

THE TALKIES



SHOOTING BLANKS

by Bruce Bawer

Every so often, while watching the current hit *Top Gun*, I found myself fondly remembering *An Officer and a Gentleman*. Now, as movies about the military go, *Officer and a Gentleman* was no *Grand Illusion*, but it accomplished quite well what it set out to do. You believed in Richard Gere's motivation for entering Officer Training School (he wanted, you'll remember, to be a finer specimen of a man than his dissolute father), in the depth of his friendship with his best buddy, in his love for Debra Winger, and in the relationship—at first hostile, and finally mutually respectful—between Gere and sergeant/father figure Louis Gossett. Of course, the film was a compendium of clichés, but it managed to make them feel fresh. It had sensitivity, humor, and chemistry; at times it even seemed to be earnestly—if not very deeply—engaged with genuine moral questions.

Top Gun covers much the same territory, but with nowhere near as much skill or conviction, and with a thoroughgoing lack of moral sense. Teen heartthrob Tom Cruise plays Lieutenant Pete "Maverick" Mitchell, an ace U.S. Navy pilot who has been sent for a course in Air Combat Maneuvering (ACM) to the Navy's Fighter Weapons School (nicknamed "Top Gun") in Miramar, California (nicknamed "Fightertown, USA"). Only the top one percent of all Navy pilots are sent to the school, and the top pilot in each graduating class, as we learn during the orientation sequence, gets his name added to a rather tacky-looking plaque on the classroom wall. Maverick makes it his goal to get his name on that plaque.

"Maverick" is an appropriate nickname for Pete. He's Movie Hero Cliché #4A—the guy who keeps driving people in charge crazy because he refuses to play by the rules, and who would have been shown the door years ago ex-

cept for the fact that, damn it, he's the best at what he does; nobody can touch him. And Maverick is (we keep hearing) the best. He flies, as they say, by the seat of his pants. He's all instinct: "You don't have time to think up there," he says, arguing with an instructor at *Top Gun*. "If you think, you're dead." (Coincidentally, this also seems to be Cruise's theory of acting.)

But he's also an arrogant showoff. He's been busted from the rank of squadron leader three times for his "showboating," of which we get a prime sample during the opening sequence: In the course of maneuvers over the Indian Ocean, Maverick meets a Soviet MIG-28 and pulls a Blue Angels-type stunt, buzzing the Russkie, upside down, at a distance of about two (yes, two) meters, while his back-seat partner, "Goose" (Anthony Edwards), takes a Polaroid of the astonished enemy. (Maverick thus becomes the only American pilot ever to engage a MIG.) Later, on their first day at *Top*

Gun, Maverick and Goose buzz the tower, causing an officer to spill coffee on himself (this becomes a running gag); Maverick is reprimanded for breaking "a major rule of engagement" by going below 10,000 feet. "I don't like you because you're dangerous," says his principal competition at *Top Gun*, the by-the-book Kazansky, nicknamed "Iceman" (Val Kilmer), whose every aeronautical move is a "perfect example of a textbook maneuver."

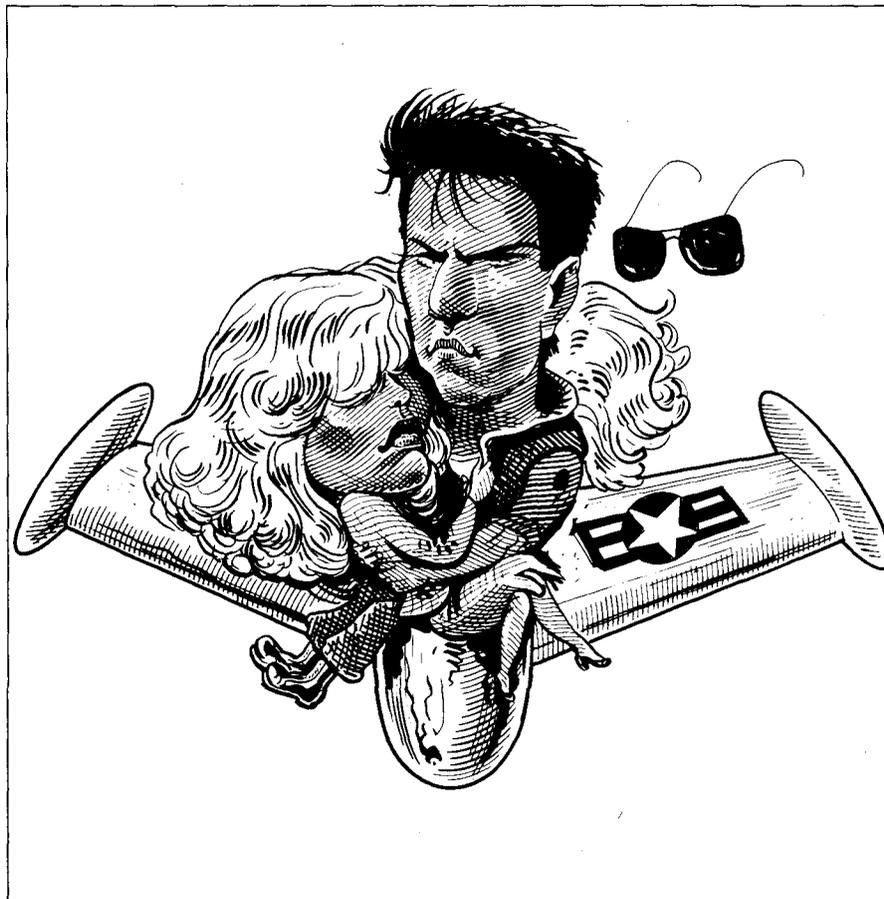
Maverick, the film is at pains to convince us, is also a wild man in the sack. He's a notorious ladykiller whose past victims (the lovable rogue!) include an admiral's daughter. When, soon after his arrival at *Top Gun*, he spots a hot-looking chick at a crowded bar, he makes a public spectacle of his interest in her, grabbing a microphone and crooning "You've Lost That Loving Feeling" at her. The hot chick, naturally, turns out to be Charlie (Kelly McGillis), his new civilian instructor who's just arrived from Washington,

