

Major General Mason M. Patrick Military Aviation Pioneer

by Louis A. Peake

With the conclusion of World War I aerial warfare was still in its infancy. Few individuals realized the implications of air power as applied to the military. The most notable exception, of course, was the outspoken and ambitious Colonel William "Billy" Mitchell. Colonel Mitchell, who assumed a martyr's role, misread the temper of the times. He got away with it in 1921, forcing General Charles Menoher, his superior, to retire. Mitchell continued playing the same role in 1923-25 when he returned from Europe, antagonizing the military establishment and President Calvin Coolidge himself. The need in the mid-1920s was for some modest steps forward to broaden the acceptance of air power by the Administration, by the Congress, and by the American people.

One man accurately read the political barometer and engineered a step-by-step process. Mason Mathews Patrick came out of the hills of his native West Virginia to center stage in Washington. It was Patrick, who in 1926, helped steer the Air Corps Act through Congress. The passage of that law was a necessary intermediate step in the evolution of the United States Air Force that we have today. "Undoubtedly the next war will be decided in the air," he said in a speech delivered in 1923.¹ This prophecy was, of course, realized during World War II, but it clearly revealed 18 years earlier one man's vision and foresight.

Mason Mathews Patrick was born on December 13, 1863, in Lewisburg, West Virginia, to Alfred Spicer Patrick and his wife, Virginia Amanda Mathews.² His father was a physician and a descendant of Mathew Patrick, who emigrated from Ireland to Massachusetts about 1720.³ Dr. Patrick was a resident of Charleston, West Virginia (then Virginia), until the outbreak of the Civil War, when he joined the Confederate Army and served as a surgeon with the rank of Major. At the end of the war, Doctor and Mrs. Patrick moved to Greenbrier County, West Virginia.⁴

Mason Patrick's early education came both in public and private schools which he attended in Lewisburg. Later, he taught school for two years.⁵ On September 1, 1882, with the assistance

of his uncle, Governor Mathews, Mason secured an appointment from Congressman John Kenna to the United States Military Academy at West Point, New York.⁶

During his tenure as a cadet Patrick displayed excellent academic ability. The academy at that time was under the superintendency of Colonel Wesley Merritt, of Civil War and Indian campaign fame, who imposed a stern military discipline which Patrick absorbed into his character. Moreover, as a cadet, Patrick was fortunate to receive instruction from two of the academy's most prominent faculty: Colonel Peter S. Michie, head of the Department of Natural and Experimental Philosophy and Colonel George L. Andrews, head of the Department of Modern Language.⁷

At the military academy Patrick acquainted himself with many of the other cadets. A graduating classmate that year was John Joseph Pershing with whom Patrick formed a lasting friendship as a cadet, and who, twice, was to play a key role in Patrick's later association with military aviation. On July 1, 1886, standing second in a class of 77, Mason Mathews Patrick graduated and received his commission as a second lieutenant in the Corps of Engineers which traditionally received the cream of the West Point crop.⁸

The first 30 years of his career were filled with a variety of engineering assignments interspersed with two three-year teaching assignments back at the Point. In June 1889, Lieutenant Patrick served on a military relief expedition to assist the victims of the famous Johnstown, Pennsylvania, flood, the country's worst natural disaster up to that time.⁹ On July 2, 1889, he was promoted to first lieutenant and with the outbreak of the Spanish-American War he received his promotion to captain on May 18, 1898.¹⁰

Captain Patrick married Grace Webster Cooley of Plainfield, New Jersey, on November 11, 1902. Although the couple had no children of their own they did, however, adopt a son, Bream Cooley.¹¹ While completing his second tour as an instructor at



Major General Mason M. Patrick, Chief of the Air Service. (Military Academy Archives)

West Point, Patrick was promoted to the rank of Major, April 23, 1904.¹² In addition to his teaching duties, he was also charged with responsibility for improving the academy's water supply.

