

Eight Decades Over Hollywood

Since 1911, filmmakers have been unable to resist the drama inherent in military flying.

By Bruce D. Callander

IN 1911, a young Army lieutenant named Henry H. Arnold was taking part in a Long Island air meet when a filmmaking company recruited him to serve as a flying stuntman in a movie titled "The Military Scout." This was one of the first encounters between military aviation and the movies.

"The Military Scout" did not turn out to be a blockbuster, but it was modestly successful, and it marked the start of the movie industry's long-running love affair with flying and the military—a romance that would span the century and take in many of Hollywood's top stars.

After his own brief stint in the movies, Lieutenant Arnold went on to bigger things—commanding US Army Air Forces during World War II and becoming a five-star general. However, "Hap" Arnold never lost his interest in films. Before and during the war, he recognized the effective role that movies could play, both as training aids for the troops and as a means of winning and maintaining public support for the war effort.

For its part, Hollywood discovered that military aviation was a gold mine of story material. Many pic-



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Hollywood recognized early on the drama, history, and interesting technology a military aviation story could bring to the screen, awarding "Wings" (above) the first Academy Award for best picture. For some actors, the movies reflected real life, as in the 1955 movie "Strategic Air Command," when former B-24 pilot Jimmy Stewart (opposite) took the controls of a bomber.





While technical errors sometimes cropped up in Hollywood's Army Air Forces, the industry did strive for realism. "Thirty Seconds Over Tokyo"—in which Spencer Tracy portrayed Jimmy Doolittle—contained footage from the actual mission.

tures followed that first effort. In 1929, the industry awarded the first best-picture Oscar to "Wings," starring Richard Arlen, Buddy Rogers, Clara Bow, and a young Gary Cooper. The film focused on the US Army Air Service of World War I and was followed by several look-alikes, such as "Dawn Patrol," "Crimson Romance," and "The Lost Squadron." Later, movie pilots in Jennys battled the bad guys in Saturday serials, and Air Corps airplanes even helped rescue Fay Wray by shooting King Kong off the Empire State Building.

Today, the Air Force probably still would OK Lieutenant Arnold's participation in the movies, because it took place on his own time and at no cost to the government, but the arrangement would involve considerably more than buttonholing a pilot at an air show [see box, p. 71].

Beyond the Back Lot

Through the earliest years, the military cooperated with Hollywood on an informal basis. Surplus warplanes were cheap, and many World War I veterans were looking for work. As a result, producers needed little technical or logistical help from the military services. By the mid-1930s, however, the Army Air Corps had begun to fly much more sophisti-

cated fighters and bombers. Air warfare became harder and harder to simulate on Hollywood's back lots. Film companies needed professional help, and the armed services, struggling to build or even maintain their strength, saw films as good promotional tools.

In 1935, Hollywood sent an all-star cast to Randolph Field, Tex., to film "West Point of the Air." Flight students and instructors saw them-

selves portrayed by Wallace Beery, Robert Young, and Robert Taylor. Four years later, Britain's Ralph Richardson and Merle Oberon starred in a similar story about RAF trainees, "The Lion Has Wings," released while Europe stood on the brink of war.

During World War II, Hollywood saw military movies as its contribution to the war effort. The services did what they could to help. With the troops busy on several continents, however, producers often had to settle for filming training exercises or using stock footage. As a result, Hollywood's presentation of the war often was limited. A film's hero might be shown taking off for a mission in a P-40 and coming home triumphantly in a P-51. Today's USAF technical advisors would have cringed at such inaccuracies, but civilian audiences at the time didn't seem to notice.

The typical script took farm boys and young city slickers through the rigors of flight training into a sanitized version of combat. Extras fell, but the hero rarely received more than a scratch. Enemy pilots were sinister but inept, and, if our side didn't always win the battle, it was sure to win the war.

For all their shortcomings, some of the films weren't bad, even by today's standards. "Air Force" (1943) told a convincing story about a B-17 landing at Pearl Harbor during the Japanese attack. In one scene, John



"Air Force" (1943) director Howard Hawks had two USAAF officers as technical advisors on the project, starring John Garfield (left). It was filmed primarily at Drew Field, Fla.

