Shapers of America

BILLY MITCHELL

EVANGELIST OF AIR POWER

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ROGER G. MILLER, PH.D.

Frontispiece: Brigadier General William "Billy" Mitchell, circa 1925. The most prominent early advocate of airpower as an offensive weapon, Mitchell is often called the "father of the U.S. Air Force."

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Introduction

by Dr. Roger G. Kennedy

The Shapers of America series profiles men and women who have had a powerful effect on the way our country has evolved. The subjects of these biographies were selected because their lives are interesting and important, and because they show what people like us can do when we summon the courage and persistence to make history. We may admire the subjects of these biographies, but their achievements, while great, are not so great as to seem irrelevant or inaccessible to our own lives.

The books in this series are not about celebrity, but about citizenship. One criterion for selection into the series is that the subjects of these biographies are not as well known as they should be. We all know something about George Washington, Thomas Jefferson, Abraham Lincoln, and Theodore Roosevelt. But over more than two centuries many other Americans have also made indelible contributions to the future of their nation and our world. The people profiled in the Shapers of America series are not likely to be sculpted onto another Mount Rushmore. However, their lives affirm an inquiring and active citizenship—a citizenship that wants to know, and is willing to venture into the unknown for good purpose.

Dr. Roger G. Kennedy is the former director of the National Park Service and is director emeritus of the National Museum of American History in Washington, D.C.

I want to comment on something that has become important to me over more than sixty years in public life: although the men and women profiled in this series changed history, they were not set apart from the rest of us by knowing in advance the exact outcome of their actions. Sometimes things turned out as they intended, sometimes not. But as the old Southern expression goes, they put down their buckets where they were, drew up the water of life, and drank deep. They acted on the best information they could get—in many cases, amid much confusion and dispute—as we all must.

Striving amid doubt, each of them could take as a text a statement made in the midst of the Civil War by Abraham Lincoln: "I do the very best I know how—the very best I can; and I mean to keep on doing that until the end. If the end brings me out all right, then what is said against me won't amount to anything. If the end brings me out wrong, 10,000 angels swearing I was right would make no difference."

The biographies of the SHAPERS OF AMERICA series reveal people who used their talents and adapted to their circumstances in order to accomplish the extraordinary. None of the people in these volumes were perfect. Each got things wrong from time to time. But they put down their buckets where they were, and kept on trying their best despite derision and defeat. That is why they can be exemplars. They were capable of acting together with others to make matters better.

Acting together! That's the key to it! Benjamin Franklin's Poor Richard said: "He that drinks his cider alone, let him catch his horse alone." There never was a lone cowboy capable of much—or very happy for very long. "He who can be happy alone," said Aristotle, "is either a brute or a God." We are citizens. The same Founding

Fathers who wrote of the pursuit of happiness—without making any promise of finding it—wrote of seeking "a *more perfect* union." They did not proclaim that their new American nation was perfect; they left plenty of room for the work of the rest of us—including the work of the people in these books.

A more perfect union comes about in increments, as each generation engages in the pursuit of happiness. The lives profiled in the SHAPERS OF AMERICA series can inspirit us to renew our own energies and to assert an active pursuit of happiness through public service. The true reward of citizenship comes from doing the best you can with what you've got, working together with—and for—other people. Putting your talents to use for the common good is a grand kind of happiness.

1 FROM THE BOWELS OF THE EARTH

On Sunday, April 22, 1917, U.S. Army Lieutenant Colonel William "Billy" Mitchell entered the French trenches near the Aisne River to watch an infantry assault. Accompanied by a single guide, wearing a borrowed steel helmet, carrying a gas mask and field glasses, he became the first American officer to observe a battle on the Western Front during World War I.

General Robert Nivelle, the French commander, had launched the Second Battle of the Aisne five days earlier following a massive bombardment by over 7,000 cannon. Nivelle then attacked with two armies on a 40-mile front between Soissons and Reims, with two more armies in

Billy Mitchell prepares to observe developments on the Western Front, circa 1918. Mitchell was the first American officer under enemy fire after the United States entered World War I on the side of the Allies, and would later become the first U.S. Air Service airman to fly over enemy lines.

Billy Mitchell, wearing a helmet borrowed from a French soldier, stands in a trench near the Aisne River, April 1917.

support. In all, the French deployed over one million men.

The Germans knew the French were coming. German infantry, protected from the bombardment in fortified underground shelters, emerged when the French troops advanced. German aircraft took control of the sky as the battle began. Artillery swept the advancing infantry with hurricane force. Machine guns mowed the French soldiers down in rows. Displaying incredible bravery, French

infantry captured the first line of German trenches but could go no further. Losses were horrendous, and repeated attacks accomplished nothing except to fill more graves. In five days of combat, the French lost almost 180,000 men. Now Billy Mitchell went to see for himself "what was necessary in this type of warfare."

