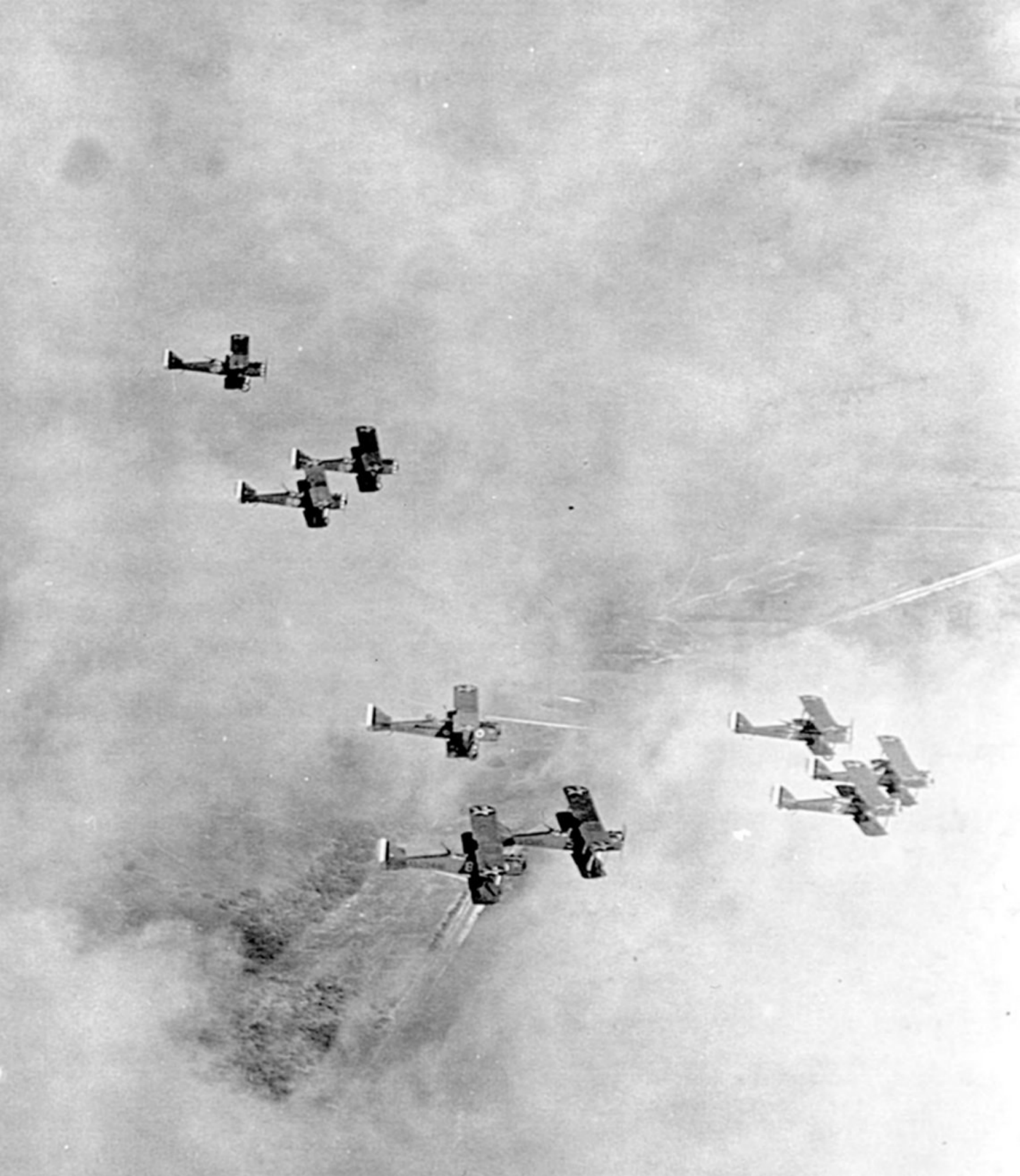


Billy Mitchell,
the 3d Attack Group
and the
Laredo Project of 1923





Roger G. Miller

(Overleaf) The 3d Attack Group in formation during the Laredo Project, February 9, 1923. (Photo courtesy, National Archives.)

On Wednesday, October 28, 1925, the court-martial of Brig. Gen. William "Billy" Mitchell convened in the Emory Building, a facility across from the northwest corner of the U.S. Capitol. Over the next two months, the court-martial became the biggest media event in the nation, one of the great trials in Twentieth Century American history. Day after day, the legal proceedings dominated headlines as Mitchell's defense attorney, Congressman Frank Reid, put the Department of War's management of air power on trial rather than the defendant himself. Throughout the trial and despite bitter testimony by opponents—like U.S. Army Generals Charles Summerall, Hugh Drum, and Dennis Nolan—Mitchell presented an optimistic, often up-beat demeanor. In spite of everything, he appeared to enjoy himself—as Billy usually did when in the limelight.¹

Testimony by one Howard G. Rath, however, provoked a different response. Rath had seen extensive combat with the Air Service's first bombardment unit, the 96th Aero Squadron, during World War I. He had flown on the 96th's initial combat mission on June 12, 1918, and served as a flight leader and operations officer before stepping up to the staff of the 1st Day Bombardment Group in mid-October.² On September 13, during the St. Mihiel offensive, he led three Breguet bombers through a formation of fifteen German pursuits, successfully striking the unit's target. Only Rath's aircraft survived and the lieutenant received the Distinguished Service Cross (DSC), the nation's second highest decoration for valor. Ordinarily, Mitchell had close relations with his combat airmen. They liked him, and he respected them. But Rath's testimony as a rebuttal witness for the prosecution revealed that he had parted ways with Billy Mitchell. He contradicted the general on the effectiveness of anti-aircraft fire, testifying that it posed a deadly threat to aircraft, and charged that during the St. Mihiel attack Mitchell had ordered the 96th to bomb under horrific conditions, forcing the fliers to face unacceptable hazards. Half of the squadron's missions had to be canceled, Rath asserted, and many of those flown should never have been attempted. Aircraft had crashed and men had died without reason, and Rath blamed Mitchell for these losses.³

