

October 2023



"It's your New York!"

The Rondout Reader

American Air Power



Quest for Supremacy

By Kevin Ahearn



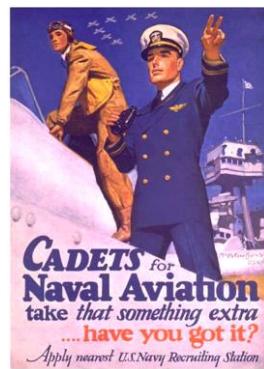
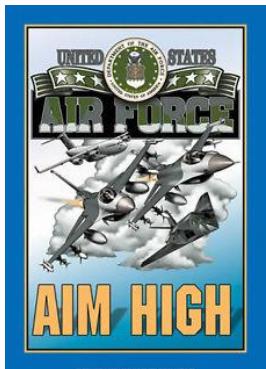
"Father of the United States Air Force"
COLONEL "BILLY" MITCHELL



“Airmen and airwomen everywhere...”



Regardless of rank, age, race, religion, gender, social preference, and branch of military service, if you fly to defend the United States of America or love and support those who do, you are my sons and daughters.



And I love each and every one of you. Always will. I'm the arrogant, abrasive son-of-a-bitch who got you your jobs!

1



BELIEF



"I cannot conceive of any use that the fleet will ever have for aircraft...The Navy doesn't need airplanes. Aviation is just a lot of noise."



"Air is one and indivisible, under neither the Army or Navy, an independent branch, the Royal Air Force."



"A popular fantasy is to suppose that flying machines could be used to drop dynamite on the enemy in time of war".

FEBRUARY 15, 1898



I've always believed in myself and in my country.



Being rich helped. I was born in France and when my family returned to America three years later, I could speak fluent French, good Spanish and German, and passable Italian.

But it would be my uncompromising English that would get me into so much trouble.



Growing up in Wisconsin, I set out to work hard at being the best at everything I did--hunting, fishing, horseback riding. Sailing with other children, I was always the captain. At prep school and college, I played quarterback.



Grandfather had been a businessman, banker and railroad president, and two-term member of Congress. Father was a financier and bank president and a US Senator. America's inspiring past and glowing future ignited me. My path was not yet chosen, but I was determined to make a mark of my own.

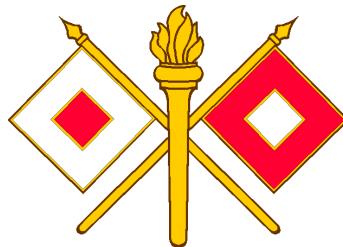
I was eighteen when the battleship *Maine* blew up in Havana Harbor. Father would soon vote to declare war on Spain.

"I'm going home to pack," I announced.

Life was going to be an adventure! But first, because I was so young, I needed my parents' consent. Mom and Dad would not hold me back and off I went! After three weeks of rigorous training...



But I would be no ordinary infantry soldier. Family connections got me assigned to the Army Signal Corps to be an *officer*.



With plenty of childhood practice, I quickly proved myself a leader, but too late for the war, getting to Havana for Spain's surrender.

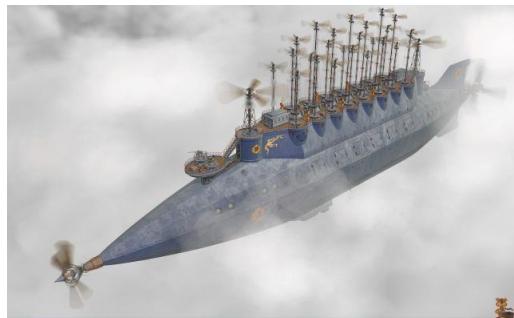


My Signal Corps mission was to lay telephone and telegram lines across the island. The 'wires of progress' and I was at the forefront. Then to the Philippines and Alaska. My men worked hard and got things done, making me the youngest captain in the Army.

All the while I read and researched and studied the latest innovations...



*"To invent an airplane is nothing. To build one is something.
But to fly is everything."*

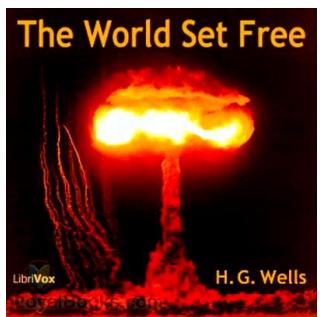


"Anything one man can imagine, other men can make real"

In 1906 came a heartbreak task: reconnecting a city to the world.

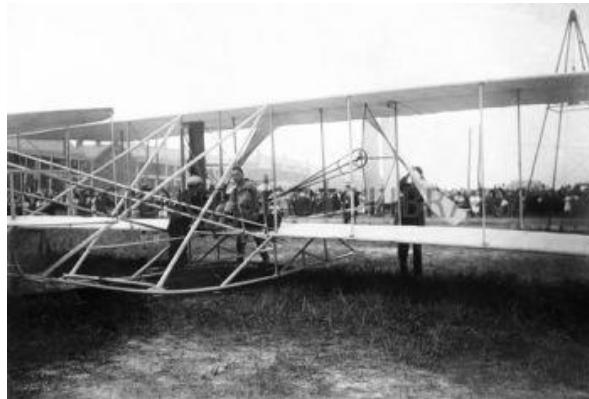


In the center of shattered San Francisco, I imagined the consequences if Man should ever possess such destructive power.



