



BILLY MITCHELL

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BOULDER
LONDON

Published in the United States of America in 2002 by
Lynne Rienner Publishers, Inc.
1800 30th Street, Boulder, Colorado 80301
www.rienner.com

and in the United Kingdom by
Lynne Rienner Publishers, Inc.
3 Henrietta Street, Covent Garden, London WC2E 8LU

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Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data

Cooke, James J.

Billy Mitchell / James J. Cooke.

p. cm.

Includes bibliographical references and index.

ISBN 1-58826-082-8 (alk. paper)

1. Mitchell, William, 1879–1936. 2. Generals—United States—Biography.

3. Aeronautics, Military—United States—History—20th century. 4. United States.
Army. Air Corps—History—20th century. I. Title.

UG626.2.M57 C66 2002

358.4'0092—dc21

2002018899

British Cataloguing in Publication Data

A Cataloguing in Publication record for this book
is available from the British Library.

Printed and bound in the United States of America

Ⓢ The paper used in this publication meets the requirements
of the American National Standard for Permanence of
Paper for Printed Library Materials Z39.48-1984.

5 4 3 2 1

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PREFACE

AS A HISTORIAN AND A PROFESSOR OF HISTORY FOR THREE decades, I was aware that figures in history often take on a larger-than-life persona that sometimes cannot stand up under serious research. There is a school of historical research that delights in revealing the warts of great persons, and concludes that those bumps and blemishes demonstrate how these individuals really contributed little to history and are unworthy of modern respect. For example, some founding fathers of the United States, because they owned slaves, are now viewed as hypocrites who did not mean what they wrote in the Declaration of Independence or the Constitution. The student newspaper at the University of Mississippi, where I taught, ran an editorial excoriating every president from Abraham Lincoln on for their personal failings. Much of the information in the editorial was incorrect, but in the writers' minds they were in the mainstream of current thought.

There are dangers in writing a biography of a historical figure when he has been perceived as a "prophet without honor." It is doubly difficult to delve into a person's life and show that he was not all that he was thought to be, when his dramatic court-martial was depicted on the movie screen by such an icon as Gary Cooper. The problem is compounded when you consider that Billy Mitchell remains a hero of the United States Air Force, a military institution worthy of respect and support. When one flies into Milwaukee, Wisconsin, the plane lands at the airport named after Mitchell. In the terminal there is a fine Mitchell Gallery of Flight Air Museum, an impressive presentation that gladdens the heart of any historian because average folk who merely survived the mind-numbing vagaries of high school U.S. history spend a good deal of time looking at and learning from the well-presented displays.

My interest in Billy Mitchell began when I spent an academic year as a visiting professor at the Air War College at Maxwell Air Force Base in Montgomery, Alabama. At that time I was just starting research on my second book on World War I, *The U.S. Air Service in the Great War* (1996), and it would have been impossible to study the efforts of the United States in the air and not take a long look at the contributions of Billy Mitchell. Besides researching the documents and materials in the U.S. Air Force Historical Agency's archives, I read the printed diary of Colonel Frank P. Lahm, which indicated a deep-seated hostility toward Billy Mitchell felt by many in the American Expeditionary Forces (AEF) during the so-called Great War. This hostility was confirmed while I was doing research at the U.S. Army Military History Institute's archives at Carlisle Barracks, Pennsylvania, as I reviewed the papers of generals Hugh A. Drum and Dennis Nolan, both of whom served with Mitchell in the AEF and played major roles in subsequent events in Mitchell's life. I had seen the 1955 movie *The Court Martial of Billy Mitchell* several times, and I shared the popular view that if only the U.S. leadership of the late 1920s and 1930s had listened to Mitchell we would not have been so unprepared for war in 1941—and that possibly the Japanese would not have been able to carry out their surprise attack at Pearl Harbor on December 7. But the more research I did on World War I, the more I became convinced that a good biography of Billy Mitchell was needed; what was missing from previous works on Billy Mitchell was the man himself. Having myself endured the stresses and strains of war, I assumed that part of the antagonism toward Mitchell resulted from the natural clash of egos, perceptions, and roles in wartime; but there was something that ran deeper than just the normal competition between highly motivated, goal-oriented officers. Suppositions such as "If only America had listened to Mitchell" and "If only Congress had stepped in during the 1925 court-martial" are not history; they are flights of fancy. There were too many other factors at play that brought about the devastating circumstances of December 1941. Having said that, it is wise to point out that Mitchell was correct in his assessment of defenses in the Pacific area.

