



U.S. AIR FORCE

## This Week in USAF and PACAF History 10 – 16 September 2012



12-15 September 1918 Brigadier General William “Billy” Mitchell commanded Allied air forces during the **first major American offensive of World War I at Saint-Mihiel, France**. These air forces supported General Pershing’s plan to remove a dent in Allied lines (see map), capture fortresses to the east, and then invade Germany.

Pershing knew control of the air was necessary, and he gave the job to an airman, Brig Gen Billy Mitchell, rather than more senior Army commanders with no aviation experience. Mitchell’s air campaign plan set many precedents for air doctrine and operations. He commanded 1,481 aircraft—at the time the largest air force ever assembled for a single battle. This force included 366 observation airplanes, 323 day bombers, 91 night bombers, and 701 pursuit aircraft.

At this time, aerial observation and artillery spotting were the first priorities of air units because those missions were crucial for army operations (and aircraft were not sufficiently developed to be decisive as an independent force). So aircraft photographed the front daily to check artillery locations, trench conditions, and other indicators. Long-range sorties were flown deep behind enemy lines to photograph and observe road and rail traffic, check the activity at ammunition dumps, and establish targets for both day and night bombardment. Guiding and observing the effects of artillery fire was hazardous duty for the aircrews because enemy pursuit aircraft could respond and attack. There was also the unseen but ever-present danger of being hit by an artillery shell in flight. Protecting the observation aircraft was also important and took precedence over bombing and strafing. (Photo of bombers below.)



Mitchell’s plans were very detailed. To keep battle preparations secret, the initial air mission was to deny enemy reconnaissance of areas behind the lines at St. Mihiel while airfields and depots were prepared. An extensive radio warning network was set up to report on all air activity. An early form of combat air patrol kept pursuit aircraft airborne over Allied airbases to intercept enemy observation aircraft.

Despite poor weather, Mitchell’s air forces made a critical contribution to the successful attack on the Saint-Mihiel salient. Pershing’s First Army captured 15,000 enemy troops and more than 250 heavy guns at the cost of 7,000 casualties, and they liberated 200 square miles of French territory. The U.S. attack only faltered when the infantry outran their slow-moving artillery support and food supplies on the muddy roads eastward.

15 September 1938 **Hickam Field was officially activated**. It was the principal army airfield in Hawaii and the only one large enough to accommodate the B-17 bomber.



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10 September 1942 [WAFS and WASPs](#). The **Women's Auxiliary Ferrying Squadron (WAFS)** was formed, and female pilots began ferrying aircraft from factories to airfields in the U.S. In 1943, all women pilots flying for the Army Air Force were placed in the **Women's Airforce Service Pilots (WASPs)**. By the end of the war, WASPs had flown all types of military aircraft, including bombers, fighters, attack aircraft, transports and trainers. However, it was not until 1977 that the G.I. Bill Improvement Act granted the WASP corps full military status for their service. In 1984, each WASP was awarded the World War II Victory Medal, and those who served for more than one year also received the American Theater Ribbon/ Campaign Medal. On July 1, 2009 the President and Congress awarded the WASPs the [Congressional Gold Medal](#), presented on March 10, 2010.



15 September 1942 Fifth Air Force airlifted the **first U.S. troops to New Guinea**, transporting men of the 126th Infantry Regiment from Australia to Seven-Mile Airdrome near Port Moresby.

13 September 1943 The 52nd Troop Carrier Wing used more than 80 transport aircraft to drop some **1,200 paratroopers on the Salerno beachhead** in Italy. Not a single man or airplane was lost in one of the most successful Allied airborne operations of the war.

15 September 1944 **Operation INTERLUDE**. Allied forces invaded Morotai in the Dutch East Indies – an island within fighter range of the southern Philippines. **FEAF units supported the operation with attacks against Japanese bases on nearby islands**. The landings on Morotai were unopposed and construction of two airdromes began at once. The photograph at right is from the [80th Fighter Squadron](#) website and shows the “Headhunters” on Morotai in November, 1944.