"Men rode upon the whirlwind that night and slew and fell like archangels. The sky rained heroes upon the astonished earth."

Two years later as Chief Signal Officer at Fort Myer, Virginia, and well aware of the strides made in aerial reconnaissance by balloons. I was eager to witness the demonstration of a new machine.



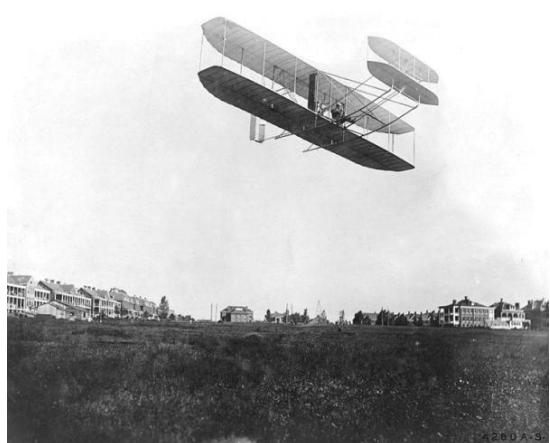
I inspected the 'Model A' closely. Mostly wood and cables, the stuff of telephone and telegraph lines.

Meeting the brilliant Orville Wright, I hoped that we would become friends. So far, the airplane's few flights had been mere 'hops'. How far would it go in the future?



"When my brother and I built the first man-carrying flying machine we thought that we were introducing into the world an invention which would make further wars practically impossible."

I stood barely fifty yards from the crude catapult that sent the craft hurdling across the field...and then...it *flew!*



Jumping into the sky, the winged thing became a *power*, an almost mythical miracle! At that moment I understood I knew nothing of the airplane except where it was going.

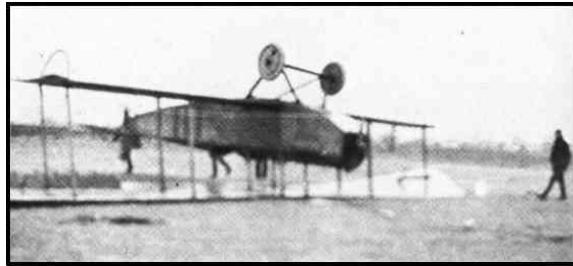


"...future war will be conducted by a special class, the air force, as it was by the armored Knights of the Middle Ages."

I longed to follow the 'Model A' and Orville to Europe, but orders were orders and I was sent back to Cuba, and then again to the Philippines. From there I journeyed to Japan, hard at work to become a future power in the Pacific. At the end of 1911, the Japanese air force had a dozen airplanes, more than the United States.

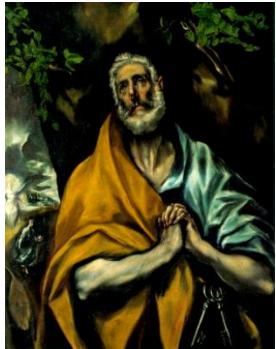
After attending the Army Staff College, I became the only Signal Corps officer on the Army General Staff in 1913 and got to know early military aviators. Made deputy commander of the aviation section in 1916, without knowing how to fly, I took private lessons at my own expense.

Finally ready for my first solo, all went well until...



I would try again and this time got my license. And with the possibility of war growing every day in Europe, off to France I went to study the production of military aircraft.

By the time I arrived, the United States had declared war on Germany. On April 17th, 1917, I became the first US officer to fly over enemy lines.



For a moment I felt like St. Peter, christening the first church; in an unarmed plane flown by a Frenchman, I *founded* American Air Power!

War is decided by getting at the vitals of the enemy, that is, to shoot him in the heart. This kind of war is like clipping off one finger, then a toe, then an ear, then his nose and gradually eating into his vitals. Would it go on forever?



Orville Wright believed the airplane's greatest power was 'to see the other side of the hill'. Aerial photography lay the enemy's forces bare. The first fighters were built to shoot down reconnaissance planes. More took to the skies to protect them. The battle for 'air superiority' took flight.



Winning the war in the air would make the sky safe for the bombers, the knockout punch of air power. The enemy could be bombed directly, *tactical* bombing to destroy its armies on the battlefield, *strategic* bombing, hitting the enemy's cities and factories.



For thousands of years, armies and navies had clashed in countless wars. Suddenly the airplane could only overwhelm them both and take command of war, but with sufficient air power, defeat the enemy on its own.

On a fine Sunday morning, a full year after the United States entered the war, I got the first American combat squadron into the air. We had to jump the Germans! I've seen their movement to the rear with my own eyes. Forget the artillery if it means delay. If we advance fast, the artillery would probably shoot a lot of our own men anyway.

At the Battle of Saint-Mihiel I led nearly 1,500 British, French and Italian planes to support American ground forces. But not a single fighter or bomber had been built in the US; we'd surrendered the Wright Brothers' leadership to the Europeans.

War in the air begins *on the ground*; my Air Service built airfields, hangars and support facilities. With Victory, I had won a bunch of medals, and couldn't wait to get back and become Chief of the American Air Service.

The Army and Navy were 'not amused'; the press loved me.



"If a nation ambitious for universal conquest gets off to a flying start in a war of the future, it may be able to control the whole world more easily than a nation has controlled a continent in the past."

