of reporters and telegrams from around the world to give his own opinion. When at last he did speak, many who heard his words believed that Colonel Billy Mitchell made the gravest mistake of his life.

### IT WAS NO MISTAKE!

A "mistake" is something one does when they speak or act without thinking, an error in judgment one looks back on afterwards and says, *"I wish I hadn't done that!"* Colonel Mitchell didn't speak without thinking...he pondered it all, carefully preparing his response for a day and a half. He knew what needed to be said, certainly understood the consequences before he spoke. As he did perhaps he recalled one of his last conversations with his friend Hap Arnold, a response to his friend's pleas to Mitchell to tone down his rhetoric before he crossed the line of no return with the military's higher command. Mitchell's response:

*"When senior officers won't see the facts, you've got to do something unorthodox...perhaps an explosion!"*

The *explosion* occurred at precisely 5 a.m. on the morning of September 5. Colonel Mitchell first handed out copies of his carefully drafted 6,080-word response to reporters, then read them a few lines:

*"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 accident to our naval aircraft, to find out something about what happened.*

*"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.*

*"The bodies of my former companions of the air molder under the soil in America and Asia, Europe and Africa, many, yes, a great many, sent there directly by official stupidity."*



After a moment of stunned silence, the reporters rushed to be first to publish perhaps the most inflammatory words ever spoken by any soldier in uniform, about the men who commanded him. Colonel Billy Mitchell had pushed the limit throughout his career and survived because of his popularity with the public and his admirable war record. This time there was no doubt he had crossed the line. The result was inescapable....

### **The Court-martial Of Billy Mitchell**

It was a Friday morning when Colonel Mitchell issued his response, and after delivering his remarks he took the weekend off to fish in the Gulf of Mexico while newspapers across the country reported and commented on the Mitchell response. The reaction was mixed, from high praise for his courage in some to damning denunciation for his insubordination in others. Among the military command there was no argument...Colonel Billy Mitchell had gone too far.

Mitchell honestly expected the Army to place him under arrest on Monday, September 7, when he returned from his weekend jaunt. By Wednesday he began to fear that, in view of his great popularity in the media and with veterans groups, the War Department might back down. On September 9 he issued additional statements including the observation:

*"What I have said about the conditions in our national defense hurts the bureaucrats in Washington. It ought to hurt them, because it's the truth!"*

It also became obvious, had it not been before, that Colonel Mitchell was almost aggressively seeking his own demise. He seemed quite prepared to face the consequences of his actions with the determination that any trial would focus not so much on the rightness or wrongness of his insubordination, but the accuracy of his charges. In his scathing September 9 statement he challenged,

*"If an investigation is desired I am eager to have it. But it must be entirely public and all the evidence must be published for the people to know about...Then and only then will we begin to get at the actual facts involved and remove it from petty politics and bureaucratic suppression.*

*"It does not matter to me whether I am in the Army or not. If the bureaucracies wish to throw me out they probably have the machine for doing it, and it will be only one more evidence of the conditions into which our national defense has drifted."*

### **The Morrow Board**

While the War Department struggled with how to deal with Billy Mitchell's latest outrage, President Calvin Coolidge became the first to act. His response was less of a reaction to Mitchell's insubordination than it was a reaction to his charges. Earlier in 1925 the President had considered an investigation into the feasibility of the mounting call for a separate air arm, and had discussed with his close friend Dwight Morrow the creation of a blue-ribbon panel to launch hearings and report its findings. Mitchell's actions may or may not have spurred the process, certainly such a panel might divert some of the attention from the Colonel's media attention, but at any rate the panel was established almost immediately after the Mitchell's second press conference.

While the Army was still investigating Mitchell and determining how to respond, Mitchell was summoned to Washington, DC, to testify before the Morrow Board. Hearings opened on Monday, September 21, and the Mitchell's arrived at Union Station in the Capitol the following Friday. He was met by a throng of 10,000 supporters including members of two American Legion Posts that carried him through the throng on their shoulders while shouting, *"We fought once...we'll fight for you now!"* Hap Arnold ushered the Mitchell's to his car and drove them to their hotel. For the remainder of the weekend Colonel Billy Mitchell was the honored guest, and hero, of local veterans groups in functions throughout the city.

Billy and Betty enjoyed a relaxing Monday together before Colonel Mitchell's September 29 appearance before the Morrow Board. They arrived together at the House Office Building just as Benjamin Foulois was wrapping up his own testimony. Ironically, Foulois' testimony was just as acrimonious as were Mitchell's words:

*"I was one of the first men to fly a plane for the Army, in 1908. I remember that in 1910 I was allowed only \$150 to keep our plane going--and I had to spend \$300 out of my own pocket to do it.*

*"I say our lack of team work today is due to the utter ignorance of the General Staff in 90 percent of the Air Service problems."*

For his own part, years later Foulois expressed surprise that it was Billy Mitchell and not himself that was court-martialed for his blatant words. Even so, Mitchell remained bitter enemies even after Mitchell's death, and Foulois was never called to testify in the subsequent court-martial proceedings.

Before the Morrow Board, Mitchell was far less impressive than others who testified. For two days before the Board, Colonel Mitchell spent most of his time reading from his recently published book *Winged Defense*, even after one board member advised Mitchell in frustration that all the members of the Board had already read his book. It is doubtful that Colonel Mitchell expected the Morrow Board to give a favorable review to his concept of an independent air arm anyway.

Mitchell did address some new points, particularly with the *Shenandoah* tragedy, charging that the Navy had violated the law with its propaganda mission. Congressman Carl Vincent asked Mitchell what laws the Navy had violated.

