



Aufsatz

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The Myth of the Flying Ace in Top Gun: Maverick

Zusammenfassung

Der Mythos des Fliegerasses entstand ursprünglich als Propaganda im Ersten Weltkrieg und wird seither in der Populärkultur immer wieder aufgegriffen. Wir argumentieren, dass Top Gun: Maverick mehrere Mythen rund um das Fliegerass darstellt: Der Film verbindet die dem Fliegerass-Mythos eigene Nostalgie mit einer Nostalgie für die 1980er Jahre und den Originalfilm Top Gun, während er den Mythos modernisiert, um Minderheiten und Frauen einzubeziehen, und gleichzeitig an Werten festhält, die für die US-Militärkultur und die Rekrutierung vorteilhaft sind.

Schlagwörter Luftfahrt; Top Gun, Heldentum, Mythos, Propaganda, Film

Abstract

The myth of the flying ace was originally born as a propaganda figure in World War I and has recurrently been portrayed in popular culture ever since. We argue that Top Gun: Maverick portrays several myths surrounding the flying ace: it combines nostalgia for a bygone time with nostalgia for the 1980s and the original Top Gun film. It modernises the myth to include minorities and women while holding onto values beneficial to US military culture and recruitment.

Keywords Aviation; Top Gun, Heroism, Myth, Propaganda, Film

Zitierempfehlung

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The Myth of the Flying Ace in Top Gun: Maverick



Grumman F-14 Tomcat

(<https://www.history.navy.mil/content/history/museums/nnam/explore/collections/aircraft/f-f-14a-tomcat.html>)

The myth of the flying ace emerged during World War I and continues to fascinate popular culture to this day. Originally born as a propaganda figure, the myth of the flying ace quickly developed a life of its own. From the Red Baron Manfred von Richthofen, as immortalized by beloved cartoon dog Snoopy, to Tom Cruise, the role of the fighter pilot was that of an ace soaring above the mud of the trenches. The myth and propaganda surrounding these men reflected knightly virtues of chivalry and honour and harkened back to a nostalgic view of warfare that stood in stark contrast to the realities of modern warfare technologies. Even though fighter pilots continue to play an important but subordinate role compared to bombers in Air Force operations, this myth gives them a central role in past propaganda and current recruiting.

The success of *Top Gun: Maverick* (2021) — the sequel to the cult classic *Top Gun* (1986) centred around Lt. Pete Maverick (Tom Cruise) — ties seamlessly into this myth. Currently, the role and future of manned and unmanned aviation is being debated in civilian and military circles, with topics such as 5th-generation fighter aircraft, armed drones, and loitering munitions frequently making the news in the ongoing Russo-Ukrainian War. In these times, *Top Gun: Maverick* makes the case for the human

factor in air warfare: technology may change, but a machine can never replace a human being, never mind a flying ace.

This paper argues that the film *Top Gun: Maverick* portrays several myths surrounding the flying ace: it combines nostalgia for the first *Top Gun* film and the 1980s with nostalgia for a bygone era of black-and-white Cold War politics and warfare before the War on Terror. Despite its many nostalgic callbacks to its predecessor and 1980s Americana, the film still acknowledges the passage of time and structural changes in the make-up of the US Armed Forces: current debates surrounding race and gender are acknowledged in the form of a more diverse cast of characters, yet American foreign policy is not. The century-old myth of the fighter ace is allowed to become more inclusive, whilst the popular understanding of aerial warfare is not. The film emphasises the role and superiority of manned air warfare in the era of integrated and increasingly computerised and interconnected cyber-information warfare. This area of warfare is increasingly focused on cyber-information technology and long-range strike capabilities, yet the film portrays aerial missions as decidedly more human- and intuition-centric than reality — thereby celebrating the dominance of the human element in warfare and the flying ace myth. The role of the individual knight of the air is cemented by the film's narrative: Maverick stands apart as an independent and iconoclastic warrior outside the traditionally hierarchical military structure — a true Maverick as his name implies. Via the myth of the flying ace, *Top Gun: Maverick* celebrates values such as comradeship, the family of choice, honour, and chivalry.

The Myth of the Flying Ace in Propaganda and Popular Culture

To understand the fascination of the civilian public with fighter pilots above all other forms of aerial combat, it is important to consider the historical context in which said fascination was born. Militaries around the world had tried to apply aviation to their war-fighting capabilities since the invention of the hot air balloon. Balloon observers were introduced in the 19th century to give commanders on the ground an improved overview of the battlefield.¹ However, it was the invention of heavier-than-air aviation at the beginning of the 20th century that made the use of aeroplanes and airships in the military a practical objective to reach. During the Progressive Era, American and European army officers began to experiment with the use of air assets as both reconnaissance and ground attack vehicles, but the outbreak of the First World War in Europe put a stop to experimentation. Instead, European powers put the young invention, just eleven years old at the time, into action.²

Initially imagined by all sides as a glorious and noble war of manoeuvre and rapid mobility that would be won within weeks, the First World War quickly saw the Western Front become bogged down as million-man armies crashed into each other on the battlefields of Belgium and France. Caused by a combination of heavy firepower on both sides and a lack of rapid mobility and logistics, in conjunction with the onset of winter, massive casualties led to the front lines freezing in place. This was not the war of individual glory, European chivalry, and noble patriotism that had been imagined

¹ Jeremy Black, *Air Power. A Global History*, London 2016, pp. 9–13.

² *Ibid.*, pp. 15–20.

in prior decades. Neither human bravery nor élan or the spirit of the offensive could counter modern industrial warfare.³

The stalemate of the Western Front, artillery barrages, and essentially siege-like conditions for months and years at a time, as well as the massive casualty figures printed in all newspapers on both sides of the conflict, made it increasingly difficult for the various governments to portray any element of the conflict as heroic instead of a waste of human life.⁴ Aviation, however, quickly established itself as a new dimension of war that could offer exciting stories for government propaganda purposes, even as news from the front disillusioned readers back home: Via the figure of the fighter pilot, chivalry and individual glory were re-established in propaganda and popular imagination alike. Literally and figuratively soaring above the mud of the trenches, these men represented a new hope for the endurance of long-established principles by transposing the myth of the chivalric knight of old to that of an equally chivalric knight of the air. In times of rapid technological advancements and a desperate situation in an unfamiliar type of war, they represented narrative-mythological stability. Yet, the same rapidity of tactical and technical development that led to the aeroplanes themselves as well as their velocity, also set the flying ace apart from previous heroic figures: “The pilot-hero was made unique by a whole mythology of speed as an experience, of space devoured, of intoxicating motion.”⁵

