

Billy Mitchell: Yesterday and Tomorrow

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Moderator: Thank you. On behalf of the Air Force Association, welcome to another session. Our topic today is Billy Mitchell, Then and Now.

Our forum speaker is the President of the IRIS Independent Research, a fellow of the AFA's Eaker Institute, she's worked for RAND, the Secretary of the Air Force, and the Chief of Staff of the Air Force. She'll make a presentation and then time allowing, she'll open the session for questions.

I would also remind you, you have some evaluation cards, if you'd please fill those out and return them, we'd appreciate it. Each of you, I think, has had an opportunity to get a copy of her bio. Let me now turn the podium over to Dr. Rebecca Grant.

[Applause]

Dr. Grant: Thank you. Thanks very much, Boyd.

Well, it's 1:30 in the afternoon, it's halfway through the conference, but I'm delighted to see a big crowd out here today to talk about Billy Mitchell. How can you have a conference on air and space power and not talk a little bit about this most notorious of American generals, a man often called the "patron saint of air power," a man who is still controversial even decades after his death. He was well known for his views on air power, but what I want to talk to you about today is where those views came from and what they mean, even in the 21st Century for the application of air and space power.

Most of you probably know Billy Mitchell best for the scene that's depicted here. He's the one standing up, waiting to hear a verdict in his court martial trial. The small picture above and to the right shows something else that Billy Mitchell was notorious for, and that is his role in leading tests on bombing German battleships. This, of course, is the captured battleship Ostreisland, bombed and successfully sunk in 1921 by aircraft. The sinking of the Ostreisland was so controversial that even decades later, Navy officers, like my father, would repeat the mantra that it would never have sunk if all those watertight doors had been closed tightly and properly at the time.

Mitchell was one to stir up controversy, but there's something else about Mitchell. Have you ever wondered what made this man the controversial exponent of air power that he really was and how many of us remember that, as we see at the quote at

the bottom, here from an ARI research paper, he had been in World War I, the commander of the biggest air battle ever in history up to that point in time.

That, as you probably know, was the Battle of San Miel. You see the picture up in the right, Billy Mitchell surrounded by some of his air service mates at the time. What was so unique about San Miel? We're going to talk a lot about this battle and you'll know everything about it by the time I finish, but put it in context for a moment by looking at the graph on the lower right. The first bar shows the number of allied aircraft at a battle two years earlier, the Battle of the Sum in 1916. It's about 386 aircraft. On the right is the allied air order battle for San Miel. At least 1100 mission-ready aircraft. This alone tells you that there is something new going on in 1918, something new and something so important to who Billy Mitchell was and what he became after the war that I'm going to spend the next thirty minutes or so telling you about it and about its impact on air power as we know it today.

This slide tells you a little bit about what Mitchell did before World War I. He was not that different from many of you out in the audience today, he was a great Army officer. He enlisted at the age of eighteen in the Army, dropped out of college to do it. As it turned out, his father was a senator, and so this enlistment was pretty quickly converted into commission as a second lieutenant.

He saw a lot of action in the Army. He was in the Philippine Insurrection, and this was a pretty bloody and brutal war with torture and recriminations on both sides. This was not a conflict for the faint of heart and it had a great impact on Mitchell and other Army officers of his day.

He also spent some time up in Alaska in the Signal Corps running telegraph wire. In fact, that's a lot of what he did in the Philippines as well.

Mitchell was an ambitious guy. His governess, as a boy, said that he was absolutely the worst behaved child she had ever met. But Mitchell loved the United States Army. He wrote to his father as a young officer about how he hoped to stay in and maybe make General one day and perhaps even turn out to be Chief of Staff of the Army.

I think this background, including his time at Leavenworth and his other assignments are worth knowing because the first thing you have to understand about Billy Mitchell is that he was an outstanding soldier, he had a real grasp of the art of warfare that was changing so rapidly at that time. This is very much reflected in his selection at the age of thirty-three, to be the youngest member of the Army's new general staff in Washington.

He was the Signal Corps rep in that staff, and that's where he first met Hap Arnold.

But in this time period, something else happened, of course, and that was the rise of military aviation. Mitchell, as you probably know from the stories, paid for his own flying lessons, wrangled himself an assignment to France, and got there actually before General Pershing, just after the U.S. had declared war in April of 1917.