*"The section which restricts Navy air activities to sea,"* he replied. Vincent indicated that Mitchell's interpretation of the law might be too broad, to which the Colonel responded: *"The Shenandoah was sent on a propaganda mission. The law was evaded, not exactly disobeyed. The orders for the trip were from non flying officers. The inquiry will bring that out."*

The *inquiry* to which Colonel Mitchell referred was the Navy's own investigation into the *Shenandoah* tragedy, scheduled to begin almost immediately. Colonel Mitchell was called before that board in early October. Mitchell refused to be sworn in, his attorney arguing that no subpoena had been issued. When Admiral Hillary Jones, president of the court of inquiry, produced a subpoena, Mitchell gave his only official response of the *Shenandoah* Inquiry:

*"I am advised by my counsel that it would be inconsistent with my legal rights and might jeopardize my case, should I be required to testify before the naval court on matters likely to be the subject of inquiry in possible court-martial proceedings."*

Colonel Mitchell had already said all he needed to about the *Shenandoah* tragedy, and he left it to the Navy to hang themselves, which they did in a most unflattering way.

In the hours after the *Shenandoah* had fallen to earth in pieces, souvenir hunters had invaded the scene of the disaster. The site had been picked virtually clean. Someone even went so far as to steal the Annapolis Class Ring from the dead finger of Captain Lansdowne. During the official inquiry the media learned that the indignities heaped upon the victims had not ended there. Bodies of the dead naval airmen had been shipped home in underwear, crude wooden caskets, and with little regard for the family. Navy regulations permitted the payment of up to \$150 for burial of a man who died in service, but the cleanup at the site and shipment of the bodies back to Lakehurst alone had exceeded the allotted amount. From Lakehurst the dead aviators had been sent home by the most economical means. Families who had submitted funeral bills to the Department of the Navy saw the bills returned to them without remuneration.

Billy Mitchell was now preparing his defense for the court-martial scheduled to begin on September 28. It would prove to be quite costly, despite the fact that his chosen counsel took the job pro bono. Despite these looming expenses, when *Liberty* magazine sent Mitchell a check for \$1,000 (after the September 5 press conference Mitchell had agreed to do an article for *Liberty*), Colonel Mitchell simply endorsed it and sent it on to Margaret Lansdowne. The widow of the *Shenandoah's* commander was instructed to share the sizable donation with the families of the other victims.

Colonel Mitchell selected as his counsel, freshman Illinois Congressman Frank R. Reid, who was a great proponent of air power. Clayton Bissell was appointed assistant defense counsel and the team went to work in Reid's Congressional office to put their case together—in only three weeks. Both men realized that they faced a virtually impossible situation. Bissell recalled:

*"We quickly decided that Mitchell was guilty as charged, with insubordination and conduct prejudicial to the service. We even convinced him that he would be found guilty. Reid asked what point we wanted to make, in that event--and we agreed that the trial had to be used to educate the American people on aviation, to make national defense mean something."*

The night before the trial began Colonel Mitchell echoed that sentiment. Pounding on the table for effect he stated with vigor: *"I'm not afraid of what the court will do to me. I'll fight on to get a real department of national defense, no matter what happens."*

When Billy Mitchell, his wife Betty, and his attorney's walked into the old and long-empty warehouse called the Emory Building at nine o'clock on the morning of September 28, it was to face some of the best recognized names of the United States Army. During one of the breaks during the days that followed, Mitchell remarked to someone nearby: *"MacArthur looks like he's been drawn through a knothole."*

General Douglas MacArthur, one of six major generals on the court, later wrote that his orders to determine the fate of Billy Mitchell were *"one of the most distasteful orders I ever received."* Six brigadier generals joined the august group. Colonel Blanton Winship was appointed to interpret law for the members.

Virtually all of the men appointed to hear testimony and find Billy Mitchell either guilty or innocent of violating the 96th Article of War were acquaintances; some were even close friends of the accused. President of the court was Major General Charles P. Summerall, whose command in Hawaii had been blasted by Mitchell little more than a year earlier.

The first order of trial was the qualifications of the judges to hear the evidence and render a fair verdict. Colonel Sherman Moreland, the Trial Judge Advocate (prosecutor) wasted little time in approving all of them. It was the most august and highest-ranking court ever assembled. Each of the

generals was steeped in the Army's traditions, and all understood well the importance of subordinates adhering to orders and protocol. Despite the friendship some had maintained with Colonel Mitchell, the inappropriateness of his actions would stand out starkly to these *old-school* military commanders.

When it came Reid's turn he first challenged Brigadier General Albert Bowley. Only a week earlier Bowley had debunked Mitchell's concepts of air power and a unified department of defense with the words: *"A single air service? Do we want this? The backbone of the army is the infantry!"* The other judges retired in private to take the matter under advisement. When they returned, General Bowley was excused.

Next Reid challenged Major General Summerall, President of the Court. It was an electric moment, General Summerall displaying a good deal of repressed anger. When the judges returned after retiring in private to consider the merits of this challenge, General Summerall was excused.

As General Summerall left the room he finally gave voice to his anger: *"Only ten minutes before court convened I shook hands with him. Now it's all over. We're enemies, Mitchell and I."*

Replacing Summerall at the head of the Court was Major General Robert Lee Howze, an old cavalry officer who had graduated from West Point in 1888, earned a Medal of Honor at White River, SD, less than three years later, commanded the U.S. Fourth Division in the Great War, and risen steadily to become one of the Army's true *old war horses*. Those who knew Howze expected him to be fair, but strict and unyielding in maintaining control of the proceedings.

Before the *jury selection* process was completed, the prosecution dismissed Major General Fred Sladen. Unlike General Summerall, General Sladen seemed truly relieved to be excused from the undesirable task that lay before the remaining nine generals.



*"I consider this the most august tribunal that has ever been called upon to act on any question since the Magna Carta,"* Frank Reid announced.

**And thus began the court martial of Colonel William *Billy Mitchell*.**



### 96th Article Of War

*Though not mentioned in these Articles, all disorders and neglects to the prejudice of good order and military discipline, all conduct of a nature to bring discredit upon the military service...shall be taken cognizance of by a...court-martial and punished at the discretion of such court.*



FRIDAY, October 30, 1925

The charges against Colonel Mitchell numbered some 52 pages, all of them related to the broad language of the 96th Article of War. Mitchell faced eight specific charges and was asked to stand and state his plea to the general issue.

