

PROFILE IN LEADERSHIP

# Airpower at St. Mihiel: Billy Mitchell, Military- Diplomacy, and One of the Great War's Largest Air Armadas

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Readers familiar with the Battle of St. Mihiel in September 1918 may recognize the following description of the battle's opening from distinguished historian and scholar of the American military experience in the Great War, Professor Edward M. Coffman. Coffman wrote "Precisely at 1 a.m. the artillery opened fire. Almost three thousand guns brightened the sky with continuous flashes and deafened men with the roar of the detonations. The Germans were surprised..." (Coffman, 1968, p. 279).

For generations, field armies had been opening their attacks with some kind of artillery bombardment, but by 1918, and certainly by September of 1918, the opening of battle by any meaningful standard began not with just the artillery preparation, but with aerial activity as well. According to the air attack plan for the Battle of St. Mihiel, the real start of the battle—as is so often the case today—was supposed to come in the air. The Chief of the Air Service for the American First Army, Col William "Billy" Mitchell, planned to initiate the battle with an air attack, possibly the first American attempt at "shock and awe." This effort did involve lots of aircraft—and in particular, lots of British and French bombers—pounding enemy positions before and during the infantry assault, in accordance with his plan for "the employment of aviation in the proposed attack." (Mitchell, 1960, pp.235-237)

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Mitchell's planning memo to General John J. Pershing, the senior American commander, included four distinct phases: preparation, the night preceding the attack, the day of the attack, and exploitation. Of special interest was the second phase, the "NIGHT PRECEDING THE ATTACK," which entailed a "Mission of bombardment aviation; during the whole night preceding the attack" and had two components: British bombers hitting so-called "strategical objectives" such as airdromes, stations, railroad crossings, bridges, and ammunition dumps; and French bombers attacking enemy personnel targets such as camps, enemy cantonments, and airdromes. (Maurer, 1979, Vol 3, pp.52-53)

This was a unique use of air power—a multinational, preliminary aerial campaign employing the forces of four Allied powers. And yet, despite this reality and its obvious importance to combat in 1918, we know very little about how airpower, and especially international airpower, was gathered, organized, and integrated into the plans and execution for the American First Army's massive St. Mihiel offensive. Like the battle itself—the largest in American history to date—the air campaign that supported it was enormous, unquestionably one of the largest, and certainly the most international air effort of the war. Mitchell, who organized and commanded the Allied air forces at St. Mihiel, led this massive collection of more than 1,400 aircraft from four countries: the U.S., France, Britain, and Italy.<sup>1</sup> (Cooke, 2002, p.87; Hudson, 1968, p.139; Alexander, 2018)

This article is part of a larger study that will ask and attempt to answer three questions about the air campaign at St. Mihiel:

1. How did the American Expeditionary Forces (AEF), First Army, and Mitchell amass this remarkably massive, international, collection of air assets?
2. How was it employed?
3. What was its role in the Allied victory?

This article focuses on addressing just the first of these questions. Of the three questions, the initial one is perhaps the most curious: How did the Americans amass one of the largest and most international air contingent of the war on the Western Front for what turned out to be rather a surprisingly brief and limited offensive? It is also an important question, because by mid-1918, the quantity, quality, and variety of air assets allocated to an offensive was at least as important as the timing and nature of their employment in the attack.

Although many individuals helped bring about this massive, international assemblage of air assets to include the Allied commander-in-chief, Marshal Ferdinand Foch; the French Army's commander, General Philippe Pétain; the commander of the American Expeditionary Forces (AEF), Gen Pershing; the senior British airman in France, Major General Hugh Trenchard; and various French aviation officers, much of the credit should probably go to Mitchell. Mitchell had been in France longer than any other significant American military officer; spent the most time visiting Allied air components; developed extraordinarily good relationships with Allied air officers; and openly admitted his great respect and admiration for the Allied air leaders, their pilots, their aircraft, their organizations, and their processes. Mitchell's unique blend of self-confidence, organizational skills, institutional leadership, and a commitment to learning proved critical to the successful creation of this unique aerial effort (Hurley, 1964, pp. 20-38).