Garfield shot down an enemy fighter from the ground with a waist gun cradled in his arms. Today, an Air Force liaison officer probably would tell the director that this was pretty farfetched, but in wartime the audience liked to believe it could happen.

"Thirty Seconds Over Tokyo" (1944), a re-creation of Ted Lawson's book about the famous 1942 B-25 raid led by Jimmy Doolittle—portrayed by Spencer Tracy—also may have had its flaws, but it was moving. The same could be said of "Flying Tigers" (1942), starring John Wayne.

On a few occasions, Hollywood shot the war "live." One film crew went to wartime England to fly with Eighth Air Force crews and came home with a documentary that General Arnold ordered distributed to



One of the movie industry's better efforts at portraying the military, "Twelve O'Clock High" showed the pressures of the air war in Europe. Here, Gregory Peck (standing) speaks to his aircrews, many of them Eglin Field, Fla., extras.



Along with rare combat footage, good acting contributed to the success of "Twelve O'Clock High." Dean Jagger (at the wheel, listening to Gregory Peck) won a best supporting actor Oscar for his performance.

GI theaters. The original "The Memphis Belle" (1944) still stands up better than the fictionalized version produced almost fifty years later with all the technology at the command of today's moviemakers.

Some movies turned out to be real duds—"Bombardier" (1943), for example, which began with cadets learning to run the Norden bombsight and ended with their bombing Tokyo from a B-17 with their former instructors (Pat O'Brien and Randolph Scott) at the controls.

A Few Star Pilots

Hollywood was not too generous about providing manpower to the services. Many actors were too old for military duty, while others were more valuable wearing uniforms in films than they would have been in combat. Of those who enlisted or were drafted, only a few gravitated toward the air services. Ronald W. Reagan and William Holden were two who chose the Army Air Forces and served most of the war with the AAF's 1st Motion Picture Unit at

Culver City, Calif. The unit had been established by General Arnold.

Alan Ladd served a few months with an Air Force line unit before receiving a medical discharge. Ray Milland tried to trade his civilian flying time for a pilot's commission but wound up as a civilian flight instructor. Burgess Meredith served in air intelligence.

A handful of stars saw air combat. Clark Gable, for example, flew missions with the 351st Bomb Group, gathering material for a training film for aerial gunners. Jimmy Stewart served a full tour as a B-24 pilot with the 445th Bomb Group. After the war, Colonel Stewart remained in the Reserve and eventually retired as a general officer. He also was one of the twelve veterans who founded the Air Force Association in 1946.

Hollywood probably made its best World War II films after the war had ended, when it could stop pretending it had all been a piece of cake. In 1949, "Twelve O'Clock High" had Gregory Peck shaping up a bad-luck bomb group. "Command Decision" in 1948 showed Clark Gable agonizing over heavy losses. Our side still won, but now we could admit how high the cost had been.

Moviemakers did not display the same enthusiasm for portrayals of air operations in the Korean War as they had during the two world wars. Beyond filming a few quickies show-



In 1955, Gen. George Kenney (right) escorted June Allyson to the premiere of "The McConnell Story," about Korean War ace Joseph McConnell. Hy Averback (center) interviewed them at the event for "The Tonight Show."

ing new jet fighters, producers largely ignored that fight. An exception was Warner Brothers, who put out "The McConnell Story," a 1955 film biography of Capt. Joe McConnell, a triple jet ace in Korea who died in a 1954 crash. The film, with Alan Ladd in the title role, had its world premiere at AFA's ninth annual National Convention in San Francisco.

The war had been over for five years when Hollywood unveiled "Battle Hymn," the true story of Dean Hess, a minister who became a World War II fighter pilot, flew in the Korean War, and befriended an orphanage. The movie did not score well at the box office.

Films about the "new" Air Force did better. In "Strategic Air Command" (1955), Jimmy Stewart, back from combat, commanded a SAC outfit while his film wife, June Allyson, bit her nails. It inspired other films about SAC, including "Bombers B-52" (1957).

The year 1963 saw the opening of "A Gathering of Eagles," a remake of the classic "Twelve O'Clock High."