Colonel William Mitchell was a complex man—certainly not the Gary Cooperesque saint of the 1955 movie, nor the hated demon that some in the War Department believed him to be. He massed over 1,400 aircraft to support the U.S. attack at St. Mihiel in 1918, and he showed in 1921 that aircraft could sink a modern battleship. His devotion to airpower was sincere, and he firmly believed that air forces should be separate from the army and the navy. Mitchell was on target when he described the state of U.S. defenses in the Hawaiian Islands and the Philippines in the 1920s. He was brave in battle and inspired great loyalty in subordinates. Mitchell was

a prolific author, having published three books on airpower and a vast number of articles in popular magazines. His ideas, rehashed many times, were available to the public, and he appeared to be closer to them than to the high-collared, grim-faced generals of the War Department. But there was another side to Mitchell. How much did he do for himself, and how much did he do “for the good of the service”? Mitchell was brash, contemptuous of superiors, unwilling to work within the army system, incapable of giving credit to others, and at times he could be unfeeling when his subordinates were in dire circumstances. He played at being rich—piling up debts, spending heavily, and borrowing money—and had one failed marriage. Finally, as a result of his actions, he lost the support of influential generals, including John J. Pershing, when they could have helped him the most. In 1925 the secretary of war described Mitchell’s behavior as “lawless,” as indeed it had become, and President Calvin Coolidge decided that the time had come to court-martial Billy Mitchell. Done right, a scholarly biography must look at all aspects of the materials available, make judgments, and overlook those who would idealize or demonize the subject. I have tried to do this while locating the person of Billy Mitchell and pointing out where he fits within the history of aviation in the United States.

To “find” Mitchell I had expert help from a number of first-rate archivists who made materials available and gave sound advice. Mitchell Yockelson of the Military Records of the National Archives first led me to Air Force archives and then, in their new facility at College Park, Maryland, to three dozen cartons that contain Mitchell’s court-martial records and transcripts. No historian can do serious work without the archivist’s expert advice and in-depth knowledge of the holdings. Yockelson and his colleagues, who have put up with me for five books now, certainly must represent the best in public service.

The staff of the Library of Congress assisted me greatly, making available their fine collections of personal papers. Ernest Emrich, Jeffery Flannery, Fred Bauman, and Bradley Gernand have an extensive knowledge of their holdings and, possibly of more importance, a deep love of American history and a sense of responsibility in preserving our nation’s past. The most valuable of their offerings are the Mitchell papers, which contain vast numbers of letters and other documents. It seemed that Mitchell’s mother never threw away a letter from her son, and particularly useful were those from the young lad, “Willie,” while at boarding school at Racine College.

Every once in a while the historian stumbles upon a gem, and I did just that when I contacted the archives of the Golda Meir Library at the University of Wisconsin, Milwaukee. I was informed by a very fine

archivist, Nicolas Weber, that the library holds the George Hardie Collection, which focuses on the history of aviation, and that a good part of the collection contains Billy Mitchell material. While researching this collection I discovered the library's Mitchell Family Papers, a small collection that turned out to provide vitally important insights. The Milwaukee County Historical Society and the Milwaukee Public Library were also most helpful in locating materials, especially newspaper accounts of Mitchell's father's spectacular divorce in the late 1870s.

