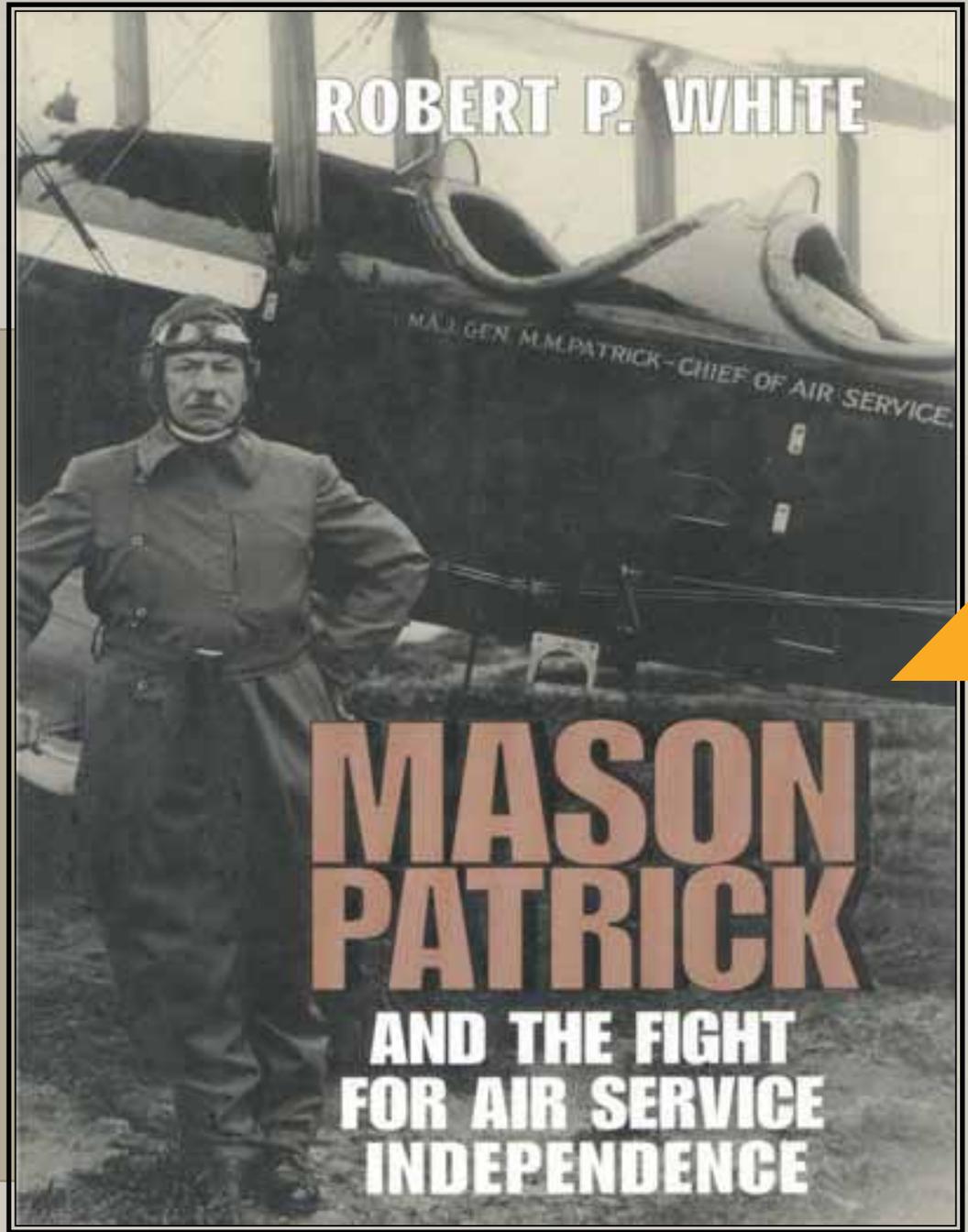




GEN John Pershing selected Mason Patrick in 1918 to command the Air Service of the American Expeditionary Force. Patrick, one of Pershing's former West Point classmates and an engineer, by virtue of his intellect, political acumen, and organizational skills, transformed the Air Service and set it on the path to independence from the U.S. Army. One of the first aviation officers to recognize the full potential of airpower during war and peacetime, Patrick was remarkably successful in gaining support for the three legs of his aviation triangle: military aviation, commercial aviation, and the aviation-manufacturing base. Patrick's tenure as chief of the Air Service and, later, the Air Corps made possible the emergence of an independent Air Force