Touring the Trenches

An infantry division's headquarters was usually within range of the enemy's artillery, and Mitchell and his guide hiked cautiously through deep communication trenches that zigzagged into a bleak and devastated land. They

Allied artillerymen fire a 75 mm gun at an enemy position. Artillery was necessary to clear enemy defenses and allow the infantry to advance on the battlefield.

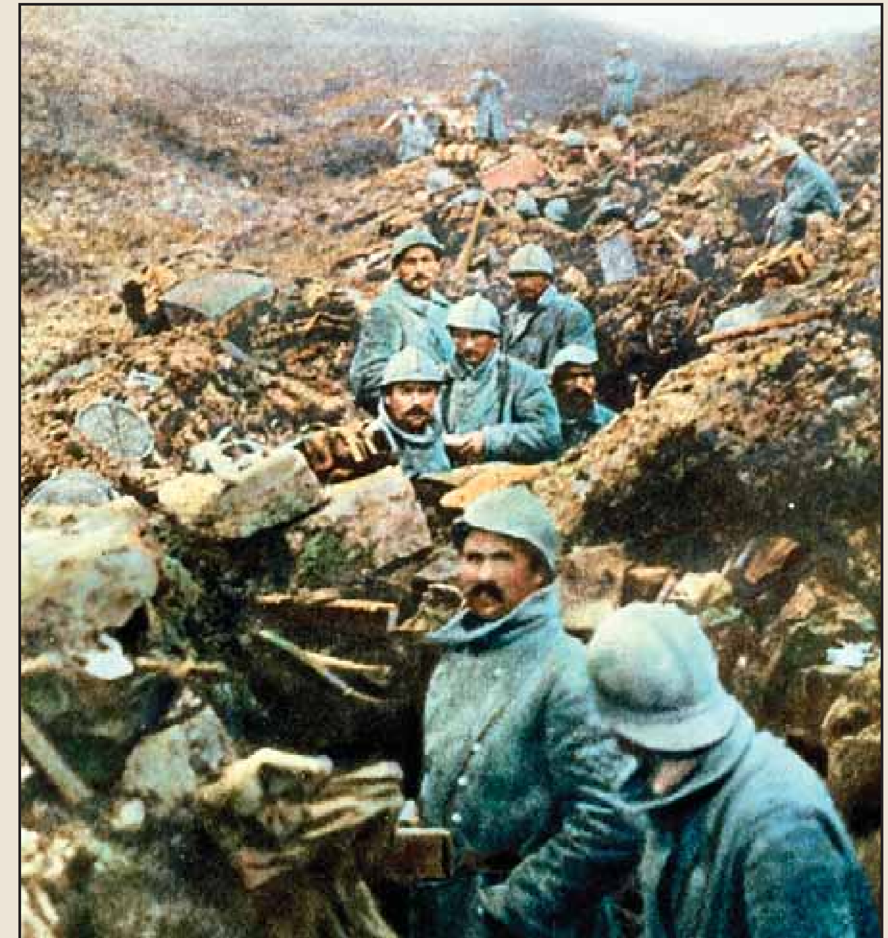
found the division commander and his staff in an elaborate underground dugout, complete with offices, bunks, living space, electricity, and kitchens. The men were safe from artillery, but not from poison gas, so a constant watch was kept. The dugout was wet and unhealthy. It stank. Men spent days deep in the earth without washing or seeing the sun.

The division commander explained to Mitchell that artillery decided modern battle. First, counter-battery fire, directed at the enemy's artillery, suppressed his ability to fire, while shells from the largest artillery pieces destroyed the enemy's trenches and fortified positions. Then, artillery provided a rolling barrage that churned the ground in front of the attacking troops, enabling the infantry to advance and hold the ground they captured. "Without this," the French general told Mitchell, "nothing can be done."

Warned that he was entering a zone of intense artillery fire, Mitchell continued deeper through the labyrinth of trenches. Seven hundred yards further, he came to a brigade headquarters in a primitive dugout protected under 20 feet of earth and two layers of steel rails. The dugout was barely high enough to stand in and had an extremely low door, which offered the men inside extra protection from shell fire. Bad air and constantly seeping water affected the men who lived in the dugout day and night.

Infantry soldiers occupied trenches on each side of the brigade headquarters. Sandbags four feet thick formed the trench walls and a high parapet provided additional protection. Most of the men kept to little recesses in the trench walls, emerging only when necessary. Mud covered the men and their rifles.

German shell fire increased; its target a point where several trenches met. To pass safely Mitchell had to alternately hug the earth or scuttle through sections destroyed by the large explosive shells. Mitchell continued to work his way forward. He passed three first-aid stations. Trails of blood ran to them. Closer to the main trenches, he saw huge rooms built 30 feet underground, the only means of protection.



This colored postcard shows French soldiers in a muddy trench, preparing for an assault on an enemy position. By 1915 both the Allies and the Central Powers had developed enormous interlocking networks of trenches on the Western Front. These defenses made it virtually impossible for either side to capture territory.