As such, the fighter pilot combined the long-standing myths surrounding chivalry and honour with modern notions of time, space, and speed. Referencing older, long-established myths massively contributed to the effectiveness of this propaganda: according to Foucault, “the development of humanity is a series of interpretations.”⁶ According to Barthes, myth transforms these interpretations into perceived facts.⁷ Therefore, generating the myth of the flying ace on the back of the myths of knighthood and chivalry proved a comparatively simple, yet incredibly effective and long-standing move. While the French aviator Roland Garros was the first flying ace, it was the German government who first used combat pilots as symbols of the war effort and national heroes. Max Immelmann and Oswald Boelcke became the first flying aces, earning the *Pour le Mérite* for their successful missions against Entente aeroplanes. The Entente followed suit, with Albert Ball becoming the first British ace.⁸ These men and the propaganda surrounding their exploits formed the basis of a myth on top of which all modern narratives of heroic pilots are built, including those from *Top Gun: Maverick*.⁹

As a result of this flying ace propaganda, the public focus on air warfare shifted. Aerial reconnaissance, pursuit or fighter planes, bombers, and other vehicles all had their place in the order of battle, but – from the public’s perspective – one group above all others received the lion’s share of attention: the fighter pilot. Military leaders on the Entente side had been reluctant to elevate pursuit or fighter pilots above others. Hugh Trenchard, commander of what eventually became the Royal Air

3 Jörn Leonhard, *Die Büchse der Pandora. Geschichte des Ersten Weltkriegs*, München 2014, pp. 276–278.

4 Linda R. Robertson, *The Dream of Civilized Warfare. World War I Flying Aces and the American Imagination*, Minneapolis/London 2003, pp. 87–91; Edgar Jones, *The Psychology of Killing: The Combat Experience of British Soldiers during the First World War*, in: *Journal of Contemporary History* 41/2 (2006), pp. 229–246, <https://www.jstor.org/stable/30036384>.

5 Roland Barthes, *Mythologies*, New York 1991, p. 71.

6 Quoted in Andrew van Henty, *The Modern Construction of Myth*, Bloomington/Indianapolis 2001, p. 294.

7 Roland Barthes, *Mythologies*, p. 128.

8 Walter Briscoe/H. Russel Standard, *Britain’s Forgotten Fighter Ace. Captain Albert Ball VC, Gloucestershire 1918*, p. 210; Linda R. Robertson, *The Dream of Civilized Warfare*, pp. 101–104.

9 *Top Gun: Maverick*, Joseph Kosinski, Paramount Pictures, USA 2022.

Force (RAF), believed that fighter pilots should not receive praise above their peers in other planes or assigned to other missions. He believed that aerial warfare was already difficult and dangerous enough and that any man who served displayed the same amount of courage and contributed equally to the mission of the air service.¹⁰ Yet Trenchard was overruled by the government because they in turn believed that the public needed heroes. In the words of Linda R. Robertson, the combat pilot “made his greatest contribution to the war as a tool for propaganda.”¹¹

In the need for individual heroic figures with a face and personality that could be marketed at the home front, the propaganda machine on both sides distorted the role played by other kinds of pilots or components of the various air forces involved in the conflict. From this distortion came a cognitive dissonance over the way the air war in the First World War was conducted: while civilians began to believe that fighter planes and aces made the largest contribution to winning the glamourised and advertised battle in the skies, military commanders instead saw fighters as one of many tools by which to conduct operations. The consensus among military historians is that air-to-air combat between individual fighter pilots was “the least significant” especially compared to artillery spotters and reconnaissance pilots.¹² This influence of the flying ace myth on the public perception of the war is very much in line with the conception of myth as such: in his *Mythologies*, Roland Barthes observes that myth “distorts; myth is neither a lie nor a confession: it is an inflexion [...] [it] transforms history into nature.”¹³ By coining the myth of the flying ace as a means of propaganda, governments laid the foundation for a public understanding of the war that was both a belief system and an “ideological narrative.”¹⁴ It is telling then that in both *Top Gun* films, despite the presence of military airbases, more modern planes, and aircraft carriers, legacy fighter aircraft are the sole foci of the narrative. Even in situations where other aviation assets would have been the logical real-life solution to a given problem, the plot is shifted in ways that allow fighter jets to excel and their pilots to display their heroic nature.¹⁵

Thus, the First World War shaped our perception of the use and conduct of aerial warfare. Fighter pilots slotted neatly into the role left by chivalric and heroic tales of old: from Homeric heroes to European armoured knights, fighter pilots were able to become symbols of heroic individual combat in which machines were just tools of individual heroes. This differentiated them from the ground forces, who were now at the mercy of deadly machinery like artillery and machine guns which nullified heroic actions. Men like Manfred von Richthofen, known colloquially as the Red Baron, could succeed where the ground forces had failed and give the newspapers recognisable faces whose adventures could inspire soldiers and civilians alike. Unlike land warfare, which had become anonymised due to the size of armies and the fragility of individual life in the face of the sheer firepower on display, a fighter pilot could be uplifted from a simple cog in the machine to a recognisable hero who stood out from the masses. Heroes “domesticated the scale of war” in a way that a division of infantry could

¹⁰ Linda R. Robertson, *The Dream of Civilized Warfare*, p. 97.

¹¹ *Ibid.*, p. 87.

¹² *Ibid.*, pp. 98–99; Phillip S. Meilinger: Trenchard and ‘Morale Bombing’: The Evolution of Royal Air Force Doctrine Before World War II, in: *The Journal of Military History* 60/2 (1996), pp. 243–270.

¹³ Roland Barthes, *Mythologies*, p. 128.

¹⁴ Andrew van Hendy, *Myth*, p. 294.

¹⁵ Robert J. Marks, *Top Gun: Maverick: Thrilling but Outdated by Today’s AI*, <https://mindmatters.ai/2022/06/top-gun-maverick-thrilling-but-outdated-by-todays-ai>.

not, making the concept of a struggle between nation-states more manageable for the people at home.¹⁶ This was not a new phenomenon by any means, as even in the Iliad, individual champions stood out against the conglomerated soldiers of the phalanx. While the phalanx was acknowledged to do its duty and helped shape the outcome of the battle, it is nonetheless characters like Agamemnon and Achilles who receive characterisation and are humanised in a way that the audience can identify with.¹⁷ During the War on Terror, special operations forces received similar attention in the media, as will be discussed at a later point.¹⁸

For Americans, the Lafayette Escadrille helped cement the fascination with air power. Long before the US entered the First World War, Americans volunteered on the side of the Entente. Their exploits as fighter pilots helped shape public opinion at home and helped with recruitment to the air forces once the United States did enter the conflict. The early romanticisation of the air war as a chivalric duel between knights of the sky had already taken place by that point and shaped the American conviction that air power could win the war on its own without putting boots on the ground. It was more palatable to the American public to consider their involvement in the conflict as an honourable and admirable affair by which American troops would help a just cause on the part of the Entente to defeat the tyranny of Imperial Germany while being “stripped of its British imperial overtones.”¹⁹ Pro-war Americans could just side-step elements of the war-entry debate regarding imperialism and colonialism, of which the French and British were as guilty as the Germans, while highlighting the heroic struggle of Entente airmen.²⁰ In the same vein, the geopolitical conflict that motivates *Top Gun: Maverick*'s top-secret assignment is irrelevant to the context of the story. It is the heroic aerial combat which is at the centre of attention.