Back home in 1919, I was appointed assistant chief of the U.S. Army Air Service. (My boss had never been *in* a plane.) What 'Air Service'? Peace had killed all that I had built. The one combat aircraft manufactured in America was obsolete before it ever left the runway.



I wanted more for the Air Service: a special corps of mechanics, troop-carrying aircraft, a civilian pilot pool for wartime, long-range bombers capable of flying the Atlantic and armor-piercing bombs. We needed bombsights, ski-equipped aircraft, engine superchargers and aerial torpedoes.

The airplane was just as essential in peacetime. I established aerial forest-fire and border patrols, then ordered a mass flight to Alaska, a transcontinental air race and a flight around the perimeter of the United States. Breaking aviation records would keep us in the news. We had to have *headlines!*



"The infantry officer's horizon was at the end of a day's march. The cavalryman saw a little further, a little faster. The artilleryman could see to the end of his trajectories. But none of them could see into the air."

The United States had 39 battleships. Some were obsolete, brought out of mothballs for the war and soon to be retired again, but most were still battleworthy. Reductions to US Air Service had been crippling, but Congress approved a naval expansion of 10 additional battleships.



“German militarism endangers the world”, I warned the nation. The armistice ending the war had come without complete victory sealed by a harsh treaty. Germany would soon rise again and the British Isles will be vulnerable to mass aerial attack.

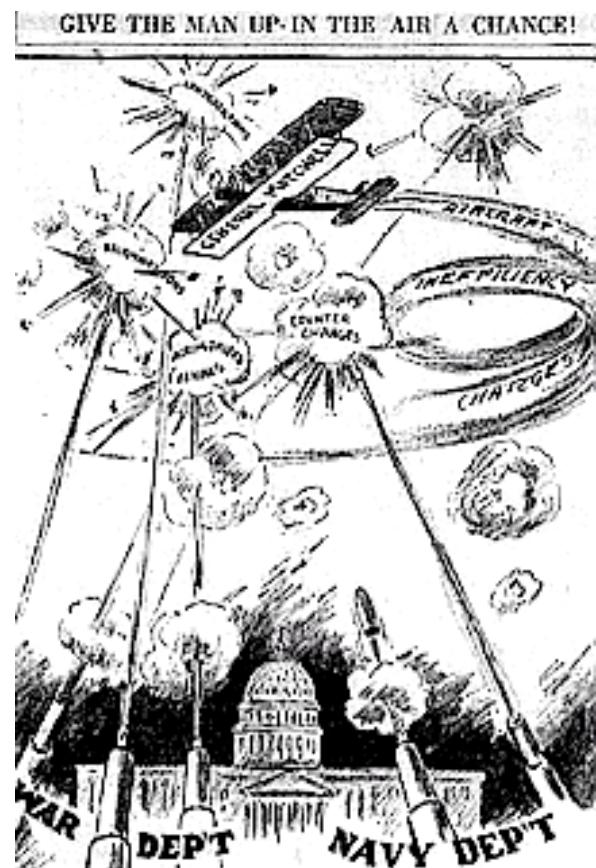


"He's the Prince of the Air right now."

As for Pearl Harbor...If our warships were to be found bottled up in a surprise attack from the air and our airplanes destroyed on the ground, nothing but a miracle would enable us to hold our Far East possessions. It would break our backs. Same with the Philippines.



The blind, stubborn admirals cited 'national security' and 'American jobs'; God bless Free Speech and The Press! I was going to smoke those people out that did not believe in the air business and either make them 'fish or cut bait'.



The General Staff knew as much about the air as a hog did about skating.



"Give me some battleships to bomb and come watch us sink-em!"

2



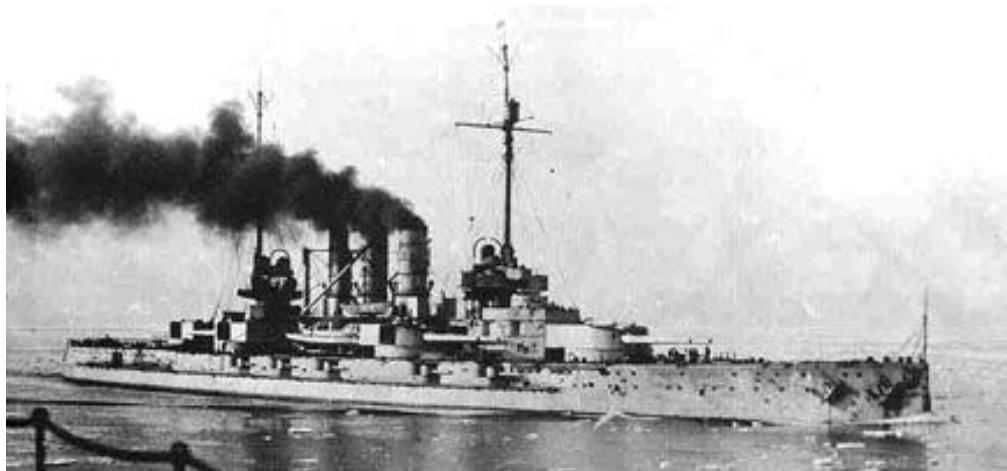
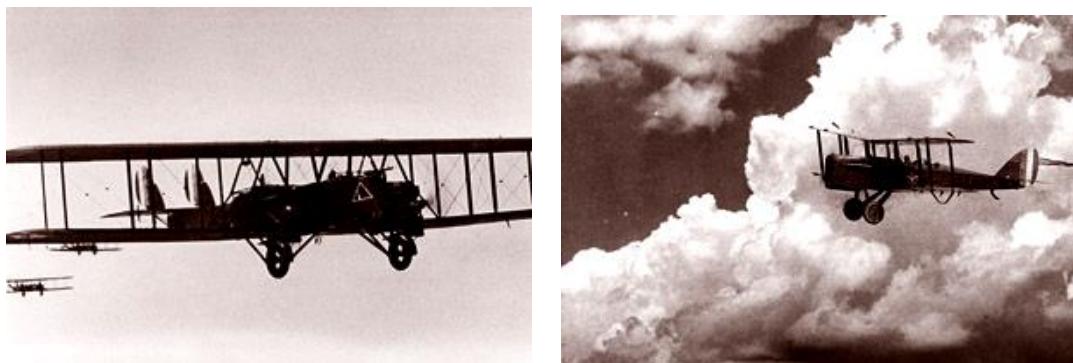
“Bombs away!”



