Billy Mitchell and the Battleships

Twenty-two minutes after the first bomb fell, *Ostfriesland* rolled over and sank to the bottom.

By John T. Correll

Battleships—large, heavily armored warships with large-caliber guns—emerged in their modern form in the 1890s and became symbols of national power in the opening decades of the 20th century.

They were known generically as "dreadnoughts," after HMS *Dreadnought,* which entered service with the British Navy in 1906. *Dreadnought* had 10 12-inch guns in its main battery and 27 lesser guns. It was the first major warship powered by turbines, making it the fastest battleship in the world. *Dreadnought* was far ahead of anything else afloat and it set off an arms race among the world's navies.

However, HMS *Dreadnought* was soon surpassed in capability by newer battleships such as USS *Arizona,* com-

Clockwise from top left: Mitchell in front of a Vought VE-7 Bluebird, 1920;* Ostfriesland *just before the bombing; and* Ostfriesland *under "attack."

missioned in 1916. *Arizona* was almost twice as large as *Dreadnought* and had more and bigger guns.

The only major clash of battleship fleets in history came at the Battle of Jutland in 1916, when the Royal Navy and the German Imperial Navy battered each other off the coast of Denmark. Among the German battleships engaged at Jutland was SMS *Ostfriesland.*

When World War I ended in 1918, the United States had 39 battleships. Some of them were obsolete, having been brought out of mothballs for the war and soon to be retired again, but most were still battleworthy. Reductions to US forces began within hours of the Armistice, but Congress approved a naval expansion of 10 additional battleships.

In the interwar period, US strategy put great faith in sea power. The Navy was the nation's first line of defense, and the battleship was the backbone of the Navy. This arrangement was about to be challenged severely by Army Air Service Brig. Gen. Billy Mitchell, who was on his way home from the war.

Billy Mitchell had gained fame as US air combat commander in France. He led nearly 1,500 American and allied aircraft in the St. Mihiel offensive in 1918, which made him history's first joint force air component commander.

He was already a celebrity. Newspapers followed what he said and did. He was awarded the Croix de Guerre by the French. In England, Mitchell had an audience with King George V, and he took the Prince of Wales up for an airplane ride.

Mitchell believed that the world stood on the threshold of an "aeronautical era" and that military airpower should be independent of ground and sea forces. He was inspired by the example of the Royal Air Force, established in 1918 as a separate service, combining the air arms of the army and navy.

The irrepressible Mitchell constantly cast aspersions at his superiors, whose enthusiasm for airpower (and for Mitchell) was strictly limited. En route home, Mitchell told his fellow passengers on the Cunard liner *Aquitania* that "the General Staff knows as much about the air as a hog does about skating." His comment was reported in the newspapers, of course.

Speaking Out

He had hoped to be Army director of military aeronautics, but that position was eliminated in a postwar reorganization and Maj. Gen. Charles T. Menoher had been chosen as Director of the Air Service in January 1919. Menoher was an artillery officer who commanded the Rainbow Division in France during World War I. His West Point classmate, Gen. John J. Pershing, made sure Menoher would keep his wartime rank and arranged for him to head the Air Service, even though Menoher had never been up in an airplane. Mitchell fell back to the grade of colonel as chief of training and operations but regained his star when he became assistant to Menoher, whose position was upgraded to Chief of Air Service.

Menoher was a good Army officer, but he knew nothing about airpower and he could not control Billy Mitchell. He supported Pershing's view that airpower must be subordinate to infantry.

It was not in Mitchell's makeup or temperament to be deferential or to support policies he disagreed with. He worked around Menoher from the start, spoke out publicly as he saw fit, and behaved as if he were the Chief of Air Service. Menoher, who could not match Mitchell in popularity or support in Congress, gritted his teeth.

In Mitchell's opinion, "changes in military systems come about only through the pressure of public opinion or disaster in war." Public opinion, responding to the wartime bombing of London by German zeppelins and airplanes, had been responsible for the creation of the Air Ministry in Britain, and Mitchell believed that public opinion would carry the day in the United States.

Mitchell's belief in airpower was broad-based, and strategic bombard-

Mitchell chose the new twin-engine Martin MB-2 biplane, shown here in formation, for his historic demonstration.

ment was particularly important. However, the target for his most famous challenge would be the battleship, and the issue nominally at question would be coastal defense.

It had always been the Navy's job to meet threats approaching the United States from the sea. Army responsibility for defense of the nation ended at the water's edge. In the 1920s, coastal defense was a much-desired mission because a large share of the shrinking defense budget went with it.