Another valuable source of information was the Alumnae and Alumni Society of Vassar College in Poughkeepsie, New York. The executive director of the society, Terri O'Shea, provided a great deal of background material pertaining to Mitchell's first wife, Caroline Stoddard Mitchell. Billy Mitchell had four strong women in his life—his mother; his sister Harriet; Caroline Stoddard; and his second wife, Elizabeth Trumbull Miller. No biography of Mitchell would be complete without a good deal of attention paid to those women who did so much to shape his life from birth to death.

Special thanks must go to Roger G. Miller of the Air Force History Support Office at Bolling Air Force Base, Washington, D.C. Dr. Miller spent a vast amount of time in discussion and correspondence with me about Billy Mitchell and the Air Service. Without his guidance I might not have remained on track. I am also indebted to Christopher R. Paulson of the Racine Heritage of Racine, Wisconsin; Paul Woehrmann, Local History and Marine Collection of the Milwaukee Public Library; Phyllis Aurand of the Thomas Balch Library of Leesburg, Virginia; and Daniel Heath de Butts of the Fauquier Historical Society of Warrenton, Virginia. Robert Haws, chairman of the Department of History of the University of Mississippi, must be acknowledged for his support, as must T. J. Ray, professor emeritus of English, whose interest in aviation history made him an easy mark for listening to my ideas and, often, my problems. Wood Brown III, of Slidell and New Orleans, Louisiana, must be cited for his assistance in providing material on the story of the Montana Class battleships. Michelle Palmertree took many disks and converted them into readable pages because my computer skills are truly nonexistent. Equally bad is my use of commas, colons, semicolons, and the like. My wife of now forty years continues, after many books, articles, scholarly papers, and book reviews, to serve as my Editorial Queen. The family that suffers together through the nuances of English grammar stays together, or something like that.

— *James J. Cooke*

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INTRODUCTION

IT WOULD BE VERY EASY TO BE MESMERIZED BY BILLY Mitchell the prophet without honor in his time, the man who predicted the Japanese attack on Pearl Harbor, the persecuted defender of the United States he saw as poorly prepared for the next air war. For those who wish to skim the surface of history the legendary Mitchell is comfortable, easy to understand. If history is, however, the careful and accurate recording of past events, then the comfortable is not always totally satisfactory. No person who has made a mark on the pages of history is one dimensional, and to be sure Billy Mitchell made his mark. He is not a footnote to history; he is an entire chapter, the subject of many books and articles. Many would not want to believe there was a dark side to his personality. Billy Mitchell was not the self-sacrificing airman who gave up everything at his court-martial in 1925. He could be a shameless self-promoter, a difficult man to deal with, a poor husband, and eventually a neglectful father. As a soldier he could be a brilliant fighter but also a poor subordinate—a man great in war, terrible in peace.

Despite his many short-comings, Mitchell earned his place in history as a pioneer air war fighter who saw better than anyone else the great potential of massed combat aircraft striking at an enemy on the battlefield. He was not simply a visionary who wrote and talked: he assembled over 1,400 airplanes to pound the Germans at St. Mihiel in 1918. No one would ever have doubted Mitchell's intelligence, and he was one of the first air fighters to see the great potential of airpower in combined arms operations.

The World War I infantry division was a combined arms team, with infantry and artillery working in concert with other elements of the division. Typically an aero-observation squadron and a balloon company with one balloon was assigned to work with the division's artillery and the

infantry. The prevailing belief was that airpower was best used in support of and in concert with the ground combat forces; and given the technological limitations of the World War I battlefield, integration of air and ground went fairly well. Mitchell, however, went beyond the concept of air-ground cooperation and saw air as extending the battlefield, with bomber aircraft acting beyond the enemies' front lines, hitting supply routes, ammunition dumps, bridges, airfields, and German troop concentrations. Pursuit aircrafts' primary function was to gain air superiority, driving enemy reconnaissance and pursuit planes from the skies. Once that was done, pursuit aircraft could then strafe enemy positions (within the limits of safety) to facilitate the attacks of American infantry. Despite his mantle of Airpower Prophet, Mitchell remained fairly orthodox in his views of battle, looking primarily at the battle at hand. He diverged from the doctrines of the Great War mostly in his emerging concept of an independent air force, which eventually developed into his belief that massive air assets could by themselves affect the outcome of not only a battle, but a war.