Thus, by 1917, Americans – lacking a sizeable army which could be shipped to Europe but possessing considerable industrial power and production plants to facilitate such an endeavour – believed that airplanes flown by America's youth could be their contribution to the hostilities.²¹ This idea remained an ideal. American doughboys did end up fighting in the trenches of the Western Front with all the consequences: gas attacks, shelling, high casualty figures, as well as few opportunities for individuals to distinguish themselves, much as the other warring parties had experienced in the three years prior – a disillusionment with the glory of combat that remained in the minds of people even when movement returned to the front in the final months of the conflict.²² Yet, the American dream of air warfare continued.

In the interwar period, serious developments in military aviation focused almost entirely on the threat of strategic, long-range bombers and how to defeat them. During operations in 1920 in Ethiopia,

16 Linda R. Robertson, *The Dream of Civilized Warfare*, pp. 100–101.

17 Hans Van Wees, *The Homeric Way of War: The 'Iliad' and the Hoplite Phalanx*, in: *Greece & Rome* 41/1 (1994), pp. 3–4, <https://www.jstor.org/stable/643127>.

18 Mark Bowden, *American Special Ops Forces Are Everywhere*, <https://www.theatlantic.com/magazine/archive/2021/04/how-special-ops-became-the-solution-to-everything/618080>.

19 Linda R. Robertson, *The Dream of Civilized Warfare*, p. 158.

20 *Ibid.*, p. 168.

21 Eliot A. Cohen, *The Mystique of U.S. Air Power*, in: *Foreign Affairs* 73/1 (1994): pp. 109–24, DOI: 10.2307/20045895.

22 Anessa C. Stagner, *Healing the Soldier, Restoring the Nation: Representations of Shell Shock in the USA During and After the First World War*, in: *Journal of Contemporary History*, 49/2 (2014), pp. 255–274, <https://www.jstor.org/stable/43697299>; Jennifer Keene, *A Brutalizing War? The USA After the First World War*, in: *Journal of Contemporary History* 50/1 (2015), pp. 78–99, <https://www.jstor.org/stable/43697364>.

the RAF emphasised its role in demoralising enemy forces and forcing them to withdraw or surrender. Believing that this could be achieved in both small and large-scale operations, it was a natural outgrowth of the massive bloodshed of the First World War.²³ Similarly, the mission in *Top Gun: Maverick* accomplishes a long-held desire for maximum firepower executed by minimal manpower. A comparatively small number of aircraft could turn the tide of battle in ways multiple divisions of soldiers were unable to in 1914.²⁴ This development largely added to the myth surrounding fighter pilots and is reflected both in the interwar developments of air power theory and the film.

Air power theorists from the Italian Giulio Douhet to the American Billy Mitchell were convinced of the utter dominance of the aircraft, especially the bomber aircraft, as the central tool in winning the next war: victory would come through the bombing of civilian populations, industrial centres, and tools of war. At the same time, one's population and soldiers would be spared from another war of attrition like the First World War: a win-win situation for governments still reeling from the consequences of the conflict and the need to limit arms spending.²⁵

The Second World War showed that air power alone could not win wars, even though air power advocates in both Britain and America tried to make the argument again and again. Destructive and controversial raids on German and Japanese industrial centres as well as the London Blitz levelled huge parts of cities yet failed to win the war on its own. Nevertheless, the war expanded the scale of aircraft use and the rate of technological development. The Second World War began with biplanes and ended with the introduction of the first jets as the world entered the Atomic Age.²⁶

Despite their relative tactical unimportance in light of the massive focus on strategic bombing from the 1920s to the 1940s, fighter pilots still managed to remain in the public imagination and the myth of their importance prevailed. Their heroic image had been painted by propaganda to aid the war effort in the First World War and the sheer dynamism of aerial combat lent itself to the portrayal in an equally dynamic new form of media: the silver screen. *Wings* (1927) portrayed the experiences of two American fighter pilots in the First World War: their struggles, romances, and heroic exploits, as well as practical stunt flying. In total, over 300 pilots partook in the filming process, including active-duty military aviators from the Army Air Corps with their planes. The film became a huge commercial and critical success, earning the first-ever Award for Outstanding Picture at the Oscars in 1928.²⁷ In 1930, and remade in 1938, *The Dawn Patrol* featured a pacifist approach to the horrors of aerial warfare and the sacrifices made by British pilots during the First World War.²⁸ Nonetheless, themes of heroism and selflessness connected fiction with reality: people across the world were mourning and honouring the contributions made by soldiers during the First World War, yet the national mood in most nations was decidedly anti-war and against any sabre-rattling that might cost another generation of young men their lives. Similarly, *A Yank in the R.A.F.* (1941) and *Flying Tigers* (1942)

²³ Jeremy Black, *Air Power*, pp. 47–48.

²⁴ Clay Bartels et. al., *Multidomain Operations and Close Air Support. A Fresh Perspective*, in: *Military Review* March–April 2017, pp. 70–79, <https://www.armyupress.army.mil/Journals/Military-Review/English-Edition-Archives/March-April-2017/ART-011>.

²⁵ Jeremy Black, *Air Power*, pp. 59–60.

²⁶ *Ibid.*, pp. 146–149.

²⁷ *Wings*, William A. Wellman, Paramount Famous Lasky Cooperation, USA 1927.

²⁸ *The Dawn Patrol*, Howard Hawks, First National Pictures, USA 1930; *The Dawn Patrol*, Edmund Goulding, Warner Bros., USA 1938.

harkened back to the early years of the First World War and the exploits of the Lafayette Escadrille. Both films feature American volunteers fighting the war before the official outbreak of hostilities between the United States and the Axis forces. This again highlights the use of the myth of the flying ace for propaganda purposes as seen in the First World War.²⁹ Exploits such as the Battle of Midway, which shifted the advantage in the Pacific towards the Allies, were captured on film by the director John Ford and his documentary short *The Battle of Midway* (1942), which again highlighted the tremendous suffering and death of military aviators while also upholding their virtue as true American heroes and patriots who were laying their lives on the line alongside sailors, marines, and soldiers to defend their nation in a time of need.³⁰ Thereby, over time, the films themselves worked to manifest the myth of the flying ace in the public perception of warfare.