Mitchell argued that the Air Service should take over. Airplanes could intercept and stop the invaders far from shore and do it faster and at lower cost than the Navy could. To prove his point, he needed to sink a battleship and as early as the summer of 1919, he began thinking about how to do it.

He also believed that airplanes launched by catapults from capital ships would be useful in coastal defense and proposed that the Air Service acquire two aircraft carriers. This was something of an embarrassment to the Navy, which in 1918, had postponed the construction of its first carrier.

Some Navy officers believed in airpower, but Adm. William S. Benson, the Chief of Naval Operations, was not among them. He said that "I cannot conceive of any use that the fleet will ever have for aircraft," and that "the Navy doesn't need airplanes. Aviation is just a lot of noise."

In August 1919, Benson disbanded the Navy Aviation Division and redistributed "aviation activities." He did not inform Assistant Secretary of the Navy Franklin D. Roosevelt, who denied before Congress that the division had been disbanded. He was forced to recant when Billy Mitchell produced a copy of Benson's directive.

The Air Will Prevail

Mitchell turned up the heat with a statement to the *New York Herald* in December 1919. "The Air Service should be organized as of co-ordinate importance to the Army itself, and not only of equal but of greater importance than the naval organization," he said. "The air will prevail over the water in a very short space of time." In 1920, Mitchell told Congress that the Air Service could sink any battleship in existence or any that could be built. He called for a demonstration in which airplanes would bomb ships.

The Navy, hoping to pre-empt Billy Mitchell, conducted its own tests in late 1920. The target was USS *Indiana,* a surplus battleship that had seen service in the Spanish-American War but downgraded to "coast battleship" status so the name could be assigned to a new ship. The old ship sank after "repeated hits," but nothing was announced and nothing appeared in the US newspapers.

On Dec. 11, two dramatic pictures showing massive bomb damage from the tests were published by *London Illustrated News.* Then seven more photos appeared in *The New York Tribune.* The press and Congress clamored for more information. Secretary of the Navy Josephus Daniels

Mitchell, flying his DH-4 toward its rendezvous with* Ostfriesland, *personally directed the bombing run.

Left: Maj. Gen. Charles T. Menoher, Chief of Air Service. Bottom: Josephus Daniels, Secretary of the Navy, an arch-foe of Mitchell's.

made public a report from Capt. W. D. Leahy, director of naval gunnery for the tests, which said, "The entire experiment pointed to the improbability of a modern battleship being either destroyed or completely put out of action by aerial bombs."

Shortly thereafter, more details emerged to the detriment of the Navy's claims. No live bombs had been dropped, only dummy bombs loaded with sand to determine location of hits. Explosives were then set off at the points where sand bombs hit. The Navy assigned an accuracy score of 11 percent to the bombs, which limited the explosions set off. Further evidence pointed to accuracy of about 40 percent.

"We can either destroy or sink any ship in existence today," Mitchell told the House Appropriations Committee in January. "All we want to do is to have you gentlemen watch us attack a battleship. ... Give us the warships to attack, and come watch it."

Daniels, ending his tour as Secretary of the Navy, blustered that "I would be glad to stand bareheaded on the deck or at the wheel of any battleship while Mitchell tried to take a crack at me from the air. If he ever tries to aim bombs on the decks of naval vessels, he will be blown to atoms long before he gets close enough to drop salt on the tail of the Navy."

Within days, two resolutions were introduced in Congress urging the Navy to provide target ships for the Army. Before the proposals came to a vote, the Navy agreed to bombing experiments on naval vessels, "carried on jointly with the Army."

Questions and Answers

In Mitchell's view, the purpose of the tests was to determine whether a battleship could be sunk by bombing. That was also the question that Congress wanted answered. However, the Navy took the position that the purpose was to determine how much bomb damage ships could withstand.

The rules and conditions for the tests were set by the Navy, which made it as difficult as possible for Mitchell to succeed. The ships had to be sunk in deep water, 100 fathoms or more. The Navy rejected two locations with sufficient depth close to shore and chose a target area some 50 miles out to sea from the mouth of the Chesapeake Bay. Langley Field, the base for Mitchell's bombers, was 25 miles farther west. That made it a two-hour round-trip for the bombers, limiting the time they could remain in the target area.

The airplanes were not allowed to use aerial torpedoes. The Air Service would be allowed only two hits with its heaviest bombs. An inspection party would go aboard the target ships after each hit to carefully survey the damage.

Mitchell formed the First Provisional Air Brigade at Langley and assembled his aircraft and crews there for the mission. The biggest available bomb weighed 1,100 pounds, which was not sufficient to sink a battleship. Capt. C. H. M. Roberts of the aircraft armament division produced a special batch of 2,000-pound bombs in time for the tests.

