

** **Please Note** * The text below is only my speaking notes for my presentation at the Memory to History Conference. For a more detailed (and fully reference paper) please contact me at r.morley@usask.ca*

Whether it is snoop heading out on his own Dawn Patrol, or;

Maverick and Goose taking bets on whether or not one of them can achieve carnal knowledge of a “lady this time.”

the images of the twentieth century pilot is remarkably consistent: they are a curious amalgam of playfulness, camaraderie, stoicism and omnipotence.

Very capable historians from Robert Wohl, Michael Paris and Western’s own Jonathan Vance have explored this very subject. Though this image of the aviator can be traced back to well before the First World War – with the exploits of channel crossing pilots like Louis Bleriot.

It was the First World War, and the place of the aviator in popular culture during that conflict that gave focus and detail to images of the aviator – and it was during the war that we see the rise of the ace.

This brief presentation – which is based on a chapter of my dissertation – will explore how during the 1930s the cinema in Great Britain not only perpetuated the image of the stereotypical ace flyer, but also amplified it – helping shape memories of the Great War in the air.

The cinema was fundamentally important to British leisure time during the interwar years. It was – according to AJP Taylor – the essential social habit of the age and the dominant entertainment industry in the country, selling almost 1 billion tickets annually by 1939. According to J. P. Mayer’s *Sociology of Film’s*

the cinema was particularly important amongst younger men and school aged boys playing an important role in informing the imaginations and leisure time of children. This would be the very same generations who would fill RAF cockpits during the Second World War.

This makes the cinema an important venue for the construction of ideas about aviators and the formation of memories about fighting the Great War in the air.

Hollywood started to produce films about the Great War as early as 1919. However, public interest in First World War films generally lapsed until the release of the *Big Parade* and *What Price Glory?* in 1925, both were the stories of American soldiers fighting in France and were well received – confirming what historian Michael Paris has argued was a long-standing desire in the British public to learn what the war was like and to be told that their sacrifices between 1914 and 1918 were worth it.

The real boom in aviation films began in 1927 with the release of *Wings* – which won the first Oscar for best picture. Not only did the film benefit from high production value and very strong camera work, but also the hysteria that grew around aviation in the wake of Charles Lindbergh's successful Atlantic crossing.

No less than twenty-six films about the First World War in the air were produced between *Wings* and the remake of *The Dawn Patrol*, released in the United States in 1938, and released in the United Kingdom in 1939. Only adding to this were dozens more films that featured aviation in some way, shape or form.

In fact, so many aviation films were produced in the early and mid 1930s that studios were actually growing concerned that the genre was becoming saturated.

Despite the enormous popularity of FWW aviation films, British film studios did not jump into the genre. What also made this especially curious is the heightened level of what's called airmindedness in Great Britain. Britons voraciously consumed all things aviation – whether it was attending air pageants, following the exploits of celebrity flyers like Alan Cobham or Amy Johnson, or watching aviation films at the cinema. Additionally, the British military was using the cinema to tell the stories of their exploits during the war.

Still, only one British-made film depicting the Royal Flying Corps was produced during the interwar years – the low-quality and poorly received 1923 film *Reverse of the Medal*. This had more to do with the state of the British film industry, not public appetite.

This meant that British cinema audiences had to rely on Hollywood films to construct post-war images of their so-called knights of the air – Or, British cinematic memories of their WWI pilots and their air war were distinctly American.

This was exacerbated by the fact that most Hollywood films of the First World War in the air focused on American aviators, whether they were fighting in the Lafayette Escadrille, the Royal Flying Corps or the American Aviation Section. This has created a situation in which, despite their relatively small contribution to the war effort, American combat pilots are over-represented in

English-language cinema. Most films like *Cock of the Air*, *Captain Swagger*, *Ace of Aces*, *Hell in the Heavens*, *The Skyhawk*, *Today We Live* and, of course, *Wings* featured American aviators.

Therefore, films like *Hell's Angels* and *The Dawn Patrol* – the two films I will focus on more closely – were especially important in the construction of the aviator's and airplane's image in the British public sphere, because they were American-made but depicted British aviators – though not necessarily using British actors.

Hell's Angels was a film like no other. Aviation, as I am sure many of you know, was a personal obsession for Howard Hughes. Watching *Wings* repeatedly, the tycoon set out to make an even better picture. This picture ended up utilising the largest private air force in the world and cost over 4 million USD, the most expensive film until *Gone with the Wind*.

It left a huge mark on aviation pictures during the 1930s, thirteen of the twenty-six first world war air films made during the 1930s were released within five years of *Hell's Angels*. Some, like *Cock of the Air*, *Sky Devils*, *The White Sister*, *Today We Live*, *Crimson Romance*, *Hell in the Heavens* and *Suzy*, all borrowed heavily from *Hell's Angels'* story and actually used aerial photography from the thousands of feet of film that Howard Hughes left on the cutting room floor.

The Dawn Patrol was equally important, if not more important, than *Hell's Angels*. It was actually a remake of a 1930 version, to the point where a lot of the

air-to-air footage was reused. It had an ensemble cast, headed by one of the biggest stars of the age – Errol Flynn. One thing it lacked, however, was the contrived story-lines of most other aviation features in the period – there were no love triangles – in fact there were no women at all in the film – or excessively romantic depictions of pilots, only an exploration of their war-time hardships and camaraderie.