After the war and into both the Cold War and the jet age, some of the best fighter pilots became test pilots. Chuck Yeager was a flying ace and test pilot who broke the sound barrier in 1947, becoming the fastest man alive. When the launch of Sputnik started the Space Race and fighter and test pilots became the first astronauts, it was naval aviator Neil Armstrong who eventually became the first man to walk on the moon. “The first American into space is not going to be a chimpanzee. (...) I want test pilots!”³¹ President Eisenhower exclaimed in the eventual dramatisation of the space race in *The Right Stuff* (1983), which chronicled the space programme's early years. Again, the high-stakes nature of aviation and the aim of reaching new technological frontiers is portrayed through the death-defying bravery and heroism of the pilots, many of whom lost or almost lost their lives in the narrative of the film, yet persevered to win the race to the moon. This neatly mirrors the continuation of the flying ace myth through time and its impact on fighter pilot's self-image. This aspect of self-sacrifice as well as the daredevil nature of these pilots and astronauts are mirrored in the scene in *Top Gun: Maverick* where Maverick (Tom Cruise) works as a test pilot and tries to break a speed record in the prototype *Darkstar*.³² Despite Admiral Cain's attempt to stop the flight, Maverick takes off anyway to save the project and the jobs of his colleagues, knowing that he will likely face disciplinary actions from his superiors. People in the control room remark “he's the fastest man alive”³³ — mirroring Chuck Yeager's status — and he eventually reaches Mach 10. For Maverick this is not a sufficient accomplishment: he needs to go further. At Mach 10.4, the plane eventually falls apart and Maverick ejects looking decidedly worse for wear. He is next seen turning up in a roadside diner and confusedly asking where he is. A star-struck child answers “Earth”,³⁴ mirroring the inclusion of astronauts in the flying ace myth.

In reality, although tales of fighter pilots and pilots-turned-astronauts dominated Hollywood, strategic bombing and the threat of nuclear strikes dominated the Cold War. Even without the threat of nuclear weapons, bombers continued to be relied upon in both the Korean and Vietnam Wars, dropping more bombs on North Korea and North Vietnam than all combatants combined in the

29 A Yank in the R.A.F, Henry King, 20th Century Fox, USA 1941; Flying Tigers. David Miller, Republic Pictures, USA 1942.

30 Mark Harris, *Five Came Back. A Story of Hollywood and the Second World War*, New York 2014, pp. 146–150.

31 *The Right Stuff*, Philip Kaufman, Warner Bros., USA 1983, 00:47:00 – 00:49:00.

32 Anon., Lockheed Martin Technology Soars on the Big Screen, <https://www.lockheedmartin.com/en-us/news/features/2022/lockheed-martin-movies.html>.

33 *Top Gun: Maverick*, 2022, 00:10:05 – 00:10:07.

34 *Ibid.*, 00:13:34 – 00:13:38.

Second World War.³⁵ The art of dogfighting - an aerial battle between fighters at close range - was eventually considered outdated with the start of the guided missile age. Although notable situations in the Vietnam War – American pilots did not achieve the levels of success originally envisioned – led to a new emphasis on training in aerial combat in the US Air Force. This led to the birth of the Fighter Weapons School for the US Navy, colloquially known as Top Gun. The new programme once again inspired the imagination of Hollywood and led to the release of the film *Top Gun*.³⁶

Top Gun (1986) then introduces us to the exploits of Lt. Pete “Maverick” Mitchell, a naval aviator who, alongside his co-pilot Lt. Nick “Goose” Bradshaw (Anthony Edwards) is sent to Naval Fighter Weapons School alongside other top pilots in the navy to improve his skills. Most of the film is spent with the pilots at the school, learning new manoeuvres and training with each other, competing for the top spot in class and the accompanying trophy, as well as the heart of their civilian instructor Charlie (Kelly McGillis).³⁷ In reality, no such trophy exists, as the school’s goal is to build teamwork and learn new and innovative ideas from one another.³⁸ A major theme of the movie is nonetheless that Maverick must learn the importance of teamwork and relying on others, especially after the tragic death of his co-pilot in a training mission. Instead, he forms a new bond with fellow aviator Tom “Iceman” Kazansky (Val Kilmer). Because of the characterisation of the fighter pilot as an individualistic knight of the sky, besting enemies in single combat through superior skills was a fundamental element of the flying ace myth at this point. This highlights how hard it is even for a film with substantial oversight from the Pentagon³⁹ and military advisors to manage the balancing act between the military’s vision for teamwork and the iconoclastic aviation archetype. Maverick even manages to shoot down two enemy MiGs at the film’s climax, making him – in-universe – the most recent pilot to defeat enemy planes in a dogfight.⁴⁰

While military aviation movies tend to be few and far apart in terms of Hollywood releases, recent decades until the release of the sequel to *Top Gun* have featured multiple stories about fighter pilots. *The Tuskegee Airmen* (1995)⁴¹ and *Red Tails* (2012)⁴² bring the traditional fighter pilot narratives of previous films to the oft-forgotten African American fighter pilots of the Second World War and their struggle against systemic racism and inequality. Their heroic qualities of integrity, bravery, and honour are equally highlighted for their prowess as fighter pilots and as members of a discriminated-against minority, fighting on and off the battlefield for human dignity.⁴³ In contrast to the first instalment of *Top*

35 Francis E. Taylor, *A House Built on Sand: Air Supremacy in US Air Force History, Theory, und Doctrine*, Montgomery 2020; Daniel L. Haulman, *Precision Aerial Bombardment of Strategic Targets. Its Rise, Fall, and Resurrection*, in: *Air Power History* 55/4 (2008), pp. 24–33, <https://www.jstor.org/stable/26275055>.

36 Robert K. Wilcox, *Scream of Eagles. The Creation of Top Gun – And the U.S. Air Victory in Vietnam*, New York 1990, pp. 113–122.

37 *Top Gun*, Tony Scott, Paramount Pictures, USA 1986.

38 Matt Trowbridge, *Sorry, Mav: There’s actually no such thing as a TOPGUN trophy*, <https://taskandpurpose.com/culture/top-gun-trophy-does-not-exist>.

39 Alissa Wilkinson, *The long, long, twisty affair between the US military and Hollywood*, <https://www.vox.com/23141487/top-gun-maverick-us-military-hollywood-oscar-winner-best-sound>.

40 *Top Gun*, 1986, 1:37:00 – 1:39:00.

41 *The Tuskegee Airmen*, Robert Markowitz, HBO Pictures, USA 1995.

42 *Red Tails*, Anthony Hemingway, 20th Century Fox, USA 2012.

43 Daniel L. Haulman, *Ivory and Ebony. White Officer Foes and Friends of the Tuskegee Airmen*, in: *Air Power History* 62/3 (2015), pp. 42–49, <https://www.jstor.org/stable/26276635>.

Gun, Top Gun: Maverick features a much more racially diverse cast and portrays people of colour in all manner of military occupations.