"NOT GUILTY," he answered in a clear, strong voice.

Each of the eight charges was then read. Four related to his September 5 conduct; and then four more (the same charges just a different date) related to his September 9 statements:

1. That Colonel Mitchell, in his statement of September 5, conducted himself "to the prejudice of good order and military discipline";
2. That his statement was "insubordinate";
3. That his statement was "highly contemptuous and disrespectful" and intended to discredit the War Department;
4. The same four specifications as those cited, but referring to the Navy Department.
5. That Colonel Mitchell, in his statement of September 9, conducted himself "to the prejudice of good order and military discipline";
6. That his statement was "insubordinate";
7. That his statement was "highly contemptuous and disrespectful" and intended to discredit the War Department;
8. The same four specifications as those cited, but referring to the Navy Department.

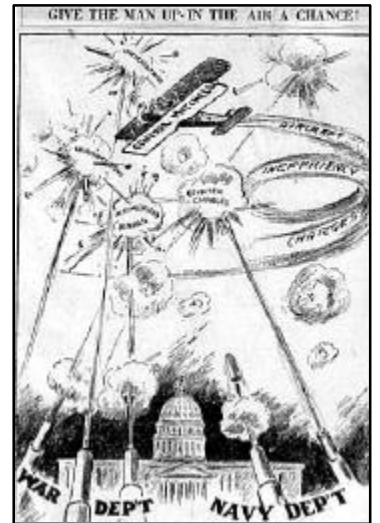
As each count was read, Colonel Mitchell again announced his plea: "Not Guilty!" That finished, court recessed for the weekend.

If the generals that stood in judgment of Billy Mitchell comprised the *most august tribunal that has ever been called*, the parade of witnesses that followed was a veritable "who's-who" of American heroes. One of the first was Major Carl Tooey Spaatz who spoke of the sad state of American air power and announced that, if he could pull all of the administrative officers away from their desks, he might be able to field a force of 15 pursuit aircraft.

*"Do you think aviation is being held back and repressed by the War Department,"* Reid asked.

The prosecution objected to the question as *calling for a conclusion from the witness*.

Before General Howze could rule on the objection, Spaatz shouted, *"I do!"* to applause from the audience.



The days that followed provided a parade of airmen, virtually all demonstrating their support for Colonel Mitchell and validating his charges with their testimony about the sad state of American air power. Observers were puzzled by the course the trial was taking. Little testimony related to whether or not Billy Mitchell was guilty of the charges, most centered on the veracity of his statements. In September the *New York Times* had predicted:

*"If the War Department decides to call Colonel Mitchell before a court-martial, the simple issue will be whether he has been guilty of disrespect to his superiors and insubordination. It will not be mismanagement of the air service."*

General Howze had already indicated that validation of Mitchell's claim that air power had been suppressed or that the September disasters had been the result of *incompetence, criminal negligence and almost treasonable administration* would have no bearing on the verdict. It was Billy Mitchell who was on trial, NOT the War Department or the Department of the Navy.

For this reason most didn't expect the trial to last more than a few days. It didn't take long to read the words Mitchell had spoken on September 5 and 9, and compare them to the broad standards of the 96th Article of War. To the surprise of almost everyone, the court seemed to be giving the accused wide latitude to educate the public. And that was exactly what Mitchell had wanted, regardless of how he got there or what it might cost him personally.

The cost was indeed great, and not only for Colonel Mitchell. There was a groundswell of support for Mitchell and one of the organizers for that effort was Ira Eaker who later stated, *"We talked over how taking part in Mitchell's trial would jeopardize our careers and decided to go ahead anyhow. (Major Henry) Arnold was the inspirational leader in that decision by this little group. When Hap Arnold took the stand his testimony was pointed and, at times, vehement as to the sorry state of American air power. After the trial Arnold was sent far from Washington for many years, and believed that this was a banishment imposed upon him for his support of Mitchell and his testimony at odds with the War Department.*

On November 10 Reid called Mr. William G. Schauffler who had commanded a squadron of the 90th Observation Group in France. There he had shot down a German plane on October 1, 1918 at the height of the Meuse-Argonne Offensive. Disheartened by what he saw happening in military aviation after the war, Schauffler had left the Army in disgust. He did still serve as a reserve officer in the Army Air Corps and was in command of six reserve squadrons. One of these was the squadron based in Washington, DC.

He testified that his squadrons existed only on paper, had no airplanes, and had mustered only once...to participate in a parade.

*"Then why do you remain in the position you're in?" Reid asked.*

*"God knows, I don't!" Schauffler answered.*

The parade of war heroes was an appropriate prelude to Armistice Day, November 11, 1925. A few minutes before eleven o'clock General Howze called a recess to observe a two-minute moment of silence for the men who had died in the Great War. Then the trial resumed, most of the testimony centering on Mitchell's charges that American defenses in the Pacific were weak and poorly organized. Among the witnesses called was Major Gerald Brant of the Air Service, a member of the General Staff.

*"Did General Mitchell make a report on the Hawaiian Island?" Reid asked.*

*"He made a report on the conditions in the Pacific which included the Hawaiian Islands, in October, 1924," Major Brant answered.*

*"When did this report reach you through channels?"*

*"Saturday."*

*"Do you mean LAST Saturday?"*

*"Yes sir."*

*"What is the opinion of the War Plans Division on this report?"*

*"It stated that these recommendations were based on General Mitchell's personal opinions and therefore no consideration need be given them."*

*"Can you produce Colonel Mitchell's report for this court?"*

*"Probably not, since they deal with strategy."*

The irony of this testimony was evident to all. Mitchell's report from his nine-month Pacific tour in 1923-24 had been considered ill conceived and baseless. It had been shuffled off to some forgotten pigeonhole in the War Department as worthless. Now, the War Department wanted to classify it as secret and ultimately did. (Not until 1958 was that report declassified, and by then, most of what Mitchell had predicted had come to pass.)