D.C. She's not in the habit of romancing her students, but Maverick's boisterous charm soon wins her over. It's love.

Or, at least, so we are supposed to believe. But we don't. We don't, in fact, believe in much of anything in this film. We don't believe in the great brotherly affection that is apparently supposed to exist between Maverick and Goose. We don't believe in the tension that is meant to exist between Maverick and Iceman, or in their requisite end-of-movie conciliation, or in the father-and-son-type bond between Maverick and the top instructor at *Top Gun* (Tom Skerritt) who, we learn, used to fly with Maverick's old man. It's a stunningly inert, uninvolved film—so much so that we don't even feel anything when Goose perishes in a plane accident.

A great part of the problem, naturally, is that the script (by Jim Cash and Jack Epps, Jr.) is mediocre and the direction (by Tony Scott) superficial. But the weakest link in the chain is without question the vaingloriously vapid Tom Cruise. His performance as Maverick is downright ludicrous. He stalks through the movie with a board up his back and a macho snarl frozen on his face. The point of the snarl, apparently, is to make him look more like a man than a boy, but it backfires: He looks more than ever like an adolescent playing a grownup in a junior high school show—an adolescent, I might add, who has absolutely no star quality, no charisma, no presence whatsoever, but whose every move demonstrates that he himself believes quite the opposite to be the case.

Nor, alas, is he a very convincing ladykiller. Here's the funniest line in the movie—it's Charlie speaking solemnly to Maverick after Goose's death has shattered his self-confidence (a development which we have to take entirely on faith, because Maverick's snarl doesn't waver): "When I first met you, you were larger than life." And she's serious! Likewise, just before they get



Bruce Bawer writes for the *New Criterion*, the *Wall Street Journal*, the *Washington Times*, and other publications.

down to business in the obligatory coition sequence (performed to the hard-driving rhythms of Harold Faltermeyer's banal score), she purrs, "Maverick, you big stud," and it's unclear whether the line is supposed to be a joke, and, if so, whether anybody connected with the film realizes just how big a joke it is.

What is clear, however, is that this is meant to be an intensely sensuous film. We're supposed to be stirred by both the sex and the Air Combat Maneuvering; predictably, the script keeps drawing parallels between the two. When Maverick and Goose walk into a bar full of women, for instance, Maverick says, "This is what I call a target-rich environment"; over drinks, Goose's wife tells Charlie that Maverick once "went ballistic" with a gal named Penny Benjamin; while discussing fighter-plane engagement Maverick shoots Charlie a significant glance and tells her, "When I see something I want, I go after it." The film pointedly cuts from an intimate encounter between Maverick and Charlie to an F-14 take-off. "This gives me a hard-on," says a pilot while viewing training films of F-14s in action, and the joke resurfaces during the final air-battle sequence, when some F-14 pilots over the Indian Ocean, Maverick among them, are keeping an eye out for Russian MIGs: "Must be close," says a pilot, "I'm getting a hard-on."

The implicit message throughout appears to be that cruising chicks is more or less like going on a search-and-destroy mission and that war is sexy—that gunning for MIGs, to put it bald-

ly, is a thrilling and manly way of sublimating homoerotic drives. If we take this to be the film's underlying "logic," it may well help to explain why Scott shows us relatively little of McGillis's body while, during a number of seemingly gratuitous locker-room and volleyball-game sequences, he unstintingly exposes the rippling flesh of Cruise and his fellow pilots (several of whom seem, *à la* Stallone, to have undergone extensive muscle-building workouts in preparation for the film). Patently, this is a film that does not shrink from attempting to exploit the most ignorant, infantile, and ignoble attitudes toward both personal and international relations. Yet it is outrageously unsuccessful even at achieving this unworthy objective: for all the fierce fondling and the fancy flying, it is one of the most remarkably dull movies in recent memory.

