

## Air and Space this Week

### Item of the Week

## ***General Billy Mitchell and the SMS Ostfriesland***

Originally appeared July 12, 2021

**KEY WORDS:** Billy Mitchell Ostfriesland Air power Project B Bombing Test Court Martial

*The story of extremely air-minded Army General Billy Mitchell is, like many momentous effects on history, a complicated and controversial thing. A number of books have been written about it, and Mitchell is included as a significant part of other analyses. It is my hope here to provide an overview summary, and (in the website version) numerous references and links so you can explore further this interesting period of our history. After all, he is considered by many to be the “patriarch” of the U.S. Air Force! The most momentous event in Mitchell’s career came one hundred years ago, on **July 21, 1921**.*

### **THE SMS OSTFRIESLAND**

The first decade of the last century was a time of rapid evolution for naval warships. Armor and armaments grew heavier, but coal-fired boilers still provided propulsion. One of Germany’s most important naval shipyards was the Imperial Works at Wilhelmshaven. The star of this part of our story is one of four sister battleships built there, each equipped with a dozen 12” naval rifles arranged in 6 turrets, bow, stern, and quarters. They sported 11” main armor, and could make 21 knots. The four were named for regions of Germany; Ostfriesland – east of the Frisian Islands – is the northwestern corner of Germany. The four sisters were part of the German Battle Squadron 1, and they participated in a number of actions against the British Grand Fleet, including the Battle of Jutland.

The four sisters were assigned one final mission as the end of the Great War approached. They were ordered to sortie against the vastly superior Grand Fleet and inflict as much damage as possible before the Armistice was signed, a suicide mission. The crews mutinied at the thought of being needlessly sacrificed in a lost cause, and their mission was canceled.

After WWI, a number of surrendered German naval ships were moved to the big British base at Scapa Flow, where British inattention, and German boldness, resulted in the ships being scuttled by their crews rather than going to the victors.

The four sisters, however, were retained in Germany, and the *SMS Ostfriesland* eventually was awarded to the United States as part of Germany’s war reparations. However, many of the relics of WWI rapidly become technologically obsolete, and post-War economic and political pressures made them unfit for front-line service.

But they still had one valuable function to perform.

The U.S. Navy, and many of its foreign counterparts, conduct extensive research into naval engineering. Especially valuable is live, full-scale testing, when a real target ship is attacked by real ordnance of different types. The *SMS Ostfriesland*, along with the German cruiser *Frankfurt*, the U.S. battleship *Iowa*, and several smaller ships were slated to be such test subjects.

The plan was for the *Ostfriesland* to be at anchor, without anyone aboard or any anti-air defenses, while weapons of progressively-larger destructive power were used against it. A significant time interval between attacks would allow an inspection team to board the target ship to observe, document, and assess the damage each attack caused.

### **WILLIAM LENDRUM “BILLY” MITCHELL**

Billy Mitchell was born on December 29, 1879, in Nice, France. His father was a U.S. Senator from Wisconsin and his family was well-connected both economically and politically. His father fought in the Civil War with Arthur and Douglas MacArthur, and his grandfather founded a railroad and a bank in Milwaukee.

Young Mitchell dropped out of college for a period in order to enlist in the U.S. Army and serve in the Spanish-American War. He was assigned to Arthur MacArthur’s Philippine command, and fought insurgents for the duration, receiving a commission at the end of the conflict. He was in the Army Signal Corps, and his next assignment led him to establish a telegraph communications system connecting the far-flung military and mining bases in Alaska.

The distances and difficulties involved in transportation and communications in such difficult terrain inspired Mitchell to think about aviation, and interest that would be significantly increased when he saw Orville Wright’s flying demonstration at Ft. Myer, in Virginia. Mitchell had to find out more about aviation’s potential, so he enrolled in a Curtiss flight school program.

Mitchell was attracting a lot of attention as a “comer” in the service, a young officer with a bright future. In early 1912, he toured the battlefields of the Russo-Japanese War, and also became familiar with the enormous geography of the Pacific Ocean. He concluded that war with Japan was likely in the future, and that aviation would play a much larger role in wartime operations than most fellow officers believed. He was selected to serve as one of the 21 officers on the General Staff at age 32, the youngest ever.

The rivalry between the Army and the Navy transcended rank, and was much more than a few bets on an annual service football game. There was a lot of “turf” involved, and this was a time when military budgets were contracting, not expanding. The Army’s aviation activities had fallen under the purview of the Signal Corps, but Mitchell became an outspoken advocate of air power deserving its own, separate, service.