On that same Armistice Day the court announced a stunning reversal in policy that many hailed as Mitchell's first victory of the trial. General Howze announced that defense evidence that substantiated Mitchell's charges against the Navy and War Departments would be considered as mitigating factors in his statements of September 5 and 9. If he could prove his own charges accurate, the court would exonerate him. It was the first sign of hope for a trial whose outcome had been certain before it began.

The day after Armistice Day Mitchell received a telegram from the members of the New York American Legion. They had sought to have Mitchell released to speak for their convention on Armistice Day, only to be denied. Since late October, Mitchell had been under arrest and was forbidden to leave the Capitol. The telegram said:

*Greetings from your buddies. America loves a man with guts!*

*1,892 years ago a packed court-martial condemned a courageous soldier for telling the truth so don't worry.*

*We are all with you and we don't mean maybe!*

That same day Reid called more war heroes to the stand, including two men who had established enviable combat records in the air, then left the Army after the war for other pursuits. The first was Reed Chambers, the great ace of the 94th Aero Squadron who, had shot down seven enemy aircraft. Chambers had now turned his attention to commercial aviation. There was no future in the Army.

Next was a man who had gone to war as a chauffeur to be rescued from that humdrum position by Billy Mitchell and given the chance to fly. He came home wearing nine Distinguished Service Crosses for his prowess in the air, and left Army aviation to build automobiles (though within a few years of the trial he would return to the skies in commercial aviation.) His testimony began with the proclamation, *"It is a crime against posterity!"* He was one of the best known of America's heroes, Eddie Rickenbacker. His support of Mitchell both on the stand and in public was without reservation.

Rickenbacker voiced his frustration during World War I of sending airmen into battle without parachutes. He testified that American air power was sorely inadequate and that the United States ranked eighth in the world in terms of air power.

He berated the War Department for its lack of new airplanes and a policy of relegating pilots to using leftover planes from the war.



*"It is dangerous to have them on hand," he announced. "The graveyards throughout the United States show that, located or attached to the flying fields."*

The prosecution objected, and had the *graveyard* remark stricken from the record. When the prosecution challenged Rickenbacker at one point and asked him if he would be surprised to see that the official records differed from his testimony, Rick responded somewhat sarcastically, *"I wouldn't be surprised by ANYTHING the records show!"* His words continued to ring loud and clear throughout the courtroom as he unflinchingly pronounced:

*"This nation owes General Mitchell a debt of gratitude for daring to speak the truth. He has learned his lessons from the only real teacher--experience."*

*"This nation will pay the price of their selfishness. Not perhaps in this generation but in that of the boys who are growing up today or their sons. The unified air service is the life insurance of our national security."*

*"One-tenth of one percent of the money now wasted on national defense, if put intelligently into aircraft, would give us some real protection. The Army is helpless without aircraft, so is the Navy."*

The trial had stretched into three weeks of debate over the War Department's handling of the Air Service and praise for Colonel Mitchell. The message differed little and the daily reports were becoming trite. Before calling the witness that would renew media attention, Reid called Colonel O. C. Pierce, a personnel officer. At one point Reid questioned him about pilot ratings. Colonel Pierce advised the court that the Air Service had only about thirty pilots who were rated as superior. Reid asked Pierce to break down these pilots according to their type of aircraft.

*"One attack, twenty-one pursuit, five bombardment, and one unclassified."*

*"What is the unclassified one?"*

*"He flies anything."*

*"What is his name? Have you got anybody in that list?"*

*"General Mitchell is the unclassified one," Pierce announced, ignoring the fact that Mitchell no longer wore a star on his shoulder."*



## Testimony from a Navy Widow

She was not a *secret witness*—Reid had been advising the media for days that she would be called to testify. Still a current of electric excitement and fascination rippled through the courtroom when, towards the middle of November, Frank Reid announced:

*"The defense calls as its next witness,*

*Margaret Ross Lansdowne."*



When the pretty, young widow of the captain of the ill-fated *Shenandoah* walked into the Emory Building, the entire courtroom rose in reverence and General Howze bowed to greet her respectfully. Reid quickly established that Mrs. Lansdowne had testified, several weeks earlier, before the official Navy inquiry into the disaster that had killed her husband. (That inquiry was still being conducted concurrent with the Mitchell trial.) Before the Naval inquiry, Mrs. Lansdowne had been somewhat reserved and her testimony contained almost nothing newsworthy. All that changed in the Mitchell trial.

It had been Mitchell's charges against the Department of the Navy after the *Shenandoah* disaster that had set in motion the events leading to this trial. The Navy had done its best to refute Mitchell's accusations, even prompting many believed, the reaction by the brother of the airship's navigator Charles Rosendahl to pen an open letter to the *Houston Chronicle* stating: *"You (Mitchell) have no place in the service of your country when you have so little respect for its authority."*

Mitchell had refused to testify before the Navy's official inquiry, citing conflicts with the defense of his own case. The true fact of the matter was, as had been borne out in previous Mitchell statements to the media, that Billy expected nothing positive to come of the *"whitewash board."* Mitchell was sure that the Navy would take care of its own, would gloss over facts and manipulate the hearing to clear itself of any wrongdoing in the tragedy. Just how far the Navy would go to accomplish this exoneration comprised the majority of Mrs. Lansdowne's testimony.

Prosecutors in the Mitchell trial did their best to prevent the testimony that followed, an account by Mrs. Lansdowne indicating pressure by the Navy to influence her testimony in the *Shenandoah* inquiry--even to the point of perjury. Captain Paul Foley had sent a communication to her prior to her testimony.