JULY 20-21, 1921



*"Without a decisive naval force we can do nothing definitive,
and with it, everything honorable and glorious."*





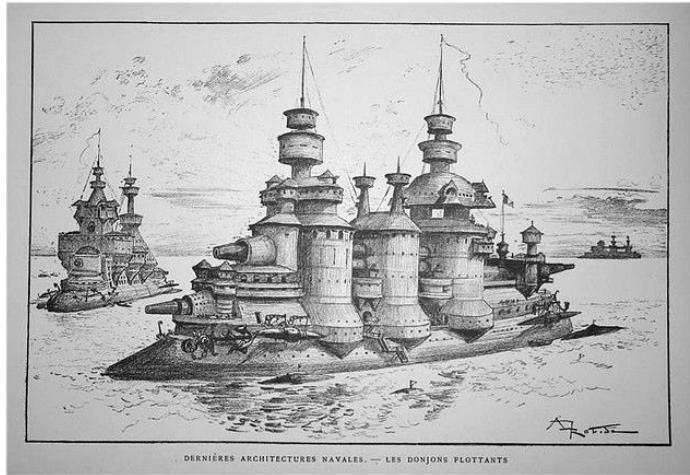
*"That idea is so damned nonsensical and impossible
that I'm willing to stand on the bridge of a battleship
while that nitwit tries to hit if from the air."*



*"Whoever commands the sea, commands the trade;
whosoever commands the trade of the world commands
the riches of the world, and consequently the world itself."*



"This operation will make him or break him."



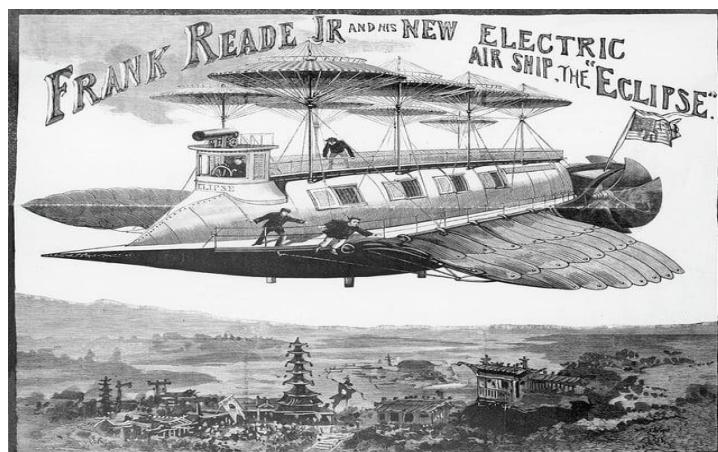
We would not fly unprepared. I assembled the 'First Provisional Air Brigade' and ordered practice with 200-pound Navy bombs slung under the wings against mock targets near Langley Field.

Not enough to damage the surface ships. I had to sink them. Leave no doubt. Had to make the Navy, and all America, *believe*:

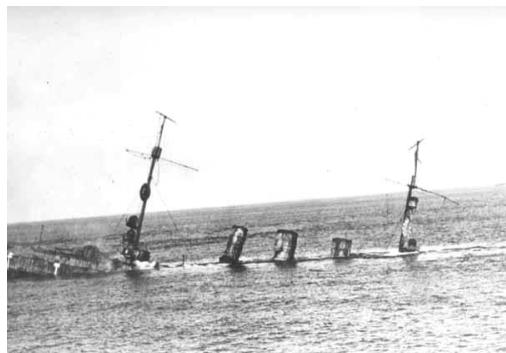
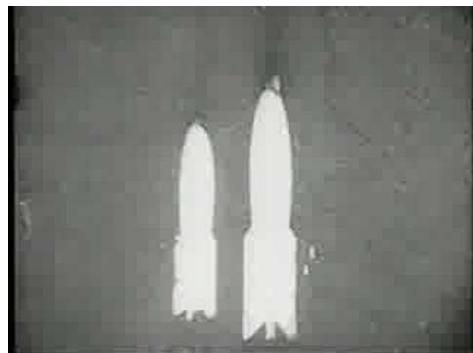


**THE FUTURE OF THE NATION IS
FOREVER BOUND UP IN THE
DEVELOPMENT OF AIR POWER.**

*"Good God! This man should be
writing dime novels."*



First up was the German cruiser *Frankfurt*...