As assistant to the chief of the Air Service, Billy Mitchell had many personal motives for his fight with the navy over the primacy of the battleship in 1921, but he did sink the great German warship *Ostfriesland* in a few minutes. Many other ships sank under the pounding of Mitchell's aerial bombardment, showing to all that great surface ships, once the pride of ocean-going navies, were vulnerable to attack by single-engine airplanes. Mitchell's crusade against the navy, however, clouded his vision and his usually fertile imagination regarding the potential of the aircraft carrier and the submarine. He did indeed see the grave dangers to American military power in the Pacific and in 1923 addressed them in a report of defenses on the Hawaiian Islands and the Philippine Islands. Knowing how aircraft could devastate military installations—especially those at Pearl Harbor in Hawaii and Clark Field in the Philippines—he wrote, with great accuracy, how such enemy attacks could be carried out. But his remedies for shortcomings of the defenses in the Pacific were far beyond the technological and financial capabilities of the United States at that time.

When war began in Europe in 1939, three years after Mitchell's death, the capabilities of the German Luftwaffe fighting in Poland and then in 1940 in the Low Countries and France motivated airpower preparedness advocates to resurrect Mitchell's ideas and warnings. Billy Mitchell was a highly literate man, and he wrote a massive number of books and articles for publication in civilian journals and magazines. Consequently, it was not difficult to find Mitchell's views, and many were reprinted in major popular magazines. As the smoke cleared over the ruins of the great American fleet at Pearl Harbor, Mitchell became even more important as a prophet who

had been silenced by the powerful decisionmakers in Washington. Billy Mitchell's views had been repressed by those generals and politicians, or so presumes the conspiracy theory. Those who wanted to find sinister motives in the War Department overlooked the fact that many of the founding fathers of airpower, such as Mason Patrick, Benjamin Foulois, and James Fetchet, had reached similar conclusions but were able to state their opinions and positions without incurring the wrath of the president or those in position to affect the decisionmaking process.

After World War II Billy Mitchell was again cited as an authority when the question of the establishment of an independent air force was debated. Many of the great air generals of the Second World War, Henry "Hap" Arnold among them, had defended Mitchell at his famous 1925 court-martial. When the United States Air Force (USAF) was finally established in 1947, it was claimed that Billy Mitchell finally had been vindicated. The army and the navy had great traditions dating back to the Revolution, and some army units could trace their lineage to before the War of Independence. A problem for the new USAF was establishing an air tradition because so much of its history was bound to the army. The USAF "founding fathers"—Patrick, Foulois, Fetchet, and Mitchell—had come to the U.S. Air Service of the Great War and the post-war era from other branches of the army. Billy Mitchell began his career in the U.S. Army Signal Corps, where his record was superb. With Mitchell, however, there was a long history of being before the public eye—his war record, his feud with the navy, his constant flow of articles in popular magazines, and then the famous 1925 court-martial.

The end of World War II in 1945 did not guarantee peace, and as hostile feelings between the United States and the Soviet Union grew deeper it was imperative to bolster support in America for the new, expensive, and perplexing international role that the nation had to assume after the war. Under President Harry S. Truman, himself a veteran of World War I, the Defense Department was established and the U.S. Air Force was created. The missions assigned to the new service were vast and complex, and the Strategic Air Command became the symbol of the new power and the role of the United States. It was important to find those who had spoken out forcefully for the national defense, for preparedness, and for airpower before Japan's attack on Pearl Harbor. In the minds of many, especially those who wore the new Air Force blue, Billy Mitchell was such a man. In 1955, at the height of the Cold War, Republic Pictures released the movie *The Court Martial of Billy Mitchell*, starring the great actor Gary Cooper, a man who had won an Oscar in 1941 for his role in *Sergeant York*. The end of this fanciful and inaccurate film depicts a convicted Billy Mitchell, in

civilian clothes, leaving Washington. In the sky he sees a flight of four De Havilland aircraft, and, as they fly by, they change into modern jet fighters.