Flyboys (2006)⁴⁴ and *The Red Baron* (2008)⁴⁵ returned to the battlefields of the First World War and the stories of the first aviators, who had not been forgotten even a century after events. The heroic portrayal of Manfred von Richthofen, the titular Red Baron, in the German-British co-production was controversial upon release in Germany because of historical inaccuracies and the fact that von Richthofen was portrayed as a heroic figure in the first place.⁴⁶ The portrayal of fighter aces as heroic figures, as previously discussed, had never been a matter of debate in anglophone cinema up to this point. Instead, mainstream portrayals of flying aces, and even of the Red Baron in particular, feature prominently in other pieces of popular culture — such as the Peanuts comics wherein Snoopy imagines himself as a flying ace dog-fighting his nemesis, the Red Baron. The previously unquestioned heroic image of Manfred von Richthofen and the controversy following the release of the *Red Baron* highlight the cultural dissonance in the way the World Wars are taught and remembered across the world.⁴⁷

Indeed, the animated movies by director Hayao Miyazaki, *Porco Rosso* (1992) and *The Wind Rises* (2013), serve to juxtapose the often-juvenile excitement of aerial combat, the triumph of human technological ingenuity, and the romantic notion of the fighter pilot with the realities of the death and destruction brought on by industrial warfare.⁴⁸ This complex understanding of both the history and the myth seems all the more fitting as the world entered the 21st century and a new conflict began when terrorists hijacked four passenger jets on 11 September 2001 to destroy the World Trade Center and the Pentagon.⁴⁹

In the years since, few contemporary fighter movies have been released, likely because peer- or near-peer level warfare was not a part of the post 9/11 wars in Iraq or Afghanistan given the air supremacy enjoyed by the American and Coalition air forces against enemies who were not able to muster a credible air defense. *Stealth* (2005), *Sky Fighter* (2005), and *R2B: Return to Base* (2012) remained the most recent major releases of contemporary fighter pilot movies until the release of *Top Gun: Maverick*. All three films – American, French, and South Korean – deal with the changing nature of aerial warfare in one way or another. *Stealth* pits man versus machine in a plot about a stolen drone platform.⁵⁰ *Sky Fighters*, which is based on a cult classic French comic book, deals with a terrorist attack against the French state which has to be stopped by French fighter pilots and their superior skills. The original French title of the film makes the metaphor more obvious: *Les Chevaliers du ciel*, knights of the sky.⁵¹ Meanwhile, *R2B: Return to Base* follows the pattern laid out by *Top Gun* thirty years prior: a talented young pilot joins a new squadron and must learn about the values of teamwork and friendship while displaying his superior piloting skills.⁵²

⁴⁴ *Flyboys*, Tony Bill, MGM Distribution Co., USA 2006.

⁴⁵ *The Red Baron*, Nikolai Müllerschön, Warner Bros. Pictures, USA/Germany 2008.

⁴⁶ Anon., *Red Baron*, <https://www.dw.com/en/red-baron-film-breaks-german-war-hero-taboos/a-3205499>.

⁴⁷ Charles M. Schulz, *Snoopy Vs. The Red Baron*, Seattle 2015.

⁴⁸ *Porco Rosso*, Hayao Miyazaki, Toho, Japan 1992; *The Wind Rises*, Hayao Miyazaki, Toho, Japan 2013.

⁴⁹ John N. Duvall/Robert P. Marzec, *Narrating 9/11*, in: *Modern Fiction Studies* 57/3 (2011), pp. 381–400.

⁵⁰ *Stealth*, Rob Cohen, Sony Pictures Releasing, USA 2005.

⁵¹ *Les Chevaliers du ciel*, Gérard Pirés, Pathé, France 2005.

⁵² *R2B: Return to Base*, Kim Dong-won, CJ Entertainment, South Korea 2012.

Top Gun: Maverick (2022) then saw the return of Tom Cruise in the role of Pete “Maverick” Mitchell. Still a naval aviator and test pilot after over thirty years, Maverick is tasked with training the next generation of Top Gun graduates for a secret mission to destroy the nuclear ambitions of an unnamed enemy nation.⁵³ Maverick’s identity as a fighter pilot is challenged in this film by his advanced age for an active-duty pilot – nearing or having already reached the point of mandatory retirement.⁵⁴ Additionally, the threat of unmanned aerial vehicles – drones – looms over the aviation community in the film, with one admiral stating: “The future is coming, and you’re not in it [...]. Your kind is headed towards extinction.”⁵⁵ Yet Maverick, self-assured, counters: “Maybe so, sir. But not today.”⁵⁶

With Maverick’s status as the only combat pilot on active duty with confirmed air kills to his name, it is on him within the film’s narrative to prove his rejoinder to the admiral true. The new pilots present the new generation of aviators; they are more diverse than the cast of the first film, including both female and people of colour aviators. Yet their characterisation and design aesthetics mirror that of Maverick: sunglasses, bomber jackets, flight suits, the almost stereotypical outfit worn by aviators since the First World War, combined with cool self-assuredness regarding their abilities. While Maverick might be on his way out, the next generation is ready to step up in an unbroken lineage from the first fighter pilots that had been laid out the moment the flying ace myth was first formed. Yet tasked with an impossible-seeming mission, Maverick proves that he is uniquely qualified for it, being able to win a simulated training mission single-handedly where the whole team working together could not accomplish this – an experienced older pilot beating out the newcomers. At the climax of the film, Maverick even manages to take on and defeat three enemy “fifth-generation fighters”⁵⁷ of an unnamed type in a dogfight with an old F-14 Tomcat stolen from the enemy base.

Not only is Maverick able to take on brand-new aeroplanes in an over-50-year-old design, he can complete the five necessary aerial victories to become a fighter ace. Maverick’s triumph over the adversity established by the narrative is complete: not only has he proven the viability of manned aviation and proven himself against younger pilots, but he also becomes the first American fighter ace since the Vietnam War. The message is clear: the myth is alive and not going anywhere soon.

References to *Top Gun* and Nostalgia for 1980s America

In *Top Gun: Maverick*, the myth of the flying ace is closely interlinked with the myth of the 1980s and nostalgia both for the decade in general as well as for the original *Top Gun* film in particular. Right from the very opening scene of *Top Gun: Maverick*, themes from *Top Gun* are incorporated into the soundtrack, aesthetic, and pacing of the film. In his first scene, Maverick is seen with his P-51 Mustang, a plane used in the Second World War, painting an image of two old war horses – an impression which is later enhanced when he flies the F-14 into battle, the plane used in *Top Gun*.

⁵³ *Top Gun: Maverick*, 2022.

⁵⁴ Ben Werner, Navy Answers How a 57-Year-Old Maverick Could Still Feel the Need for Speed, <https://news.usni.org/2019/07/22/navy-answers-how-a-57-year-old-maverick-could-still-feel-the-need-for-speed>.

⁵⁵ *Top Gun: Maverick*, 2022, 00:15:10 – 00:16:12.

⁵⁶ *Ibid.*, 00:16:16 – 00:16:20.

⁵⁷ *Top Gun: Maverick*, 2022, 00:18:32 – 00:18:36.