Rath's testimony deeply angered Billy Mitchell. As the veteran spoke, Mitchell seethed. According to biographer Douglas Waller, he

gripped the defense table as if it would keep him from launching himself at Rath. At times he leaned over to Reid, angrily whispering in his ear. Other times, he turned around to the reporter sitting just behind him and in a low hoarse voice uttered insults about Rath. . . . [T]o have one of his airmen accuse him of incompetent and reckless leadership in combat outraged him. It was the ultimate betrayal, as far as he was concerned.⁴

Mitchell's attorney compounded the impact of Rath's testimony. Reid attacked Rath during cross-examination, intimating that the former airman had shown cowardice in the face of the enemy. Reid had never spent a day under fire, and his abuse of a decorated veteran infuriated the distinguished members of the court. Brig. Gen. Edward L. King

wasn't going to let a U.S. Congressman humiliate a brave soldier. "I would like to ask the president of the court . . . to inform defense counsel that a man may do things even if he is afraid!" he shouted, almost sputtering with rage. "I certainly object to the insinuation, as I get it, that this witness was a coward. I don't think that his testimony shows it!" . . . [Maj. Gen. Sidney S.] Graves . . . put his arm around his fellow general's shoulder and squeezed it.⁵

Reid's performance not only deeply offended the generals sitting in judgment, but for the first time alienated the spectators, who until this point had demonstratively favored Mitchell. As Reid poured hostile questions on Rath, boos and hisses enveloped the courtroom. General King's righteous outburst led to applause and cheers from the spectators. "Their hostility stunned Reid and Mitchell."⁶

Reid, like his client, had given way to emotion when he should have remained calm. The defense's best approach would have been to turn Rath's testimony in Mitchell's favor. Reid should have shown Rath the respect his record deserved, then cross-examined him carefully to elicit the fact that commanders often send their men into combat at terrible hazard when they judge the effort necessary and at times when subordinates believe the danger

RATH'S TESTIMONY DEEPLY ANGERED BILLY MITCHELL. AS THE VETERAN SPOKE, MITCHELL SEETHED

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The 3d Attack Group in attack formation during the Laredo Project, February 9, 1923. (Photo courtesy, National Archives.)



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too great. Combat demands extreme effort and tragic loss; sometimes the forces committed succeed and sometimes they fail; and often subordinate leaders blame heavy losses on superiors who they see as having demanded unreasonable, unjustified sacrifice. Rath, in short, was blaming Mitchell for a situation common in warfare. The president of the court was Maj. Gen. Robert Howze, holder of the Medal of Honor,⁷ and the board was composed of senior leaders whose chests were heavy with decorations. Men like Maj. Gen. Douglas MacArthur understood and accepted a leader's need to order soldiers to perform beyond their capabilities.⁸

Ultimately, the court-martial never hinged on Rath's testimony and, in the final analysis, his assertions probably made little difference in the verdict. But the episode colored the proceedings and tarnished Mitchell's image. Still, the situation might have been even more damaging. Extreme demands during wartime can be justified by exigent conditions and military necessity. During peacetime, however, such exertions are quite another matter. It was probably fortunate for Mitchell and his reputation that the prosecution failed to exploit a somewhat analogous episode that occurred in Texas in February 1923.

When Maj. Gen. Mason M. Patrick assumed command of the U.S. Army Air Service on October 5, 1921, he also took on the task of managing his second-in-command, Billy Mitchell. Patrick had

proven during World War I that he could handle the flamboyant, irrepressible airman. Now, that responsibility was his again. An essential element among Patrick's management techniques was to keep Mitchell on the move and out of Washington, D.C. One such trip took place at the beginning of 1923.⁹

On January 21, piloting his personal airplane and accompanied by an aide, Mitchell left Bolling Field bound for McCook Field near Dayton, Ohio, to visit the Air Service's Engineering Department. At McCook, the general examined the latest developments in night flying equipment, landing lights, and superchargers. He personally flew a new training aircraft that featured side-by-side seating, and also a two-seat, high-altitude pursuit plane that he judged promising.¹⁰ From Ohio, Mitchell flew north to Selfridge Field, Michigan, home of his favorite unit, the 1st Pursuit Group. At Selfridge, he inspected the command, observed maneuvers, and tested a Thomas-Morse MB-3 pursuit aircraft equipped with an auxiliary fuel tank that could be dropped when empty, and an MB-3 that featured snow skis in place of wheels. Next, Mitchell inspected the Air Service's lighter-than-air training school at Scott Field, Illinois, and then flew to Kelly Field, outside San Antonio, Texas, for a week of inspections, reviews, and maneuvers.¹¹

Subsequently, a three-day flight then took Mitchell to Camp Borden in Ontario, site of



(Top left) A De Havilland DH-4 developed at McCook Field, Ohio, equipped with eight machine guns, c. 1920. The gun mounted over the wing is a belt-fed Marlin. (Photo courtesy, National Museum of the U.S. Air Force, Dayton, Ohio.)



(Top right) A De Havilland DH-4B of the 90th Attack Squadron with two pair of drum-fed .30 cal. Lewis machine guns mounted on the sides of the fuselage, February 9, 1923. (Photo courtesy, National Archives.)

(Above) Five DH-4Bs on the flight line at Kelly Field, Texas, flown by the 90th Attack Squadron during the Laredo Project, February 9, 1923. (Photo courtesy, National Archives.)