As anyone who has studied Mitchell in even the most cursory fashion is well aware, Mitchell could be a stridently critical observer of his superiors, peers, and

<sup>1</sup> Most accounts use the figure of 1481 aircraft at St Mihiel, and many assert that this was the largest aggregation of airpower for any battle in the entire war. However, other reliable sources note that a total of 1,904 French and British aircraft supported the Amiens offensive of August 1918. The RAF supported the attack with 800 aircraft, while the French added 1,104 (Alexander, 2018).

subordinates and was not at all shy about expressing his criticisms. For example, in his own memoir, which is so complimentary of British and French leaders, units, equipment, and systems, Mitchell criticized American officers repeatedly—to include even Pershing. Mitchell criticized the AEF staff repeatedly, stating that “instead of working smoothly as the Europeans did, everyone ‘passed the buck’ to the next fellow in true regular-army style.” He claims Pershing “thought aviation was full of dynamite and pussyfooted just when we needed the most action.” (Mitchell, 1960, p. 146). Regarding the contingent of officers that arrived in Nov 1917, Mitchell wrote, “shipload of aviation officers arrived under Brigadier-General Benjamin Foulois...almost none of whom had ever seen an airplane. A more incompetent lot of air warriors had never arrived in the zone of active military operation since the war began.” (Mitchell, 1960, p. 165).

This element of his personality makes it all the more important to note that Mitchell, who was not always a gracious and cooperative colleague or subordinate within the AEF, appears to have been an exceptionally agreeable peer and partner to his international allies and associates. While Pershing grew increasingly critical of the French and British forces the more he learned of their methods—even to the point of trying to limit the involvement of his officers, men, and units with their Allied counterparts—Mitchell eagerly soaked up all he could from them, and wanted to maximize American interaction with, and lesson-learning from, the more experienced Allies.<sup>2</sup>

2 Pershing repeatedly criticized Allied doctrine, methods, and morale, at one point even noting that he considered some of the training his forces received from them to have been “a positive detriment.” (Pershing, personal communications, 25 August 1918). While Pershing grew more and more suspicious and dissatisfied with the training provided by the Allies, Mitchell wanted more and more of it for his Airmen. In November 1917 Mitchell, concerned about the lack of combat aircraft available to continue training for recently arrived American pilots, proposed to Pershing that half of the new pilots “be sent to the French air service to perfect themselves for duty on the front, with the idea of bringing them back to us as soon as their training was finished.” (Mitchell, p. 171).

Mitchell’s early and lengthy interaction with the French and British led him to conclude that the American army had much to learn from its associates. Mitchell was already in Europe—specifically in Spain, en route to France—when the U.S. government declared war on April 6, 1917. He reached Paris on April 10, and immediately began work on plans for American aviation involvement in the war. Within a week and a half, he had developed and sent to Washington what he described as a “complete program” for the coming American aviation effort (Mitchell, 1960, pp. 14-16). However, he did not accomplish this on his own (even by his own admission, and he was not the kind of man who minimized his own accomplishments); he did it by working closely with French authorities. Within those 10 days, he had secured the dedicated support of two French liaison officers and an adjutant, consulted with the French Aeronautic Headquarters, and met with Daniel Vincent, the French Secretary of Aviation. By the 20th of April, Mitchell was touring the front, escorted by staff officers from the French Aeronautical HQ. He visited the airdrome of the French IV Army Corps, saw the equipment first hand, and met with senior aviation commanders and other aircrew. He was almost uniformly impressed (Mitchell, 1960, pp. 21, 24, 29).

On April 22, he convinced his escorts to take him “wherever an attack was going on” so he “could see what was necessary in this kind of warfare” (Mitchell, 1960, p. 36). He visited a French division HQ, a brigade HQ, and a regimental commander; went forward to the battalion and met its major (Mitchell admitted that “he impressed me as a splendid example of all a battalion commander should be, strong, agile, cool and educated”); and continued on all the way into the “first fire trench” (Mitchell, 1960, p. 41). He was significantly affected by what he saw and experienced in these front trenches, both regarding artillery’s unprecedented domination of the battlefield, and by

the necessity of cooperating with the Allies to develop an overwhelmingly powerful air force to contribute to the breaking of the deadlock (Mitchell, 1960, pp. 39, 43).