Maverick is seen wearing his bomber jacket sporting mission patches and aviator sunglasses – mirroring the classic fighter pilot image and his appearance in the first film – and riding his Kawasaki GPZ 900R Ninja, the motorcycle he also rode in *Top Gun*. This use of technology from the original film invokes a strong sense of 1980s nostalgia as well as nostalgia for *Top Gun*, while simultaneously referencing the myth of the fighter pilot. During the test flight of the *Darkstar*, Maverick is seen pushing boundaries and buzzing the tower just like he did in *Top Gun*, implying the character has been left largely unaffected by the time between the two instalments. When close to the sky, Maverick says “Talk to me, Goose”,⁵⁸ indicating his long-lost best friend still features prominently in his day-to-day thoughts, especially when flying. Whilst Maverick remains unaltered, there is no suggestion of stability in his lifestyle, and he actively refuses change despite challenging and changing circumstances.

One aspect of this is Maverick’s partial circumvention of automatisisation via his supreme flying skills. This idea is very much in line with the origins and the history of the flying ace myth, which was established to create traditional heroes despite advances in the mechanisation and industrialisation of warfare. In *Top Gun: Maverick*, Maverick even goes so far as to fly increasingly outdated planes throughout the film into combat against 5th-generation fighter planes. This is portrayed in parallel to the film’s character constellation: the contrast between Maverick and the new generation of pilots surrounding Goose’s son Rooster (Miles Teller) mirrors the changing role of pilots as battle managers in modern, more automated planes.⁵⁹ Throughout the film, the superiority of more modern pilots and planes alike is repeatedly questioned via Maverick’s successful manoeuvres despite his and his planes’ outdatedness. His portrayal as a hero and a flying ace combines the more general theme of coming to terms with ageing and technological and societal change with the flying ace myth.

By confirming his superior skills again and again and ultimately becoming a flying ace, Maverick resolves some of the tensions with authority – personalised by Admiral Cain – and manifests his role outside of traditional military ranks. This emphasises the link between the fighter pilot lifestyle as presented in the film with the myth of freedom and the so-called American Dream. It is also notable that Maverick is typically portrayed as flying planes alone, without a co-pilot.

Both, Maverick and Rooster go to great lengths and accept great personal risks to save others. Ultimately, Maverick cannot keep Rooster out of conflicts because the two of them are too alike. Maverick repeatedly risks his life to save others’ lives or careers, both at Top Gun school and during the test flight at the beginning of the film. The comparison with the younger generation of fighter pilots emphasises that they too develop similar mindsets throughout the film. The flying ace myth has two main dimensions: its societal role with the resulting public perception of fighter pilots, and the fighter pilots’ self-image, which influences these scenes and the characters’ development. Before Maverick is introduced as their trainer, there is a debate amongst the younger generation of pilots about who is going to take on that role: “Everyone here is the best there is. Who the hell are they gonna get to teach us?”⁶⁰ This goes to show that this self-image based on the flying ace myth prevailed despite changes in the nature of fighter pilots’ work. The introduction of female fighter pilots shows that women too possess the skills and the mindset necessary to serve their country and become heroic figures,

58 Ibid., 00:10:25 – 00:10:28.

59 Ibid., 00:15:00 – 00:15:19.

60 Ibid., 00:29:02 – 00:29:09.

making the message both more inclusive and increasing the pool for military recruitment. Now anyone can be a hero if they put in the work and join the US military. Via the myth of the flying ace, heroism and chivalry become attainable to women after having been a purely masculine trait for centuries.

Nostalgia for *Top Gun* in particular emphasises the role of family: whilst in the first film, *Top Gun* fighter pilots were portrayed as a closely-knit society of friends, the generational shift in *Top Gun: Maverick* results in an accompanying shift in focus – fellow aviators are family. Maverick's relationships with Penny (Jennifer Connelly), Iceman, and especially Rooster are prime examples of this. By eventually resolving his issues with Rooster, Maverick becomes a father figure. For all the *Top Gun* nostalgia, this is a considerable character development from both the Maverick in the first film and from the version we see at the beginning of *Top Gun: Maverick*.

1980s nostalgia in *Top Gun: Maverick* also has a strong element of longing for simpler times. This is especially true when it comes to the element of a clearly defined, peer-level enemy: the mission in the film is constructed in such a way that there is a very small micro-cosmos in which there is a clearly defined enemy with technologies that negate the advantages of modern American military equipment. Instead of using the Lockheed Martin F-35 Lightning II, the heroes are forced to use the Boeing F/A-18 Super Hornet. This generates a situation in which Maverick's experience is an advantage, yet he still deems it a suicide mission. Thereby, the mission caters to the aspects of the flying ace myth Maverick seems to define himself by and simultaneously re-creates a situation that is closer to the Cold War as portrayed in *Top Gun* than it is to the highly automated missions of the War on Terror.

The Myth of the Flying Ace since 2001: Pax Americana and Peer-Level Threats

While *Top Gun: Maverick* was released after the end of American involvement in Afghanistan, it was written and filmed while this major operation of the Global War on Terror was still ongoing. Though major combat operations had by then been relegated to long-term memory, the War on Terror has had a huge impact on American politics and foreign policy since 2001. Since then, the fight against terrorism has been expanded and redefined multiple times during the Bush and Obama administrations. Severe losses in Afghanistan and Iraq over years and eventually decades burdened US military families. At the same time, the wars were primarily ground campaigns in which both the US Air Force and US Navy primarily provided air support for US Army and US Marine Corps units. After the initial invasion of Iraq, no enemy air assets were directly engaged by American aviators; Afghanistan never had an air force with which to contest American air supremacy.

The primary military and civilian focus of the war was on the ground level and due to the nature of fighting an insurgency and terrorists, usually on the platoon or even smaller fire team level. While regular army and marine units received media attention and their exploits were highlighted in various television series and movies like *Generation Kill* (2008)⁶¹ or *The Hurt Locker* (2009),⁶² special operations forces like CAG or the Navy SEALs took centre stage for the artistic processing of the War

⁶¹ *Generation Kill*, David Simon/Ed Burns, HBO, USA 2008.

⁶² *The Hurt Locker*, Kathryn Bigelow, Summit Entertainment, USA 2009.

on Terror. Stories like *Act of Valor* (2012),⁶³ *Lone Survivor* (2013),⁶⁴ and *American Sniper* (2014)⁶⁵ captured the imagination of the public just as much as video games like *Call of Duty 4: Modern Warfare* (2007)⁶⁶ did. These intellectual properties, regardless of medium, chronicled the stories of highly trained soldiers who were able to stand out from the anonymity of the regular armed forces through specialist training, equipment, and missions. Just as the aviator had eclipsed the regular soldier during the First World War as an individualistic totem of masculine virtues, so did the special forces operator replace the aviator at a time when military aviation was in a support role for ground forces. When aviation assets are seen in these stories, they are called in for air strikes against ground targets by the protagonists via radio, serving a similar narrative role as the arrival of the cavalry in old Wild West stories. The aerial war is distant and anonymised compared to previous wars, with tactical bombing and fighter-bombers receiving the lion's share of screen time as opposed to pure fighters or interceptors engaged in dogfighting against enemy planes. It is telling that when fighters returned to a central role in *Top Gun: Maverick*, it was in the form of the FA-18 fighter-bomber rather than the F-14 interceptor.

