

This Day in History... December 17, 1925

The Court-Martial of Billy Mitchell

On December 17, 1925, the seven-week court-martial of World War I aviation pioneer Billy Mitchell came to an end. He was charged for his public criticism of the military in its rejection of the importance of air power.

Mitchell had planned and commanded almost 1,500 aircraft in the Battle of Saint-Mihiel during World War I and commanded all American air combat units in France. After the war, he was made assistant chief of the Army Air Service. Mitchell spoke often about the importance of air power and said it was the key to winning future wars. Mitchell's prediction that airplanes would make naval vessels obsolete put him at odds with the Navy and War Departments. Mitchell demonstrated his point by sinking a captured German battleship in 1921. However, his boss, John J. Pershing, and the Navy dismissed the importance of the demonstration.



Rickenbacker had been Mitchell's driver during WWI and testified on his behalf.

When Mitchell's term as assistant air chief expired in 1925, he wasn't reappointed. Instead, he was made the aviation officer of the Army's Eighth Corps Area at Fort Sam Houston and reverted to colonel. Mitchell felt he had been demoted. Also in 1925, there were two navy aircraft accidents. Secretary of the Navy Curtis D. Wilbur stated these incidents showed the limitations of airpower. Mitchell was enraged by his comments and called a press conference on September 5. In a 5,000 word statement, Mitchell said "These accidents are the direct result of the incompetency, criminal negligence, and almost treasonable administration of the national defense by the Navy and War Departments."

He went on to say, "All aviation policies, schemes, and systems are dictated by nonflying officers of the Army or Navy who know practically nothing about it... Officers and agents sent by the War and Navy Departments to Congress have almost always given incomplete, misleading, or false information about aeronautics." Four days later he issued another statement, challenging the department that if they didn't like his statement, they could take disciplinary action. But, he said, the War and Navy Departments should be investigated for "their conduct in the disgraceful administration of aviation."



In his memoirs, Arnold admitted that while his defense was putting airpower on trial, Mitchell was guilty of making such comments.

Mitchell was then called to Washington, DC, and was charged under the 96th Article of War that covered "disorders and neglects to the prejudice of good order and discipline [and] all conduct of a nature to bring discredit upon the military service." Between his two September statements, there were eight specifications to the charge.

Mitchell's court-martial began on October 29. The prosecution presented its evidence on November 2, arguing that the only fact that mattered was that Mitchell made these statements. Mitchell's defense however, planned to call 73 witnesses and present thousands of Army documents, intending to show that Mitchell's statements were valid. They showed that Mitchell had made 163 recommendations over the past seven years, and most of them were ignored.

Among those who testified on Mitchell's behalf were Eddie Rickenbacker, Hap Arnold, Carl Spaatz, Robert Olds, and Fiorello La Guardia. The public largely supported Mitchell. The court deliberated for three hours on December 17, 1925, and found Mitchell guilty on the charge and all specifications. They found that the validity of his statements was irrelevant, only that he had made the statements. Mitchell was suspended from rank, command, and duty, and took away his pay for five years. President Calvin Coolidge approved the conviction on January 25, but he reduced his punishment to taking half his pay. Mitchell then resigned from the Army on February 1.



Mitchell eventually became known as the Father of the US Air Force.



Stamp pictures Mitchell and his personal SPAD XVI biplane.



In his testimony, La Guardia said, "Billy Mitchell is not being judged by his peers, he is being judged by nine dog robbers of the general staff."

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Mitchell continued to speak out about the importance of air power until his death in 1936. When the Air Force became independent from the Army in 1947, it was proclaimed, "The Day Billy Mitchell Dreamed Of." In 1955, Gary Cooper portrayed Mitchell in the film, *The Court-Martial of Billy Mitchell*. Then in 1956, Mitchell's son petitioned the Air Force to overturn the court-martial, which they did in 1957. The board stated, "The conclusion is inescapable in the board's opinion that Mitchell was tried for his views rather than a violation of Article 96."



Mitchell's boyhood friend Douglas MacArthur was on the court and is believed to have voted in his favor.

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