Next, the destroyer *G102*...



Both went down. Then...



The New York Times

"Naval officers are insisting that the fliers will never sink the Ostfriesland at all."



Instead of using small Navy bombs, we loaded up with 2000-pounders supplied by the Army. In twenty-two minutes...

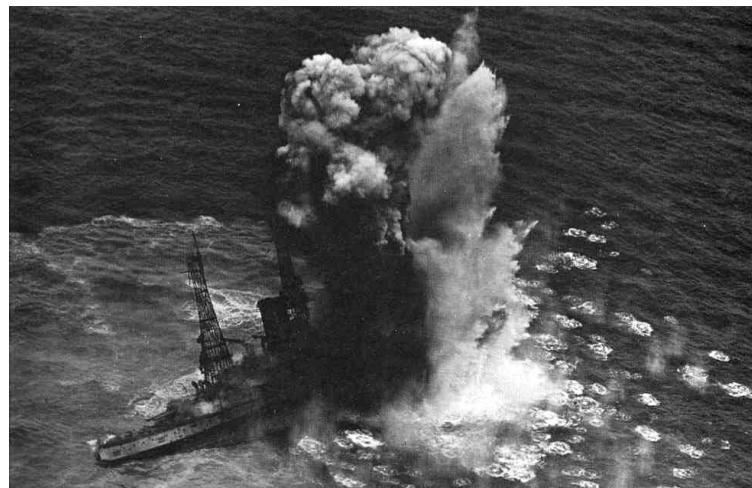


"Such an experiment without actual conditions of war to support it is a foolish waste of time."

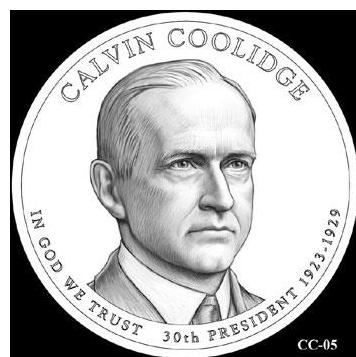


"The battleship is still the backbone of the fleet and the bulwark of the nation's sea defense."

In later tests, the *Alabama*...



Then down went the *New Jersey* and the *Virginia*...



*"The battleship has been fully vindicated.
There will be no change in defense policy."*

Air power could not only sink ships, but also destroy cities. To prove it, I led my bombers on a mock attack.

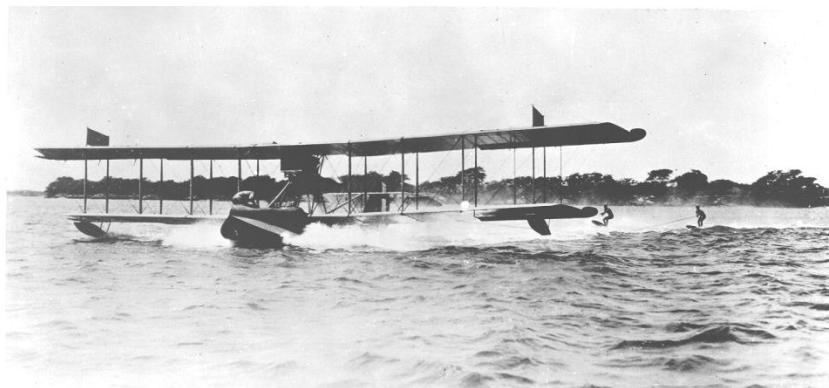


Flying down Broadway to the tip of Manhattan Island, we picked landmark buildings as targets. With just 21 tons of bombs, air power would have paralyzed the city.



"New York City could be effectively attacked from the air."

The War Department wanted me gone, and shipped me out to Hawaii. I came back with a vengeance, detailing the poor defenses I found.



"Have they no better use for airplanes?"

Not home for long, I was sent to Europe and then the Far East and returned in 1924 with a report.



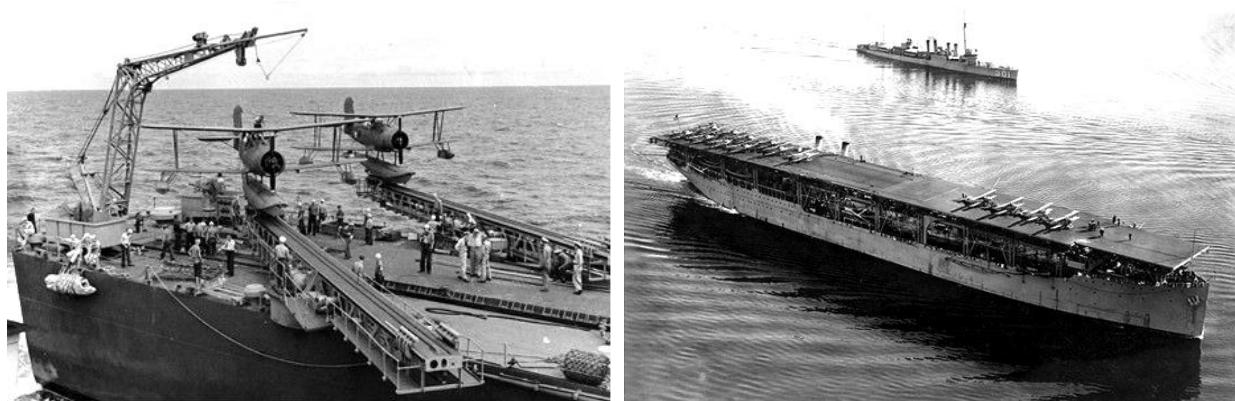
"Japan is preparing her whole war-making powers so that every advantage can be taken of new developments in the art of war."

