

Future of air power may ride with guided missiles. Most airmen believe they are still in their infancy, and someday one will be built to take man on that first flight into the unknown.



Fought for Air Power

by Kevin V. Brown

ONLY THREE newspapers carried accounts of the incident. Later, a clipping was shown to President Theodore Roosevelt. Teddy grunted, then forwarded it to the office of the Secretary of War, where it lay undisturbed for nearly four years.

Finally, almost reluctantly, a communiqué was issued from Washington on Aug. 1, 1907, ordering the Army's Signal Corps to "study the flying machine and the possibility of adapting it to military purposes."

The original incident, of course, was Orville Wright's historic flight at Kitty Hawk, N. C. The order that followed so slowly was equally historic, because it created—50 years ago next Thursday—the first military air unit in the world. But the lag in between is as much a part of the Air Force story as its many firsts.

The greatest air power in the world grew—sporadically—on a foundation laid by visionary men who saw beyond the range of their ships and who fought not only the unknown in the sky but the lethargy on the ground.

The Early Days. Lieut. Thomas E. Selfridge was killed in the first fatal air crash in 1908. The following year the Army bought the first military plane from the

Wright brothers and established the first military air field at College Park, Md.

In 1910 Army fliers dropped sandbags on targets and fired guns from the air, the first tests of the plane as an offensive weapon. Airmen saw its potential, but when they asked for more planes, one Congressman reportedly blustered, "Why? I thought we already had one!"

Inertia prevailed. In our first military air mission—into Mexico—six of the eight rickety planes sent across the border were destroyed within a month; the remaining two were condemned.

World War I. By 1917, the country that had pioneered aviation was a weak 14th in air power. Britain had about 300 planes, Germany 500, and France 1,000. We had 55, mostly obsolete.

But in the dogfights over the trenches, we discovered something more valuable: the American pilot. In planes grimly nicknamed "flying coffins," the enthusiastic young airmen piled up a 3-to-1 victory margin over their experienced foes. Capt. Eddie Rickenbacker alone accounted for 26.

Between Wars. Lethargy set in again. After the Armistice, U.S. Army planes were stacked in piles and burned.

America's independent Air Force is actually only 10 years old. For 40 years it was a branch of the Army. Started as the aeronautical division of the Signal Corps on Aug. 1, 1907, it became the Aviation Section in 1914, the Army Air Service in 1918, the Army Air Corps in 1926, and the Army Air Forces in 1941. It became the U.S. Air Force in 1947.

The most strident protest came from Brig. Gen. Billy Mitchell, a prophet without honor until too late. Among his prophecies:

—Airplanes would sink battleships.

—Airplanes would cross oceans and circle the globe.

—There would be nationwide commercial air routes.

—Invasions would be made by parachute.

—Japan would attack Hawaii and the Philippines from the air.

—There would someday be a separate Air Force.

—Airplanes would fly faster than sound.

All this, remember, was immediately after World War I, when the airplane was still little more than a kite. Mitchell was court-martialed, not because he knew too much too soon, but because he was too loud in saying so.

The Air Service remained a minor branch of service, but Army pilots went on broadening the boundaries of

flight so that they would never again be the same.

Lieut. J. A. Macready climbed to 34,508 feet (1921), radically lifting the ceiling of the sky; Army airmen made the first round-the-world flight (1924), shrinking the earth; an Army reserve pilot, Charles Lindbergh, soloed nonstop from New York to Paris (1927), dramatizing flight as no one has done, before or since; and Lieut. Jimmy Doolittle made the first "blind" flight (1929), opening the air to all-weather flying.

But by Pearl Harbor, we were again caught in the propwash of nations who had flown ahead. Gen. Hap Arnold, World War II chief of staff, summed up the airman's agony: "Between the wars we had the time, but no money. Now we'll get the money, but we don't have the time." They found the time, though, and used it.

World War II. Starting with fewer than 3,000 combat aircraft, we built a force of

nearly 80,000, and the American pilots—a new generation this time—again outflowed and outfought the enemy on all fronts in ratios up to 5 to 1. (In Korea, in the first jet warfare, the ratio shot up to 14 to 1.) Strategic bombing, an American invention, also was developed to a fine art. More than two million tons of explosives were pinpointed on targets from altitudes up to 35,000 feet. And a single bomb—the one dropped on Hiroshima from an Army B-29—ushered in a new age.

The Independent Air Force. In 1947, the last two of Mitchell's predictions came true, 20 years after his death. Capt. Charles Yeager, flying the Bell X-1 rocket ship, exploded through the sound barrier for the first time, and the United States Air Force was created, taking its stand as an equal alongside the Army and the Navy.

Where next for this young giant? Lieut. Col. Pete Everest, who flew the X-1's big brother, the X-2, to a record 1,900 miles per hour last Summer, gave one airman's answer. Speaking to a group of scientists who were studying the possibilities of flight to the moon, Everest said, "Gentlemen, when you build that ship, I want to make that trip to the moon."