*"It was delivered to me the day before the court (hearing)," she testified in a strong, clear voice.*

*"Have you a copy of this communication?" Reid asked.*

*"I have not--I tore it up."*

Reid read a portion of Mrs. Lansdowne's subsequent testimony: *"My husband was very much opposed to this flight and protested as vigorously as any officer is allowed to do to his superiors. Everyone knows that in the military or naval services, orders are given to be obeyed and no officer cares to earn the stigma of cowardice or insubordination."*

Throughout Mrs. Lansdowne's testimony the prosecution found itself facing some of the most damning testimony yet, words that more vividly verified Mitchell's charges than anything that had been heard before. Throughout the morning and into the afternoon they bombarded Reid with objection after objection. Reid fought them back at every turn and managed to get most of Mrs. Lansdowne's story told. When he finished and turned to the prosecution for cross-examination, the testimony became even more damning.

Though the prosecutors could argue vehemently with Reid, to attack Mrs. Lansdowne under cross-examination would have been a public relations blunder for sure. The strong but visibly sad lady before them was only twenty-three years old, and had lost her husband only three months earlier. When she was asked to relate the visit she had received from Captain Foley PRIOR to receiving his communiqué, her story demonstrated that the Navy had shown no such effort to spare her feelings after the tragedy.

*"Captain Foley sought to impress me with the importance of the court and told me that the court had all the powers of any federal court and that the solemnity of my appearance was very great and that I should be sure to tell the truth.*

*"He then asked me what I was going to say and I answered him that I preferred to make my own statement to the (Shenandoah inquiry) court.*

*"He asserted that he wanted to find out what I had on my mind, and please to get it off (my mind), and said, 'Let's rehearse the statement you are going to make to the court. Tell me the entire thing you are going to say.' I answered again that I did not want to make my statement.*

*"He told me that I had no right to say that the flight was a political flight, as the taxpayers in the Middle West had a perfect right to see their property, to which I answered that in the case of a battleship you wouldn't take it out to the Great Lakes and interest the taxpayers in the property.*

*"He answered that it couldn't be done--and I said that it couldn't in the case of the Shenandoah, but they (the Navy) were so stupid it had to be proven to them."*

Mrs. Lansdowne's testimony was followed by a parade of witnesses designed to demonstrate that the *Shenandoah* tragedy had indeed been the result of ignorance on the part of the Department of the Navy. Perhaps the most explosive testimony came near the end of this line of examination when Ernest Sheehan, a newspaper reporter took the stand. Based near the Ohio field where the broken airship had fallen, he had been one of the first on the scene and the first to interview survivors. Under oath he testified that these aviators had spoken freely with him until officials from the Navy arrived. *"Commander Klein (one of those officials) requested me not to write the cause of the wreck...(he) knew what I had because I told him...He asked me not to mix in it."*

Reid asked with mock incredulity if Sheehan was intimating that Commander Klein was urging him to suppress the facts of the disaster. *"That was the impression I got,"* Sheehan answered.

Though there was some powerful testimony in that fourth full week of the trial to excoriate the Navy's ill-fated propaganda mission for the *Shenandoah*, after the stirring story shared by Mrs. Lansdowne it appeared somewhat lackluster. Then on November 19, one of the Navy's own took the stand. While he made it clear from the outset that he disagreed with Mitchell's call for a separate air force, he was poignant in his frank words about the Navy's handling of aviation.

The admiral was now sixty-four years old with snowy-white hair, but he spoke with clarity and purpose. There he also spoke without fear of reprisal for he had retired three years earlier. That might not have mattered anyway--Admiral William Sims had always spoke his mind and damn the consequences. Before the Mitchell hearing he announced:

*"The Navy Department hasn't any defined policy (regarding air power). It is going along from day to day, more or less in a higgley-piggledy way."*

Sims patently condemned the decision by the Navy to send the *Shenandoah* on its propaganda mission and testified that he believed that indeed young officers were afraid to speak their true convictions. To do so would jeopardize one's career and advancement.

Admiral Sims finished his testimony on Thursday and was followed the next day by a few more witnesses before Reid announced that he was finished. On Monday, November 23, Colonel Mitchell would take the stand in his own defense. It was the point in the trial the entire country...perhaps indeed the world, had been waiting for.

Colonel Mitchell's testimony in actuality consumed only about one day in the seven-week trial. For nearly seven years he had spoken his messages...before Congress, in detailed reports to the War Department, in articles for publication, before Veterans' groups and the general public, and especially in his recently published book. Ironically, a good deal of his cross-examination was directed not at the veracity of the air theory espoused in *Winged Defense*, but the originality of them. (To this day Mitchell historians often are quick to point out that many of Mitchell's concepts were derived from his associations with men like Sir Trenchard, Benjamin Foulois, and others.) The Colonel was repeatedly bombarded with questions to determine which of his statements were based on fact and which were based upon personal opinion. It became a long and for the most part, exceedingly banal sparing match.

There were times that it would seem as if a distant light sparkled in his eyes as he spoke of the future of air power, but these moments tended to lend credence to the opinion that Mitchell had perhaps become so focused on air power that he had lost touch with reality. Some of his recommendations and predictions were preposterous in 1925:

- Aircraft carriers capable of carrying a hundred bombers or pursuit aircraft
- A gliding bomb that could be launched from airplanes and then guided for up to ten miles to its target
- Winged bombs with accurate controls for target acquisition
- A program to train and grade aviation mechanics for military service
- A meteorological service to track weather patterns for aviation
- Amphibious airplanes for rescue work
- All metal bombers and bombers with as many as FOUR engines
- A defense strategy for the Pacific based out of Alaska and supported by a strong air force
- Development of instruments to enable aircraft to fly in fog
- Bombers with a range of thousands of miles, capable of crossing either ocean that framed the United States
- Observation planes that could fly as high as 30,000 feet

As to the charges leveled in the *Shenandoah* tragedy, did Mitchell believe his facts were accurate?