Canada's School of Aviation, and from there he went to Ottawa to pay a courtesy call on the Governor General of Canada, Lord Byng. On March 2, Mitchell returned to Bolling, having completed a 5,000-mile trip in an open-cockpit aircraft in the dead of winter.¹²

The focal point of this trip was Kelly Field, and the principal organization based at that facility was the 3d Attack Group. This unit had grown out of a system of Air Service patrols along the border with Mexico following World War I. By 1921, trouble had declined enabling the Air Service to concentrate the organization at Kelly Field. The 3d Attack Group's mission under Lt. Col. Seth W. Cooke was to support army ground forces, and General Mitchell expected it to perfect the ground attack techniques that the Air Service had begun using in France in 1918.¹³

The Attack Group flew two-seat De Havilland DH-4B aircraft powered by the 400 h.p. Liberty engine. The DH-4 had been a highly successful British observation and bombing aircraft selected by the Air Service in 1917 for production in the United States. U.S. firms ultimately produced over 4,500 DH-4s and it became the only American-built aircraft to see combat, equipping some eight



observation and bombing squadrons by the end of the war. Following World War I, hundreds were modified as DH-4Bs by strengthening the airframe, moving the gas tank ahead of the pilot, and placing the pilot and observer closer together. Tight post-war budgets encouraged use of DH-4Bs in almost every role practicable. They not only served as bombing, observation, and ground attack aircraft, but also became trainers, ambulances, target tugs, and air racers. Some patrolled the border and others watched for forest fires. Still others delivered mail. The Air Service also used the aircraft as a test bed for a variety of engines, instruments, armament, and equipment. In all, the Air Service produced over sixty identifiable variants. Both Generals Patrick and Mitchell flew especially prepared DH-4Bs as their personal airplanes.¹⁴

Mitchell's week in San Antonio was a major affair that must be dissected layer by layer like an onion. On the surface, everything went well. He arrived late on Friday, February 2, and on Saturday, despite icy, windy conditions, conducted a general inspection of barracks and hangars, a dismounted inspection of Kelly personnel, and an aerial review.¹⁵ Bitter cold failed to keep the general, a distinguished horseman, from riding on Sunday, but canceled outside activities planned for Monday.¹⁶ Despite conditions, however Mitchell still tested a DH-4B equipped with eight machine guns, then lectured Air Service officers on aerial tactics and the state of the Air Service in general.¹⁷ Tuesday, the weather moderated and the 3d Attack Group took to the air for a day of maneuvers led by Mitchell in a Kelly Field DH-4B prepared for his use.¹⁸ Wednesday morning saw more aerial maneuvers, and during the afternoon Mitchell inspected the San Antonio Air Intermediate Depot at Kelly, one of the regional supply and repair depots operated by the Air Service. On Thursday morning, he drove across town to Brooks Field to inspect the flight line and facilities, and in the afternoon he lectured to the officers at nearby Fort Sam Houston.¹⁹

Friday, February 9, saw the *piece de resistance*; an assault by twenty-three DH-4Bs led by Mitchell on a simulated convoy of trucks set upon a target range located seven miles east of Laredo on the



(Above) An attack by the 90th Attack Squadron on the simulated truck train during the Laredo Project, February 9, 1923. Note the three hits in the danger zone. (Photo courtesy, National Archives.)

(Above right) A direct hit on the number six target during the tests at Laredo, Texas, February 9, 1923. (Photo courtesy, National Archives.)



THIS STORY WAS FOR THE PUBLIC ... PRIVATELY, MITCHELL REPORTED ... THAT THE INSPECTION AND AERIAL REVIEW ON THE FIRST SATURDAY MORNING HAD REVEALED SERIOUS PROBLEMS

Mexican border. The 3d Attack Group lost two aircraft in accidents, but completed the maneuver successfully, repeatedly striking every target, while an audience "of thousands"²⁰ witnessed their accuracy. On Saturday morning, the attack group completed the week with a bombing demonstration at Kelly Field. During this exercise another aircraft crashed.²¹ Mitchell departed on Saturday evening. He was full of praise for San Antonio, for Kelly Field, and for the 3d Attack Group: "I found here an enthusiastic, well-trained command of officers and men," he told a newspaperman.²² And the *San Antonio Express* featured Mitchell's particular praise for the exercise at Laredo: "The problem was carried out with precision and correctness and was pronounced by the assistant air chief one of the most difficult problems worked out by the service in years."²³

This story was for the public. A different one lay beneath this glossy veneer. Privately, Mitchell reported to General Patrick that the inspection and aerial review on the first Saturday morning had revealed serious problems: "The Attack Group," he wrote, "is in very bad shape in every way; in the command, operations, squadron organizations, and supply." He placed the primary blame on the commanding officer who was "entirely unfamiliar with the handling of a tactical unit . . ." Fortunately, however, a veteran air leader, one of Mitchell's protégés, had recently taken command of the 10th School Squadron at Kelly Field, the unit that conducted advanced flying training for the Air Service. Maj. Lewis H. Brereton had commanded the 12th Aero Squadron and the Corps Observation Wing for First U.S. Army during World War I, earning a DSC during the St. Mihiel offensive. He finished the war as Mitchell's operations officer and then served under him in the Operations and Training Group at Air Service headquarters in Washington following the conflict.²⁴ "Louie" Brereton took command of the 3d Attack Group on Monday, February 5, and Mitchell spent much of the rest of the week helping reorient the group, retrain it to use new methods of operation, perfect its organization, and upgrade its equipment. From Mitchell's point of view, the aerial displays described in the press as reviews and

maneuvers were demonstrations that Brereton was taking hold, and the 3d Attack Group was learning its job.²⁵

The most important of these events was the February 9 exercise at Laredo. The target was a simulated truck column of twelve vehicles caught in a defile confining them to the road. The 3d Attack Group flew from Kelly to Laredo, landed at an air field outside the town for final orders, took off and attacked the "convoy" with machine guns and bombs, and then returned to Kelly. The maneuver, Mitchell reported to Patrick, was "fairly well executed"; however, the ground echelon performed poorly because it had never been taught its duties. The actual aerial assault was excellent. Bombs and machine gun fire hit every truck-size target, and Mitchell was effusive: "I believe even with the way the Group is organized now, no Mexican column can move in the day time within 100 miles of where this Group is stationed," he wrote in his most bellicose style. "This includes railroad trains and boats on the rivers, as well as columns of troops."²⁶

In this version of events, Mitchell presented the picture that his intervention was the critical factor in the transformation of the 3d Attack Group from a substandard unit to an effective combat command. The 3d Attack Group leaders agreed with Mitchell's assessment, reporting in the *Air Service News Letter* for February 17 that significant improvement had been made in the group's ability to accomplish its mission:

The inclement weather has stopped practically all flying during the past week, giving the squadrons a chance to prepare the different data and rectify the mistakes found by General Mitchell on his recent visit and inspection. These ideas are being worked on and the group is steadily assuming the form of a real attack group as laid down in regulations.²⁷

Others found the same result. On May 5, 1923, following an inspection of the Attack Group, Maj. Gen. Eli A. Helmick, Inspector General of the Army, reported that the "systematic manner and rapidity with which the warming up, the take-off and the assembly in aerial formation of the entire com-



(Top) Wreck of the De Havilland DH-4B flown by Lt. Frank T. Honsinger and TSgt. James W. Kelly, Laredo Project, February 9, 1923. (Photo courtesy Air Force Historical Research Agency, Maxwell AFB, AL)

(Above) Wreck of the De Havilland DH-4B flown by Lt. Harry J. Martin and Sgt. Walter S. Godecki, Kelly Field, Texas, February 10, 1923. (Photo courtesy Air Force Historical Research Agency, Maxwell AFB, AL)

mand, composed of some 45 planes, were carried out, indicated a very high degree of training and discipline.²⁸

Underneath this success, however, lay still another story that centered on the DH-4Bs, several of which had been equipped with eight machine guns, twice its standard armament. In its description of these aircraft, the *San Antonio Express* reported that these were the first De Havillands so heavily armed, but in reality efforts to up-gun the aircraft had begun much earlier.²⁹ In 1920 the Engineering Department at McCook Field had attempted to enhance the DH-4's ground attack capability. This variant retained the twin, synchronized Marlin guns firing forward through the propeller and the twin moveable Lewis guns on a scarf ring firing to the rear. To these, the engineers added two additional Marlin guns in the floor of the pilot's cockpit firing forward and down at about a 45 degree angle. A second pair of Lewis guns fired down and to the rear through the observer's cockpit floor. In theory, as the DH-4 dived at a target the pilot would fire his front pair of synchronized guns;

as the target disappeared under the airplane's nose, the pilot would raise the aircraft to horizontal and fire the fixed guns angled forward and down; as the aircraft passed over the target the rear guns in the floor would fire; and, finally, as the pilot pointed the nose up and clawed for altitude, the observer would resort to his guns firing over the horizontal stabilizer.³⁰

While some of the McCook Field-modified aircraft may have been with the 3d Attack Group in 1923,³¹ most of the eight-gun DH-4Bs in the February exercises were modified locally at the specific direction of Billy Mitchell. Pilot Lt. George H. Beverley later recounted that Mitchell loaded the DH-4s with extra machine guns mounted along side the fuselage and on the wings. A photograph of a 90th Attack Squadron DH-4B equipped with two pair of Lewis guns on the side of the fuselage below the observer aimed down and forward, an arrangement different from that tested at McCook, validates Beverley's memory.³²

The number of DH-4Bs so equipped is uncertain. One account indicates that Kelly's shops prepared as many as fifteen.³³ Another account, which describes the 8th Attack Squadron's aircraft as fully equipped with special equipment prescribed for attack and bombardment, may or may not refer to extra machine guns. The 26th Attack Squadron furnished a flight of five DH-4Bs, but the armament carried was unspecified. The 90th Attack Squadron mounted "arsenals" on three aircraft consisting of eight machine guns and six .45 caliber pistols! A photograph of five 90th DH-4Bs, supports this report. One aircraft definitely carries additional machine guns, while two others appear to have them, although the detail is too small to be certain. Other Kelly organizations contributed to the 3d Attack Group's air strength. The 60th Service squadron furnished two DH-4Bs equipped with bomb racks, machine guns, and a radio, while the 10th School Squadron dispatched a Martin NBS-1 bomber to ferry supplies. Two DH-4Bs from the 22nd Photo Section airplanes accompanied the attack formation to Laredo and "took many good photographs."³⁴ Several of the squadrons worked all night preparing their aircraft for the exercise.³⁵

On February 9, 1923, Mitchell led the 3d Attack Group south to Laredo. The formation landed at an air field near the town, the airmen reviewed the attack plans for last minute changes, and then the aircraft took off for the target range to the east. Lt. Lotha A. Smith led the first flight of five DH-4Bs; Lt. Arnold H. Rich had the second position behind Smith. Two aircraft in the formation carried telephones, radios, and bomb racks. The other three carried eight machine guns. At this point, existing published accounts diverge. The *Air Service News Letter* reported that Lieutenant Rich crashed over the target from an altitude of sixty feet. He was bruised, but his observer, Private Dryden, was seriously injured both internally and externally.³⁶ The *San Antonio Express*, on the other hand, reported that Rich hooked a wing on a derrick near Laredo

Maj. Gen. Mason M. Patrick, Chief of the Air Service, on the left, and Brig. Gen. William "Billy" Mitchell, Assistant Chief.



MITCHELL REPORTED ON THE TWO FATAL CRASHES TO GENERAL PATRICK IMMEDIATELY FOLLOWING THE SECOND ACCIDENT

after starting for the target range. Rich ended up with a black eye while Dyer wrenched his back and cut his chin.³⁷ In any case, worse followed quickly.

The five-ship formation from the 90th Attack Squadron approached the simulated truck convoy at about 1:42 in the afternoon.³⁸ The air was clear and the wind light. Lt. Frank T. Honsinger and TSgt. James W. Kelly flying one of the eight-gun DH-4Bs were on their second pass when the airplane went out of control, crashed, and burned about a mile southeast of the target range. Both men died in the blaze. Another pilot, Lt. Byron E. Gates reported that Honsinger was making an extremely steep bank to get into attack position when the aircraft nosedived into the ground and instantly burst into flames. Despite the crash, the maneuvers continued through to their conclusion, and the remaining aircraft flew back to Kelly Field.³⁹