The Army reacted like 'a green demolition team approaching an unexploded bomb.' The Air Service got no money, still flew obsolete, dangerous aircraft. With every crash, I held Washington responsible.



"Should there be such a war America would have to fight it a long way from home...It would be gravely embarrassing to the American people if the ideas of your General Mitchell were more appreciated in Japan than in the United States."

I kept writing, the Navy's job was to counter threats approaching the United States from the sea. I wanted catapult-launched planes from capital ships to provide early warning, or even better...



The Navy wouldn't listen, again postponing the construction of its first aircraft carrier. When my appointment with the Air Service expired in 1925, I was demoted back to colonel and exiled to Texas.

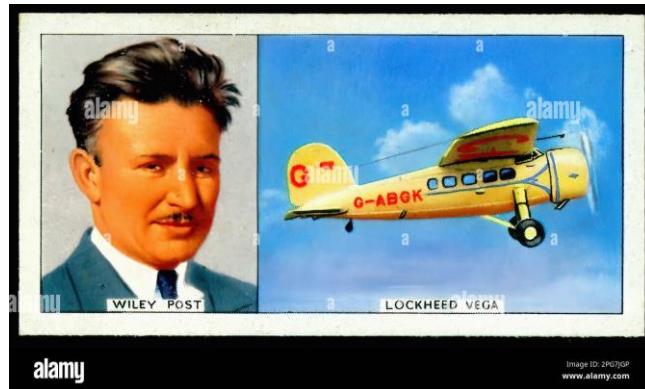
Finally rid of me? Not a chance! When an overloaded Navy dirigible crashed, killing more than a dozen airmen, I let loose with a broadside.



"...Incompetency, criminal negligence, and the almost treasonable negligence of our national defense by the War and Navy departments. All aviation policies, schemes and systems are dictated by the non-flying officers of the Army and Navy, who know practically nothing about it. I can stand by no longer and see these disgusting performances...at the expense of the lives of our people, and the delusions of the American public."



They court-martialed me for insubordination, *not* because I wrong. American reality had nothing to do it. The grand military tradition had to be protected. Colonels and generals would decide my fate.



"Billy Mitchell is the only man ever connected with high-up- aviation in Washington to use the air for anything but exhaling purposes."

Crowds poured in to watch while the newspapers poured it on.

'Insubordination and folly' charged *The New York Times*. *Herald Tribune*: 'Opinionative, arrogant and intolerant.' From the *Kansas City Star*: 'a zealot, a fanatic, a one-idea man.'

After seven weeks, I was found guilty on all counts, topped off with a '26-gun' coup de grace from the Army Judge Advocate:



"Is such a man a safe guide? Is he a constructive person or is he a loose talking imaginative megalomaniac?... Is this man a Moses, fitted to lead the people out of a wilderness?... Is he not rather the all too familiar charlatan and demagogue type...and except for a decided difference in poise and mental powers in Burr's favor, like Aaron Burr?"

I resigned from the Army and took a trip, four months from coast to coast, lecturing, showing films of the ship bombings, always pushing the necessity for military preparedness in the air.



Love for the airplane, the technical miracle of my lifetime, kept me fighting away. And the wondrous things it could make happen.



Its beauty, grace and power, above all, aviation made me *imagine...*



We were living under a new sky; the airplane was going to forever change national defense and transportation.



Crossing oceans non-stop, fighting for the sky at more than 1000 miles per hour.



All over the world and possibly beyond into interstellar space.

America had to *believe*. Writing and lecturing, my goal was to found a University of Aviation that would place the United States forever first in the development of air power.



The Great Depression postponed my dream and millions of others.

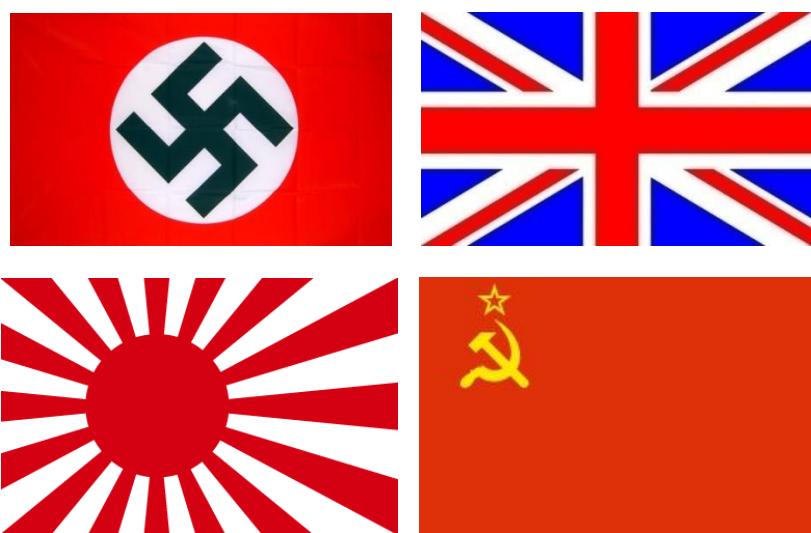


A new voice took to the stage.