1863-1942

MG Mason M. Patrick

Recognizing a Pioneer

Patrick Air Force Base, Fla., was named in honor of MG Mason M. Patrick, a pioneer of the Army Air Corps, on Aug. 1, 1950. This designation recognizes both Patrick's 41 years of service to the Army and the nation, and his significant efforts in developing the initial Air Service.

Patrick's career is an interesting one. Born Dec. 13, 1863, in what is now Lewisburg, W.V., Patrick graduated second in his class from West Point in 1886. He continued his studies for three years at the Engineer School of Application, Willets Point, N.Y., graduating in July 1889 and was soon promoted to first lieutenant. His first assignment took him to Johnstown, Pa., to support relief efforts following a devastating flood. From there, Patrick went to the Carolinas where he was in charge of river and harbor work.

Patrick returned to West Point from 1892 to 1895 to teach engineering. Between 1887 and 1901, he addressed Mississippi River improvements, working on rivers in Ohio and Tennessee. In 1901, he transferred to Washington to serve as an assistant to the Chief of Engineers. He held this post for two years, before again returning to teach at West Point. During his three years in the faculty, he was promoted to major in 1904.

In 1906, Patrick was given command of the 2d Battalion of Engineers in Cuba, as such he was the Chief Engineer for the Army of Cuban Pacification. From there, in 1909, he transferred back to the United States to develop river and harbor projects in Virginia (1909-1912) and Michigan (1912-1916). Also during this time, 1910-1912, now LTC Patrick was on the board directing the raising of the USS Maine from Havana Harbor.

In March 1916, Patrick was promoted to the rank of colonel. During this year, he organized and commanded the first U.S. Army Engineers serving on the U.S.-Mexico border. The next year, in August 1917, Patrick was promoted to brigadier general and transferred to France and the American Expeditionary Forces (AEF) fighting World War I. In September of that year, he was named Chief Engineer of Lines of Communication and Director of Construction and Forestry of the American Expeditionary Force. In this capacity, he would oversee the construction of ports, railroads, depots and airfields needed to support the Force. Within the year, however, GEN John J. Pershing appointed Patrick to command the combined Air Service of the American Expeditionary Force. He held this position from May 1918 through the end of the war in





Four specially built aircraft were commissioned from the Douglas Aircraft Company for the first flight around the world. The World Cruisers, as they were called, were christened the Seattle, the Chicago (pictured here), the Boston, and the New Orleans.



1919 and was subsequently promoted to major general (June 1918). “An excellent organizer and administrator,” Patrick was tasked to “whip it into shape.” Although the United States entered the war without a single plane “fit for battle,” it was soon a disciplined and efficient organization and had grown to include 2,129 officers. Working with the British and French, Patrick was able to acquire military planes and the necessary training for the pilots and crews. With only four air units in active service in June 1918, by the day of the Armistice in November 1918, the Air Service had grown to 45 squadrons at the front.

With the end of the war, Patrick oversaw the demobilization of the combat Air Service units and returned to the Corps of Engineers. In 1920, he became the Assistant Chief of Engineers and commander of the Army’s engineering school.