He spent several months helping to set up the fledgling Army Air Service, and then by the summer of 1918, he had in fact become the commander of that service under 1st Army.

So what? Well the war in 1918 was a very different war from the trench warfare that you may think about when you think back on World War I. It was an experience that was to have a great impact on the subsequent campaigns of the 20th Century, and very much on World War II and on the development of combined arms and of air power.

This map, which is printed in French, which is very appropriate for this depiction, shows the line as it existed in 1918, and you see there are colors that show the Belgians, that show the French, that show the British sector. And the French sector is down below and you see a little nook in the lines in the very far right hand corner, which is the Salient of San Miel, that had actually been there since 1914 and the initial German advances.

Then you see over in the far left hand corner, there's a little map legend for the American army in brown, but you don't see it on the map. That's because in the summer of 1918, there was no American Army sector. The Americans were very much the junior partners in this relationship. The troops that were there and had been there and had been there and fighting for many months were filtered in mostly amongst the French divisions. In fact, one of the top French commanders, [Paten], said there is no American Army at this time.

Now the other thing that had happened, of course, was the major German offensives, beginning in the spring of 1918. There were actually five separate offenses that carried on through the summer. They had made World War I a far more mobile war than had been the case in the past. It was so bad that the Allies finally had to come together and appoint a single commander and that was Marshall Fausch, depicted in the right hand side.

So the Americans, in the summer of 1918, Mitchell among them, had a lot to prove. He was in pretty good company. A lieutenant colonel named George C. Marshall was hoping to go take command of a regiment. His plans were thwarted when he was asked

to come back and be a key planner on Pershing's staff.

General John J. Pershing himself had strong ideas about what he called open warfare, maneuver warfare, not hiding and fighting in the trenches, but doing something much more suited to the cavalry background that Pershing knew so well. Pershing and his top commanders believed that the Americans could go over and demonstrate a new type of fighting, but to do this they had to have an independent sector and a battle of their own with a unified American Army, and that was to be the Battle of San Miel.

Also cast in a role in this battle was Pershing's former aid, a very young George Patton, depicted there with his tank. So Billy Mitchell was right in the center of a group of generals and younger officers who were literally going to try to make the United States military a world class power for the first time, if they could pull it off.

The battlespace of 1918 was pretty different as well. It was by now routine to have air superiority, to expect to interdict enemy forces ten or twenty, perhaps, kilometers behind the lines and to try to send reconnaissance back that far, as well. There had been a number of experiments and forays with strategic bombing for several months, strategic bombing then being only to a distance of tens of kilometers or a bit more.

Now, what made Mitchell think that he could pull together an air offensive like the one he would lead at San Miel? There had been battlefield experiences as the allies countered the last of the German spring offensives, and two of the most important took place in July, a mistake on this chart, they actually both took place in July at what was called the second Battle of the Marn. In these cases, the new U.S. air service, which had set up formal operations only in February and March and April of that year, was able to really pull some things off at the operational level. The reconnaissance by now was quite steady, and combined with the work of the other allied air services, they were able to give the supreme commander, Marshall Fausch, a very detailed, accurate picture of German build ups of things that happened during the attacks and of retreats. Invaluable air reconnaissance, very dependable air reconnaissance.

They had also scored some successes with targeting troops on the move. In the final offensive here that the Germans launched, Mitchell talks one time about being up in an airplane and spotting in his sector German troops on five bridges. What a shame, he said, to ruin such fine infantry marching in order, but he flew back to the headquarters of the first pursuit group, landed, and got other planes up in the air. So there was a much more regular ability to combine air with the rest of the land force in the offensives. This had already been proven in a small way by the summer of 1918.

Seeing is believing; here is one of those reconnaissance photos taken earlier in the spring. Marked out to show pretty good detail about what was going on in the battlespace.

A clear understanding, too, of what was tactical work defined as close to the lines and very much including the functions of observation that were essential to division and corps maneuver.

In a separate discussion of what was strategical operations. Mitchell talked about those as being like the difference between division cavalry, which was tactical, and independent cavalry, which was strategic. These were operations happening twenty five thousand yards or further from the front lines. All these pictures come from air service photos of the 1st World War sprinkled over that period of the summer of 1918. You can see in this one a bombing attack taking place.