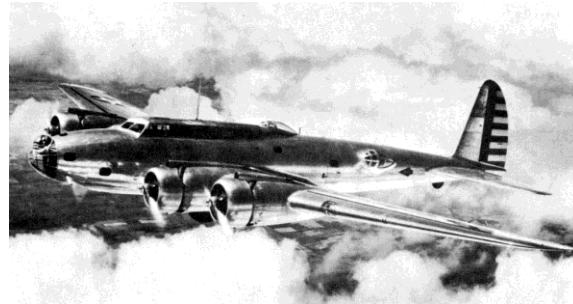


"The next war will be very different from the last."

Beyond our shores, powerful air forces were being readied...



Finally, the United States produced its first great plane.



Based on both coasts, the mission of the Boeing B-17 was to fly out more than 200 miles to drop bombs on invading enemy battleships.

My health began to betray me. If I could have flown just one more mission to prove the priceless value of air power...



*"Beauty did not kill the beast.
The airplanes got'em!"*

Near the end, I sought final rest, turning down an Army plot in Arlington Cemetery to be buried in Milwaukie.



I believed in what I stood for, and too often, stood alone. I hope I'll be remembered as an American who did everything he could for the defense of his country.

Of all the predictions I made, one I feared most:



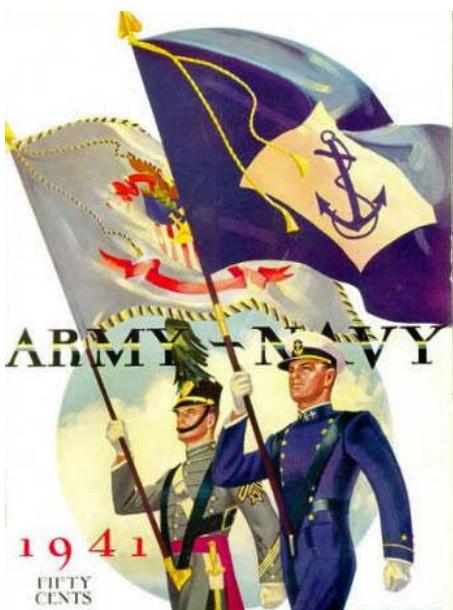
**WITHOUT DECLARING WAR, JAPANESE AIR POWER WILL ATTACK
PEARL HARBOR, ONE SUNDAY MORNING.**

3



INFAMY

NOVEMBER 29, 1941



From the **Official Game Program**: beside a picture of Arizona: *"It is significant that despite claims of air enthusiasts no battleship has yet been sunk by bombs."*

TWO SUNDAYS LATER



"I fear all we have done is to awaken a sleeping giant and fill him with a terrible resolve."

Finally, an admiral gets one *right* -- Pearl Harbor ignited the torch of American Air Power!



"We must be the great arsenal of democracy."

The first American heroes of the WW II air war never left the ground.



And the *first* to strike back at the enemy homeland...

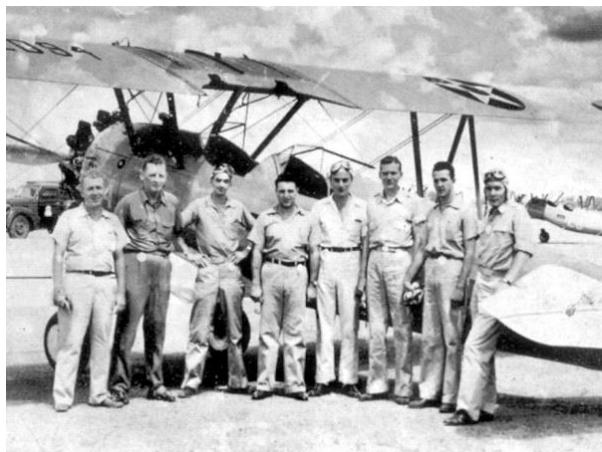


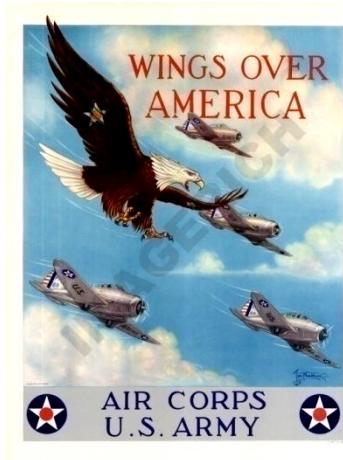
Sixteen bombers on a one-way mission to Tokyo and the wild blue yonder...



B-25 Mitchell Bombers!

American Air Power had entered the war late, weak and unprepared.





We got strong in a hurry, pilots, navigators and bombardiers training at Roswell Field in New Mexico.



The spirit of American Air Power **never let up!**



We paid a fearsome price to win the air war over Europe!



In the Pacific, the largest, most powerful, most fearsome battleship ever built sailed out to challenge...



And was swiftly sunk **by American Air Power..**



We just didn't beat the Japs and the Nazis, we overwhelmed them. God bless America's Industrial Might!

The Axis started the war with the world's mightiest air forces!