In 1906, Patrick left the continental United States for the first time, serving as chief engineer with the Army of Cuban Pacification.¹³ In this capacity he was responsible for building many miles of hard-surface, macadam roads and for producing a military map of the entire island. The map he finally produced represented the best ever made to that date.¹⁴

Returning to the United States in 1909 he was placed in command of the Norfolk, Virginia, Engineer District, where he was not only in charge of all harbor and river work but also he was responsible for the coastal defense fortifications at Fort Monroe and Cape Henry, Virginia. While engaged on these projects he was promoted to lieutenant colonel on June 13, 1910.¹⁵

One of Patrick's most unusual assignments came in 1910 when he was appointed a member of the Board of Officers charged with raising the wreck of the battleship U.S.S. MAINE, the cause of whose sinking remains in dispute to this day, in Havana Harbor, Cuba. He spent several months in Cuba involved with this undertaking and assisted in the final sinking of the wreck in the open sea.¹⁶

From 1912 to 1916 Patrick was stationed in Detroit, Michigan. There he was in charge of the Engineer District and responsible for the construction and maintenance of the canals and locks, channels and harbors in the Great Lakes; of the Lake Survey; and of the building of the locks at Sault Saint Marie, Michigan. He was promoted to the rank of colonel on March 24, 1916.¹⁷

In 1916 the notorious Villa Raid on Columbus, New Mexico, occurred and the Punitive Expedition into Mexico followed. Colonel Patrick organized and commanded the First Regiment of Engineers at San Antonio, Texas, and served with the regiment along the Mexican border trying to catch the rebel Pancho Villa.¹⁸

War had been raging in Europe for three years by this time. When the United States declared war on April 6, 1917, the army began evaluating and selecting its most experienced officers to go overseas. On August 5, 1917, Brigadier General Mason Patrick replaced his eagles with stars and three days later he sailed to France on the S.S. FINLAND, docking at St. Nazaire on August 21.¹⁹ Upon his arrival he was ordered to proceed immediately to Paris and report to the Commander in Chief of the American Expeditionary Forces, his classmate and friend, General John J. Pershing, who promptly placed him in command of all engineer instruction in the A.E.F.²⁰

In September 1917, Patrick was appointed Chief Engineer, Lines of Communication, a title which was later changed to Director of Construction and Forestry. He held this position until May 1918. As Chief Engineer, Brigadier General Patrick was responsible for all forestry operations and construction of docks, hospitals, railways, storage depots, and any other building in France. For a short time he held the distinction of being temporarily Commanding General of the Zone of the Interior, later designated as the Services of Supply.²¹

At the height of American involvement in World War I, Patrick was presented the most important assignment of his military career to that time. In May 1918, the tough, disciplined and moustachioed General Patrick was asked by General Pershing to take command of all Air Service units in the A.E.F. This assign-

ment, needless to say, would not be easy. To insure that he had full authority, Patrick was simultaneously promoted to the rank of major general.²²

General Pershing was perplexed about what to do with his infant military Air Service. The situation in May 1918 was confusing. Plagued by internal strife and organizational confusion, the situation was further complicated by the personal jealousies and the bitter running battle of two men—Brigadier General Benjamin Foulois and Lieutenant Colonel William Mitchell. The clash of these two personalities sparked a bitter feud in the Air Service. Foulois viewed Mitchell with the greatest contempt while Mitchell's conduct bordered upon open insubordination. Foulois requested that Pershing remove Mitchell from his current post and return him to the United States. General Pershing, however, realized the tactical ability of Mitchell as well as his competence as a liaison officer with both the British and French and denied the request.

The solution to the problem was not long in occurring to the commander-in-chief of the A.E.F. He knew Mason Patrick, who had never been in an airplane, was a competent, capable administrator. So once again he sent for Patrick to come to Paris. When Patrick arrived Pershing said to him, "In all this army, there is but one thing causing me real anxiety, and that's the Air Service. There are a lot of good men in it, but they're running around in circles. Somebody has got to make them go straight. I want you to do the job."²³

Pershing immediately appointed the astonished Patrick Chief of the Air Service of the A.E.F.