So by July of 1918, Mitchell knew that the air service had the potential to really make a difference in an offensive. This picture here, which actually shows Allied back lines, give you an idea of the type of lucrative target environment that these aviators were functioning in. Mitchell wanted not only to gain air superiority, which was essential, but to then extend that to attacking the back areas, and this would feature heavily in his plans for San Miel.

But Mitchell had a big problem. He believed that the Germans could move as many as two thousand aircraft to any sector of the lines within three days. This is far more than had been seen in earlier battles in the war, but German air strength had actually peaked in the spring of 1918. Mitchell, on the other hand, when he was put in charge of 1st Army's Air Service, found that he had only about four to five hundred aircraft at his disposal. This wasn't nearly enough. And so what he had to do was go and arrange to borrow aircraft from his allies.

Now imagine Mitchell is a colonel in the junior partner of the allies in an unproven, untested force and what he wants is to borrow everybody else's air force. It is a moment of stunning audacity I think very much illustrating what a unique man this must have been. Lucky for Mitchell, he had already made the acquaintance of Sir Hugh Trencher the previous year. He was very well acquainted with one of Marshall Fausch's top aides, and Mitchell was essentially through his explanations of air power through his understanding of what he wanted to do, able to convince these men to lend him these aircraft. He had to have known what he was doing to pull off this type of arrangement. It made him, in effect, the first combined air component commander, a phrase that we really know well today. This is really what made Mitchell the first CFACC.

The plan for San Miel, which was a salient, was to try to collapse the salient, and actually to see this as a preparation for a larger offensive, which the Americans would call the Muse Argonne Offensive which took place later in the month of September. The idea was to extend air control and then attack strongly at the base of the salient in order to make sure that it collapsed and to prevent Germans from bringing up reinforcements.

In the event, it's important to remember that San Miel doesn't even make the top ten of World War I battles except for this unique employment of air power. It was very much an operation that the Allies decided was not a bad thing to do, it was a good chance to let the Americans have their way. But in the air, as Mitchell put it so well, nothing like this had ever been tried before. This level of coordination not only among the air forces, but with the ground forces.

The military operation, it required an all new wiring diagram, and Mitchell guided Pershing's staff into signing out these orders in late July of 1918. Mitchell held several titles during the time he was in France, but the one he ended up with and the one that counted was Chief of Air Service of the 1st Army. Think of this as, this is a field army, an organizational construct we don't see much of today. Pershing was, of course, the Commander, 1st Army of the Allied Expeditionary Forces in France; underneath him, III Corps, comprising sixteen U.S. divisions, six divisions on loan from the French.

Mitchell divided his air resources into two pieces. He gave control of corps and division observation aircraft, and this included everything from balloons to night reconnaissance, some night pursuit work, and a large corps of observers who would observe infantry movement and adjust artillery fire.

It had been routine for three years to let this be commanded by corps and division commanders. They also kept aircraft for their own liaison purposes. So a great bulk of the aircraft remained under that corps and division control giving Mitchell essentially ad hoc but not op con of these forces. But reserved to himself were the forces with which he wanted to create this first of the modern air campaigns, and these were his pursuit forces, his observation forces, U.S. bombardment forces totaling a grand forty-two aircraft with borrowed French and Italian day bombardment forces, not the great Hanley Pages as used by the British, but smaller observation aircraft armed with up to five hundred bombs.

And finally, Trencher's half of his independent RAF bombing force. Trencher said take them, assign them their targets, but I'll keep control, essentially giving Mitchell TaCon of those forces, but OpCon of the others. And this, in the words of the

ARI research papers is what made this largest ever air battle, commanded by this obscure American colonel. I feel he cannot have been very obscure to these men on the Western front by this time.

The San Miel salient, as I showed in the Bulge earlier on, looked about like this, up in the top right hand corner, you have the city of Metz. This was to be one of the target areas for Trencher's night bombers. Also, the air fields at Marge le Tour.

This is a very familiar type of plan. What are your first set of targets? These were actually signed out by Pershing and executed by predominately, the British independent bombing forces. But just as it all was coming together, the supreme commander had a moment of doubt and Marshall Fausch says my God, we'd have to pull all these forces out, we need to move them up the line to do the Muse Argonne, you all are never going to get this San Miel offensive done quick enough to get in place.