Then came the Vietnam War, however, and the beginning of an anti-war, antimilitary era in filmmaking. As public opinion turned against the war, Hollywood veered from the production of films supporting the services toward those portraying military leaders as villains.

(1964), a dark comedy starring Peter Sellers in three roles. The movie featured a SAC B-52 headed for Russia on an irretrievable mission and ended with the pilot (Slim Pickens) riding an atomic bomb down to the target to begin World War III.

During this period, even Hollywood's retelling of old war stories carried an antimilitary message. "The Blue Max" (1966) showed a World War I German ace (George Peppard) becoming a national hero, then being killed by an ambitious superior. "Catch-22" (1970) presented a bizarre collection of reluctant crewmen, bumbling commanders, and scheming ground officers.

The Air Force lent little cooperation to such films, and its efforts to put more positive images of the service on the screen were largely fruitless. During the Vietnam War era,



Some Hollywood productions carried an antimilitary message in the 1960s. At the climax of one of the most famous of these, "Dr. Strangelove," actor Slim Pickens rode an atomic bomb to earth, bronco-style, to start World War III.

Madmen and Nukes

The pro-SAC movies of the 1950s gave way to more equivocal portrayals. "Fail Safe" (1964) was the fictional tale of a B-52 mission gone awry, culminating in the nuclear destruction of Moscow and Soviet retaliation in kind against New York city. Also put on the screen were fantastic tales of military madmen running amok with nuclear weapons. The most famous of these was "Dr. Strangelove, or: How I Learned to Stop Worrying and Love the Bomb"

Hollywood, like much of the public, seemed unable or unwilling to distinguish between a politically unpopular war and the men and women who were trying to make the best of a bad situation.

The problem may have been less about ideology than it was about the studios eyeing the bottom line and deciding that Vietnam didn't sell. Charles Davis, chief of the Entertainment Division, Western Region Office of USAF Public Affairs in Los Angeles, Calif., sums it up this way:

"Vietnam was an unhappy story heading for an unhappy ending, which breaks the basic rule of entertainment."

The bitter taste lingered well after the Vietnam War ended, but, gradually, public support for the military returned. With it came a reconciliation of sorts between Hollywood and the armed forces, especially military aviation.

A major breakthrough came in the 1980s with release of the highly successful "Top Gun," starring Tom Cruise. The film was about Navy F-14 Tomcat crews, but it rekindled Hollywood's enthusiasm more generally for military aviation. The services now could provide new and startling "props"—such as high-tech fighters and supersonic bombers—as well as new combat scenarios packed with action.

Less Impressed

These days, however, the Air Force is not as star-struck as it was in the 1930s, and approval of projects is not easily won.

USAF's Western Region Office recently considered a proposal for a film about a disgruntled Air Force pilot flying a nuclear-armed F-117A toward Washington with a plan to shut down the government permanently. Officials suggested the screenwriter rework the story or forget about official cooperation.

A recent Columbia Pictures proposal sparked a different response. The movie is a heartwarming story



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With some exceptions, moviemakers paid less attention to Korean War air operations than they had to previous wars. Even with Rock Hudson as the star, the Korean War movie "Battle Hymn" was not a big success.

about a father and teenage daughter trying to teach a flock of Canada geese to migrate south. Flying two ultralight airplanes in formation with the flock, the pair puts down at an Air Force base (played by Niagara Falls IAP/ARS, N. Y.) and then flies to a happy ending. Columbia not only got to film at the base but had access to a horde of extras who did not need help from the wardrobe department. Under DoD rules, military personnel may perform with the filmmakers during off-duty time. The film (working title: "Father Goose") is set for release this year.

Unlikely to gain cooperation, say DoD instructions, are projects that "appear to condone activities by private citizens when such activities are contrary to US government policy." The director making a movie about the macho loner who launches a private war, for example, is unlikely to get help from the services.

On the other hand, comedies with a military setting are not automatically ruled out. The services bristle at stereotyping sergeants as wheeler-dealers and generals as bumbling buffoons, but the antics of individuals coping with service life have been a Hollywood staple since the silent-movie days.

