

Battleships Bombed by Billy Mitchell ^[1]

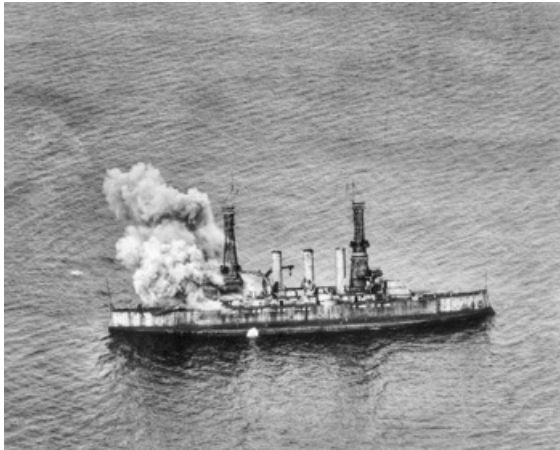
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Battleships Bombed by Billy Mitchell

by Paul Branch, 2006

See also: [Graveyard of the Atlantic](#) ^[2]



The USS New Jersey after being hit by one of several bombs that sank the ship off the North Carolina coast, 5 Sept. 1923. North Carolina Collection, University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill Library.

In 1923 two surplus navy battleships were bombed and sunk by aircraft under the command of [Brig. Gen. William "Billy" Mitchell](#) ^[3] off [Cape Hatteras](#) ^[4] to determine the effectiveness of air power against heavy surface ships. Mitchell, an outspoken advocate of air power, had demonstrated in 1921 what many naval strategists considered impossible—that battleships could be destroyed from the air—when he used airplanes to sink an old surplus battleship. Two years later, he set up the experiment off [Cape Hatteras](#) ^[4] to determine if battleships could be sunk by high-level bombing and to measure the potential for aircraft being called into combat from long distances to intercept a hostile warship. The target vessels, which were to be scrapped under postwar naval limitation treaties, were the 14,949-ton *New Jersey* and *Virginia*, built between 1902 and 1906 at a cost of \$6 million each and anchored 18 miles southeast of [Cape Hatteras](#) ^[4].

The attacks began on the morning of 5 Sept. 1923. While officers and dignitaries watched from another ship, the first planes flew directly into action from Langley Airfield, Va., a distance of 175 miles, demonstrating the feasibility of long-range attack. The remaining planes under Mitchell flew from a temporary airfield on Hatteras. The *New Jersey* was shelled with 600-pound bombs from 10,000 feet, which left the ship damaged and leaking. The attack then shifted to the *Virginia*, which was sunk with thirteen 1,100-pound bombs from 3,000 feet in only 30 minutes. That afternoon the planes returned to send the *New Jersey* to the bottom in only a few minutes.

The experiment proved both the benefit of high-altitude bombing and aircraft long-range strike capability. However, debate over the use of air power against ships continued until [World War II](#) ^[5] conclusively demonstrated the value of air power.

References:

Burke Davis, *The Billy Mitchell Story* (1969).

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William Schwarzer, *The Lion Killers: Billy Mitchell and the Birth of Strategic Bombing* (2003).

Subjects:

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Origin - location:

Dare County ^[12]

From:

Encyclopedia of North Carolina, University of North Carolina Press.^[13]

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