And one of the most formulaic, too. Like many recent service pictures, *Top Gun* trades on the typical adolescent male moviegoer's conflicting feelings about his father. In *An Officer and a Gentleman* Richard Gere strove to prove himself a better man than his dad; in a film (which I haven't seen) released earlier this year the boy hero stole an Air Force jet and flew to his father's rescue. In *Top Gun* we are told that Maverick is the son of the late Duke Mitchell, a top-notch seat-of-his-pants Navy pilot who mysteriously disappeared in an F-4 in Nam in 1965. The legend (which Maverick refuses to accept but can't disprove because the

relevant documents are classified by the Pentagon) is that Duke Mitchell "screwed up" somehow; because he "screwed up," we are to believe, Maverick was unable to get into the Naval Academy. This, the film suggests, is why Maverick is so driven, so cocky, and so damn good. He's out (a) to erase the blot on the family escutcheon, and (b) to be an even better pilot than his dad. "It's like every time we go up there you're flying against a ghost," Goose says to him. This conflict is resolved so clumsily and halfheartedly that you get the feeling even Cash and Epps couldn't get themselves to take it seriously.

What *Top Gun* does take altogether too seriously, however, is the increasingly familiar Hollywood philosophy (nowadays often equated, in filmland, with the American dream) that if you ain't the best, you ain't nothing. Every few minutes somebody or other in this movie speaks of belonging to "the elite" or being "the best of the best" or observes that "There are no points for second place" or that (and here's the moral of the whole shebang) "To be the best of the best you've got to make mistakes and then go on." In the end, of course, Maverick gets a chance to regain the self-confidence he lost after Goose's death. At his class's graduation exercises, news comes of a "crisis situation" in the Indian Ocean: A disabled U.S. Navy ship has drifted into enemy waters (for the purposes of this movie, the less geography you know, the better) and some F-14s are needed to provide air cover while the ship is rescued. Naturally, both Maverick and Iceman

are called into action, and when they come up against a couple of Soviet MIGs it is Maverick who mows them down handily, thus proving the superiority of his "instinctive" fighter piloting to Iceman's by-the-book approach. Why this episode doesn't escalate into World War III is anybody's guess.

Given this state of affairs, it is almost a shame that *Top Gun* is so well photographed. The cinematographer, Jeffrey Kimball, has done a masterly job, especially with the breathtaking aerial sequences. But though the film is crowded with lovely light, fog, smoke, and cloud effects, and features a number of arrestingly photographed surfaces, the exquisite camerawork only serves to point up the fact that there's nothing beneath those surfaces. This is, indeed, a "designer film" in the tradition of *Flashdance*; it's a movie in which the magnificently lit and shot beads of water, for example, on the just-showered faces and shoulders of Maverick and his cohorts leave a more lasting impression than their dialogue or the expressions on their faces. And this, ultimately, is the most disturbing thing about *Top Gun*—that such deliberate mindlessness, such calculated vacuity, is brought to bear upon a theme whose implications are of the most solemn consequence. This film lionizes ignorance, venerates immaturity, reveres raw, primitive instinct; it strives aggressively—and, alas, manages completely—not to contradict a single inane illusion of the type cherished by the most horrible sort of teenage boy. Certainly the good old USA deserves better. □

EMINENTOES



OUR MAN IN MOSCOW

by Michael Ledeen

I don't know how much we're paying Mikhail Gorbachev to act as an American agent in the Kremlin, but he's worth every ruble he gets from the CIA. This previously well-kept secret was blown over the course of the past couple of months, for "Iron Mike's" behavior can only be explained if he is

Michael Ledeen is senior fellow in international affairs at the Georgetown Center for Strategic and International Studies.

an American agent: at each crucial moment for Ronald Reagan, the Soviet Union provided him maximum assistance.

First came the Philippine elections; the United States had clearly become identified with the hated Marcos regime, and many of the Aquino people seemed to be flirting with the Communists. So we were worried about the consequences of an open American break with Marcos. How could we feel confident that Aquino wouldn't be

tempted to play footsie with the charming and debonair comrade Gorbachev?

The problem was solved by William Casey, the Director of Central Intelligence, who gave instructions that Gorbachev embrace Marcos right after the elections. When these instructions arrived, Gorbachev was furious. "What!" he exclaimed. "They want me to be the only world leader to hail the election of that dying old crook?"

"Why not?" he was told by the deep-cover CIA case officer in Moscow.

"After all, you hailed the elections of Andropov and Chernenko, and they certainly fit that description. And you weren't paid nearly so well for those endorsements as you will be for this one."

And so it was done, thus making it possible for the United States to ditch Marcos, knowing that Aquino couldn't possibly turn to the only major figure in the world who had acclaimed the fraudulent election of her arch-enemy.