

Top Gun: Maverick

Film Review

Jonathan Lighter

Air war is made pretty appealing to the susceptible in *Top Gun: Maverick* (2022), where there's no mud, and death is instantaneous, invisible, and rare: just one factor that makes it the feel-good war movie of the past thirty-odd years and conceivably of the next thirty as well. As in the original *Top Gun* (1986), the chief non-preposterous elements here are the aircraft types depicted (real and CGI) and the existence of exhaustively trained, highly proficient pilots in U.S. Navy Aviation. Like the boys of *All Quiet*, the pilots of *TG:M* are luminous with promise too: but it's the very specific promise of getting airborne from a carrier and strutting their stuff by punishing an adversary of the United States. Their pre-emptive strike could mean regional war, but the movie doesn't care because its own targets, audiences of adolescents and Tom Cruise fans, don't care either. What they may care about, though, is the volley-ball game on a Southern California beach, which emphasizes again that male and female movie-star physiques are sure signs of competence and courage – and possibly of patriotism also.

Nearly forty years after he shot down imaginary "MiG-28's" in the first *Top Gun*, "Maverick" (Tom) is America's hottest test pilot. The first thing he does is obliterate the hypersonic, G-force defying Darkstar X-plane by rocketing it and himself to a face-flattening ten times the speed of sound plus, a mere four times faster than any airplane not based in Hollywood. And, like Superman, Mav can survive a last-second bailout at more than Mach 10. What makes the crazy flight and self-indulgent destruction of a billion-dollar aircraft even more

satisfying is that it's against the explicit wishes/orders of stiff-necked killjoy Admiral Cain (played by either Ed Harris or the mummy of the Pharaoh Khufu). The upshot? Mav, whose bent for insubordination has kept him a captain at the age of about sixty, is so miraculous and necessary to national defense that instead of real punishment, Cain ships him to the elite Top Gun school near San Diego to instruct crews half his age. He'll teach them to fly a near-suicide mission (the kind Hollywood relishes) and will lead too, despite having had no combat training himself since the days of the F-14. The target is a "secret uranium enrichment site controlled by a rogue regime" in "violation of a NATO treaty." This well-chosen underground site is guarded by SAM batteries and a mile-high blind canyon wall. Throw in a few fifth-generation stealth fighters (played by Russian Su-57s in perfectly integrated CGI), and the strike force's work is cut out for it. The official word is that no fewer than "three miracles" will be required to destroy the target and get clear. The topnotch F/A-18 jets, an E-2 AWACS plane, crackerjack aircrews, a barrage of cruise missiles, and overage CPT Pete "Maverick" Mitchell can't do it alone.

You can fill in the rest yourself, though familiarity with the previous *Top Gun* helps: a couple of trademark scenes are reprised, and Mav's wingman Iceman (Val Kilmer), now a dying admiral, reappears. Rooster (Miles Teller, a.k.a. Mr. Fantastic in 2015's *Fantastic Four*) is the son of – and a ringer for – Mav's old backseater Goose (Anthony Edwards), and he holds Maverick responsible for his dad's death years ago. (Why else would he be in the story?) A plot point not in the first *Top Gun* comes in when Mav and Rooster have to steal an enemy jet to get out of Dodge – much like Clint Eastwood in *Firefox* (1982) and most like John Agar in the ultra-low budget *Jet Attack* (1958).

Filling it in yourself, however, is far less fun than watching *Top Gun: Maverick*, which is shamefully entertaining, starting with the sci-fi flight of Darkstar and ending with Tom Cruise

piloting his real-life, technically retro P-51 Mustang. The spry Cruise, older but only slightly mellower than in '86, makes the unbelievable Maverick almost credible, even when he's admonishing some of the world's best jet pilots to forget everything they've already learned, because he knows better. Jennifer Connolly as Mav's bar-and-sailboat-owning, single-mom squeeze adds more subdued romantic relief than did Kelly McGillis as the irresistible, lonely astrophysicist-and-female-Top Gun instructor of yesteryear.

Even more amazing than the CGI and SFX are the abundant clips of real Navy pilots rockin' and rollin' their sixteen-ton Super Hornets through the sky and way down on the deck. Scores of Navy fliers and advisers get small-print credit at the end: they deserve a bolder font.¹

With bumptious screen pilots sporting handles like "Hangman," "Warlock," "Phoenix," and "Payback" that mostly supplant their mundane real names, director Joseph Kosinski's *TG:M* can't quite hide its comic-book worldview behind a superficially credible but largely bogus realism. That didn't seem necessary in the *paterfamilias* of jet-strike movies, Mark Robson's *The Bridges at Toko-ri* (1954), which also depicts a possibly suicidal mission rocketing down a canyon bristling with antiaircraft.²

Little in that movie, based on a lean novella by James A. Michener, looked implausible – except for the part when William Holden shares with wife Grace Kelly the plan of his coming secret mission so she can worry about him. (It was promoted as "More Than a Great Motion Picture – A Rare Human Story"; *TG:M* rightly touts itself as neither.) Not long after *Bridges* there was the even more earnest, semi-documentary realism of Briton Michael Anderson's *The Dam Busters* (1955). Both films took their cue from real missions: Holden and his Panther jets destroy vital North Korean bridges, while Richard Todd and his Lancaster bombers flood the Rhineland in a mission both daring and unprecedented.³

And following them came *633 Squadron* (1964), which set a new feature-film standard in stunning aerial cinematography; it sent Cliff Robertson and his Mosquito bombers through the ack-ack of a narrow fjord to destroy the Nazi rocket-fuel plant at its head, protected by a rock-face like the Matterhorn (sounds familiar...). But because they are dramas, not cartoons, none of these predecessors narrate a danger-laden air mission with *TG:M*'s high zest, that periodically manifested quality that gives war movies a bad name. And compared to the latest bunch of fliers in battle on screen, the pilots played by Holden, Todd, and Robertson were too skeptical, too reflective, too individualized, for modern mass taste. They expressed feelings not always consistent with invulnerability. Instead of egotistical confidence, they exhibited grace under pressure. Not coincidentally, their movies appeared before the age of video games.

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NOTES

¹ Why a training establishment is tasked with planning and executing a secret combat operation isn't addressed, but it's probably so they could put "Top Gun" in the title with a clear conscience. *Top Gun: Maverick*, moreover, doesn't mind that the Top Gun school moved from the oceanside San Diego area to the Nevada desert in 1997.

² Colonel James B. Doolittle's raiders in *Thirty Seconds Over Tokyo* (1944) take off from the carrier *Hornet*, but they're Army Air Corps B-25's.

³ Flying sequences in both films inspired some of the space combat in Lucas's *Star Wars* (1977).