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# Billy Mitchell



## Early Airpower Advocate

By [Stephen Sherman](#), Aug. 2001. Updated April 16, 2012.

Fifteen hundred aircraft were ready to help dislodge the German forces from the St.-Mihiel salient. Colonel William Mitchell had come up with the idea: 100 squadrons, manned by French, American, and British crews would coordinate with the army's ground attack. On September 12, five hundred scouts and light bombers strafed and bombed the German front. At the same time, another thousand planes flew deep into enemy territory, breaking supply lines, destroying transport, and cutting communications.

The world's first large-scale, coordinated air-ground offensive was a huge success. The Allies eliminated the salient entirely, capturing 15,000 prisoners in the process.

## Background

Born in 1879, to wealthy parents who were living in Nice, France at the time, Billy Mitchell grew up in Wisconsin, on a prosperous country farm, with horses, cows, a pond, and plenty of room. At age nineteen, he enlisted in the 1st Wisconsin Infantry Regiment, to participate in the Spanish-American War. His aptitude for telegraphy led him the Signal Corps, and to the Philippines and Alaska.

When the Aeronautical Division of the Signal Corps was formed in 1907, Mitchell saw aviation as the coming thing, and paid for his own flight lessons. He was always blunt and outspoken in his advocacy of airpower. In 1913, as a Captain, he testified before Congress, stating that the United States lagged behind in military aviation. As a Major, he headed the small aviation section of the Signal Corps. In 1917 he was sent to the

war in Europe as an observer, to help define the needs of the Aviation Service. A week after his arrival, the U.S. entered the war.

## The War in Europe

The sophistication of the military aircraft being used in 1917 surprised Mitchell: 150 HP engines, synchronized twin machine guns, bomb racks, camera fittings, etc.. All of this far exceeded the primitive Curtiss Jennies and other equipment that he had seen in American service. He learned as much as he could, first-hand, about the modern airplanes. He flew as a gunner in British and French two-seaters. He went up in kite balloons. He traveled all over the front, seeing as many units as possible. The French even awarded him the *Croix de Guerre*. The stalemated front, with trenches, machine guns, artillery, observation balloons, and millions of men, impressed Colonel Mitchell. He believed the airplane, used as a bomber, could solve the problem. To him, the aerial dogfights and low-level attacks on ground troops did not use the airplane to its greatest potential. He found an ally in General Sir Hugh "Boom" Trenchard of the British RFC. Mitchell summarized the views of the early proponents of airpower:

The airplane is an offensive weapon, not a defensive weapon. Air power, properly organized, will make it possible to attack and to continue to attack, even though the enemy is on the offensive. We have been using the airplane improperly. No number of flying machines can prevent an enemy aircraft from crossing the lines. The sky itself is too large to defend. We must plan military aviation to attack the rear areas of any enemy and destroy all means of supply."

At this early date, Mitchell ran afoul of Army politics and interests; his outspokenness didn't help. When General Benjamin Foulois was appointed head of the U.S. Air Service (sidelining Mitchell), an uproar ensued. Foulois was moved over to a service & supply group. General Mason Patrick took over the Air Service, and Billy Mitchell retained command of the combat squadrons at the front.

By September, he had persuaded the Allied military leaders to use airpower as he envisioned, in the Saint-Mihiel offensive described above. But he could not convince the leaders, especially the British, to bomb German industrial cities.

He proved himself to be a great leader and organizer. At America's entry into the war, the Signal Corps' aviation branch consisted of just over 1,000 men. By war's end, the Air Service included 45 squadrons, almost 200,000 men, and 740 combat airplanes. They had destroyed 780 enemy planes & 73 balloons, counted 71 aces, and had dropped 140 tons of bombs.

## After the War

He continued to push for airpower, especially bombers. In 1921, he made headlines when his airplanes sank a naval target, the *Ostfriesland*, a German battleship that was not moving, not firing anti-aircraft, nor defended by fighter airplanes. Like most early bombing advocates, he overvalued it, but he could see the pattern of future warfare. He continued to criticize the War and Navy Departments for their handling of aviation.

Finally, he was court-martialed in 1925 and sentenced to suspension for five years. But his Army career was over, a fact he recognized with his resignation the following year. He died in 1936 (at age 57), unrepentant in his views. It is interesting to speculate what he would have thought of Pearl Harbor, and what if any role he might have played in its aftermath, had he still been alive.

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