15 September 1950 **Operation CHROMITE – MacArthur's invasion of Inchon**. U.S. forces supported by Navy and Marine Corps air strikes invaded **Inchon**, Korea. Meanwhile, Fifth Air Force, which had provided air support to the Eighth U.S. Army and other UN ground forces holding the Pusan perimeter, now made air attacks in coordination with a UN break-out. On 18 September, forty-two B-29s dropped 1,600 bombs on enemy troop concentrations near Waegwan, allowing UN forces to advance rapidly toward Seoul. The Inchon invasion coupled with the Eighth Army advance turned the tide in the Korean War. The Eighth Army Commander, Lt Gen Walton H. Walker, said:

*“I will gladly lay my cards on the table and state that if it had not been for the air support that we received from the Fifth Air Force we would not have been able to stay in Korea.”*



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14 September 1951 Capt John S. Walmsley, Jr., USAF (right) earned the **Medal of Honor** when he was shot down and killed on a night interdiction mission in Korea. Flying a searchlight-equipped B-26 Invader, Capt Walmsley stopped an enemy supply train with bombs and then made repeated passes to illuminate it for other bombers. He flew through intense enemy fire to ensure target destruction. More on Capt Walmsley [here](#).



13 September 1985 In history's only successful satellite kill by an aircraft-launched missile, an ASM-135 anti-satellite (ASAT) weapon launched from an F-15 successfully destroyed an orbiting satellite moving at 17,500 miles per hour approximately 290 miles above the Earth. Major Wilbert D. "Doug" Pearson, Jr., zoom-climbed his F-15 to 80,000 feet and then launched the ASAT. Both the first and second stages fired successfully, and the miniature kinetic kill vehicle separated, homed in on the satellite, and destroyed it upon impact. At left, an ASAT launch from an F-15.

16 September 1985 **Hickam AFB was designated a National Historic Landmark** as one of the nation's most significant World War II historic sites. A bronze plaque reflecting Hickam's historical significance was placed among other memorials surrounding the base flagpole.

15 September 1991 The **C-17A first flew** in a trip from Long Beach to Edwards AFB. Capable of delivering outsized cargo to a tactical environment, the Globemaster III increased the Air Force's ability for airlift into relatively small airfields, eliminating the need to shift cargo from larger to smaller transports.

12 September – 18 October 1992 After **Typhoon Iniki** devastated Kauai in the Hawaiian chain, Air Mobility Command, Pacific Air Forces, the Air Force Reserve and the Air National Guard airlifted 6,888 tons of relief equipment and supplies to Hawaii. The operation also airlifted more than 12,000 passengers, including evacuees as well as military and civilian relief workers.

14-30 September 1995 The Air Force airlifted more than 30 tons of medical supplies from Charleston AFB, South Carolina, to Hanoi, Vietnam, marking the **first USAF humanitarian-airlift mission to Vietnam since 1975**.



15 September 1996 **Operation PACIFIC HAVEN** began. Saddam Hussein's attack on the Kurdish safe haven in northern Iraq drove thousands of Kurds from their homes. The Air Force evacuated thousands of these refugees to Andersen AFB, Guam, where they were processed for settlement in the United States. At left, three Kurds walk to the reception center at Andersen.



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11 September 2001 **Terrorists hijacked four commercial passenger aircraft** with the goal of destroying heavily-populated and highly symbolic targets in the United States. Two planes crashed into the twin towers of World Trade Center in New York City (below left). Both towers collapsed within two hours. The third plane crashed into the Pentagon (below right). Passengers and members of the flight crew on the fourth aircraft tried to retake control of their plane from the hijackers; that plane crashed into a field in rural Pennsylvania. The Federal Aviation Administration grounded all airliners in the U.S. for several days. Excluding the 19 hijackers, a confirmed 2,977 people died as a result of these attacks.



As part of America's response, **the Global War on Terror began**. President George W. Bush announced the war on terrorism and initiated homeland-defense efforts, including **Operation NOBLE EAGLE**, which involved combat air patrols within the United States and Guam.