Well the planners, including George Marshall said no, I think we can pull it off, we'll do this offensive and then we will hastily swing the forces, which really was several, about twenty to forty, even sixty miles up the line that they had to move in order to get back in place for the next push.

Pershing went to the map. He brought over the Secretary of War from America to France to observe, and he said take this away from us and it will destroy everything we've worked for. Fausch relented and San Miel was back on.

These essentially were Pershing's orders, the night bombardment, air superiority, and in World War I, you went out and got air superiority over again every morning at dawn and held it until evening, if you were lucky.

What Mitchell wanted to do was have air superiority first and then switch to interdiction, and here you see basically the layout of this battle that took from about the 12th to about the 15th of September. On the ground side it was an immediate success. There were, in fact, indications that the Germans were beginning to pull out of that sector of the line in the first place and the ground forces, as you'll see in the next couple of charts, really rolled up their objectives very quickly.

First job: control of the air, and you see it written out here in Pershing's order. Picture up above in the right, Eddie Rickenbacker, coming in to command of the 94th Squadron around this time; not at this time the leading ace, though he would end the war that way. The picture that you see, irony of ironies, is actually a German attack on a U.S. supply dump just before the battle of San Miel. So what you see in that picture being done to the American sector, that is what Mitchell planned to do to the

Germans during the attack.

And then what happened? It's an air campaign, the weather went to heck. It was so bad that at headquarters the night before the offensive, Pershing and his commanders sat around wondering if they should go ahead and they finally decided to go ahead and do it, and sure enough, it was rainy and misty and low ceilings all the first morning, but by noon, and in certain areas of the front, the weather had begun to clear. And the plan that Mitchell had conceived, borrowed forces for, and put into place, begins to unfold. He starts with his caps for his pursuit groups. Seven to eleven thousand feet, another set at eleven to twenty. That's to keep all the German aviators five to six kilometers back behind their own lines. It doesn't sound like very much, but that was what they tended to use in those days.

He expected his pursuit pilots to fly about three sorties a day, so by noon, he had four or more squadrons who would wait on strip alert armed with bombs. When they got the call about German forces moving, they would go off and start this interdiction. And towards evening and through the second and the third day, the air combat, the contest for air superiority, began to intensify.

This shows some of the divisions moving in the sector. You see there, for example, the 42nd Division, the Rainbow Division. And the red line shows the advance of the first day. Tremendous advance. Look at the kind of bluish area about the middle of the chart. That's an area where the 103rd Squadron did some interdiction that afternoon. One of the lieutenants reported that he'd spotted four German trucks on the road near that town of Danfitu and going ahead and bombed and strafed them.

They kept the air superiority line pushed back, as you see in the pale color moving back towards the right hand part of the chart, and already the Germans are beginning to move. This is Mitchell's central insight. Something that becomes common in the rest of the 20th Century, but in many ways is new at San Miel. It's better to get the enemy targets up, out, and moving to hunt them from the air. You have to mix it up to create the lucrative targets that the pursuit pilots were now finding.

Eddie Rickenbacker was one of those, he flew an air superiority sortie. Then he and his frequent wing man, Reid Chambers, went and flew two other sorties, and the second one of the day they spotted a half mile long horse drawn artillery train. Men, wagons, harnesses, guns. They went down and strafed them and Rickenbacker says, horses stampeded, men ran in all directions, he pulls his plan up in says, now let them sort out that mess. So it's not destruction, but it's delay, it's disruption, it's compounding the chaos already going on as the ground forces press ahead.

Later that day, another patrol, and so it's this relentless use of air and air superiority and air interdiction combined in these numbers, really for the first time.

This carries on with the first pursuit group assigned a particular area marked out in black. They use roads and valleys and other landmarks. It's like a kill box or a key pad system that we see decades later in the air operations that you all are familiar with. All this was up and working on the Western Front in September 1918.