It was apparent that a "square-jawed will and a strong hand able to apply discipline and see that the several units cooperated to a given plan, on a given date, in a given way," and in no other way was what was needed.²⁴ General Pershing had reasoned—correctly, as it turned out—that Patrick would stand above the ambitious young air officers, almost all of whom, including Mitchell and Foulois, were under 40 years of age.

"The appointment of Patrick, a nonflying officer, to head the Air Service may," as one observer noted, "have dampened strategic air thinking," but it did bring "order out of confusion."²⁵ Without hesitation, nor objection, Patrick began. He made Mitchell Chief of Air Service, First Army, while he moved Foulois back to the post of Chief of Air Service Operations.

Largely, as a result of his managerial skills, the Air Service, A.E.F., provided effective observation, pursuit squadrons, and tactical bombing support for Pershing's ground forces during the St. Mihiel and Meuse-Argonne campaigns. At the end of the war American air strength within the A.E.F. had grown to 45 combat squadrons and 23 balloon companies, the whole manned by approximately 60,000 officers and men.²⁶

Major General Patrick remained in France following the war. He was appointed as a member of the Inter-Allied Aviation Committee to the Paris Peace Conference.²⁷ The committee dealt with the terms which were to be imposed upon Germany's air arm under the eventual Treaty of Versailles.

Patrick was the recipient of several foreign awards and decorations including the Legion of Honor (France); Order of St. Maurice and St. Lazarus (Italy); Commander, Order of Leopold (Belgium); and Knight, Order of the British Empire.²⁸ The United States awarded him the Distinguished Service Medal for "exceptionally meritorious and distinguished services." His commendation further indicated:



Major General Mason M. Patrick and Brigadier General William Mitchell, Air Service. (National Air and Space Museum)

He displayed much ability and devotion to duty . . . as chief of the Air Service of the American Expeditionary Forces, he perfected and ably administered the organization of this important department.²⁹

In July 1919, Major General Patrick returned to the United States whereupon he reverted to the rank of Colonel. After a much-deserved leave of absence, to be with his wife and family, Colonel Patrick assumed duties with the Corps of Engineers, Gulf Division, in New Orleans, Louisiana, and later as Assistant to the Chief of Engineers in Washington, D.C.³⁰

In October 1921, Patrick found himself called upon once again to quell internal strife within the Air Service. The current Chief of the Air Service, General Charles Menoher, could not restrain his rambunctious assistant, the highly vocal Billy Mitchell. By 1921 Mitchell was openly criticizing Congress for cutting appropriations for the Air Service; he was demanding separation of the Air Service from the Army, and he was predicting, much to the dismay of the Navy, that planes could sink or destroy any ship in existence. Menoher finally became so infuriated with Mitchell that he resigned. Mitchell, who had hoped to replace Menoher, once again found himself serving under the command of Patrick who was returned to the grade of Major General.³¹

Of General Patrick's appointment, America's leading air ace, Eddie Rickenbacker, commented tersely that it was "as sensible as making Pershing Admiral of the Swiss Navy."³² Realizing that he needed greater rapport with the young pilots under his command, Patrick, nearly 60 years old, learned to fly. He received instructions from Major Herbert A. Dargue. On June 26, 1923, Major General Mason Patrick took and passed the standard pilot's test and qualified to wear pilot's wings.³³ This event was an unprecedented achievement.

General Patrick found the Air Service "practically demobilized" and urged mass production of new airplanes plus an intensified program to begin immediately. To the surprise of many, the recently appointed chief, with his newly acquired status as a pilot, was becoming as visionary and imaginative as the irrepressible Mitchell. In a public address in 1923 he made

this lucidly clear when he stated his conviction in unequivocal fashion:

"Undoubtedly the next war will be decided in the air . . . we must perfect our air forces."³⁴

Ironically, despite Mitchell's outspoken behavior, Mason Patrick wanted to retain him as his Assistant Chief of Air Service. However, Secretary of War John W. Weeks refused to extend Mitchell's four-year term. Moreover, the Chief of Staff of the Army—who was also from Greenbrier County, West Virginia—Major General John L. Hines, was under considerable pressure to court-martial Mitchell for his almost treasonable behavior. Even more ironically, Patrick would subsequently have the onerous duty of serving on Mitchell's court-martial board in 1925.