Mitchell's own words describing battle in 1917 are helpful here: "In that one day alone I saw and asked about enough to write a book.... Anyone who thinks that war is not more 'heller' than ever, should have been in the first lines during these battles and tasted a little of what it was. Our people hadn't the remotest conception of it. It sounds as if I may be overstating things, but I think that is impossible with the words we now have in our language" (1960, pp. 46-47).

The context of Mitchell's remarks do not make it entirely clear just who he meant by "our people" who "hadn't the remotest conception" of modern battle—but it is certainly possible, perhaps even probable, that he was referring to the leadership of the U.S. Army back in the United States. It is worth noting that during these initial days, weeks, and even months of American belligerency, while Mitchell was experiencing the Western Front first hand, meeting with experienced Allied officers of all levels of command, and of both ground and air units, General Pershing—the future commander of all American forces in Europe—was still in San Antonio wondering what his role would be in the war. Pershing did not report to Washington, D.C., to learn more of his impending command, until 10 May (Smythe, 1986, p. 5). He and his initial staff of 191 officers and men sailed for Europe on 28 May, arrived in Liverpool on 8 June, and finally got to France on the 13th of June (Smythe, 1986, pp. 11-14, 19). By this point, Mitchell had developed important, close, and uniformly positive relationships with many senior and mid-level Allied officials, including both civilian and military leaders of the French Air Force, and General Trenchard, the commander of Britain's Royal

Flying Corps on the Western Front at the time of their initial meeting.<sup>3</sup>

For those familiar with Mitchell's often hypercritical attitude toward others' systems and processes (e.g., he asserted that as of 1917, "The United States, in a military way, was absolutely helpless. The American regular army and navy knew nothing of up-to-date war and refused to be taught..."), his almost uniformly positive assessments of Allied leaders and their systems is striking (Mitchell, 1960, p. 9). Nearly all of his comments and assessments of French and British airmen and their processes were positive, and by all accounts he developed more amiable relationships with his French and British colleagues than he did with many of his fellow Americans. Unlike most of his fellow countrymen, Mitchell could read and speak French well.

He also made his staff officers study and practice the language, and he sent them out to the "French units on the line to get as much experience as they could" get (Mitchell, pp. 27, 157; Hurley, 1964, pp. 22-23).

Mitchell's *Memoirs of World War I*, are filled with descriptions of his positive experiences with the Allies, and especially his good relationships with Allied leaders. After his extensive and intensive visits to French air units, he wrote: "I formed an impression that the French Air Service was very efficient. This was due to their excellent planes, their splendid mechanics, and their well-trained aviators" (Mitchell, 1960, p. 25).

Mitchell established and maintained close relationships with many French air officers, especially Major Paul Armengaud, a French pilot and General

<sup>3</sup> Trenchard held numerous posts between May, 1917 and the end of the war. When he and Mitchell first met, Trenchard was the commander of the "RFC-in-the-Field." In January 1918, he became the Chief of the Air Staff, but three months later he quit that position after frustrations with Lord Rothermere, the head of the Air Ministry at the time. In June 1918, he took command of the RAF's new Independent Force.

Staff officer who Mitchell worked with regularly from the spring of 1917 on. After Pershing's arrival, Mitchell recommended Armengaud become the official French air liaison officer to the AEF. Armengaud appears to have split his time between Mitchell's HQ (Mitchell even appointed him to be one of his own Assistant Chiefs of Staff in the summer of 1918) and Foch's HQ, where he must have been the senior aviation officer on Foch's small staff.<sup>4</sup> Colonel Frank Lahm, an American airman on the G-3 (Operations) staff at U.S. First Army HQ in August 1918, suggests that the large French contingent at St. Mihiel resulted from a long discussion with Armengaud in Mitchell's office. (Lahm, 1970, p.120)

Mitchell got along with the British air leaders at least as well as he did with his French associates, and thought just as highly of their efficiency. He first met with Trenchard and examined British air equipment, bases, and processes in May 1917. Mitchell admitted that he "thoroughly concurred in General Trenchard's ideas" regarding the organization and implementation of airpower (Mitchell, p. 111), and exclaimed after his visit that "never had I spent a more instructive four days than those with the British, nor have I ever met a man with whom it was a greater pleasure to talk and associate than with General Trenchard." Furthermore, Mitchell claimed that Trenchard "promised him every assistance" in the future, and "invited" him "to come back whenever" he "wanted to talk matters over" (Mitchell, 1960, p. 116).