In a deep hole, Mitchell surprised the colonel commanding the 227th Regiment of the line, who was astounded that any foreign officer would be so far forward. A subordinate scrambled down the trench to tell the regiment an American officer was among them. The grinning, muddy faces that popped out of the ground to see him reminded Mitchell of gophers looking out of their holes. The soldiers were dirty and covered with mud. After six days of continuous fighting, the survivors slept in their clothes where they lay and had no time to clean their weapons.

Observing an Attack

The attack Mitchell had come to watch kicked off about 300 yards away. The hill to be captured had been a continuous artillery target for several hours despite frantic German counter-battery fire. A line of men went over the top of the trenches, disappearing in dust, haze, and smoke. Several bright flares soared into the sky, and upon that signal the field artillery, legendary French 75s, began firing rapidly, concentrating on one section of the German position.

Mitchell went further forward to the battalion position. There he found the soldiers so coated with mud that he could not distinguish between officers and enlisted men. While he was there German heavy artillery rounds began landing directly on the position and everyone scrambled for a dugout 30 feet below the surface. The earth around them shuddered as tons of metal crashed down. Two hundred yards further and Mitchell reached a trench that had been largely destroyed by artillery. The troops had attempted to deepen it in the two days they had been there, but could do little during daylight because of the constant enemy fire. Bodies of some of the French

Mitchell (right) in a trench in France with three unidentified officers. Mitchell's observations while serving on the Western Front helped shape his ideas about the importance of airpower in waging modern war.

infantry who had captured the position still lay where they had fallen. A greater number of German corpses—men who had just failed to recapture the trench—littered the ground.

The French companies defending this trench had been reduced to less than 80 men each, a third of their normal strength. The exhausted men lacked grenades but had plenty of ammunition for their rifles and a machine gun. The soldiers' rifles worked, Mitchell found, but poorly: rust was common and the rifles were clotted with mud. While in the trench Mitchell was introduced to a machine gunner who had stopped the German counterattack

almost single handedly. “These guns, if ably handled by cool men, were this war’s most grimly efficient agents of destruction,” Mitchell later wrote, “and it was entirely impossible to advance in front of them over open ground.”

From his new location, Mitchell watched the French artillery barrage roll forward. The infantry could not be seen; the hill was covered with smoke, flame, and bursting shells, “a fantastic and very uncomfortable inferno,” in Mitchell’s words. The infantry seized the hill, and promptly sent up signals that called for additional artillery support. As the division commander had told Mitchell, without artillery nothing could be done.

“In this one day alone, I saw and asked about enough to write a book,” Mitchell later wrote in his memoirs:

> What struck me most forcibly was the utter helplessness of the infantry when attacking over open ground, against modern machine guns and cannon. Neither side had yet developed a system which would protect the individual foot soldier, so with him it was simply a case of being sacrificed for an infinitesimal gain, as an advance of a mile or two into those elaborately entrenched positions did not mean anything.

Stalemate on the Western Front

The war Mitchell had come to France to observe, and which the United States had just entered on April 6, 1917, was almost three years old. It had begun in August 1914 with a massive German onslaught through Belgium that had flanked the French army and was only halted by German logistical and transportation problems, and a desperate stand by French and British forces on the Marne River east of Paris. The opposing armies then raced each

other to the North Sea in a vain effort to outflank the trenches that each side dug.

By the end of 1914, the trenches of the Western Front extended across Europe, from the North Sea to the mountains of neutral Switzerland. No open flank existed for the armies at either end. Pressured by governments and publics demanding victory, conventional-thinking generals, confronted by a problem they were unequipped to solve, launched what amounted to little more than head-on mass assaults in an effort to batter their way through the enemy’s lines. Advances were measured in hundreds of yards; casualties by mid-1917 were counted in the millions. No end was in sight.

Billy Mitchell spent 10 days watching the failure of the Nivelle offensive. He was profoundly disgusted by what he found. To Mitchell, a way to achieve victory had to exist. If an army could not find a way “around” the enemy lines and could not go “through” an opposing force, only “under” or “over” remained. The armies had tried tunneling, but it offered little hope of breakthrough and none at all of victory. As for the “over,” this was the first major conflict in which the fragile airplane, barely 14 years old in 1917, played a major role. And the airplane seemed to offer a way. “A very significant thing to me was that we could cross the lines of these contending armies in a few minutes in our airplane,” Mitchell concluded, “whereas the armies had been locked in the struggle, immovable, powerless to advance, for three years.”

The airplane already performed critical missions, such as reconnaissance and attacks against ground troops, but what if it could be something more than just an aid to the ground armies? What if fleets of airplanes could soar above the impregnable defenses that stretched like an unbroken scar

across Europe? What if they could attack the enemy's heartland, destroying its means of waging war or its will to fight? What if the airplane could provide a quick and decisive way to victory without the terrible bloodshed and mass destruction that characterized the Western Front? What if the airplane, properly and knowledgably wielded, was the key to modern war? What if?

For the remainder of the war—and throughout the rest of his life—Billy Mitchell made it his mission to turn men's eyes to the sky.

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