As these continued, the Germans did indeed bring more aircraft into the sector. Never the two thousand that Mitchell had said he feared would be appearing, but somewhere in the number of 150 to 200 or so. Several of the top American aces of that time get kills at San Miel, Rickenbacker gets one later on, and in fact, the leading ace of that day in the U.S. count, far behind most of the rest of the aviators on the front, but the leading ace was a man named David Putnum. He shot down a Fokker D-7 late in the first day on the Battle of San Miel at about 6:30 and by 7:15 had himself been shot down and killed by the young German ace Gaylord van Hantelman. So there was quite a brewing contest for air superiority, just as Mitchell had expected, but he'd achieved his goal of keeping them back far enough and long enough to let that ground campaign unfold successfully and unmolested from the air.

They flew about 3300 sorties at San Miel, very respectable, even by today's standards. This was a division between pursuit and bombardment and the observers doing corps division work or doing work for Mitchell's independently operated force under the air service. They dropped many, many tons of bombs in relatively small amounts. They could drop weapons up to about five hundred pounds, a little more in some cases. But you look at this chart, what you have here is a real air campaign, first of its kind. Everything you see unfolding here become the common elements of deep battle later on throughout the 20th Century and even today. The ability to attack troops, transport, supply in the second echelons, the ability to reach back to the war-making capacity, and the overriding importance of air superiority with it all.

What were some of the lessons? Well there were lessons that were absorbed not just by Mitchell and the aviators, but by everyone who watched this unfold, by George Marshall, by Patton, by Eisenhower, as we'll see in a subsequent chart, though he was not involved in this.

I like this little picture in the top. It comes from the Army's official guide to the World War I battles, actually published by the American Battle Monuments Commission, and it says quite simply, German gun destroyed by aviator, and if you

look at it, that's certainly how it looks to me. So it was realized and understood within the American Army at the time, that there were things that air could do to create an entirely different style of war in the combined arms campaign.

This was Mitchell's legacy, essentially. Pershing was so impressed that he awarded him his first star, promoting him to brigadier general.

Now imagine that you had just been through that experience. Would that not stand in a way as the defining experience of your soldier career? And that's what it was for Mitchell. He had come to France when the air service had only a handful of aircraft, none of the ideas, none of the strategy, and not much more than a year later, he pulled off the biggest air battle to date. A true combined arms campaign.

This left Mitchell determined, determined not to let American air power slip back to what it had been before San Miél. And to my mind, this explains a lot of the Billy Mitchell that we see after the war. He has it this time, really barely seven more years on active duty, it explains who he is and what he was, it explains how he began to think in many of his published works beyond the combined arms application and to look at strategic bombing and what more air power could do.

At the same time, in the late 1920's, this is the time that the Germans are beginning to understand what air does and battlefield organization and to lay the groundwork of air doctrine that becomes a big underlying part of blitzkrieg and of other aspects of World War II. It's understood increasingly in the United States, and what you see in this group photo is John J. Pershing in the center and in the back, second from right, a young Dwight Eisenhower getting ready to go and write that Battle Monuments guide that I showed you a couple of slides back. So these leaders of the time begin to really understand what the combined arms need and the role of air power in that, so as frail as the aircraft are, as light as the bombs are, all the pieces of the air campaign are in place, and these gentlemen are pretty well aware of that.

Mitchell does as much as he can within the confines of the service. This was a service, the air service that had gone from about 20,000 officers at the end of the war, to 880 by the early 1920s. There wasn't much money for anything, no one was in the mood to spend more on defense. Mitchell did what he could, particularly in experimentation. And that's how we see the Ausfriesland tests. The Navy had been working on similar things, but Mitchell was able to make this test successful.

He spent a lot of time flying. He briefly set a world speed record on his own. He did a lot of mentoring, a lot of

pushing of aeronautical development. But in the end, he was frustrated at the pace of life in the Army; it was a frustrating time for all innovators. Eisenhower and Patton, who were good friends, were warned not to write any more articles about tanks, lest it damage their careers.

What finally pushed Mitchell over the edge was, as you know, was the crash of the USS Shenandoah, a Navy dirigible. This led him to release the long telegram in which he accused high officials of near treasonous conduct in the mismanagement of military aviation, and that's what led directly to his court martial.

But I feel that we can't understand any of that appropriately unless it's through the lens of San Miel, and that from that and from Mitchell at San Miel, we can take about four lessons with which I'll wrap up the briefing.