The services draw the line when the laughs are at the expense of the military establishment. The Army did not object to a script that featured a female Army recruit struggling through the rigors of basic training, but it did balk at the portion of the script that called for her to deal with a lecherous general officer.

The Air Force had no objection to a Disney comedy about an enlistee with a fear of dogs who winds up assigned to DoD's dog-handling program at Lackland AFB, Tex. The difference, said Mr. Davis, is that the humor lies in the individual's being out of his element, not in service life itself.

Once approved, service cooperation can range from helping scriptwriters get a feel for military jargon

Movie Rules and Regs

Armed service cooperation with film and television productions now is governed by a long DoD regulation (Instruction 5410.16). Each service has additional guidelines and an office to deal with producers throughout the life of a project.

For the Air Force, the contact point is the Western Region Office of USAF Public Affairs, housed in the Federal Building in Los Angeles, Calif., and directed by Lt. Col. Thomas Worsdale. It reviews scripts and recommends or advises against service involvement. Final approval or disapproval comes from the Defense Secretary's special assistant for Audiovisual Media.

Criteria for approval are comprehensive. The production must present an authentic or at least feasible interpretation of military life. It must be informational and considered to be in the best interest of public understanding of the services.

If a producer receives the Pentagon's official blessing, he can draw on service resources ranging from technical advice on uniforms to the systems needed to recreate a full air battle. The film company must pay for expenses, such as a liaison officer's per diem costs, flying hours, and consumables. Costs can run into the millions, but service cooperation can make the difference between an authentic production and a routine shoot-'em-up created in the studio.

In return for its assistance, the service receives assurances from the producer that a film will approximate authentic military life and that the film might help spur recruiting and increase support for the service.



Clark Gable (with microphone) talks to a damaged bomber's crew in "Command Decision" (1948). He understood this perilous situation: As Captain Gable, he had flown bomb missions in World War II.

to supplying a liaison officer and opening a base for location shots. However, the production company not only must pick up the tab for the use of the assets but also must restore any government property involved to its original or better condition. If the script calls for more action than the Air Force can justify as routine training, the producer must foot the bill for the extra amount.

The Defense Department does not take IOUs. Producers must furnish a line of credit from a reputable bank, carry full insurance, and sign a statement absolving the government of liability.

Even if a producer agrees to the conditions, approval comes only after lengthy negotiations, during which the Air Force may ask for major script changes.

Unsalvageable

In some cases, scripts can't be doctored enough. For example, the focus of the recent blockbuster "Broken Arrow" is a disgruntled Air Force officer (John Travolta) who steals a bomber with nuclear weapons aboard. USAF worked with the producers but still found the script unacceptable and withdrew support. In the end, the producer used computers to create most of the aerial effects.

"It was just too unrealistic to suggest that an Air Force officer would do the kinds of things Travolta did," said Lt. Col. Thomas Worsdale of



Paramount Director William Wellman had World War I flying experience, which enabled him to gain the War Department's cooperation in producing "Wings" (above). Today, a USAF public affairs office works with the movie industry.

the Western Region Office. "It isn't something we could see happening in real life."

At other times, producers welcome Air Force suggestions in the interest of accuracy. "The draft has been over for more than twenty years," said Mr. Davis. "Most of the people in the entertainment industry are young

and have no military background, so they appreciate the help."

Such was the case with "Apollo 13." This account of the 1970 moon mission that went wrong is mostly a NASA story, but the Air Force assisted through its 30th Audiovisual Squadron, Vandenberg AFB, Calif. Vandenberg itself was the setting for "The Net," a film about a computer hacker trying to stop a satellite launch. The Air Force found the premise of that film believable and cooperated. The Defense Department, however, balked at a similar story line in "WarGames," the 1983 story of a teenage hacker (Matthew Broderick) who accidentally breaks into North American Aerospace Defense Command computers.

Military cooperation does not guarantee commercial success, of course, but successful productions can be

rewarding for both the producers and the services. Studies have shown that movies are the best media for reaching eighteen- to twenty-four-year-olds who might consider Air Force careers.

It requires only "a small investment," said Mr. Davis, but "that positive exposure is worth millions." ■

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