

LETTERS FROM GRANDPA

#358

Dearest grandchild,

Stephen was the first Christian martyr. Just before he was stoned to death he said: “**Was there ever a prophet your fathers did not persecute?**” (Acts 7:52 NIV) The Jewish leaders had a track record of rejecting prophets sent to them by God. Jesus reminded the Pharisees that they were the descendants of those who murdered the prophets (Matt. 22:31). Someone noted that while Moses was alive he was hated, but after he died the people praised him, but hated the prophets who taught the Law of Moses. When the prophets were dead they too were praised but John the Baptist was hated for preaching the message of the prophets. When John was dead the people praised him, but persecuted Jesus who preached the same message as John. Etc.

Today’s letter will seek to establish that this kind of ignorance and prejudice is not limited to religious leaders. This truth rose to the surface like cream on milk when I read the book *Flyboys* by James Bradley. Bradley offered the following insights into the persecution of the late Billy Mitchell. Mitchell was the handsome and articulate son of a wealthy U. S. Senator from Milwaukee. During W. W. I he was the first American to fly over an enemy in battle. He discovered that planes by “strategic bombing” could target the enemy’s manufacturing plants and choke off their ability to fight. Up to that point in time military battles had been fought on land, or on the sea. Mitchell believed that future wars would involve a third dimension - the air.

Mitchell returned home from war convinced that a strong air force was essential for national security. He dared to suggest a department of the Air Force that would be co-equal with that of the army and navy. The cost of battle ships was many millions of dollars but for a tiny fraction of that cost America could build a strong air force. By making such assertions, he was not only tampering with military tradition but also deep pockets in the deep state with lucrative military contracts.

It must be remembered that W. W. I airplanes were tiny contraptions made of light wood and fabric. They could be brought down in flight by a slight encounter with a phone wire, or destroyed on the ground by a child with a hatchet. The idea that these “airplanes” could compete with a battle ship would be like believing that sparrows could destroy a castle. Mitchell therefore sought to prove his point by a well publicized test. The American Navy had captured the German battleship *Ostfriesland*. She was said to be a wonderful ship, as nearly unsinkable as possible. She had four steel skins to protect her from mines and torpedoes, and an intricate system of water tight compartments. No matter how much damage she sustained, they believed she would always make it home. In the Battle of Jutland, for example, she had struck a powerful undersea mine and yet made it safely back to port.

On July 21, 1921, some 300 notables were present to witness the test. This august assembly included Cabinet officers, Senators, Representatives, and military attaches of foreign powers including Japan. There were also aeronautical and naval experts, and 50 newspaper reporters. On the eve of the test the New York Times reported that naval officers insisted that those tiny airplanes would never sink the *Ostfriesland*. General Mitchell was made fun of and ridiculed both in the press and in private by America’s most powerful leaders. The “test” began at 12:19 P.M. and 21 minutes later the *Ostfriesland* vanished beneath the surface. Many seasoned admirals and captains were sobbing audibly while others hid their faces with handkerchiefs. If you think these seasoned military leaders were going to change just because of facts and evidence you need to listen again to Stephen and take another look at history. The leaders of America were not yet ready to build a strong air force.

Mitchell warned that if war broke out “tomorrow” it would take us two years to catch up with Japan. He warned that some day soldiers could be dropped out of airplanes. He further charged that

both the Congress and our military leaders acted like the army and navy were created for their benefit rather than the defense of our country. Consequently, those who saw the potential of an air force were “bluffed and bulldozed” so that they dare not tell the truth to non- flying bureaucrats.

At this point President Calvin Coolidge ordered Billy Mitchell to be court-martialed. The trial was a media circus and still stands as the longest in history. The president’s “blue ribbon” commission concluded that “there was no ground for anticipating the development of aviation to the point where it would constitute a direct menace to the United States.” Mitchell was found guilty of insubordination and was sentenced “to be suspended from rank, command, and duty, with forfeiture of all pay and allowances for five years.” Mitchell, only 57, died a broken man on Feb. 19, 1936. One of his last utterances was to fellow pilot Homer Berry: *“The American people will regret the day I was crucified by politics and bureaucracy.”*

Sadly, Mitchels predictions came true at Pearl Harbor and the air force belatedly sought to honor this disgraced hero by naming a twin engined bomber after him. It was the “Mitchell B – 25” that General Doolittle used to bomb Tokyo.

The first amendment of the U.S. Constitution guarantees freedom of speech. The Supreme Court has ruled that this freedom includes “vigorous debate”, “the free and uninterrupted exchange of ideas”, and even “insulting and outrageous speech”. In the real world, however, the descendants of those who destroyed Stephen and Mitchell are still around. That’s why certain speakers are silenced on campus, and certain ideas are banned on Facebook and Twitter. Sadly, certain ideas and points of view, no matter how relevant and true, will receive no corporate payouts, or government grants. The cynic said it like this: “One thing we learn from history is that people do not learn from history”. Stephen is dead, and so is Billy Mitchell, but their legacy lives on to inspire us to join the requiem of the unafraid!

I love you,

Grandpa Boyce