The big bombs would be delivered by two kinds of airplanes. A number of Handley Page O/400s, variants of a British World War I bomber, were in the fleet and capable of carrying large loads. The best airplane, however, would be the new twin-engine Martin MB-2 biplane, then coming off the production lines. It had a cruise range of 558 miles and could carry a 3,000-pound load.

Mitchell had decided that his pilots would not try for direct hits on the

Corbis photo

Mitchell and Pershing in France during World War I.

ships. The most effective technique would be a near miss, with the bombs exploding underwater and creating a water hammer to inflict maximum damage on the hull of the ships.

The Harding Administration had taken office and the new Secretary of War was John W. Weeks. The Navy complained to him about Mitchell's public statements and criticism. Menoher was increasingly exasperated. A week before the tests were to begin, he asked that Mitchell be dismissed.

Opening Shots

Weeks was initially inclined to agree. The *New York World* quoted him as saying Mitchell "had greatly annoyed the Navy," and the *New York Sun* reported that Mitchell would probably be removed. There was strong pro-Mitchell reaction in the press, and Weeks, taking note of Mitchell's popularity with the public and Congress, backed down and gave Mitchell a reprimand in private instead. Menoher went back to gritting his teeth.

The tests opened the morning of June 21, with press and observers present on the naval transport USS *Henderson.* The air operations would be directed by Navy Capt. Alfred W. Johnson, commander of the air force of the Atlantic Fleet, who was not a pilot.

The targets were to be an aged and surplus US battleship and four former German Navy vessels, including the battleship *Ostfriesland,* obtained in the peace settlement after World War I and scheduled for demolition. The attacks on the first four ships were strictly preliminary events.

- June 21. Navy airmen sank the ex-German submarine U-117 with 12 bombs.
- June 29. Navy airplanes attacked the old US battleship *Iowa* with dummy bombs. Of 80 bombs dropped, only two were scored as direct hits. Battleship advocates took comfort from this round of the testing.
- July 13. The Army airmen made their first appearance. The Martin bombers (limited to 300-pound bombs by the rules) sank the former German destroyer G-102 in 19 minutes.
- July 18. Navy and Army airplanes took turns attacking the former German light cruiser *Frankfurt.* No bomb heavier than 600 pounds was allowed. There were frequent intermissions as inspectors dragged out their on-board inspections. The Air Service was finally allowed to strike and sank the vessel with 600-pound bombs. The Navy, which had figured on using gunfire from ships to finish off *Frankfurt,* was surprised.

The main event was *Ostfriesland,* which had taken 18 hits from the big guns of British battleships at Jutland, struck a mine on the way home, and was ready again for action two months later. *Ostfriesland* had been built to be as near unsinkable as possible. It had four skins for protection against mines and torpedoes. The ship was divided into separate watertight compartments so it could not be sunk by any single hole in the hull.

The New York Times, reporting from the assembly area at Old Point Comfort the night before the first attack on *Ostfriesland* said, "Naval officers are insisting that the fliers will never sink the *Ostfriesland* at all."

Bombardment of *Ostfriesland* was planned in several phases, spread out over two days, July 20 and 21. A large number of Navy ships had gathered in the target area to watch, and about 300 VIP observers were present aboard the transport ship *Henderson.* Among them were Pershing (who had become Chief of Staff on July 1), Secretary of War Weeks, Secretary of the Navy Edwin Denby, 18 members of Congress, 50 news reporters, and various admirals and generals.

Flying overhead was Billy Mitchell, who accompanied all of the bombing missions in his personal airplane, *Osprey,* a two-seat de Havilland DH-4B. A long blue pennant streamed from the tail for identification. Mitchell was accompanied by Capt. St. Clair Streett, flying in the back seat as navigator.

Navy and Marine Corps airplanes went at *Ostfriesland* first, spending an hour and 17 minutes dropping small

bombs and doing minimal damage. As the Air Service airplanes approached, they were ordered not to attack since observers were going on board. When Mitchell complained about the delay, Johnson said it was the airmen's fault for taking off early. Indeed they had taken off early—by nine minutes. Johnson and the inspectors kept them circling for 47 minutes, then ended the tests for the day after the Air Service had dropped only half of its bombs.

The battleship was still afloat and the Navy gloated. Clinton Gilbert of *The Washington Post* reported, "On the good ship *Henderson,* Secretary Denby told us how little impression the bombs had made. High naval officers sniggered cheerfully." Sen. Wesley L. Jones of Washington state said that a Navy officer told him "it was a thousand to one that the ship would not be sunk by the bombing."