The next day a five-ship formation from the 8th Attack Squadron bombed and strafed at Kelly Field No. 2 observed by Mitchell and Maj. Gen. Edward M. Lewis, Commander of the Eighth Corps Area. The weather was poor. The aircraft took off in V-formation and went to 125 feet, a ceiling established by low-lying clouds. As they maneuvered into a single-file attack formation preparatory to bombing their target, Lt. Lawrence J. Carr, in the fourth aircraft in line, saw the last DH-4B stall with its wings almost vertical. It then spun, crashed, and caught fire. Lt. Harry J. Martin died instantly, but his back-seater, Sgt. Walter S. Godecki, may have survived. A soldier who rushed to the wreck reported that he heard cries for help seconds before the aircraft and its occupants burned.⁴⁰

Mitchell reported on the two fatal crashes to General Patrick immediately following the second accident. At Laredo, he was in the air less than 100 yards from the aircraft that crashed, the result, he said, of a straight stall. The second crash was also a stall, he informed Patrick. Mitchell's first thought was of the fuel tanks, since both aircraft burned. The Air Service needed tanks that would not explode, and Mitchell recommended installation of special fuel pumps, the addition of fire proof covering, and positioning the fuel tank where it would not spill gasoline over the engine during a crash. Mitchell was also concerned about the DH-4B's tendency to stall. He pointed out that the thick cantilever wing found in Fokker aircraft had a more forgiving stall than provided by the thin airfoil of the De Havilland, thus giving the pilot better opportunity to recover air speed.⁴¹

Lastly, Mitchell turned his attention to the armament. Both aircraft in the fatal crashes carried eight-gun batteries, and Mitchell sought to allay any concern that the weight of the additional guns and ammunition and the aerodynamic effects of hanging them outside the fuselage was a problem. Shortly after arriving, he had flown one of the eight-gun DH-4Bs himself, Mitchell reported to Patrick, and "its air worthiness was entirely satisfactory to me; that is as far as a transformed D.H. goes. . . . I could notice no difference in the flying of the ship with the eight gun installation, myself."⁴² He went on to acknowledge, however, that the position of the guns might have affected aircraft performance and directed that the question be thoroughly investigated.⁴³

As for the investigations, the first accident was the nonfatal crash and if an accident report was

TWO OF THE PILOTS ... PLACED THE BLAME FOR THE ACCIDENTS AND DEATHS ON BILLY MITCHELL



prepared, it has failed to survive. The limited documentation that exists reflects a concern with the status of the DH-4B itself. Apparently, on the day before the accident, Lt. Charles H. Robinson of the 26th Attack Squadron had flown the aircraft to Laredo and reported it to be extremely "wing heavy." He was assigned another aircraft, but for some reason the flying officer allowed Lieutenant Rich to fly the airplane, though it should have been tagged "out of commission." The correspondence concluded that "the officer in charge of flying had committed a grave error in permitting the plane to be flown after receiving an adverse report."⁴⁴ Wing heaviness would have been a problem at low altitude, especially in a turn, but apparently Rich's failure to see a derrick caused the accident.

Neither report on the two fatal crashes addressed the question of the impact that the additional machine guns might have had on the flight characteristics and handling of the aircraft. Both blamed the dead pilots. The report on Honsinger determined that the pilot "lost control of his plane and dove into the ground."⁴⁵ That on Martin stated that the aircraft stalled from an altitude of between 100 and 150 feet and went into a tail spin. The crash, it concluded, was the result of "an error in judgment or faulty pilotage."⁴⁶

In his letter to Patrick, Mitchell anticipated these results, but he also seems to have realized that he may have asked too much from the 3d Attack Group pilots. He acknowledged the dangers of the type of low-level mission the 3d Attack Group was required to fly and emphasized the need for capable pilots. "Of course if a pilot noses a loaded ship up in a turn it is going to stall and if he stalls near the ground he is going to have a crash," he stated. "The only safeguards against this is [sic] good pilotage."⁴⁷ And in another passage he added that "a loaded ship requires good handling and these pilots have not had very much experience in that sort of work."⁴⁸

Still one more layer of this story exists. Two of the pilots at Kelly Field, Lieutenant Beverley, mentioned above, and Lt. Orval R. Cook—and, if the latter's memory can be relied upon, other flyers from the 3d Attack Group—placed the blame for the accidents and deaths on Billy Mitchell. According to their version of events, a combination of inexperienced pilots, unfamiliar tactics, the modified DH-4Bs, and Mitchell's hubris led to the disastrous loss of aircraft and life.

Cook was a recent graduate of the flying school at Brooks Field assigned to the 10th School Squadron. In addition to taking advanced flying training, he also had an extra duty as the assistant engineering officer in charge of the engine overhaul shops. The aircraft and flying equipment, Cook remembered, were in poor mechanical condition because of the inexperience of the maintenance personnel and the persistent lack of funds.⁴⁹ Cook also confirmed Mitchell's view that the pilots assigned to the 3d Attack Group were largely inexperienced, and many of the newcomers were unused to flying close to the ground at altitudes between 100 and 150 feet.⁵⁰ Beverley, a veteran instructor pilot with the 10th School Squadron who had transferred to the 3d Attack Group, recalled that Mitchell loaded the DH-4s with extra machine guns mounted along side the fuselage and on the wings, which interfered with the slip stream, blanketing the elevator and rudder and reducing the aircraft's maneuverability, especially in a dive.⁵¹

Further, during the briefing on the tactics to be used for the exercise, Mitchell had intervened, complaining that the group's standard tactics would be useless under real combat conditions. He took over the briefing, lecturing the pilots on the "proper" altitudes and tactics to use and peremptorily ordering the 3d Attack Group to carry them out. As a result, according to Beverley and Cook, the three aircraft were lost and four airmen killed trying to



Maj. Lewis H. Brereton, Commander of the 3rd Attack Group thanks to Billy Mitchell's intervention, was a highly decorated veteran of World War I.

