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Mitchell, William

By [Douglas C. Waller](#)

Mitchell, *William* (Billy)

A leader of American airpower during World War I, Mitchell commanded the largest armada of airplanes ever to attack the German force.

Born 29 December 1879 in Nice, France

Died 19 February 1936 in New York City, USA

In World War I, Brigadier General William “Billy” Mitchell of the American Expeditionary Forces, led the largest armada of airplanes ever assembled to attack the Germans during the Saint-Mihiel offensive from 12-16 September 1918 and the Meuse-Argonne offensive (both in France) from 26 September-11 November 1918. Brigadier General Mitchell was the first officer to use mass air attacks during World War I, seeing airpower as a decisive weapon.

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Early Life

William “Billy” Mitchell (1879-1936) was born in Nice, France, the grandson of one of the wealthiest men in the American Midwest, who built his fortune in banking and railroads. He grew up in

Milwaukee and attended what is now known as George Washington University before joining the U.S. Signal Corps during the Spanish-American War. Eventually becoming enamored with flight, he took flying lessons at his own expense. In 1912, he became the youngest member of the Army General Staff at the age of 33, and by 1916 had risen to Chief of the Air Service of the First Army.

Saint-Mihiel Offensive

The Saint-Mihiel salient was a narrow bulge in the German lines on the [Western Front](#), protruding around the French town of Saint-Mihiel and just across the Meuse River southeast of [Verdun](#). The Germans had stubbornly held it since the war's beginning as a buffer to protect critical rail and [supply lines](#) at Metz. General [John "Black Jack" Pershing \(1860-1948\)](#), the [American Expeditionary Forces](#) commander who so far had parceled out his units to support European armies, now had a major attack under his control. More than 600,000 U.S. and French soldiers, 3,010 [artillery](#) pieces, and 267 [tanks](#) were massed on the northern and southern edges of the salient to squeeze out the Germans inside the bulge beginning 12 September 1918.

Massive Airpower Display

Mitchell had assembled the largest concentration of aircraft ever put together for one battle: 1,476 American, French, British, and Italian warplanes. The Germans, he calculated, could launch nearly 2,000 [aircraft](#) against the allies by day three of the attack. Mitchell proposed a bold plan no air commander had ever attempted—a massive first strike behind enemy lines to knock out German supply points and air facilities. Up to that point, Pershing's ground commanders had little idea how to use airpower as an offensive weapon in war, seeing it mostly as a tool for [reconnaissance](#). Mitchell hoped heavy blows in the beginning would stagger the enemy, giving the Allies control of the skies for the first few days until the Germans recovered and counterattacked.

A Short Offensive

Flying over the Saint-Mihiel salient two days before the offensive's start, Mitchell realized the Germans had no intention of holding it. He could see some enemy units preparing to move to the rear. "The battle of Saint-Mihiel was really over on the first day," Mitchell wrote in his [book](#), *Memoirs of World War I*. Heavy rains and high winds limited the massive strike he planned at the outset, but some of Mitchell's pilots managed to strafe enemy troops and bomb supply dumps in the German rear. By day three, the Germans sent planes over Allied lines, but Mitchell's strategy of overwhelming force kept most enemy aircraft pinned down or defending rear echelons.

Meuse-Argonne Offensive

The final American offensive, to punch through German lines on the Western Front between the Meuse River and the Argonne Forest, proved more difficult for Pershing's ground soldiers and

Mitchell's aviators. On 26 September 1918 over one million Americans were thrown into the costly battle, which took six and half weeks for Pershing to win. The weather stayed miserable. This time the Germans put more planes into the fight. But the strategy of overwhelming air power again succeeded in helping block German advances.

Airpower's Role in WWI

Mitchell's pilots dropped 138 tons of bombs on 150 targets during the war and shot down twice as many German planes as the Germans did of theirs. But the airplane was not the decisive [weapon](#) of the war. That honor belonged to the artillery. Aerial bombing did more psychological than actual damage; troops felt helpless when the flying machines dumped ordnance on them. Pershing, however, left Europe pleased with his pilots.

After the war, Mitchell became a worldwide celebrity when in 1921 his bi-planes attacked a surplus German [dreadnought](#) and sent it to the bottom of the ocean, proving that aircraft could sink a battleship. Opinionated and abrasive, Mitchell was court-martialed in 1925 for insubordination after he publicly criticized the army and navy for neglecting airpower. Even so, Mitchell, who planted the seeds for what is now America's global airpower, is regarded by many as the father of the United States Air Force.

Douglas C. Waller, Independent scholar

Reviewed by external referees on behalf of the General Editors

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