On the morning of the second day, Lt. Clayton L. Bissell led a flight of Martins that attacked with 1,000-pound bombs. One of the bombs was a direct hit, and the Navy stopped the test for inspection. The Martins returned to base with nine bombs remaining. On the control ship, Johnson, supposedly an objective director of the testing, let his emotions show. "By Jove," he said, "we're not going to sink this ship!"

The last shot at *Ostfriesland* was set for midday July 21. Capt. W. R. Lawson would lead it, a flight of six Martins and two Handley Pages, each carrying a 2,000-pound bomb. As the pilots stood by waiting to take off, Johnson called with a change in rules. The bombers could bring no more than three of their biggest bombs to the target area. The written agreement had been that the Air Service would be allowed two direct hits with their biggest bombs.

Mitchell, disgusted, ordered all eight aircraft to proceed. He fired off a message to the Navy, saying that his bombers were carrying 2,000-pounders and would continue attacking "until we have secured [the] two direct hits [the] Army is authorized to make." He got no reply.

One of the Handley Pages had to drop out of the formation, but the other seven airplanes went on to the target. They had no intention of making two direct hits and stopping the test. Their orders were to aim for near misses to create water hammer shock waves against the hull.

Twenty-Two Minutes and Gone

The first bomb fell at 12:18 p.m. It was a near miss, as planned. The other airplanes swept in at spaced intervals and delivered their ordnance. "We could see her rise eight or 10 feet between the terrific blows from under water," Mitchell said. The sixth bomb, at 12:31, sealed *Ostfriesland's* doom. Twenty-two minutes after the first bomb fell, the old battleship sank at 12:40. The seventh airplane, a Handley Page, dropped its unneeded bomb as a final salute at the point where the battleship had gone down.

Mitchell followed the bombers back to Langley, jubilantly waggling the wings of *Osprey* as he flew by *Henderson.*

The Navy officers were shocked, but soon recovered their voices. The Navy claimed for years afterward that Mitchell had violated the rules and destroyed the value of the tests for determining the effects of various kinds of bombs on ships.

Johnson, in his reminisces for the Naval Historical Center in 1959 when he was a retired vice admiral, said that Mitchell and his fliers "looked upon bombing largely as one would a sporting event." (During the course of his career, Johnson had gone on to command the battleship *Colorado.*)

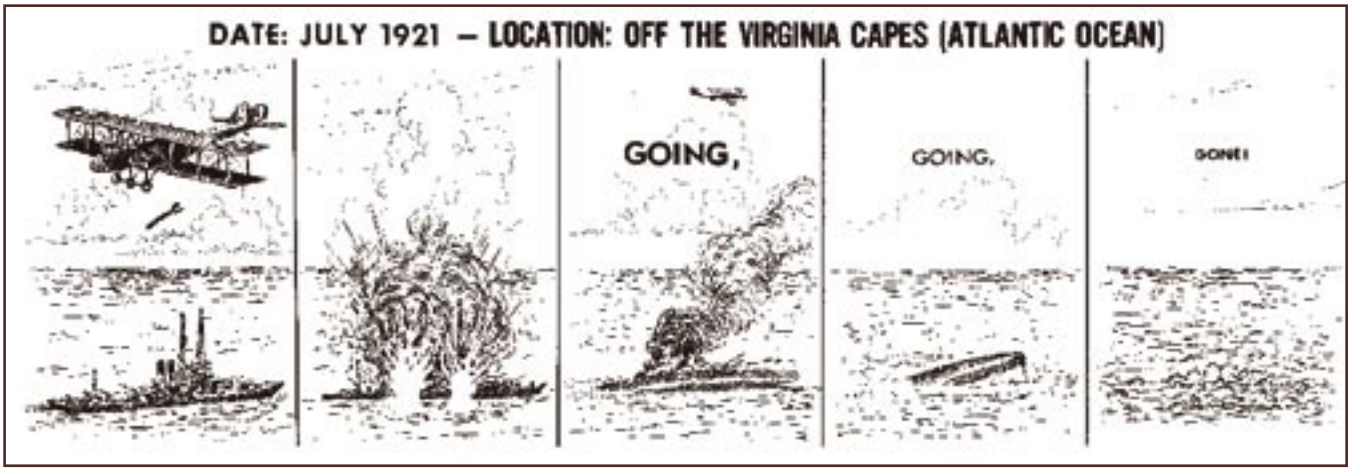
Mitchell, testifying to Congress, said, "In my opinion, the Navy actually tried to prevent our sinking the *Ostfriesland.*" Writing years later, Mitchell said, "I believe to this day that the officer controlling the air attacks had orders from the admiral not to let us sink the *Ostfriesland.*"

To the press and the public, the outcome was easy enough to understand. Billy Mitchell had sunk a battleship, just as he said he could. However, both the Army and the Navy sought to minimize Mitchell's success.