UNDOUBTEDLY, THOUGH, A MEMORABLE DEGREE OF ANTI-MITCHELL BELLY-ACHING TOOK PLACE IN THE 3D ATTACK GROUP

do maneuvers they had not been trained to do and which Mitchell had ordered at the last minute.⁵²

The reaction of these two pilots, especially that of Cook, was reminiscent of the testimony that Howard Rath would present two years later during Mitchell's court martial. Both men clearly blamed Mitchell for the losses, and according to Cook, the deaths almost caused a mutiny within the 3d Attack Group.⁵³ Cook was interviewed some fifty-one years after the events described, and, while it is clear that Mitchell's actions made a deep impression that stayed with him, he probably overstated the degree of pilot reaction. Military pilots, professionals, grumble and complain, but almost never mutiny or revolt. Undoubtedly, though, a memorable degree of anti-Mitchell bellyaching took place in the 3d Attack Group.

Published and unpublished accounts documenting the Laredo Project make it clear that while pilot error may have been a critical factor, several elements were actually at work. It seems clear, for one, that despite Mitchell's denial, the additional machine guns mounted outside the fuselage had a critical impact on the flight characteristics of the DH-4B, severely affecting the aircraft's maneuverability. Lieutenant Beverley's description appears to be correct. The extra guns and their mounts interfered with the slip stream and blanketed the elevator and rudder, a condition that especially affected control in a turn when lift was reduced and made the aircraft delicate to handle. Additionally, though not mentioned in any sources, the weight of the battery of extra guns and ammunition—a total of at least 150 pounds, or the weight of an additional man—placed several feet behind the aircraft's center of gravity probably made the De

Havilland even more tail heavy than normal, increasing the sensitivity of the aircraft longitudinally and adding to its propensity to stall. Finally, the externally mounted guns would have added drag to the equation, further reducing the aircraft's performance.

An experienced pilot could deal with these characteristics. Mitchell, as noted, found the modified DH-4B air worthy and entirely satisfactory; although, he had added the caveat "that is as far as a transformed D.H. goes." But many of the 3d Attack Group pilots were inexperienced and uncomfortable flying close to the ground. Rich's non-fatal crash was probably the result of inexperience, certainly it showed inattentiveness. As for the dead pilots. Martin had only earned his wings in 1921 and had just 165 hours of flying time. He was considered an average pilot and was not authorized to instruct others.⁵⁴ Honsinger, on the other hand, was a veteran. From May 1918 through May 1920 he had served as a Student Officer and Assistant Officer in Charge of Flying at Langley Field, Virginia. He then joined the 9th Aero Squadron at Fresno, California, and flew Forest Fire Patrol. Following a refresher course at Carlstrom Field, Florida, he conducted Advanced Observation training at Post Field, Oklahoma, before transferring to Kelly Field in January 1923.⁵⁵

The exercise conditions apparently contributed to the tragedy. First, Mitchell ordered the modifications made at the last minute and little if any time existed for the aircrews to develop familiarity with the reconfigured aircraft and, especially, with its flight characteristics at low altitude. Further, Mitchell changed the parameters of the maneuvers at the last minute and ordered the aircrews to do things they had not trained to do. Mitchell took over the mission briefing, complaining that the group's standard tactics would be useless under real combat conditions. He then briefed the pilots on the proper altitudes and tactics and peremptorily ordered the 3d Attack Group to carry them out though the pilots had no time to familiarize themselves with the procedures. To Beverley and Cook, these last minute changes were a prelude to tragedy.

To give Mitchell credit, on the other hand, it was part of his responsibility to ensure that operational training was as realistic as conditions allowed. An air force that fails to train as it will fight is bound to be a less effective one, and its losses in combat, at least initially, will be higher than a force that has made every effort to practice under realistic conditions. This is the presumption that would later guide the Cold War operational training conducted by Strategic Air Command units, the reasoning behind the establishment of Red Flag, and the concept that guides training in today's Air Force. Victory and the fewest combat losses go to the best prepared.

Perhaps the strangest element in the Laredo Project disaster to modern airmen is the equanimity with which the losses during the Laredo project were accepted. There was little protest within the

service, and no public outcry despite some colorful newspaper coverage. Both Cook and Beverley had lost faith in Billy Mitchell, who they blamed in large measure, and apparently the pilots of the 3d Attack Group showed a severe reaction to the accidents and deaths, as noted above, but only hints of this kind of response exist. The incident seems to have been quickly forgotten. The loss of three aircraft and four men appears to have been an acceptable price of operations and of the evaluation of new equipment and tactics.

Finally, it is completely speculation, but could this incident have come back to haunt Billy Mitchell during the 1925 court-martial? As Douglas Waller details in *A Question of Loyalty*, the U.S. Army prosecution team conducted a thorough and extensive search for information that might be used to discredit Mitchell. The team

attempted to leave no stone unturned. But for some reason, the prosecution either failed to recognize or to exploit the loss of the aircraft and men during the Laredo Project, and that was fortunate for the defendant. An account of peacetime rather than wartime losses might have appeared more damning to the court and thus more useful to a prosecution committed to discrediting Mitchell, presuming that any of the airmen involved would have testified against him. Cook, despite having been a new pilot in 1923, might have provided effective testimony. In his words spoken years later: "I kind of revised my impression of Mitchell at the time. Just that one occasion, and I did see one of the accidents, so it made an impression on me. At that time, I thought that he was pretty arrogant and unreasonable."⁵⁶ ■

NOTES

1. Billy Mitchell has proven a popular subject for writers; however, relatively few biographies contain a detailed account of the famous 1925 trial since access to the official transcript and supporting records was restricted for many years. The first to make the event a central focus of a biography was Burke Davis in *The Billy Mitchell Affair* (New York: Random House, 1967). More recently, Michael Grumelli dissected the court-martial carefully in "Trial by Faith: The Dissent and Court-Martial of Billy Mitchell," a 1991 Ph.D. dissertation completed at Rutgers University that, regrettably, remains unpublished at this date. Most recently the court-martial was carefully analyzed by Douglas Waller who used it as the framework for his biography, *A Question of Loyalty: Gen. Billy Mitchell and the Court-Martial that Grippled the Nation* (New York: HarperCollins Publishers, 2004). For other important Mitchell biographies, see Alfred H. Hurley, *Billy Mitchell: Crusader for Air Power* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1975) and James J. Cooke, *Billy Mitchell* (Boulder, Co.: Lynne Rienner, Publishers, 2002). The account of the Laredo project in Phillip S. Meilinger, *Hoyt S. Vandenberg: The Life of a General* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1989), p. 12, is misleading. Meilinger suggests that the incident took place in 1926, which was a year after Mitchell resigned from the service, and that Vandenberg was assigned to the 3d Attack Group at the time the Laredo project took place. He actually joined the unit later.