Perhaps more important to Mitchell's effectiveness in amassing the St. Mihiel air armada is what Trenchard thought of him. Trenchard's biographer, Andrew Boyle, admits that the British air commander found

all the senior American air service leaders "extremely eager to co-operate and delightfully frank about their inexperience" ("in contrast to the French," Boyle also adds). But then, Boyle asserts that "by far the most engaging of these young enthusiasts, and certainly the one for whom Trenchard developed the greatest respect and affection was Billy Mitchell" (Boyle, 1962, p. 298). From the beginning, according to Boyle, the brash but likable Mitchell insisted on learning all he could from the British, and proclaimed his desire to cooperate closely with Trenchard, not only administratively and logistically, but operationally. Boyle claims that within the first minutes of meeting Trenchard, the aggressive American Airman stated that he needed "to know all you can teach me about operations, because we will be joining you in these before long" (Boyle, 1962, p. 298).

As with the French, Mitchell readily assumed the role of student to his more experienced British associates, but he was an extraordinarily aggressive student. At that first meeting Mitchell quickly asked Trenchard to show him British "equipment ... stores," and their "system of supply." Trenchard told Mitchell it was "quite a large order," and asked him, perhaps sarcastically, "how many weeks" he had to spare. When Mitchell offered the suggestion that they start straight away with seeing the equipment that very day, and continue the next, Trenchard asked him if he supposed he had "nothing better to do than chaperon you and answer questions?" Mitchell flattered Trenchard by insisting that he knew the British had "a good organization here. It won't miss you if you take a day or two off...." Trenchard's aide expected an explosion from the British general, but instead Trenchard tellingly replied, "All right, come along with me young man. I can see you're the sort who usually gets what he wants in the end." And then, according to Boyle, for the better part of the next three days Mitchell "seldom left Trenchard's side." Trenchard later told his aide, that Mitchell was "a man after my own heart," and presciently added, "If only he can break his habit of trying to convert opponents by killing

<sup>4</sup> Hudson refers to Armengaud as Foch's liaison officer of aviation (Hudson, 1968, p. 104). Mitchell briefly describes some of Armengaud's duties at Foch's HQ in his memoirs; apparently, he created and maintained an up-to-date array of reconnaissance photographs of the front, referred to as "Armengaud's Cinema" (p. 211).

them, he'll go far" (Boyle, 1962 p. 299). Mitchell may not have learned that lesson when fighting his battles within the American military establishment, but he appears to have been dramatically more diplomatic, more engaging, and more successful at winning the support and cooperation of others when dealing with his international allies.

Mitchell visited Trenchard repeatedly—"officially and unofficially" according to Boyle—over the next few months in the summer of 1917. And then, in the summer of 1918, when Mitchell was building his plan for the St. Mihiel attack, he twice paid Trenchard a visit (now serving as commander of the RAF's Independent Force of bombers), letting Trenchard review his emerging concept of operations. When Foch officially requested extensive British air support for St. Mihiel (and organizationally, Foch could only request, not compel), Boyle notes that Trenchard "gladly directed nearly half his bomber force" to join the effort by "pounding selected railway junctions, airfields and supply centres behind enemy lines" (Cox, 2004, p. 300). Trenchard reported to his civilian superior in England, Lord Weir, that he was "doing his best to assist the Americans" at St. Mihiel. And indeed he was, even to the extent of displeasing his military superior, Frederick Sykes, the Chief of Air Staff, who thought that Trenchard's tactical operations in support of Mitchell's air campaign were accomplished, in part, by neglecting his primary duty of true strategic bombardment. Perhaps Mitchell's winsomeness and collegiality was a key reason for Trenchard's enthusiastic contribution to allied airpower dominance at St. Mihiel.