Mitchell was the only Army Signal Corps member on the General Staff, and when the head of the AAS got into trouble and was relieved, Mitchell assumed temporary command for a brief period. He was not allowed to continue flight training (too much age and too much rank) but

he completed it just the same on his own. He made Major in July, 1916, and posted to the Chief of the Air Service of the First Army.

During WWI, Major Mitchell was sent to coordinate air efforts with Britain and France. He was a “lead from the front” kind of commander, and would make the first flight over German lines by any American officer. His reputation as a resourceful fighter and good leader grew, and he had a couple of promotions. He successfully led a 1500-plane multi-national air attack in the Battle of Saint-Mihiel, received a promotion to light colonel, and ended the War as the Chief of Air Service, with a chest-full of medals, including the DFC, the DSM, and more.

General Mitchell was expecting to be named the Director of Air Service for the entire Army after returning home. However, that billet was given to an artilleryman friend of a classmate of General Pershing. The idea was to keep Army aviation under the strict control of the ground Army, something that Mitchell thought was ridiculous.

Mitchell’s thinking about aviation and U.S. Navy was equally at odds with the battleship admirals dominating Navy command. The Navy did not think that anything associated with the Army would appreciate the aviation needs of the Navy, but worse, they realized that Mitchell was likely correct when he began spouting off about the surface Navy becoming obsolete since their pretty battleships couldn’t avoid aerial bombs. Mitchell was right in the long run, but was ahead of his time, and his brusque manner offended many of the officers in both services.

### **PROJECT B – A LIVE ORDINANCE TEST on JULY 21, 1921**

The Army and Navy agreed to conduct the testing briefly described in the Introduction to this Item. Project B would involve a series of tests under a variety of conditions, using live ordinance against real (if obsolete) naval targets.

General Mitchell made a series of public statements prior to the tests, widely reported to the public, that battleships were an obsolete waste of money; they cost a thousand times as much as an airplane, which could sink them with one bomb. He said that airborne anti-shiping aircraft could keep opposing naval forces from getting within range of American coastal facilities (the origin of the “Flying Fortress” idea – a flying coastal defense weapon rather than one fortified against opposing planes). He stressed that his planes could easily sink a battleship, and would prove it if he was allowed to.

The Navy pushed back. Hard. Secretary of the Navy Daniels publicly stated that he would gladly stand on the bridge of any target ship during an Army bombing attack (which actually would have proved to be a pretty safe bet). The Navy even preemptively struck with its own bombing test against ships, publicly concluding that “(it was an) improbability (that) a modern battleship (could be) destroyed or completely put out of action by aerial bombs.” The value of the Navy’s “demonstration” plummeted when it came out that they hadn’t actually conducted a bombing test; the bombs dropped were actually sandbags, and the target ship was sunk with pre-set explosives.

A series of tests were conducted without controversy against small ships during June and early July, 1921. Then the big days came, starting on July 20, 1921. The *Ostfriesland* was anchored and defenseless. The first wave of attacking bombers would drop small bombs, 230 pounds

each. A wave of bombers flew over, dropping 33 bombs, with only 8 hits. As was expected from the small size of the bombs, there was superficial damage to the *Ostfriesland's* upper works, but no significant damage to her big guns or hull.

Next up were three waves of bombers, one with more 230-pound bombs, the two with 270 pounders. Only five of the larger bombs hit. Inspection showed that again, there was no major damage to the heavier structures of the battleship, but there was some superficial damage topside. Inspection showed that it was near misses, and the water-transmitted concussion that they caused, that resulted in more hull damage than the hits did. Thus ended the first day of the testing.

A fifth wave of bombers attacked the *Ostfriesland* early in the morning on July 21. This time they would be dropping 1000-pound bombs. The planes could carry only one bomb that heavy; six were dropped (against a stationary, undefended target); three were hits. Inspection showed that the resulting damage was not fatal, but there was some flooding from a minor hull breach. Inspection would take place later that day to show just how much damage the half-tonners had caused.

This concluded the test program as approved by the Navy. The *Ostfriesland* was taking on water slowly, but would likely have survived in a normal damage-control environment. It's also likely that even more misses would have taken place if the battleship had been underway and firing back.

Mitchell was determined to prove his boast, so he sent in a final wavy of bombers that afternoon, armed with 2000-pound bombs, before the afternoon inspection could take place. His planes dropped six bombs, with no hits (did I mention the *Ostfriesland* was at anchor?). The concussion was devastating, however, and the poor old *Ostfriesland* rolled over and sank.