"The battleship is still the backbone of the fleet and the bulwark of the nation's sea defense, and will so remain so long as the safe navigation of the sea for purposes of trade or transportation is vital to success in war," said the Joint Army and Navy Board report on bombing tests, made public Aug. 19 and reported in *The New York Times.* "The airplane, like the submarine, destroyer, and mine has added to the dangers to which battleships are exposed, but has not made the battleship obsolete."

General Pershing was the senior member of the board and his signature was the only one on the report. It was a deliberate expression of solidarity with the Navy and intended to diminish the significance of the tests.

Mitchell made his own report to Menoher, and it contradicted the board report signed by Pershing. Menoher filed it away, but it was soon in the hands of the press. "Had the Army Air Service been permitted to attack as it desired, none of the seacraft attacked would have lasted 10 minutes in a serviceable condition," Mitchell said



***A cartoon depicting the sinking of* Ostfriesland.**

A group of Mitchell's airmen after the sinking of* Ostfriesland. *They had earned the right to call themselves "battleship bombers."

in a part of the report quoted by *The New York Times* on Sept. 14.

It was too much for good soldier Menoher. He said that either Mitchell went or he did. Secretary Weeks, again consulting the political omens, decided that Menoher would be the one to go. Pershing sent for Mason M. Patrick, a strong officer who had gotten Mitchell under control in France. He promoted Patrick to major general and made him Chief of the Air Service.

Patrick was made of sterner stuff than Menoher. When Mitchell threatened to resign if he didn't get his way, Patrick invited him to put in his papers and escorted him to office where he could do it. Mitchell backed down and did not challenge Patrick again. Patrick, who learned to fly and won his wings as a junior pilot at age 60, gained both the respect and the affection of the force he led.

The Navy had allocated another vessel, the pre-Dreadnought battleship *Alabama,* to the Army for bombing tests. Mitchell's bombers sank it in the Chesapeake Bay Sept. 27, 1921. After that demonstration, the First Provisional Air Brigade was disbanded.

In another series of tests in 1923, Mitchell and the Air Service sank the surplus battleship *Virginia* and severely damaged the battleship *New Jersey* in operations off Cape Hatteras.

Pershing again supported the Navy against Mitchell. His statement, which he allowed the Navy to edit, was published by *The New York Times.* "These tests against obsolete battleships will not, I hope, be considered as conclusive evidence that similar bombs would sink modern types of battleships," he said.

On to the Carriers

Navy aviators joined their battleship comrades in heaping invective on Billy Mitchell, but they were ready enough to take advantage of what he had achieved. The Bureau of Aeronautics was created Aug. 10, 1921, the first new bureau in the Navy since the Civil War.

In the Washington Treaty for the Limitation of Naval Armaments in 1921, the United States and other nations agreed to ceilings on capital ships. Construction of battleships was curtailed, and the US Navy began its transition from battleships to carriers.

In 1922, the Navy commissioned its first carrier, USS *Langley,* converted from a collier, USS *Jupiter.* Two partially completed battle cruisers, *Lexington* and *Saratoga,* were converted to aircraft carriers, commissioned in 1927.

In 1924, Mitchell predicted that the next war would begin with an early morning air attack on Pearl Harbor by the Japanese. The Army War Plans Division dismissed Mitchell's forecast as "exaggerated" and "unsound."

Domination of the Navy by "battleship admirals" continued, and they decreed that the primary task for carriers was protection of battleships. In 1925, the General Board of the Navy declared, "The battleship is the element of ultimate force in the fleet, and all other elements are contributory to the fulfillment of its function as the final arbiter in sea warfare."

Mitchell's detractors took great satisfaction when Mitchell was court-martialed in 1925 for conduct prejudicial to good order and discipline as a result of his virulent public criticism of Army and Navy leaders. Mitchell was found guilty and subsequently resigned from the Army.

The coastal defense mission remained with the Army ground forces and the Navy through the 1920s, but in the 1930s, the Air Corps took on responsibility for coastal defense and used it to help justify long-range bombers such as the B-17.

The battleship fraternity was not quite finished with its chest thumping. The program for the Army-Navy football game on Nov. 29, 1941 included a picture of the battleship *Arizona.* "It is significant that despite the claims of air enthusiasts no battleship has yet been sunk by bombs," the caption said. The program did not say what the Navy thought had happened off the Virginia Capes in 1921.

Eight days later, Japanese aircraft bombed and sank *Arizona* at its moorings at Pearl Harbor. ■

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