BILLY MITCHELL

William Lendrum Mitchell visited Nome twice, sent Army planes to Nome, and influenced the development of the city.

Born in 1879, to wealthy parents who were living in Nice, France at the time, Billy Mitchell grew up in Wisconsin, on a prosperous country farm, with horses, cows, a pond, and plenty of room. At age nineteen, he enlisted in the 1st Wisconsin Infantry Regiment, to participate in the Spanish-American War. His aptitude for telegraphy led him to the Signal Corps, and to the Philippines and Alaska.

Mitchell wrote of Alaska in a manuscript later published as "THE OPENING OF ALASKA", 1901-1903. This is the story of his early military assignment in Alaska while the U.S. Army Signal Corps built the Washington-Alaska Military Cable and Telegraph System (WAMCATS; renamed Alaska Communication System, ACS in 1936). Mitchell, in his words, "participated, laid out, and worked on the Alaska telegraph system." The system included a wireless link between Fort St. Michael on one side of Norton Sound and Nome on the other. Both communities got 210-foot masts for the radio antenna. Preparing for that construction first brought Mitchell to Nome.

On October 5, 1901, Mitchell rode the steamer *St. Paul* from St. Michael

> "…over the hundred odd miles to Nome across Norton Sound, arriving there next morning. Nome City looked like a metropolis. It was said to have a population of 35,000 [an exaggeration]. …There was no port whatever. Ranged along the beach and still working their 'rockers' were the beach miners. …We landed in small boats running through the surf. The people were a tough looking lot, much worse than at Dawson or any place up the river. This was because Nome was easy to get to; one could come there directly by boat after the left and not have to take the perilous and grueling trips through the passes or over the long stretches of the Yukon. For another thing, Nome had no such efficient police control as Dawson, and there was a noticeable lack of law and order. I was told that the Federal Judge there was wholly corrupt…The same gambling dens, saloons and dance halls existed in Nome as at the other places, but of a more lawless and degraded character."

Only days later Mitchell was in Seattle, so he did not stay long in Nome. In July 1903, after finishing his military tour in Alaska, Mitchell again went to Nome, again by steamer – this time the *Portland*, and again from St. Michael. This time he remained with the ship that picked up passengers in Nome and proceeded south through the Bering Sea.

In 1920, Mitchell sent the Black Wolf Squadron from New York City to Nome. This flight was to demonstrate the reliability of airplanes, to prove the skill of Army aviators, to illustrate the long-distance military implications of airplanes, to open an airway to the United States territory of Alaska, and to generate public and political support for the Air Service, which was suffering through post-World War I budget cuts. The squadron departed Mitchell Field, Long Island, New York, on July 15, 1920. Each plane had a crew of two, a pilot and a mechanic. There were four planes, all war-surplus de Havilland DH-4B biplanes, powered by Liberty engines.

On August 23, 1920 at 5:30 p.m., they landed on the old parade grounds of the abandoned Fort Davis outside of Nome. They promptly delivered airmail carried from New York to Nome. The city gave a parade and a banquet to honor the aviators, and the local Arctic Brotherhood lodge held a reception for them.

The squadron loft Nome on August 31, and landed at Mitchell Field on October 20. During their three-month (97 day) expedition, the military aviators flew 9,329 miles and logged 112 hours of flight time. In the introduction to his OPENING OF ALASKA, Mitchell summarized the event:

> "In 1920, I sent a flight of airplanes from New York to Nome and back again without the loss of a ship or a man. This expedition was ably commanded by Capt. [St. Clair] Streett [U.S. Air Service]. The airway was established with the cooperation of the Canadian government. I hoped that it would be maintained permanently, but this has not been done."

The Army officially called this the Alaska Flying Expedition. Because of the emblem painted of each plane, the expedition also became known as the Black Wolf Squadron. The press often called it simply the New York to Nome Flight. Mitchell had anticipated that a flight to Nome would prepare the way for an Army round-the-world flight, which it did. In 1924, Army aviators became the first to fly around the world.

In 1924, Mitchell predicted an unprovoked attack on the U.S. by Japan and the significance of Alaska for defense. Again, in 1935, he argued for arming Alaska for the defense of the United States. At that time he explained,

> "Japan is our dangerous enemy in the Pacific. They won't attack Panama. They will come right here to Alaska. Alaska is the most central place in the world for aircraft, and that is true of either Europe, Asia, or North America. I believe in the future he who holds Alaska will hold the world, and I think it is the most important strategic place in the world."

When writing his memoirs of working on the Alaska telegraph, Mitchell added,

> "In the studies I have made of the application of military power on and across the Pacific, Alaska always stands out as the key point. With modern means of transportation in the air, we are no longer afraid of cold, fog, rain and snow or any other climatic condition. Our modern aircraft can not only operate under such conditions, landing and taking off successfully if fogs, defrosting their wings, and providing for their personnel in the coldest temperatures, but they can rise up into the so-called stratosphere where conditions are always the same and navigate with precision and assurance."

In 1936, the combination of heart trouble and influenza fell Mitchell. He died in February. Although Congress failed to fund the construction of military bases in Alaska during his lifetime, the United States did build bases in Alaska, including Marks Army Air Force Base in Nome, during World War II.