2. James J. Sloan, Jr., *Wings of Honor: American Airmen in World War I* (Atglen, Penn.: Schiffer Military History, 1994), pp. 163, 164-65, 181.

3. Waller, *A Question of Loyalty*, pp. 295-96. Rath's testimony painted a graphic picture of conditions in the St. Mihiel. The weather on September 12, the opening day of the offensive, had been the worst in eastern France in many years. Severe winds made formation flying dangerous, while heavy clouds and a low ceiling limited visibility. A week of heavy rains made the Amanty air field so muddy that half the airplanes broke propellers during take-off, rendering the weakened formations more vulnerable to enemy defenses. Under these conditions, the 96th launched attacks on both the 12th and the 13th and suffered grievous losses. The first two days of the St. Mihiel assault cost the squadron ten aircraft and twelve airmen. The cost rose as the bombers pressed home their attacks. The 1st Day Bombardment Group, consisting of

11th, 20th, and 96th Aero Squadrons, lost 35 percent of its flying personnel killed and wounded in the St. Mihiel. Maurer Maurer, ed., *The U.S. Air Service in World War I* (Washington, D.C.: Office of Air Force History, 1978), I, p. 365; Sloan, *Wings of Honor*, pp. 242-44.

4. Waller, *A Question of Loyalty*, pp. 296, 297.

5. *Ibid.*, p. 299.

6. *Ibid.* Newspaper articles publicized the change in audience reaction widely. See, for example, Art, "Assails Mitchell on Deaths in War," *New York Times*, December 10, 1925, p. 10; Art, John Edwin Nevin, "Bravery of Fliers Brings Sharp Tilt at Mitchell Trial," *Washington Post*, December 10, 1925, p. 1.

7. Cavalryman Robert Lee Howze was awarded the Medal of Honor in 1891 for action against the Lakota Indians. He subsequently served in the Spanish-American War, Philippine Insurrection, and the Punitive Expedition in Mexico. During World War I, Howze commanded the 38th Infantry Division during the Meuse-Argonne campaign. In addition to the Medal of Honor, he also held two Silver Stars and the Distinguished Service Medal. See his entry in *The Handbook of Texas Online*, www.tsha.utexas.edu/handbook/online/.

8. Son of Arthur MacArthur, a Civil War Medal of Honor winner, the future General of the Armies had served as chief of staff of the 42nd Infantry Division and then commander of the 84th Infantry Brigade in the Meuse-Argonne campaign. He ended World War I with seven Silver Stars, two Purple Hearts, and the Distinguished Service Medal. MacArthur would receive his Medal of Honor during World War II. See his entry in *Wikipedia: The Free Encyclopedia*, en.wikipedia.org/wiki/

9. Patrick's relationship with Mitchell is carefully examined in Robert P. White, *Mason Patrick and the Fight for Air Service Independence* (Washington, D.C.: Smithsonian Institution Press, 2001). See esp. pp. 2-5, 21-23, and 54-61.

10. Ltr, Mitchell to Patrick, January 23, 1923, File General Correspondence, 1925 (1 of 7), Box 11, Papers of William Mitchell, Library of Congress (Hereafter cited as Mitchell Papers, LoC.); Art, "Ends 5,000-Mile Flight; Favors Skis for Planes," *The Washington Post*, March 6, 1923, p. 14; Art, "Ends 5,000-Mile Air Trip," *New York Times*, March 6, 1923, p. 3.

11. Ltr, Mitchell to Patrick, January 30, 1923, File General Correspondence, 1925 (1 of 7), Box 11, Mitchell Papers, LoC.; Art, "Ends 5,000-Mile Flight; Favors Skis for