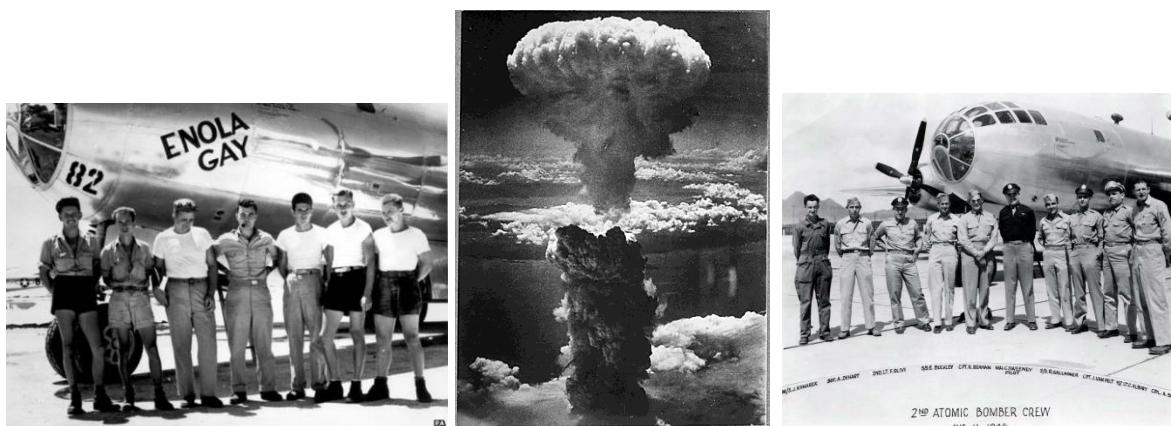
United as never before, over the course of the war, US Industrial Might produced nearly 400,000 airplanes of all types!



Our enemies flew into the “dustbin of history”!

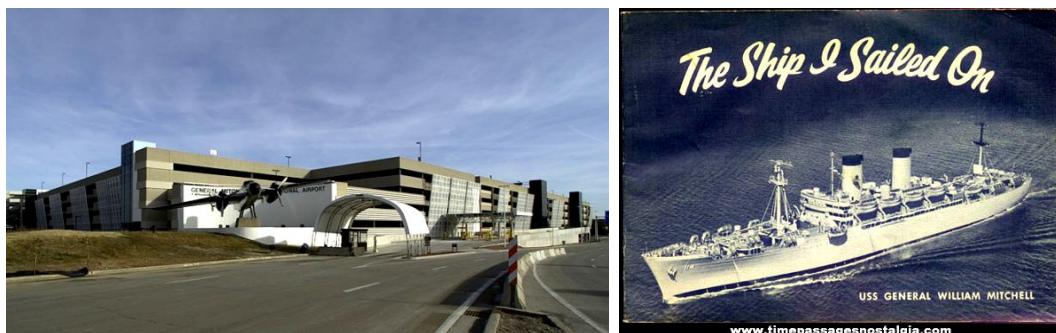


The final missions...

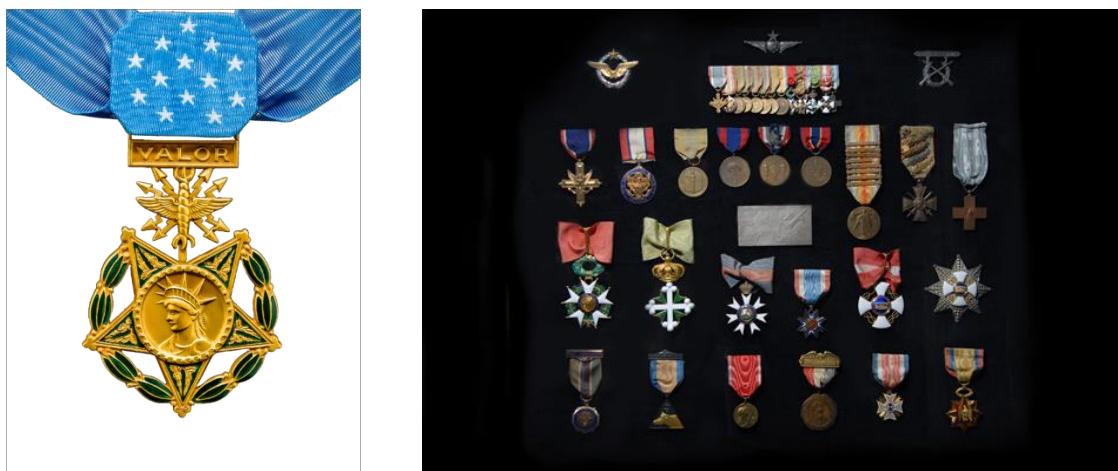


The war over and won, American Air Power had achieved Global Air Supremacy!

Milwaukee named their airport after me, and look what I got from the Coast Guard!



In 1946 Congress posthumously awarded me a special Congressional **Medal of Honor** in recognition for his "outstanding pioneer service and foresight" in the field of American military aviation.



My stature does *not* belong in an airport annex...



But *larger-than-life* in front of the National Air & Space Museum.



*“Roger wilco, American Air Power had achieved Supremacy!
But America was still not safe!”*

(To be continued...)



“All my stories are free to read and they always will be.” KA

The Rondout Reader

FROM ELLENVILLE TO KINGSTON



AN INDELIBLE SCRAPBOOK

by Kevin Ahern

The Rondout Reader

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“The greatest adventure of the 21st Century!”

Center City Chronicle

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