Although utterly convinced of the importance of air power, General Patrick chose a moderate approach toward gaining autonomy for the Air Service. In 1924 and 1925 he testified before various investigation boards inquiring into the state of aviation matters. He urged the creation of an Air Corps directly responsible to the Secretary of War rather than an entirely separate service. He envisioned a similar Air Corps in the Navy Department.³⁵ Although the Air Corps Act of 1926 incorporated some of his recommendations, it fell far short of establishing the semiautonomous force many aviators desired.

During his six-year tenure as Chief of the Air Service, U.S. Army, Major General Patrick worked hard and achieved many substantial advances for the service. He had stated in his Annual Report for 1923 that "as a result of various reductions and inadequacies the Air Service is operating on a basis which does not permit fulfillment of its mission."³⁶ To overcome these inadequacies he sponsored and supported aviation engineering and experimentation. He approved the first around-the-world flight by Army pilots in 1924.³⁷ He organized and sent out the Pan-American Good-Will Flight which flew to every capital in Central and South America. He reorganized the Army's experimental flying group at Wright Field, Dayton, Ohio. He superintended the establishment of the Army's "West Point of the Air" at Randolph Field, near San Antonio, Texas. Moreover, he

was Chief of the Air Service when the organization was changed in July 1926 to the Air Corps. Thus General Patrick was the first Chief of the Air Corps.³⁸

General Patrick was a firm believer in the dictum, "Flying men shall be led by a flyer," which he established as precedent by his own example.³⁹ On December 12, 1927, Major General Patrick retired, not only as Chief of the Air Corps, but from the Army.⁴⁰

General Patrick spent his early retirement in Washington. In 1928 he published his book, *The United States in the Air*.⁴¹ For the next several years he published several articles and lectured on problems incidental to aviation.⁴² He continued to lead an active life. Although politically a Democrat, Patrick was appointed by President Herbert Hoover as Public Utilities Commissioner for the District of Columbia in 1929—a post he held for four years.⁴³

In 1930 he saw his adopted son, Bream Cooley Patrick, graduate from the United States Military Academy and receive a commission in the Air Corps. Four years later, with his wife, he visited his son then stationed in the Philippine Islands. During that trip he also visited China and Japan before returning home to Washington.⁴⁴

On January 29, 1942, Mason Mathews Patrick, aged 78 years old, died in Walter Reed Army Hospital, Washington, D.C., a victim of arteriosclerotic heart disease and cancer. He was interred with full military honors in Arlington National Cemetery.⁴⁵

Mason Patrick was in the service of his country for 41 years. He had graduated from the military academy. He served during the Spanish-American War. He served on the Mexican border during the Punitive Expedition. He campaigned in France with the A.E.F. during World War I. More importantly, he gained the friendship of General John J. Pershing who appointed him to the crowning feature of his military career—Chief of the Air Corps, U.S. Army.

Mason Mathews Patrick was the first high-ranking Army officer to envision, and proclaim, the full potential of military aviation in the United States. He brought a marked degree of order from chaos. His unusual capability as an engineer received professional recognition when he was awarded a Gold Medal by the Society of American Military Engineers in 1934. The Daughters of the Confederacy awarded him the Cross of Service and his home state of West Virginia bestowed upon him the state's Distinguished Service Medal in recognition of his accomplishments.⁴⁶

This early advocate of military air power deserves the gratitude of airmen the world over for his life and work. He had the vision to foresee the future and the courage to proclaim his vision. General Oscar Westover, Chief of the Air Corps, 1935-38, wrote of General Patrick:

"Most of the laws and regulations which are largely responsible for the present stature, not alone of the military but of civil aviation as well, in this country owe their inception and arrangement, and in fact their initial organization to his Herculean brain. He personally headed or served as the leading departmental aviation committees and boards which sponsored and fostered air development in this country."⁴⁷

As a lasting tribute to the memory of his service, the United States Air Force, on August 1, 1950, renamed the Joint Long Range Proving Ground at Cocoa, Florida, Patrick Air Force Base, in his honor.⁴⁸

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