- Planes," *The Washington Post*, March 6, 1923, p. 14; Art, "Ends 5,000-Mile Air Trip," *New York Times*, March 6, 1923, p. 3. Selfridge Field was a popular Mitchell destination for another reason. He was courting Elizabeth Trumbull Miller, who lived in nearby Detroit. They would marry on October 11, 1923.
12. Art, "Ends 5,000-Mile Flight; Favors Skis for Planes," *The Washington Post*, March 6, 1923, p. 14; Art, "Ends 5,000-Mile Air Trip," *New York Times*, March 6, 1923, p. 3. Sir Julian Hedworth George Byng, later Viscount Byng of Vimy, an English officer, was the highly regarded commander of the Canadian Corps during World War I.
13. Lawrence Cortesi, *The Grim Reapers: History of the 3d Bomb Group, 1918-1965* (Temple City, Ca.: Historical Aviation Album, 1985), pp. 3-4. In 1923, the 3d Attack Group comprised the 8th, 13th, 26th, and 90th Attack Squadrons.
14. A.J. Jackson, *De Havilland Aircraft Since 1909*, rev. ed. (Annapolis, Md.: Naval Institute Press, 1978), pp. 53-68. Veterans generally rated the Salmson 2A2 a better observation machine than the DH-4 and the Breguet 14 a better bomber. Both machines were French. The best discussion of the U.S. effort to equip the Air Service with the DH-4 can be found in I. B. Holley, Jr., *Ideas and Weapons: Exploitation of the Aerial Weapon by the United States During World War I: A Study in the Relationship of Technological Advance, Military Doctrine, and the Development of Weapons*, New Imprint (Washington, D.C.: Office of Air Force History, 1983).
15. Art, "Aerial Review Staged for Assistant Chief of Nation's Air Service," *San Antonio Express*, February 4, 1923, p. 10. Maj. Gen. Edward M. Lewis, commander of the Eighth Corps Area, Brig. Gen. Dennis Nolan, commander of Fort Sam Houston, Lt. Col. John H. Howard, commander of Kelly Field, and Maj. Ralph Royce, commander of Brooks Field, led the receiving party. This was the same General Nolan who testified against Mitchell at the court-martial. Their enmity dated to their World War I service in France. See Cook, *Billy Mitchell*, pp. 64, 97, 101.
16. Art, "America Keeps Ahead of World in Air—Mitchell," *Ibid.*, February 5, 1923, p. 1.
17. Art, "Mitchell Tests Plane Carrying 8 Machine Guns," *Ibid.*, February 6, 1923, p. 3.
18. *Air Service News Letter*, February 20, 1923, p. 3; March 5, 1923, p. 12; March 21, 1923, pp. 3, 14-15.
19. Art, "Mitchell Takes to Air at Kelly," *San Antonio Express*, February 7, 1923, p. 3.
20. Art, "Kelly Flyers Die in Laredo Plane Crash," *Ibid.*, February 10, 1923, pp. 1, 3.
21. Art, "Two Kelly Field Flyers Burn to Death in Crash," *Ibid.*, February 11, 1923, p. 13.
22. Art, "Kelly Field Ideal as Base for Mexican Border Flying Assistant Air Chief Finds," *Ibid.*, February 11, 1923, p. 3.
23. *Ibid.*
24. Roger G. Miller, "A Pretty Damn Able Commander: Lewis Hyde Brereton," Part I, *Air Power History* (Winter, 2000), pp. 4-27.
25. Ltr, Mitchell to Patrick, February 10, 1923 [1], File General Correspondence, 1925 (1 of 7), Box 11, Mitchell Papers, LoC. Mitchell wrote two letters to Patrick on February 10. It is presumed that the letter not mentioning the aircraft accidents was written first, but this is uncertain. Accordingly, the letters are designated in this article with a [1] or a [2] based on their order in the file folder.
26. *Ibid.*
27. *Air Service News Letter*, February 17, 1923, p. 15.
28. Report to the Adjutant General, May 15, 1923, in 201 File, Lewis Hyde Brereton, Military Personnel Records, National Personnel Records Center, St. Louis, Missouri.
29. Art, "Mitchell Tests Plane Carrying 8 Machine Guns," *San Antonio Express*, February 6, 1923, p. 3.
30. *Air Service News Letter*, April 12, 1920, pp. 1-2. A photograph from the National Museum of the U.S. Air Force, Dayton, Ohio, shows another variant, a DH-4 with the second pair of Marlin guns mounted outside the fuselage over the wing pointed forward and down. Both the Lewis and Marlin were light-weight, air-cooled machine guns. The former featured a self-contained ammunition drum containing 97 rounds mounted on top the gun, while the latter was a belt-fed weapon that adapted well to existing interrupter gears. See "Lewis Gun," First World War.Com, www.firstworldwar.com/atoz/mgun_marlin.htm and "Marlin Gun," First World War.Com, www.firstworldwar.com/atoz/mgun_marlin.htm
31. The 26th Attack Squadron reportedly flew the "B-15" version of the DH-4B modified for low-level strafing. This variant is not further described, but may have designated a type equipped with a nonstandard armament that might include additional machine guns. Cortesi, *The Grim Reapers*, pp. 3-4.
32. George H. Beverley, *Pioneer in the Air Corps: The Memoirs of Brigadier General George H. Beverley* (Manhattan, Kans.: Sunflower University Press, 1982), p. 21; Photo no. 3B-05703, "Armament on DH-4," Box 1018, 342 HS, Still Photographs Division, National Archives and Records Administration (NARA), College Park, Md.
33. Cortesi, *The Grim Reapers*, pp. 3-4.
34. *Air Service News Letter*, March 21, 1923, pp. 14-15.
35. Cortesi, *The Grim Reapers*, pp. 3-4.
36. *Air Service News Letter*, March 21, 1923, pp. 14-15.
37. Art, "Kelly Flyers Die in Laredo Plane Crash," *San Antonio Express*, February 10, 1923, p. 1.
38. *Air Service News Letter*, March 21, 1923, pp. 14-15.
39. Rpt, "Honsinger, 2nd Lt. Frank T.," February 9, 1923, Aircraft Accident and Incident Reports, 200.3912-1, Air Force Historical Research Agency, Maxwell AFB, Alabama (Hereafter cited as AFHRA.); Art, "Two Army Fliers Killed at Texas Maneuvers," *The Washington Post*, February 10, 1923, p. 3; Art, "Two Aviators Die in Crash," *New York Times*, February 10, 1923, p. 13.
40. Rpt, "Martin, 1st Lt. Harry J.," February 10, 1923, Aircraft Accident and Incident Reports, 200.3912-1, AFHRA.
41. Ltr, Mitchell to Patrick, February 10, 1923 [2], File General Correspondence, 1925 (1 of 7), Box 11, Mitchell Papers, LoC.
42. *Ibid.*
43. *Ibid.*
44. Rpt, "Rich, 2nd Lt. Arnold H.," February 9, 1923, Aircraft Accident and Incident Reports, 200.3912-1, AFHRA.
45. Rpt, "Honsinger, 2nd Lt. Frank T.," February 9, 1923, *Ibid.*
46. "Martin, 1st Lt. Harry J.," February 10, 1923, *Ibid.*
47. Ltr, Mitchell to Patrick, February 10, 1923 [2], File General Correspondence, 1925 (1 of 7), Box 11, Mitchell Papers, LoC.
48. *Ibid.*
49. Intvw, Gen. Orval R. Cook, June 4-5, August 6-7, 1974, p. 106, U.S. Air Force Oral History Program, K239.0512-740, AFHRA.
50. *Ibid.*, pp. 106-107.
51. Beverley, *Pioneer in the Air Corps*, p. 21.
52. Intvw, Cook, pp. 106-107; Beverley, *Pioneer in the Air Corps*, p. 21.
53. Intvw, Cook, p. 107.
54. Rpt, "Martin, 1st Lt. Harry J.," February 10, 1923, Aircraft Accident and Incident Reports, 200.3912-1, AFHRA.
55. "Honsinger, 2nd Lt. Frank T.," February 9, 1923, *Ibid.*
56. Intvw, Cook, p. 107.