

EMBRACING THE WARPLANE: ROMANTICISM'S ROLE IN THE RISE OF AIR POWER

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“It was my place, at that time in space, and the jet was mine for those moments. Though it was a place where I could quickly die, the cockpit was a place where I truly lived.”

—Brian Shul, “Sled Driver; Flying The World’s Fastest Jet,” 1992

In the early stages of aviation technology, the duration of World War I and the decade to follow, the United States Army Air Service played but a minor role in both America’s military strategy and budget; aircraft were severely overshadowed by the mighty battleship, the “backbone of the [naval] fleet and the bulwark of the nation’s sea defense” (CR 8625). But several factors shifted the country’s perspective of the warplane into a more appealing and popular light: Brigadier General Billy Mitchell’s compelling arguments; the aerial bombing tests of 1921; and the successful sinking of the German battleship SMS *Ostfriesland*.

Mitchell primarily anchored the success of his experiments to the warplane’s efficiency. “There are no conditions in which seacraft can operate efficiently in which aircraft cannot operate efficiently,” Mitchell claimed, firmly grounding his argument for a change in military spending in logic and reasoning; “Air forces . . . can find and destroy all classes of seacraft” (U.S. 1828-1829). And when asked if he could prove his position, he replied, “Give us the warships to attack and come out and watch it” (Davis 71).

The emphasis of efficiency within Mitchell’s campaign, however, is quite perplexing, for while the overwhelming factor in the military’s approval of aerial warfare was the warplane’s efficiency, there was a much more immediate concern surrounding early aviation. In the early 1920s, only a few days ever went by without the report of yet another warplane crash, another grotesque disaster in the skies. June 1921 alone yielded eight horrid tragedies, from “Lightning Bolt Felled Big Plane” to “Planes Crash in Air and Pilots Go to Death;” even movie star Jimmie Callahan’s fingers were cut off by a propeller in the process of filming a stunt (Film 10). Yet less than a month later, the military seemed ready to embrace the menacing warplane. Perhaps even more astounding was the public’s stance. Mitchell’s aerial tests sought the nation’s approval as well, and somehow his arguments compelled the press to endorse the warplane despite all the nightmarish articles they constantly published about the dangers and insecurities of aviation. Where did this appeal come from? What could possibly influence the nation to act so myopically, to embrace unflinchingly such a deadly machine?

By identifying the warplane as a “vehicle of romance,” H. Bruce Franklin argues that the warplane’s appeal stemmed from something very contrary to efficiency (55). Franklin observes the vast appeal of the plane in the “warplane models assembled by millions of boys and young men during World War II, the thousands of warplane magazines filled with glossy photographs that some find as stimulating as those in men’s magazines,” and even the movie *Strategic Air Command*, “in which Jimmy Stewart’s response to his first sight of a B-47 nuclear bomber is, ‘She’s the most beautiful thing I’ve ever seen in my life’” (Franklin 54). It is this evidence, as well, that suggests that the romance generated is only a product of warplanes and not ordinary planes. Ordinary planes are useful and efficient, but load an automatic gun and a two-ton bomb aboard and the vehicle takes on a whole new persona. However, planes had already been used as bombers as early as 1915, in the midst of WWI. Mitchell wasn’t even the first to romanticize the warplane; an article with the headline “Briton Drops Bombs at Zeebrugge Despite Heavy German Fire” reads,

Thursday night, an English warplane hovered over Zeebrugge, and, defying the concentrated fire, made a sudden dive to within 300 feet. . . . The airman coolly dropped his bombs at short range on the submarine. . . . There was a terrific explosion, and the submarine was sunk. The aviator got away safely (“Aviator” 1).

The title suggests struggle and conflict, but the report itself lends the aviator a cool and casual air. Within this short wire, we can already see the romanticizing of both the warplane and its suave maverick cowboy-like pilot. Through his examination of various military and media transcripts, Harry H. Ransom concludes that the test bombings of 1921 were “the most significant events of the period, even more important than the total experiences of the Air Service in the [first] World War,” like the one above (27). But how could simulations carry a stronger effect than a real wartime skirmish?

Because all the bombings of 1915 were overseas, we salvaged but a few stories and no pictures; Mitchell recognized that he could not romanticize the warplane nearly as effectively through imaginative words as he could through actual images. Mitchell’s plan was far more complex than a simple test of the aircraft’s capability; aside from the designing of the largest bombs ever made and new instruments to calculate the trajectory of his new weapons, Mitchell also hired George Goddard, a young and innovative photographer, to handle public relations. “I want newsreels of those sinking ships in every theater in the country, just as soon as we can get them there,” Mitchell ordered (Davis 79). Soon Goddard’s films began screening nationwide, and the country was beginning to picture the warplane as never before.



U.S. Air Force, 1921

Mitchell invited several distinguished international delegates to witness the sinking of the *Ostfriesland* from a naval ship stationed nearby, the Henderson, but his greatest concern was the flock of reporters present for the event (Davis 101). Members from all the major papers, including representatives from England, Italy, France, Spain,

Portugal, and Brazil, were on hand to observe and report the results. It is through the eyes of these observers and their firsthand reports that we can get a taste of the warplane's true character.

Interestingly, the reporters invariably refer to the *Ostfriesland*, like all ships of its time, as female; they describe how the two-thousand-pound bombs “rupture her plates and bulkheads” (Hicks 36), “open her seams and make a sinking bulk of her” (“Sinking” 5). The personification of the battleship echoes a strong familiarity with her, a century-long history. In striking contrast, these journalists never attribute a gender to the plane; it was a mysterious stranger whose audience had not yet established a familiarity with it. This was not a mere test run but the dramatic introduction of a new character into the complex storyline that was naval warfare.