*"More so than ever. Now I KNOW they are true."*

With regard to the military's propaganda machine and the muzzling of officers, had Colonel Mitchell ever given information to the media while in service as Assistant Chief of the Air Service?

*"Often. There was no other way of getting the truth out, I found."*

In 1913 hadn't Mitchell issued a statement opposing separation of the Air Service from the Signal Corps?

*"Yes...and I never made a worse statement!"*

A titter of laughter went through the courtroom at the candid remark. Major Gullion then turned to General Howze and surprised everyone in the room when he announced:

*"We are through with the witness."*

Before the (Thanksgiving) holiday recess, Congressman Fiorello LaGuardia took the stand. *"It's not convenient for me to come,"* he had told Clayton Bissell when he'd called for the Congressman's help, *"but I'll be there."*

Reporters got to the Congressmen at his hotel room early in the morning of his court appearance. From there it was on to the Emory Building where the World War I veteran pilot told the court that New York City would be helpless before an attack from the air by a foreign enemy. By the time Reid had finished questioning the fiery young Congressman, the words from his early morning press conference had reached the streets.

When Gullion began cross-examination, he looked with some annoyance at LaGuardia. *"The newspapers recently quoted you as saying, 'Billy Mitchell isn't being tried by a jury of his peers but by nine beribboned dogrobbers of the General Staff.' Were you correctly quoted?"*

*"I didn't say 'beribboned'." LaGuardia deadpanned.*

The courtroom burst into laughter and General Howze struggled to regain control. The President of the Court looked at the Congressman and stated: *"The court would like to have you explain what was meant by your characterization of this court."*

*"From my experience as a member of Congress and from my contact with the General Staff, I'm convinced that the training, the background, the experience and the attitude of officers of high rank of the Army are conducive to carrying out the wishes and desires of the General Staff....I want to say that, at that time, I didn't know General MacArthur was on this court."*

Again the room broke into laughter and MacArthur looked up uncomfortably. For most of the proceedings he had tried to remain conspicuously, inconspicuous.

Court resumed on Monday, the last day of November and the same day on which the Morrow Board submitted its report to President Coolidge. The disappointing but anticipated conclusion was at odds with Mitchell's call for a separate air force. Despite this recommendation from the committee that had spent two months interviewing 99 witnesses, a board that in hindsight some believe was seated when it was to counteract the charges anticipated in Mitchell's trial, the Morrow Report was a small victory for the Air Service. It recommended renaming the Air Service to the "Air Corps," a small step away from the concept of air power as an auxiliary (service organization) to the Army. It further encouraged representation on the General Staff and advocated offices of the Assistant Secretary of the Army and of the Navy and of Commerce be established for the air services.



Ultimately it would lead to the U.S. Army Air Corps Act of 1926, which also included a five-year buildup of American air power.

Among the first witnesses called in this last phase of the Mitchell trial was Navy pilot John Rodgers of the ill-fated PN-9 flight to Hawaii. Commander Rodgers did his best to portray the mission in a light favorable to the Navy, refuting Mitchell's claims that it was a publicity stunt. It was, he told the court, an effort to practice navigation and to qualify the Navy's aviators.

*"You haven't a single qualified aviator in the Navy?" Reid asked.*

*"That's what we're trying to do, qualify ourselves," Rodgers responded.*

On the first day of December, the well known and widely admired Admiral Richard Byrd was called to the stand. His presence was notable, but his testimony was lackluster next to the objections and wrangling between Reid and Gullion. The sparing continued for the next several days as the prosecution presented a series of witnesses to refute the testimony of the Mitchell supporters. The *Shenandoah's* navigator, Lieutenant Commander Charles Rosendal, testified that Commander Lansdowne had never protested the flight that had resulted in the disaster of September 3. That flight, subsequent high-ranking Naval officers testified, had been ordered for *"training and development of the ship,"* not for propaganda purposes.

Even some of those who testified for the prosecution found themselves agreeing with Mitchell far too much to suit the prosecutors. Several planned witnesses were never placed on the witness stand when Gullion realized their support was for the accused. Thurman Bane had been Chief of Engineering at McCook Field through Mitchell's bombing tests, and the two had often clashed. Bane had once commented to another, *"You shouldn't fool with Mitchell. He's crazy."* Called out of retirement to testify against Mitchell, he was quickly dropped from the list of witnesses when the Army realized he would support the accused. Bane even apologized to Mitchell for his past criticism.

Mitchell just smiled and replied,

*"Forget it. All that's water over the dam. We've got to work together now, and save air power."*

Such was the general nature of Colonel Mitchell through much of the trial. It was almost as if he never realized it was his life—his career—that was at stake. Even in the face of the most scathing rebuke from prosecution witnesses, Mitchell tended not to take anything personally. It was both frustrating--and admirable. Those who testified against him might have felt more comfortable had the man glared at them, or rebuffed them. Instead, he seemed focused only on his hypothesis, never on the personal attack. After the trial he remained friends with MacArthur, and two of his judges (General McCoy and Colonel Winship) became godfathers to his children.

One of the last witnesses in the seven-week trial was the previously excused President of the Court, General Summerall. He blasted Mitchell's report on combat conditions in the Pacific. When questioned about his "Mitchell and I are now enemies" quote to the media upon being excused from the trial, he denied making the statement despite a demeanor that gave evidence to just such an opinion. Even so, somewhere during the hearing or shortly thereafter General Summerall made a statement that would become a lasting tribute to the colonel...