Billy Mitchell as acted by Gary Cooper, however, bore little resemblance to the actual person. In the movie Mitchell continually resists, with righteous anger, any suggestion of involving the press and politics in his case. The reality was just the opposite; Mitchell was a master at using the press and creating a public persona. The movie led the audience to believe that only after the crash of the airship *Shenandoah* in 1925 did Mitchell in righteous indignation speak out. This was a glaring inaccuracy. During Allen Gullion's cross-examination of Mitchell, Gullion—played brilliantly by Rod Steiger—brings up a number of Mitchell's predictions about the future technological advances in aircraft, such as transoceanic flight, missiles, and supersonic aircraft, giving the impression that only Mitchell had this vision of the future in the air. According to the script, Mitchell alone saw the need for a unified air service, though in truth Mason Patrick, Benjamin Foulois, and James E. Fetchet had gone on record supporting such a concept. The impression given to movie audiences was of Mitchell as a solitary Moses, dedicated to leading the American people out of a wilderness created by the hide-bound, unimaginative, anti-airpower generals of the War Department.

The movie's depiction of Mitchell's court-martial also bore little relation to reality. Viewers were given the sense that the court-martial was basically a kangaroo court, hell-bent on the destruction of Mitchell because he dared to question the General Staff and the War Department. Mitchell's enemy, a fictitious General Guthrie, played by the fine character actor Charles Bickford, was seen as making all of the rulings when, in fact, Colonel Blanton Winship, a Judge Advocate General officer of impeccable reputation, ruled on matters of law—and often ruled against the prosecution. When the script was sent to the Pentagon in June 1955, a number of army lawyers tried to point out glaring errors of fact as far as procedure was concerned. By and large they were ignored.¹ Members of the Office of the Judge Advocate General were invited to attend the premier showing of the movie at the Anacostia Naval Photographic Center in Washington, D.C. They were no less taken aback at the factual errors in the movie.² But by then the movie was in theaters, and Billy Mitchell, or perhaps Gary Cooper, was confirmed as a "prophet without honor."

The independent air force was created, and with good reason and fine results. Mitchell had indeed been on the mark when he warned about a potential attack on the Hawaiian Islands and the Philippines. Like many officers who had service in the Pacific area, Mitchell knew of the growing competition and hostility between the United States and the empire of

Japan. Billy Mitchell had seen the introduction of the automobile, airplane, radio, and motion pictures, and by reading records from his Virginia home one gathers that his wife had what labor-saving devices were available in the 1920s and early 1930s. A man of intelligence and good education from a first-rate institution did not need much prompting to make predictions. Mitchell understood the principle of mass, and his assembling of over 1,400 aircraft for World War I's September 1918 St. Mihiel offensive achieved air superiority over the battlefield and contributed greatly to the success of the first great American offensive operation carried out by John J. Pershing's AEF. The movie-makers sadly left out this great accomplishment, an act of planning and execution that won personal praise from Black Jack Pershing himself. The movie includes a perfunctory mention of Mitchell's many decorations (during the beginning of Gullion's cross-examination of Mitchell), but the reasons for receiving such high honors from the United States were omitted, leaving the audience in the dark as to who Mitchell actually was and what he had done prior to the 1921 sinking of the *Ostfriesland* and the 1925 crash of the *Shenandoah*.

What the movie did was to obscure Billy Mitchell, the man. It gave him the mantle of great patriot and the cloak of martyrdom. Without some understanding of the human Billy Mitchell, the script writers, producers, and directors were left with defense counsel Frank Reid's conspiracy theory—that "they" were out to get Mitchell because he dared to challenge the star-spangled generals of the War Department. One of those dark forces behind the projected martyrdom of Billy Mitchell was President Calvin Coolidge, who is seen in the movie directing the prosecuting lawyer, Colonel Sherman Moreland, to "try harder" to convict Mitchell. Moreland was portrayed by Fred Clark, an actor who had won accolades as a comedian on the screen, and, in keeping with his Hollywood persona, was regarded as a buffoon, constantly challenged and defeated by Reid, played by Ralph Bellamy, well-known as a very serious actor.