Additionally, when American air power was discussed culturally during the War on Terror, an increasing focus was placed on Unmanned Aerial Vehicles like the Predator or Reaper drones. With American and coalition partner air forces enjoying uncontested air supremacy in both theatres of operation, these drones were able to shoulder an increasingly large amount of air support, surveillance, and reconnaissance duties that had previously been the exclusive domain of manned aeroplanes. The ethics of drone warfare became a recurring topic in public discourse during the Obama administration, especially after leaks by Wikileaks about the killing of civilians in Iraq, Afghanistan, as well as neutral Pakistan. The questionable ethics of the killings as well as the fact that the drones were piloted from the safety of the United States were criticised and covered by journalists and artists in the 2010s.⁶⁷ The film *Eye in the Sky* (2015) meticulously detailed the steps involved in an operation from intelligence gathering to the kill order.⁶⁸ *Tom Clancy's Jack Ryan* (2018–2023) features a drone pilot dealing with PTSD and guilt over his role in the programme. Although in these properties death and destruction are brought on by aeroplanes, both highlight the perceived cold and detached reality of decisions over life and death being made in conference rooms and in front of computers thousands of miles away from the battlefield.⁶⁹

Meanwhile, no American aviator was put in a position where they had to engage enemy pilots in direct combat after 2003, a fact that is textually discussed in *Top Gun: Maverick*. Responding to an admiral stating that his students are the best the navy has to offer, *Maverick* responds that the pilots were told so their entire lives while “they’ve been dropping bombs from a high altitude with little to no

63 *Act of Valor*, Mouse McCoy/Scott Waugh, Relativity Media, USA 2012.

64 *Lone Survivor*, Peter Berg, Universal Pictures, USA 2013.

65 *American Sniper*, Clint Eastwood, Warner Bros. Pictures, USA 2014.

66 *Call of Duty 4: Modern Warfare*, Infinity Ward, Activision, USA 2007.

67 Avery Plaw, et al., Practice Makes Perfect?: The Changing Civilian Toll of CIA Drone Strikes in Pakistan, in: *Perspectives on Terrorism* 5/5 (2011), pp. 53–56, <https://www.jstor.org/stable/26298539>; Ahmed S. Hashin/Grégoire Patt, What's That Buzz? The Rise of Drone Warfare, in: *Counter Terrorist Trends and Analyses* 4/9 (2012), pp. 12–13, <https://www.jstor.org/stable/26351086>; Sarah Kreps/John Kaag, The Use of Unmanned Aerial Vehicles in Contemporary Conflict. A Legal and Ethical Analysis, in: *Polity* 44/2 (2012), pp. 260–85, <https://doi.org/10.1057/pol.2012.2>.

68 *Eye in the Sky*, Gavin Hood, Entertainment One, USA 2015.

69 *Tom Clancy's Jack Ryan*. Season 1, Carlton Cuse/Graham Roland, Amazon Studios, USA 2018.

dog fighting.”⁷⁰ Through the character of Maverick, a Cold War veteran with aerial victories to his name, the film acknowledges that for all the might of American military aviation, American pilots have not been able to distinguish themselves in aerial combat, with an increasing number of pilots being assigned to drone piloting duty.⁷¹ As mentioned previously, the dismissal of the rival admiral’s drone programme by Maverick earlier in the film rejects the possibility of drones as the future of military aviation out of hand before the actual plot of the film is even revealed. With the statement on the role of manned aviation during the War on Terror, the film acknowledges the last twenty years of military aviation history, while simultaneously dismissing it as a fluke: “The parameters of this mission call for something they have never encountered.”⁷² Even in contemporary war, manned aviation plays a vital role and the same dedication and skills Maverick exhibited in the first film are still relevant. This places the Global War on Terror as an outlier rather than the start of a new trend. Thereby, the film showcases the persistence of the myth of the fighter pilot, the flying ace, in spite of tactical developments: the heroic figure of the fighter pilot maintains their elevated position as a figure that offers identification in an ever more impersonal and anti-heroic context of mechanised warfare. Their actual tactical relevance is even less important than it was during the myth’s time of origin in the First World War One, yet their cultural significance persists.

When introduced to his trainee pilots, the best of the best who have graduated from the Top Gun programme in recent years, Maverick picks up the flight manual of the Boeing F/A-18 Super Hornet and throws it in a bin.⁷³ His superior had just told the group of student pilots that the War on Terror era of American military aviation, a period of uncontested aerial warfare, is over: “The enemy’s new fifth-generation fighter has levelled the playing field (...) we no longer possess the technological advantage.”⁷⁴

While never identified as any specific plane in the text of the movie, graphics shown in the training sequences and the enemy planes later fought by the protagonists were modelled after the Russian Sukhoi Su-57 stealth fighter. Another fifth-generation fighter that could have been alluded to was the Chinese Chengdu J-20.⁷⁵ While both planes have been fielded in recent years as answers to the American stealth fighter programmes which created the F-22 Raptor and the F-35 Lightning II, Western analysts so far have no consensus – neither positive nor negative – on the validity of Russian and Chinese claims on the actual capabilities of the Su-57 and the J-20 compared to the American platforms.⁷⁶

70 Top Gun: Maverick, 2022, 00:43:19 – 00:43:26.

71 Stephen Losey, Air Force doesn’t have enough drone pilots or sensor operators, GAO says, <https://www.airforcetimes.com/news/your-air-force/2020/06/26/air-force-doesnt-have-enough-drone-pilots-or-sensor-operators-gao-says>.

72 Top Gun: Maverick, 2022, 00:43:25.

73 Ibid., 00:34:32 – 00:34:34.

74 Ibid., 00:33:11 – 00:33:20.

75 Matthew Buckley, Fighter Pilot Breaks Down Every Fighter Jet From Top Gun: Maverick, <https://www.wired.com/video/watch/fighter-pilot-breaks-down-every-jet-from-top-gun>.

76 Dan Parsons, Fifth-Generation Fighters Will Determine Air Dominance in Future Conflicts, in: National Defense 99/730 (2014), pp. 38–39, <https://www.jstor.org/stable/27020456>; Tony Bertuca, Pentagon. China Spending, Restructuring and Pushing for Influence, in: Inside the Pentagon 32/20 (2016), pp. 3–4, <https://www.jstor.org/stable/insipent.32.20.07>; Mangesh Sawant: Why China Cannot Challenge the Military Primacy, <https://www.airuniversity.af.edu/JIPA/Display/Article/2870650/why-china-cannot-challenge-the-us-military-primacy>; Ellie

Additionally, instead of flying the Lockheed Martin F-35, which is alluded to as an option in the film, enemy counter-measures force the navy to rely on the older, fourth-generation F/A-18 Super Hornet. While the film explains the use of the F/A-18 – enemy jamming technology which can negate the technology in the F-35 – an additional filmmaking reason exists: unlike the F-35, the F/A-18 possesses a two-seater version in which the actors were able to film their scenes in-flight.⁷⁷ From a thematic perspective, the use of the F/A-18 also allows the Americans to slip into the role of the underdog fighting off newer, more powerful aeroplanes. It also allows the film to sidestep any discussions about the capabilities of the various planes to preserve both an element of threat coming from the enemy planes and the idea that the American F/A-18 are outgunned and thus vulnerable.