*"Mitchell is one of that damned kind of soldier who's wonderful in war  
and terrible in peace!"*

On the morning of December 17, General Howze called for arguments to sum up the case. Mitchell turned to Reid and asked him to remain seated, then rose to face the generals himself. The court had reneged on its November 11 policy that it would consider the substantiation of the statements precipitating Mitchell's trial as a mitigating factor to his guilt under the 96th Article of War. In a clear, strong voice he addressed the court:

*"My trial before this court-martial is the culmination of the efforts of the General Staff of the Army and the General Board of the Navy to depreciate the value of air power and keep it in auxiliary position, which absolutely compromised the whole system of national defense.*

*"The truth of every statement which I have made has been proved by good and sufficient evidence before this court, not by men who gained their knowledge of aviation by staying on the ground and having their statements prepared by numerous staff...but by actual fliers.*

*"To proceed with the case would serve no useful purpose. I have therefore directed my counsel to entirely close out our part of the proceeding without argument."*

Major Gullion could not be so casual. Against the recommendation of Colonel Moreland, Gullion launched into a diatribe of scathing rebuke for Mitchell and a plethora of flowering praise for the generals who sat in judgment. He even provided mimeographed copies of his summation to the press. As the court took a noon recess, one of the spectators rushed forward to put an arm around Colonel Mitchell and tell him, *"The people are with you, Billy. Keep punching. You'll rope 'em yet."*

Years later Mitchell remembered those warm words from a good friend as, *"a moment of tenderness--the one moment of all that nightmare which I'll never forget."* It had been one of the few times Will Rogers ever made a statement without a humorous punch line.

Following lunch, Colonel Moreland reversed himself and gave his own closing statement, telling the court: *"I do not believe that this court has any right to send out into the Army again an officer about whom there can be any question as to loyalty, as to subordination, as to his complete dedication to the best interests of the service."*



The prosecution then rested and Howze asked Reid again if the defense wished to say anything further. *"Nothing."* Reid replied. All that could be said had been said and no one doubted the outcome.

It took only half an hour for the court to render a verdict, little more than another hour to determine the punishment. As twilight spread across the Washington Monument, in the dreary confines of the old Emory Building, Colonel William Billy Mitchell stood to his feet as each of the specifications against him were read. After each count the finding was announced--nine times including the general charge. Nine times the court announced:

**GUILTY!**

When the verdicts had all been read General Howze announced: *"The court upon secret written ballot, two-thirds of the members present concurring, sentences the accused to be suspended from rank, command and duty with the forfeiture of all pay and allowances for five years."*

That secret written ballot remained a true secret, though Betty Mitchell later claimed that General Howze told her there had been a split verdict. Billy Mitchell was himself convinced that the verdict had not been unanimous, and went to his grave at least hoping that his boyhood friend Douglas MacArthur had cast a dissenting ballot. Fiorello LaGuardia later told a Mitchell biographer that a janitor had found the crumpled ballots in a wastebasket; one marked *"Not Guilty"*—in the penmanship of Douglas MacArthur.

In 1945 General MacArthur wrote Senator Alexander Wiley of Wisconsin advising that he had cast the lone dissenting vote. He further claimed Mitchell knew this before his death, and expressed his appreciation for that. In his memoirs MacArthur recalled of his boyhood friend:

*"When the verdict was reached, many believed I had betrayed my friend...Nothing could be further from the truth. I did what I could in his behalf and I helped save him from dismissal. That he was wrong in the violence of his language is self-evident; that he was right in his thesis is equally true and incontrovertible.  
"Had he lived through World War II he would have seen the fulfillment of many of his prophecies."*

Rightly or wrongly, Douglas MacArthur never could shake the ghost of the court-martial of Billy Mitchell. Years later when he commanded American forces in the South Pacific, he never fully gained the confidence of American airmen who believed he'd betrayed a friend.

The Mitchell's took the verdict and the sentence quite in stride, Mitchell walking to the front of the courtroom to shake hands with each of the judges before he left the Emory Building. The verdict at least, was not unexpected. The sentence, many people felt, had been far more lenient than anyone could have hoped for. He could have been dismissed summarily and completely from the Army.

Frank Reid told the media: *"They may think they have silenced Mitchell, but his ideas will go marching on, and those who crucified him will be the first to put his aviation suggestions into practice. He is a 1925 John Brown."*



Therein may have been the true reason for the lenient verdict, at least in the supposition of some. By retaining Mitchell in the Army under suspension of rank and command, the War Department at least still maintained some control over the uncontrollable Billy Mitchell.

While several in Congress threatened to raise a storm of support for Mitchell after the Christmas holidays, it never fully materialized. On January 26, 1926, President Calvin Coolidge approved the findings and the sentence of the court-martial judges. Mitchell in turn sent a note to the Adjutant General:

*"I hereby tender my resignation as an officer in the United States Army, to take effect on February 1, 1926."*

It was probably the only time Mitchell sent something in writing to the Army command structure that it wasn't immediately ignored. On February 1, 1926, Billy Mitchell became a civilian.

Billy Mitchell could not, and would not, be silenced. In the years after becoming a civilian, he continued to speak, and write prolifically. He wrote a wonderful story of the life of a great but unconventional American General...his old mentor Adolphus Greeley. He continued to promote aviation, call for a unified air force and warn of the dangers of war in the Pacific.

On February 19, 1935, William Billy Mitchell died in his bed of complications from influenza. He was fifty-six years old, but in his own words, *had lived three lives*. Rumors that the Army denied him burial at Arlington were false; Billy Mitchell wanted to go home to his native Wisconsin. He was buried at Forest Home Cemetery in Milwaukee after a simple funeral. Joining the relatives who served as pallbearers was General Frank McCoy, one of the court-martial judges.

Six years later on October 15, 1941, Congressman McCormack introduced H.J. 240 in the 77th Congress. It read:

**WHEREAS** the late William L. Mitchell faithfully and honorably carried out his duties as a brigadier general in the Air Service of the United States Army during the World War, having served fearlessly throughout 14 major actions; and

**WHEREAS** the march of events has proven the wisdom of many recommendations made to Congress by the said late William L. Mitchell during 1924 and 1925; and

**WHEREAS** it is the desire of Congress to honor the memory of the said late William L. Mitchell:

**THEREFORE BE IT**

**RESOLVED** by the Senate and House of Representatives of the United States of America in Congress assembled,

That the Secretary of War is authorized and directed to make the records of the War Department indicate that the late William L. Mitchell's rank of brigadier general has been restored as of the effective date of his resignation from the Army; and

**THE** President of the United States is hereby authorized to issue the necessary commissions or documents incident to the restoration of such rank.