By 1921, however, the morale and organization of the Air Service had deteriorated. Internal arguments among the leadership and repeated budget cuts, 60 percent in a three year period, had demoralized the service and diminished the personnel to only 950 officers. Given this situation and his previous experience with the Air Service, in October 1921, COL Mason Patrick of the U.S. Corps of Engineers was named Director of the Army Air Service with the rank of major general. At that time, the weekly magazine *The Outlook* noted that his selection “is certain to give very general satisfaction and redound to the great benefit of the Air Service, which of late has not been functioning as smoothly as those best informed could wish.”²¹ Or as another source recounts, he was assigned to “come in and shake the foolishness out of this new service and sit on the lid.”²²

Although “not a flier, nor even a technician in air mechanics,” Patrick was a recognized leader. As such he was tasked with building the Air Corps from the ground up. Not only was it necessary to address doctrinal issues between the Army and the Navy and the internal discord, Patrick was also to develop the Service itself, supervising the procurement of aircraft and a budget of \$20 million. The Air Service of 1922 relied on 3,369 World War I surplus aircraft of which only 910 were airworthy, and given advances in aviation were already obsolete, and with manpower levels that were inadequate to effectively maintain and fly the aircraft.

Under his direction, the Air Service truly took shape with experimental facilities developed at Wright Field, Ohio, and a training facility at San Antonio, Texas, where he himself learned to fly. Patrick earned his wings at the age of 59. He increased the number of personnel in the Air Service and the number of trained pilots and developed its supplies and equipment. As early as 1923, Patrick observed “Undoubtedly the next war will be decided in the air.”²³ As a result he sought to ensure that “the Air Service would be able to enter combat on the first day of war to gain air superiority and maintain it.”²⁴

Demonstrating the gains that had been accomplished, Patrick authorized the first flight around the world by Army pilots in 1924,⁵ followed by a series of Pan-American goodwill flights to every capital in Central and South America. Army pilots also set a series of speed, distance and altitude records during his tenure as Chief.

Reappointed as Chief of the Air Service in October 1925, Patrick continued his campaign to create a separate service. His argument, based upon



The historic Pan-American Goodwill Flight was made by ten pilots in five Loening OA-1A amphibian aircraft from 1926 – 1927, through Mexico, Central and South America. The purpose of the flight was to improve relations with Latin American countries, to encourage commercial aviation, and to provide valuable training for Air Corps personnel. To stimulate public interest, each airplane was named after a major U.S. city—the New York, the San Antonio, the San Francisco (pictured here), the Detroit, and the St. Louis.



studies of aerial warfare and the results of World War I, divided military aviation into two areas: air service (attached to ground units, performing tasks such as reconnaissance and artillery targeting) and air force (pursuit, bombardment and other units devoted to offensive purposes).⁶ Through lectures at the War and Staff Colleges and published articles, Patrick worked to gain support for an independent service.

In January 1926, Patrick introduced a proposal that would create a separate Air Corps, comparable to the Marine Corps. Ultimately, in July 1926, the Army Air Corps Act of 1926 reorganized the Air Service as the Air Corps, under an Assistant Secretary of War, and supported by a five year procurement and expansion program.

Patrick retired from the Army in December 1927. In 1928, he published a book on the American air program entitled “The U.S. in the Air.” Patrick also continued to serve; this time in the capacity of Public Utilities Commissioner for the District of Columbia from 1929 to 1933. Patrick died on Jan. 29, 1942, and is buried at Arlington National Cemetery. In addition to Patrick Air Force Base, MG Patrick was memorialized by the U.S. Navy in 1944 with the U.S. Navy transport ship USS General M.M. Patrick (AP-150). 

Footnotes

- 1 “The New Head of the Air Service.” *The Outlook*, Vol. 129, 12 October 1921, p. 206.
- 2 “Mason Patrick and the Creation of the U.S. Air Corps.” U.S. Centennial of Flight Commission Web page, http://www.centennialofflight.gov/essay/Air_Power/Patrick/AP15.htm.
- 3 Biography, United States Air Force – Major General Mason M. Patrick, http://www.af.mil/information/bios/bio_print.asp?bioid=6695&page=1.
- 4 “Mason Patrick and the Creation of the U.S. Air Corps.”
- 5 From April –September 1924, a team of Army pilots made the first round-the world flight. They flew Douglas Liberty 400 bombers for 26,345 miles during 363 flying hours in 175 days.
- 6 “Mason Patrick and the Creation of the U.S. Air Corps”.

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