So what exactly was the image of the “ace” pilot presented in the two films?

Like their war-time celebrity status and other films in the period, four important common traits are attributed to the ace in these films: boisterousness, camaraderie, stoicism and omnipotence.

However, it should be kept in mind that the aviators who appear in both films are actually more complex than the simple caricatures that have appeared in films like *Top Gun*. For example, the brothers who are featured in *Hell’s Angels*, Roy and Monte, do not both possess the stereotypical characteristics of the aviator – but combined they do. The same can be said for the leads in the *Dawn Patrol*, who have their subtle differences, and varying levels of seriousness and playfulness.

The first common image of the ace found on the screen during the interwar years was that of the boisterous, drinking playboy. While other films of the period depict the ace in a similar way, it is clearly on display in both *Hell’s Angels* and the *Dawn Patrol*.

The mess in Hell's Angels, typical of flyers, bustling and loud – a real joyous atmosphere. The pilots trade barbs with each other and make fun of their adjutants. Additionally, at numerous other junctures of the film pilots are shown enjoying drink with their comrades and other soldiers.

Like in HA, alcohol and the officers' mess are very important in the DP, and they reiterated commonly held views of the ace:

-- their mess is adorned with the wreckage of downed German airplanes and sign on the wall that says the "binge patrol;"

-- they are frequently seen signing songs, like "hurrah for the last man who dies;"

-- when they are not drinking they escape the realities of the war by putting their feet up and reading;

-- even in meetings with senior officers, drink is almost always offered;

-- their love of alcohol also appears to be transnational, as they enjoy a night drinking with a downed German pilot

This anecdote draws me to the second important commonality between pilots in both films: their chivalric camaraderie:

- the encounter between the downed German aviator, and the members of the dawn patrol is highly effective in highlighting the camaraderie between World War One aces. Despite the clear language barrier, they are able to forge an intimate connection with their so-called enemy.

- The relationship between David Niven's character Scotty and Errol Flynn's Captain Courtney also shows this deep camaraderie. This is not meant to suggest that camaraderie was not common in war-time, of course it was, but there exists a certain humour about the closeness between the men can be seen in later films about aviators. Equals.
- Finally, when captain Courtney is killed at the end of the film (sorry) German pilots pay homage to his bravery by returning his goggles and helmet to his base.

The camaraderie of the cinematic ace was bolstered by their stoicism.

- for all their drunken behaviour and passionate camaraderie, screen-aces were stoic warriors – lethal killers – when push came to shove.
- In Hell's Angels Roy and Monte are captured in a daring raid. Once in captivity Roy is forced to kill his own brother before he reveals the secrets of an upcoming offensive.
- Once in their cockpits, the members of the dawn patrol were serious knights of the air who openly discussed understanding of the stakes involved in their aerial battles and are depicted ruthlessly bringing down enemy airplanes.
- However, the ace was not uniformly militaristic. Most aviation films during the interwar years, especially those in the late 1930s, like DP were markedly pacifist in tone – warning duality of becoming an ace flyer.

Finally, The ace flier, as they appear on the screen, are omnipotent, one-man war-winning fliers – they were the difference makers, who transcended the dehumanizing experience of the foot-soldiers in the trenches.

- For example, in *Hell's Angels*, a pilot single-handedly brings down a massive zeppelin, which was threatening to obliterate Trafalgar square, albeit at the sacrifice of his own life.
- At the conclusion of the *Dawn Patrol*, Flynn's character, having ordered his best friend's brother to his death, launches a devastating solo attack against a German arms depot. One that no bomber during the Great War could have achieved, let alone with a Sopwith Camel. He is able to destroy the depot, kill dozens of German soldiers, and shoot down German flyers before finally succumbing to the German Ace von Richter.

Was the image of the ace flyer: one, accepted by British cinemagoers and two, was it an accurate representation of British aviators during the interwar years.

Assessing popular responses to films, at any period, let alone in Great Britain during the 1930s (when there was no comprehensive tally of box office receipts) is extremely difficult, if not impossible.

Yet, to get a cursory idea of how British moviegoers reacted to this image of the aviator we can turn to reviews of the films, both in trade periodicals like *Kine Weekly*, *Picturegoer* and the *Monthly Film Bulletin*, and in British News papers.

British cinema publications and newspapers accepted the representation of the lives and deaths of the World War I flying aces. To them, the ace, as he appeared on the screen, was an accurate reflection, or at the least very close relative of the ace who fought during the war. At the same time, they praised the realism of the air war on the screen. This realism was further reinforced by RAF and air ministry participation in the London premieres of both films.

British public opinion, of course, is much more difficult to assess. Yet, Martin Francis's 2009 book *The Flyer: British Culture and the Royal Air Force, 1939-1945* provides an excellent look at the aviator – as they were seen by the British public in the 1930s. He shares a number of anecdotes that highlight this very same dualistic vision of the British flyer: they were seen as such poorly disciplined hooligans that many landlords were reluctant give them lodging, but by the start of the Second World War, the aviator was as stoic warrior, or the words of one RAF pilot's wife: "the pick of British manhood."

As we can see, there was a tangible connection between the aviator as they appeared on British screens and how they were received in the general population. And, at the very least, film acted as a transmitter of the stereotypical image of the ace flyer during the interwar period.

Many British boys and young men throughout the interwar years imitated this image of the ace and they took those memories of the ace with them when volunteered to fly for the RAF during the Second World War.