Though he was a great and talented actor, Gary Cooper portrayed only a fraction of the personality that was Billy Mitchell. Cooper was bound by the script, which was filled with historical errors and misrepresentations of the facts. The movie was great propaganda at a time when the United States needed underpinnings for its new world role, but in the long run it fixed in the American mind a vision that Gary was Billy, and nothing could have been further from the truth.

In history it is difficult to separate truth from myth, simply because so many prefer to believe the myth. Billy Mitchell was one of those figures in history who loomed at times larger than life, and his reputation was enhanced by a fledgling United States Air Force and reinforced by a movie

in 1955. There was a public Mitchell persona: the daring airman, the crusader for airpower and an independent air force, the persecuted officer who dared to speak out, the fine Virginia squire horseman and hunter. Beneath the surface was a man haunted by the memory of his Senator-father; the lonely lad at Racine College; the tentatively defiant, young, imperialist-ordained officer; the man always in need of money to maintain his way of life.

No one could ever take away from Billy Mitchell his great achievements in World War I or his crusade for an independent air force. But one must also recognize that the founders of American airpower were many, and most of them worked quietly within the army system. The magnitude of Billy Mitchell's personality, his literary achievements, his overactive ego, and his self-promotion obscured those who shared his quest. The life story of Billy Mitchell spans the time from the Spanish-American War to the Great War, from William McKinley to Franklin D. Roosevelt. He was a product of his family and his times—a family that left an indelible mark upon him. He, in turn, left his impression upon the history of the United States in the twentieth century.

NOTES

1. Memorandum, Public Information Office, Department of the Army, 27 June 1955, and Comments, Military Justice Division, Opinions Branch, 27 June 1955, in National Archives, Archives II, College Park, MD, Records Group 153, Records of the Judge Advocate General, General Courts Martial, William Mitchell Case Records, Entry 40, Case Number 168771, Carton 9214-21.

2. Memorandum, Judge Advocate General, Opinions Branch, 1 November 1955, in National Archives, Archives II, College Park, MD, Records Group 153, Records of the Judge Advocate General, General Courts Martial, William Mitchell Case Records, Entry 40, Case Number 168771, Carton 9214-21.

ONE

YOUNG WILLIE

THE WINTER OF 1935-1936 WAS A HARD ONE, EVEN FOR Wisconsin. Snow had covered the ground and piled in drifts, making travel hard for those required to move about. At the Milwaukee train station the station master awaited the arrival of a train that had been slowed by late February snowfalls. Waiting with the station master was a hearse driver and a few Great War veterans from a local aviators' post of the American Legion. The train pulled into the station, and the veterans came to attention. The first man off the train was Eddie Rickenbacker of the old 94th Aero Squadron, the Hat-in-the-Ring Squadron, the greatest ace of the Great War. Following Rickenbacker came a drawn-faced brunette, an attractive woman, who walked with the assurance of one who had mastered horses in the ring and who had weathered the onslaught of newspaper reporters' countless questions. Two other women who had come to the station embraced the widow, and all waited for the oak coffin to be unloaded from the train.

The wooden box contained the earthly remains of William "Billy" Mitchell, grandson of a congressman, son of a senator, war hero, general, court-martialed and resigned officer. It had been Billy Mitchell who organized 1,485 aircraft for John J. Pershing's first great American offensive of World War I at a place known as St. Mihiel, Mitchell who had challenged the U.S. Navy over airpower in 1921 and sent the German battleship *Ostfriesland* to the bottom of the sea with a few minutes of aerial bombardment. His court-martial in 1925 had been justified in the eyes of some, but for many Mitchell had emerged as a martyr for the air defenses of the United States. For his final trip home Mitchell had been dressed in civilian clothes. Had he worn a uniform, he would have displayed many ribbons, among them the Croix de Guerre, the Distinguished Service Cross, and the