One is the importance of the combined arms. I said earlier that Mitchell loved the Army and he was a good soldier and he understood warfare and he understood maneuver. That is part of what made him so successful at San Miel, was understanding how that land battle would unfold and where air could assist and lead it, and this long quote here, which I'll let you read through, really says what he believed, and he's writing here to his fliers, talking about the losses on the ground, you must understand them, they share your losses. They're wading through the mud, you're freezing through the air, it's about the team together, about the combined arms.

Mitchell was also really good at speaking out and something I think is not remembered about him, he knew how to speak out and in what forum. What to say, how to explain air power, when to close the deal. And I put this picture of a modern era CAOC here because, first, I think Mitchell would pretty quickly have understood what was going on, but air power is something that comes into the combined arms at the operational level. One cannot expect people who've come up in other services to immediately, automatically, understand what this CAOC does in this industrial art of production of air power. You have to be able to explain what you all do and imagine all the other things listed here on the left: sortie production, the space tasking order, air base defense. These are all part of the airman's art. Mitchell had to have been very good at explaining these to his land comrades and that's something that modern airmen need to take on as well. Know how to explain it, know how it fits in, know when to speak out.

Finally, Mitchell would have been nowhere without his allies. They literally taught him through good and bad, lessons the art of employment of air power. Hugh Trencher was really quite fond of him, Trencher was crusty and phlegmatic himself, he

said of Mitchell, he's a man after my own heart, if only he could break his habit of trying to convert his opponents by killing them, he will go far. You can see from this quote that they understood this brash and brilliant commander, was helped enormously that Mitchell, who'd been born in France, was fluent in the language, able to liaise very effectively with Fausch's headquarters and the liaison officers there. And Mitchell himself, in the quote at the bottom talked about how he valued working shoulder to shoulder with airmen. It's a rare war in the air that's conducted without allies. It was essential then as it remains to today, for force structure, for bases, for wisdom, for guidance.

And finally, what Mitchell might have left has his greatest legacy was the fact that he was an inspiration to others. Here are four men whom he inspired: Eddie Rickenbacker, was a driver in Pershing's motor pool, until Mitchell helped him pass his exam to get into the air service as an engineering officer. You had to be twenty five to get into the air service in that time, Rickenbacker was twenty seven, but somehow the doctor that Mitchell found certified that Rickenbacker was indeed twenty five years old, and he was able to go to pilot training and become the leading ace of the U.S. side in World War I.

Mitchell worked for a man named Major Spaats at Isadune Air Field. Spaats, of course, became the first Chief of Staff. In the lower left hand corner you see Ira Aker, helped out Mitchell during the period of his trial. And Hap Arnold, who had had a good laugh when Signal Corps Captain Mitchell came in to the War Department and said he wanted to learn all about airplanes, and Hap Arnold was one of the very few who'd actually flown one, but became a devoted comrade of Mitchell's.

So that Mitchell left this kind of legacy behind him. It's pretty impressive. And you can believe that these men saw the Billy Mitchell of San Miel. The one who understood and could lead them in that combined arms setting.

Two very illustrious generals had two great quotes about Billy Mitchell with which I will leave you. Douglas McArthur, who had in fact been a boyhood friend of Mitchell's, served as one of the jurors on his court martial trial, and put it very aptly when he said that really Mitchell saw everything that would come to pass in World War II. Mitchell had by then been dead for many years, he died in 1936, but as McArthur put it, had he lived, you would have seen the fulfillment of many of these prophecies. McArthur was a master of air power in his own right in the Southwest Pacific and certainly recognized those qualities in his former boyhood friend, who actually beat him into the Army, Billy Mitchell.

And finally, Hap Arnold. I think no one has put it better,

really, than Arnold about the fact that he was, as Arnold says, righter than hell, and he knew it, and if you weren't with him, you were against him. That somehow sums up the whole character of Mitchell and yet both of those could be applied to anyone, to perhaps any theorist, or someone who would have just speculated or written about air power, but it was really the combat experiences of San Miel that made Billy Mitchell the pioneer that he was then and that makes him relevant by example for his understanding of the combined arms, his ability to work with his allies, to inspire, to lead, and to innovate, that's the Billy Mitchell of San Miel and that's the Billy Mitchell whose legacy we all owe something to today.

Thank you very much. I'll take a couple questions if there are any.

[Applause]

Great, well thank you very much, I'm glad you were here to listen to this today.

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