General Mitchell was jubilant, and in trouble. He had seriously violated the terms of the testing and undermined much of its value. He went to the press to brag about the results being just as he predicted, and much of the press responded with him as the "infallible prophet of aviation." Exaggerations were rife on both sides.

President Harding and the Navy brass were angry because Mitchell's actions made the Navy and its penchant for battleships look weak at a time of tense international negotiation over curtailing naval strength worldwide. General Pershing dismissed Mitchell's views and suppressed the sinking report, which was leaked to the press and made public anyway.

The Chief of the Army Air Corps, and told the Secretary of War he would resign if Mitchell were not immediately relieved of his Deputy AAC role. The Secretary declined and the Chief AAS followed through on his promise and resigned. Mitchell offered to resign, but it was not accepted. A new Chief was installed, who told Mitchell that his counsel was welcome, but all decisions would be made by him.

Mitchell may have been an accurate prophet, but he was at best difficult to deal with. A stubborn zealot who drank too much, Mitchell was called in to quell the May, 1920, mine strike in West Virginia that pitted miners against the Stone Mountain Company. The Company hired a private army of 3000 and used private planes to drop dynamite on the miners, ten of whom were killed in the fighting. Mitchell provided planes that conducted aerial reconnaissance,

losing one with its full crew in a crash. He threatened to have U.S. Army planes drop tear gas on the miners in their bunkers so the other militia goons could shoot them. He became an enthusiastic proponent of using military air power against civilians, even Americans.

The Army and Navy were in discussions with how to best incorporate aviation into the defense of the United States, and the U.S. House of Representatives were interested in the issue. The Navy refused a proposal to expand the existing Air Service as a jointly-controlled entity, enraging Mitchell.

Mitchell's term as Deputy Chief of the AAS was just that, a term, which expired in March, 1925. His promotion to Brigadier General had come with the assignment; when his term expired, he reverted back to his base rank of colonel (not uncommon in those days). It was not a demotion for cause. He tried to get his term extended, but failed.

In September, 1925, the Army zeppelin, *USS Shenandoah*, went down in Illinois during a storm while on a publicity trip. Fourteen of her crew perished in the crash. Three seaplanes were lost on a flight from the West Coast to Hawaii that same month. Mitchell intemperately accused top brass in both services with "incompetence and almost treasonable administration of the national defense."

### **THE COURT MARTIAL and AFTERMATH**

Gee, ya think the brass might get angry at that? You'd be right. Mitchell was hauled up on charges, eight specifications to be exact. One of the court martial judges was Douglas MacArthur, and the trial was a great public sensation. A number of prominent aviators testified on Mitchell's behalf, including Eddie Rickenbacker, Hap Arnold, Carl Spaatz, Ira Eaker, and even Fiorella LaGuardia. But their defense and support were based on their perception of his beliefs on air power as accurate, not the military charges of insubordination at hand.

It was a pretty open-and-shut case. There was some truth to Mitchell's words, but no doubt of his insubordination. The Court found that the accuracy of Mitchell's accusations was not germane to the charges against him, and found him guilty of all specifications, suspending him from active duty for five years without pay. The Court also held that this punishment was more lenient than the charges allowed for, because of Mitchell's great service during WWI.

Mitchell resigned from the Army in 1926, and continued to be an air power advocate the rest of his life. He died on February 19, 1936, at age 56.

The Japanese quickly proved the accuracy of Mitchell's vision in December, 1941, at Pearl Harbor when planes sank large ships at anchor, and three days later, when a number of level bombers sank the British battleships *Repulse* and *Prince of Wales* in the South China Sea while they attempted to take evasive action. The ship's guns could not be elevated high enough to engage the attacking bombers, and Japanese accuracy was a whole lot better than that of the Army when dropping on the *Ostfriesland*.

The Army honored Mitchell's memory and advocacy by naming their B-25 medium bomber after him. [Recall that in the recent Item about [Skipping Stones, Sinking Ships, Busting Dams](#), that it was the B-25 Mitchell that Pappy Gunn turned into a anti-shipping strafers...] The naval community turned to after a fashion, naming a [Liberty Ship](#) after him...

Congress had a one-of-a-kind Gold Medal struck for Mitchell in honor of his service and foresight. It was posthumously awarded in 1946; a nice recognition but NOT a Congressional Medal of Honor (as mis-stated in several sources).

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Last Edited on 12 July 2021