

Mitchell Trophy Air Races at Selfridge Field

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Members of the First Pursuit Group, Selfridge Field, who were selected to compete in the 1935 Mitchell Trophy Air Race.
(Photo courtesy of the Selfridge Military Air Museum. Used with permission).

The years following the end of World War I were exciting times at Selfridge Field. Air power had proven to be a weapon of enormous value to the Allies during the late conflict, and, in 1919, Selfridge became the home of the Army's famed 1st Pursuit Group. 1st Pursuit had distinguished itself during the war with 1,413 aerial engagements resulting in 202 confirmed kills of enemy aircraft. Among the aviators who served with the Group was Eddie Rickenbacker, known as America's "Ace of Aces" for his 26 kills, including one that earned him the Medal of Honor. Now that 1st Pursuit was headquartered at Selfridge, new generations of fighter aircraft and fighter pilots would earn their wings in the skies near Mount Clemens.

William "Billy" Mitchell was a man who understood the awesome potential of air power for the United States armed forces. Brigadier General Mitchell had directed air assaults in Europe and had flown his own plane in combat. Following the war, he engaged in an outspoken campaign to develop the American air forces, including a much-publicized demonstration off the Virginia coast in which he sought to convince the U.S. Navy that battleships were obsolete by bombing and sinking the captured German battlewagon *Ostfriedsland*.

In keeping with his interest in seeing the skills of American military aviators developed to the fullest, Billy Mitchell established the Mitchell Trophy Air Race in 1922. The Mitchell Trophy was named in honor of the general's younger brother, John L. Mitchell, who had lost his life while serving with the 1st Pursuit Group in France during World War I. General Mitchell donated the air race trophy in his brother's memory. Race participants were drawn exclusively from among the members of the 1st Pursuit Group, and the inaugural race was held at the Group's home, Selfridge Field, in the autumn of

that year.

The first race was but one event in the National Air Races held at Selfridge that year. Other classic contests held annually during this golden age of air racing included the Pulitzer, Curtiss and Boeing races. Mitchell competitors flew five laps around a 20-mile course marked by pylons, but pilots might as easily have followed the line of spectators' automobiles which ringed the circuit.

For several years after the first competition, the Mitchell Trophy Race was held at various airfields around the country, wherever the other major trophy contests were being held. In 1930, the Mitchell Race returned to Selfridge, where it would remain through the last race in 1936.

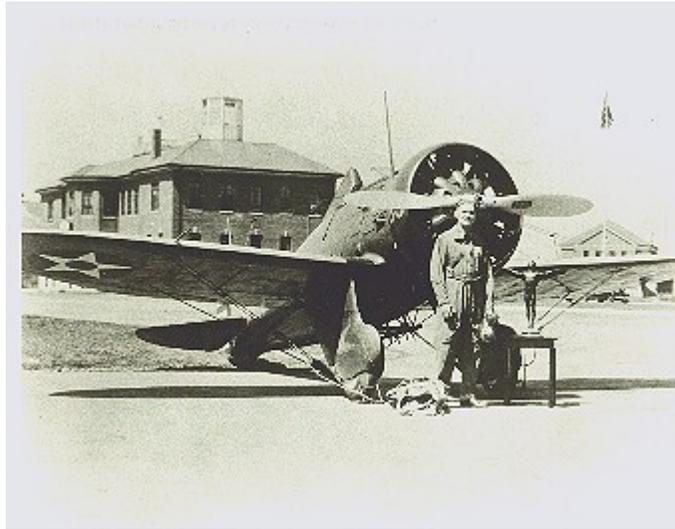
Several Mitchell winners were destined to meet tragic and early deaths. The 1923 winner, Burt E. Skeel, died in the year following his victory while competing in the Pulitzer race, when his airplane crashed after throwing a propeller blade. The 1924 winner, Cyrus K. Bettis, died in 1926 when his airplane crashed in the Pennsylvania mountains. Several of his former comrades from Selfridge took part in ceremonies naming a Pittsburgh airport in his memory. Thomas K. Matthews, who won the Mitchell in 1925, was killed in a 1927 automobile accident. A plane crash also ended the life of Irvin A. Woodring, 1927 winner, who was killed in January, 1933, while testing a prototype of the P-30 attack bomber. Karl E. Gimmmler, 1935 winner, was killed in 1936 at Barksdale Field when his airplane spun into the ground during gunnery practice.

Year	Winner	Speed	Location
1922	Donald F. Stace	148 mph	Selfridge Field
1923	Burt E. Skeel	161 mph	St. Louis, MO
1924	Cyrus K. Bettis	175.41 mph	Dayton, OH
1925	Thomas K. Matthews	161.7 mph	Mitchell Field, Long Island
1926	Lawrence C. Elliott	160 mph	Philadelphia, PA
1927	Irvin A. Woodring*	158.4 mph	Dayton, OH
1928	Ernest H. Lawson	154.7 mph	Los Angeles, CA
1929	Paul B. Wurtsmith	152.17 mph	Cleveland, OH
1930	Louis A. Vaupre	146.7 mph	Selfridge Field
1931	not held		
1932	not held		
1933	not held		
1934	Fred C. Nelson	216.8 mph	Selfridge Field
1935	Karl E. Gimmmler	214.68 mph	Selfridge Field
1936	John M. Sterling	217.546 mph	Selfridge Field

*Some accounts of the time erroneously name the 1927 winner as William L. Cornelius, who in fact was the winner of another race involving pilots from 1st Pursuit Group.

The 1928 winner, Ernest H. Lawson, rose to the rank of colonel and was commander of the 305th Bomb Group during World War II. He was killed in action in 1944. Paul B. Wurtsmith, the 1929 winner, went on to a distinguished flying career during World War II and attained the rank of major general. He met an untimely death in 1946, however, when his B-25 bomber crashed in North Carolina. The Air Force installation at Oscoda, Michigan, was named Wurtsmith Air Force Base in his memory in 1953.

The last Mitchell race was held in 1936, coincidentally the same year in which General Mitchell died. Clouds of war were gathering anew over Europe, and 1st Pursuit Group was destined to distinguish itself once again in combat. During World War II the aviators and their P-38s would fly more than 1,400 combat missions and earn three Distinguished Unit Citations. Many changes in the history of air power would come now, and quickly. The jet age was dawning; only 11 years after John M. Sterling posted his 217 mph win in 1936, an airplane would break the sound barrier and its speed would be measured in Mach numbers.



*1934 winner Fred C. Nelson poses with the Mitchell Trophy in front of his pursuit aircraft
(Photo courtesy of Selfridge Military Air Museum. Used with permission.)*

The Mitchell Trophy itself resurfaced in 1962, when General Charles W. Sweeney presented it to Captain Anthony Gardecki of the 4th Tactical Fighter Wing, Seymour Johnson Air Force Base, North Carolina, in recognition of Gardecki's achievement in scoring the highest number of points in an F-105D Radar Nuclear Delivery event. Today, the Mitchell Trophy resides in the commander's office at the 4th Fighter Wing, Seymour Johnson AFB.

The Library is grateful to Mr. Ed Stoll of the Selfridge Military Air Museum and SSgt. John D. DeShetler, 1st Fighter Wing Historian, Langley AFB, for their assistance with this article.

For further information about the Mitchell Trophy Air Races and the 1st Pursuit Group, we recommend:

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