Fifty-six days later the moment Billy Mitchell had feared and warned his country to prepare for, happened in the most tragic of manners. On the morning of December 7, 1941, the unified air service of Japan attacked Ford Island on the Island of Oahu. The most powerful fleet in the world was crushed beneath a torrent of bombs, and nearly 200 American airplanes were destroyed on the ground where they were parked. More than 2,000 Americans died that day. The attack commenced at 7:55 a.m. on a Sunday morning. Billy Mitchell's warning to America in 1924 had been off—by twenty-five minutes.

Within ten hours Japanese aircraft made a nearly simultaneous strike on Clark Field in the Philippine Islands, virtually destroying America's air force in the South Pacific. It was 12:30 p.m. local time...Mitchell had missed that one by less than two hours.



Shortly before Mitchell's death in 1935, he had an emotional conversation with his good friend, Alfred Verville. Mitchell knew that his heart was failing and told his friend:

*"All I wish is that I could stick around to finish up--and I want to be around for the next big show."*

*"What do you mean, General?" Verville asked.*

*"I mean," answered Mitchell, "the real air-power war, the real world war."*



While the United States reeled from the horrible surprise attacks throughout the Pacific and the world wondered if there was any hope to recover, one airman stepped to the foreground. Years before he had served, for one day, as an aid to General Billy Mitchell. Two days before Colonel Mitchell's trial began, the forward-thinking twenty-eight-year old Air Service lieutenant won the Schneider Cup Race at Baltimore, Maryland, and set a new speed record for seaplanes of 245.7 mph. On the morning of April 18, 1942, that same airman, now a Lieutenant Colonel, led 80 volunteers of the Army Air Corps in a daring raid on Japan to give the United States its first ray of hope.

As they lifted off from the deck of the aircraft carrier *Hornet* to carry out what would have been considered an impossible mission, they delivered a healthy dose of *payback* to the Japanese...flying B-25 MITCHELL bombers. When *the real world war* came, in a sense...General Billy Mitchell was *around for the big show*.

### On August 8, 1946 the United States congress approved Private Law 884:\*

AN ACT Authorizing the President of the United States to award posthumously in the name of Congress a Medal of Honor to William Mitchell.

*Be it enacted by the Senate and House of Representatives of the United States of America in Congress assembled,*

That the President of the United States is requested to cause a gold medal to be struck, with suitable emblems, devices and inscriptions, to be presented to the late William Mitchell, formerly a Colonel, United States Army, in recognition of his outstanding pioneer service and foresight in the field of American Military Aviation.

Sec. 2. When the medal provided for in section 1 of this Act shall have been struck, the President shall transmit the same to William Mitchell, Junior, son of the said William Mitchell, to be presented to him in the name of the people of the United States.

Sec. 3. A sufficient sum of money to carry this Act into effect is hereby authorized to be appropriated, out of money in the Treasury not otherwise appropriated.



\* [Billy Mitchell's *Medal of Honor* has since been the subject of some confusion. One can quickly see by the images of the medal struck that it is NOT the Medal of Honor authorized by Congress during the Civil War, and commonly called *The Congressional Medal of Honor*. The U.S. Senate's Committee on Veterans' Affairs publication, *Medal of Honor Recipients, 1863-1978* further perpetuated this error by listing Billy Mitchell among its list of Medal of Honor Recipients. The medal is, in fact, NOT THE Medal of Honor, but a special award, authorized by Congress similar in concept to few other such rare awards as the Four Chaplains Medal authorized after World War II and presented only to the four men for whom it was named.]

## Conclusion:

On July 26, 1947, President Harry S Truman signed the National Security Act of 1947. Based on lessons learned during World War II, sweeping changes were made in the command structure of the United States Army and Navy. That act established a Department of Defense to be headed by a civilian secretary appointed by the President and holding Cabinet rank. The office of the Secretary of War became the Secretary of the Army who would, with his counterpart in the Navy, work together for a unified military defense with a Joint Chiefs of Staff. On that day the United States Air Force was born, a separate arm with its own Secretary of the Air Force...coequal with that of the Army and Navy. Billy Mitchell's dream had at last come true.

In 1955 the Air Force Association passed a resolution calling for Billy Mitchell's conviction to be overturned. Two years later his youngest son, William Mitchell, Jr. petitioned the Air Force to set aside his father's conviction. Reluctantly Secretary of the Air Force James H. Douglas, after writing:

*"It is tragic that an officer who contributed so much to his country's welfare should have terminated his military career under such circumstances. Today, however, I am confident that his services to his country and his unique foresight as to the place of air power in the defense of our country are fully recognized by his countrymen.*

*"The application is denied."*

The touching efforts of his son and the airmen who followed in his footsteps aside, that is probably how Billy Mitchell would have wanted it...to be remembered as a man who understood that sometimes *"you've got to do something unorthodox...perhaps an explosion."* Billy Mitchell's explosion changed our world.

Nearly a century after that trial in 1925, Mitchell is almost as controversial as he was when he lived. His name evokes strong opinion, still berated by some, worshipped by others. His most ardent admirers still claim Mitchell had the right ideas; he just accomplished them the wrong way. Billy Mitchell would probably say, were he alive today, that he accomplished them THE ONLY WAY. He was indeed, a sort of soldier.



Right or wrong, the most fitting epitaph may well be the words spoken by Frank Reed on the night before the court-martial began:

*"Rome endured as long as there were Romans....*

*America will endure as long as there are Mitchells."*

**Remove this sheet and print Part 3**