It is never stated outright which country the anonymous enemy nation is supposed to represent. Its terrain seems to imply an arctic or at least winter setting, the majority of equipment is Soviet or Russian in design, they have nuclear ambitions but no nuclear weapons, and they fly Grumman F-14 Tomcats. The only nation in the world that qualifies for the last two points would be the Republic of Iran.⁷⁸ By bringing in these vague details that are coded as decidedly belonging to enemies in nature, the film wants to distance itself from the recent War on Terror. Instead of being set in an arid climate like Iraq and Afghanistan,⁷⁹ it is set in the cold. Instead of being a developing nation, it is highly developed and capable of nuclear engineering. Instead of providing no challenge to American air power, it fields highly capable fighters. Even the phrasing of the casus belli for the attack on the enemy's nuclear test site in the film is given as a violation of a "multilateral NATO treaty",⁸⁰ an illusion of the real-life Iran Nuclear Deal during the Obama administration, which failed during the Trump administration.⁸¹

The mention of NATO has a multi-layered role in this situation as it allows the film to harken back to the era of the Cold War, in which NATO existed as a defensive alliance meant to deter Soviet ambitions against its members. This gives the film's protagonists a sense of purpose and heroic stakes: if the mission fails, an enemy nation will gain the power to build nuclear weapons and threaten the global order. Given the fact that the invasion of Iraq in 2003 as part of the War on Terror was justified by trying to disarm Saddam Hussein of his supposed weapons of mass destruction, the use of the nuclear threat can be seen as a way for the United States and NATO to redeem themselves on the international stage.⁸² Additionally, the United States can justify its intervention in a sovereign nation's internal affairs by trying to enforce the liberal international order which has existed since the end of the Second World War, with the United States as a global superpower serving as a guarantor of

Cook, How Russia's Su-57 Felon Jets Compare to U.S. F-35, F-22 Fighters, <https://www.newsweek.com/russia-su-75-felon-jet-us-f-35-f-22-aircraft-ukraine-war-1772392>.

⁷⁷ Su Fang Tham, Stunt Spotlight. Inside the Aircraft of 'Top Gun: Maverick' with the IRL Fighter Pilots, <https://www.filmindependent.org/blog/aircraft-carrier-sequences-of-top-gun-maverick>.

⁷⁸ Iran received American military equipment before the Iranian Revolution and at the time of filming still maintained a fleet of American-made air assets which included the F-14 Tomcat.

⁷⁹ Iraq and Afghanistan have repeatedly been portrayed as arid or desert countries in the media despite both nations possessing varied climates depending on the region and season.

⁸⁰ Top Gun: Maverick, 2022, 00:18:09 – 00:18:13.

⁸¹ Brian O'Toole, Rejoining the Iran Nuclear Deal. Not So Easy, <https://www.atlanticcouncil.org/in-depth-research-reports/issue-brief/rejoining-the-iran-nuclear-deal-not-so-easy>.

⁸² Christopher J. Fettweis, Credibility and the War on Terror, in: Political Science Quarterly 122/4 (2007), pp. 625–632. <https://www.jstor.org/stable/20202929>.

the status quo. Given that at the time of filming this concept was being challenged primarily by China and Russia and secondarily by Iran and North Korea, coding the enemy nation as containing geographic, technological, historical, or geopolitical markers which could apply to all four nations, can be seen as intentional.⁸³ Applying these cultural markers of historic or contemporary threats allows for the justification of American military intervention in the enemy nation. Much like in the first film, enemy pilots are never seen outside of dehumanised figures wearing full-body flight suits and mirrored helmets. The enemy's motivation is never addressed, nor is the option of a diplomatic solution. Instead, air power can do what its proponents have championed since the First World War: allowing for intervention in an enemy nation to enforce foreign policy interests without putting boots on the ground.

Lastly, the American battle plan for the mission involves a team of strike fighters navigating a canyon to avoid enemy anti-air missiles before diving towards the target and taking it out with a precision shot into its weak point. Indeed, during the actual mission, the targeting computer fails and the pilot is forced to aim manually. This set-up replicates the climactic battle in *Star Wars Episode IV: A New Hope*, in which Luke Skywalker and a squadron of X-Wings try to accomplish the same plan to destroy the Death Star. By copying the structure of one of the most influential films of all time, filmmakers code Maverick and his pilots as Luke Skywalker and the Rebel Alliance taking on the evil Galactic Empire.⁸⁴ Yet through intuition and skill – “It’s not the plane, it’s the pilot”⁸⁵ – they succeed.

By choosing an enemy which combines both a technological peer status – at least on paper – and cultural markers harkening back to the Cold War, *Top Gun: Maverick* attempts to resurrect the conditions necessary for an American military movie in which success in aerial combat is not guaranteed and the heroes are challenged by a technological peer. The success of the American pilots can thus be attributed to their superior training and skills, which make them worthy successors to the fighter aces of old.

Conclusion

In conclusion, *Top Gun: Maverick* makes use of the flying ace myth without fully updating it to the current military status quo. Whilst the myth now extends to women and people of colour, it is combined with strong nostalgia for bygone times, especially the 1980s and *Top Gun*. Instead of using the myth of the flying ace to question its current application, the film utilises it as a vehicle through which to depict Maverick's troubles coming to terms with his age and legacy, essentially a delayed midlife crisis. The myth helps Maverick overcome this crisis via his skillset – being a flying ace saves him from having to question his ways, yet we still see him grow into his age by resolving his issues with Rooster.

At the same time, this reinforcement of the conventions of the flying ace myth absolves the narrative of the need to question the present and future of American military aviation. American

⁸³ Paul D. Miller, This is How the Liberal International Order Dies, <https://www.atlanticcouncil.org/blogs/new-atlanticist/this-is-how-the-liberal-international-order-dies>.

⁸⁴ *Star Wars Episode IV: A New Hope*, George Lucas, 20th Century Fox, USA 1977.

⁸⁵ *Top Gun: Maverick*, 2022, 01:50:33 – 01:50:36.

foreign policy decisions during the Global War on Terror, the Iraq War, and the Afghanistan War are circumvented by shifting focus on potential peer-level threats. The nostalgia for 1980s American culture and geopolitics is interwoven with Maverick's desire for a worthy adversary as witnessed in *Top Gun*: an enemy that can fight back, challenge his skills, and allow him to finally reach the legendary status of flying ace in an honourable fashion.