

Maj Gen Mason M. Patrick

DR. ROBERT P. WHITE



Maj Gen Mason M. Patrick stands as one of the great yet unsung pioneers of American airpower. An engineering officer by training, this 1886 graduate of West Point did not begin his military-aviation career until 1918. At that time, during World War I, Gen

John J. Pershing selected Patrick to command the Air Service of the American Expeditionary Force (AEF). Patrick's no-nonsense approach brought order to the personality-induced chaos (primarily the friction between Gen William "Billy" Mitchell and Gen Benjamin D. Foulois) that had engulfed the air arm. With Patrick in charge, the AEF Air Service provided the support that Pershing desperately required.

After the war, Patrick returned to his engineering role, thinking he had left military aviation for good. But by the end of 1921, the Air Service found itself embroiled in doctrinal disagreements, severe fiscal deficiencies, and personal antagonisms, all of which greatly degraded the efficiency and promise of this new combat arm. Now the chief of staff, General Pershing turned to Mason Patrick once again to take charge of the Air Service.

Merely keeping the Air Service breathing, let alone attempting to gain autonomy, proved a massive and problematic undertaking. To complicate matters, Patrick had to contend with Mitchell, his second in command. Realizing his deputy's advantages and disadvantages, Patrick deftly employed Mitchell's talents but constrained his political and publicist personality. Patrick even favored retaining Mitchell as his deputy but could not save this volatile airman from himself. Ultimately, Mitchell's outspoken tactics resulted in his court-martial and subsequent resignation in February 1926.

Beginning in October 1921, it fell to Patrick to orchestrate the behind-the-scenes policies and politics that



eventually resulted in the creation of the US Army Air Corps in July 1926, along with an impressive five-year procurement program. One of the first aviation officers to recognize the full potential of airpower during war and peacetime, Patrick proved remarkably successful in gaining support for the three legs of his aviation triangle: military aviation, commercial aviation, and the aviation manufacturing base; he also promoted legislation that greatly enhanced each of these spheres. A visionary as well, he explained in detail the concept of what would eventually become, in the 1990s, the air expeditionary force to an Army General Service School audience at Fort Leavenworth, Kansas—in 1924. Patrick even found time to earn his wings, doing so at age 59.

Like Mitchell, Patrick believed in the strategic and independent capabilities of the air arm. But he took a much more practical, gradualist, and successful approach to set the Air Service on the road to independence.

To Learn More . . .

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