How the Italians were brought in is still a mystery. Neither of the two published histories of Italian airpower in the Great War even mention that the two Caproni squadrons on the Western Front were participating in the St. Mihiel operation, much less how they were incorporated into the air campaign, or specifically, what they achieved in it. The two best

Italian language histories of the Italian air service in the Great War, Roberto Gentilli and Paolo Varriale (1999) and Basilio Di Martino (2011), give very little information on the two Caproni squadrons, the 3rd and 15th, that joined Mitchell's air armada in the late summer and fall of 1918. Neither book gives much operational information about the three Caproni squadrons that spent time on the Western Front in 1918. One hint, however, comes from an interview with Trenchard in 1934, in which he stated that in 1918 "two Italian squadrons were actually placed under" him "as Independent Force Commander" (Abbatiello, p. 6). That might explain their involvement at St. Mihiel, but it might not. The memoir of French Great War aviator and bombardier René Martel claims that an Italian bomb group, G.B 18, with three Caproni squadrons (Squadrons 5, 14, and 15, each with four aircraft) operated "under direct orders of Chef de Bataillon Villome," the commander of a French night bombardment *groupement* that served at St. Mihiel (Martel, 2006, p. 254).

Assembling this multinational force was a remarkable achievement, but the complexities did not cease there. Having assembled this vast force, Mitchell followed by executing operational command of this far-flung and disparate air armada, bringing a fresh set of questions to the fore. How was airpower actually employed at St. Mihiel, and what was its role in the Allied victory?

Regarding the former, all accounts admit that the foul weather significantly affected the execution of Mitchell's plan. While the details are sketchy, it appears that the French and British bombers were unable to carry out their missions during the night preceding the infantry attack<sup>5</sup>—though the official records show

5 For the British involvement, see "Report from Independent Force, RAF, 12 September. Following summary of Bombing Operations. Night of Sept 11th and 12th. No work was possible" (Maurer, Vol 3, p. 254). For the efforts of the French Night Bombing Group, see the chart at the end of Operations Report No. 13, which shows no sorties flown by that group between 19:00 Sept 11th and 19:00 Sept 12th. The narrative portion of the report fails to mention the group at all (Maurer, Vol 3, p. 257-261).

that they definitely were ordered to conduct missions that night.

The First Army directed Mitchell to bomb the following targets that “evening and night”: the rail center and ammunition dump at Chambley; the road junction of Champs just southwest of Chambley; the rail center, supply dump, and airdrome at Lars-la-Tour (by the British); the munitions dump near Gondrecourt; the munitions dump at Valleroy (“at once if possible”); the main rail station at Metz (by the British); the supply dump at St-Jean-les-Buzy; and the rail center and supply dump at Dommary-Baroncourt. Mitchell was instructed to “issue the necessary orders” for these attacks, and to “request cooperation of the British Independent Air Service.” (US Army Center of Military History, 1990, Vol. 8, pp. 240-241).

During the day of the initial infantry assault, it is clear that the Allies were able to dominate the skies over and behind that St. Mihiel battlefield, despite the continued clouds and rain. While they might not have achieved air supremacy, they certainly gained air superiority during the critical first two days of battle. And this was largely a result of the overwhelming numbers that Mitchell and his American, French, British, and Italian colleagues assembled for the battle.

To what extent the half-dozen main roads heading northeast out of the salient became “highways of death” for the Germans on September 12-13, 1918, is part of a longer study of airpower’s employment during the battle. However, it appears safe to say, as Pershing did after the offensive ended, that Allied airpower played a significant role in helping the American First Army achieve a clear and significant victory at St. Mihiel. Pershing congratulated Mitchell not only “on the successful and very important part taken by the Air Force” at St. Mihiel, but he also correctly noted the importance of the “organization and control of the tremendous concentration of Air forces, including

American, French, British and Italian units, which has enabled the Air Service of the First Army to carry out so successfully its dangerous and important mission” (Mitchell, p. 250). That concentration was the result of a great deal of cooperation and goodwill among the Allied and associated powers, and was brought about in large part by the energetic, collegial, pro-cooperative effort and spirit of Billy Mitchell.

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