Mitchell actually found his two-thousand-pound bombs to be more useful when they did not directly hit his target but rather land nearby; the detonation, magnified by the pressure underwater, could rip the ship's hull apart. But the “hammer effect,” as it came to be known, was not only an efficient and useful strategy; it also left a powerful impression upon the reporters present. The underwater detonation sent a fierce shockwave through the water, causing the Henderson and its crew to shake violently and rumble (Davis 107). The terrifying effects of the ton-heavy bombs suddenly transformed the warplane from a stranger—an unfamiliar piece of machinery—into something much more awesome. The roles had been reversed; now the skies were a location of control, and the ground seemed not so safe. The association and familiarity the battleship carried also helped to intensify the drama and romanticism of the moment. While the sinking of the *Ostfriesland* undoubtedly proved the efficiency of the warplane—the ship sunk rather quickly, in under eight minutes—what caught its audience's eyes was the manner in which she went down: “[I]n the few moments of the final plunge [the *Ostfriesland*] assumed a perpendicular position. . . . Turning completely over, the vessel sank bottom up, the keel being the part of the ship last seen” (Hicks 36). Not much unlike another practice target, U.S. Air Force, 1921 the *Frankfurt*, which “was lifted bodily several feet by the blast and at once began to settle forward. . . [and] as she went down, her rudders and propeller rose clearly out of the water” (Hicks 36), there was an element of grace to the *Ostfriesland's*—and any warship's—destruction. It clutched from the forceful blow delivered by the plane and rolled over on its side. And just before it permanently went down, it stood itself upright in the air. One last breath, one final gasp of air, and then it slowly withered to its subterranean burial ground. The *Ostfriesland* didn't just sink; it died dramatically. The bomb's terrifying shockwaves, the battleship's familiarity, and the *Ostfriesland's* graceful burial all lent a certain drama to the spectacle and all contributed to its romanticism, but Franklin argues that they accomplished even more. By contrasting the aerial bombings to Herman Melville's “Utilitarian View of the Monitor's Flight,” the depiction of technology as “plain mechanic power,” Franklin suggests that these bombings not only glorified the warplane but also gave it life (Franklin 48, 54). The

warplane, now infused with a soul, not only became easy to embrace, but even became easy to relate to on a personal level, as was perfectly demonstrated by Jimmy Stewart's remarks. This personification, by no means an insignificant factor, tremendously swayed the public both to favor and trust the warplane and its aviary capabilities.

One is left to wonder, however, what kind of argument romanticism should provide for the approval of aerial combat. If the warplane truly were a danger to fly, wouldn't our ability to relate to it like a person spur our caution and concerns and dissuade us from admiring its military capabilities? If we are truly weighing the existing dangers against our emotional investment, how can we come to pick and choose, to love the machine's awesome and terrifying bombs and yet look away from all the imminent tragedy? Mitchell's tests, however, did not only romantically recreate the warplane's nature; they directly countered any previous images that may have been associated with it, like endless smoke and blazing fires from midair crashes, lightning bolts, and many other freakish disasters. On July 10, 1921, a mere eleven days prior to Mitchell's tests, a bombing plane spun out of control and crashed full force into Langin Field, a crowded auto field with thousands of people, killing six and injuring fifty. The *Washington Post* and many other papers printed a very gruesome—and very real—photo of the ghastly wreck in the next day's paper; thick black smoke poured from the melee, the scorching fires added to the hellishness of the scene. These images added a complication to Mitchell's project. It would no longer suffice for Mitchell's planes to functionally perform their task; somehow, Goddard's films would have to not only avert the association between smoke, fire, and the warplane from people's thoughts, but also negate that very association.

Perhaps what made Goddard's movies so effective and romantic was neither the birth of the plane nor the graceful death of the battleship. For many logical reasons the relative difficulty of hitting a floating target compared to a stationary land base, and the comparatively common presence of heavy gale winds and fog at sea—General Mitchell conducted his experiments on the water, but the ocean setting had an advantageous effect as well. By relying on the hammer effect to rip open the hulls of victim ships, the bombings that very next week negated the effects of the nightmarish scene at Langin Field, recreating the identity of the plane as a much quieter destructive force. Smoke was replaced with steam, fire with water. The battleship didn't smolder; it quietly sank. Most importantly, the test left no mess behind; the surface of the water returned to its peaceful and calm state. On water, the plane didn't just defeat the warship; it erased it from existence. On water, the plane didn't just cause massive destruction; it also wiped it from our memories.

This disparity between the effects of aerial bombing on land and on sea actually played a clear role in the Navy's decision how they would employ the use of warplanes. Captain William S. Pye, the Navy's assistant director of their War Plans Division, argued that "if the people of the United States had seriously considered this question of international morality, they would reject the idea of strategic bombing," thereby

decreasing the need of warplanes (Ransom 28). Pye, in conclusion, felt comfortable only in using aircraft on the sea, where the civilian casualties would be reduced. However, the question here wasn't over the efficiency of TNT as a destructive agent; all Pye debated was the proper method of delivery, by air or by sea (Goodrich 10). Perhaps the comfort Pye felt, the comfort Pye predicted Americans would feel, was the clean quiet and efficient death the warplane could administer with its mammoth, menacing, and yet relatively silent bombs. Without thick black smoke or traces of rubble, with a more graceful and romantic image to feed the nation, Mitchell had the perfect footage to deliver to its audience; the "questions of morality" had been masterfully offset.

It was not until 1964 that Stanley Kubrick's cinematic satire *Dr. Strangelove* forced the world to consider this crime, humanity's crime of unjustly falling in love with warfare. The movie was released at the height of the Cold War and blatantly parodied the international anxieties of pending doom, the fear that our "nuclear deterrents" could accidentally—and ironically—result in the thorough annihilation of life on Earth. But "what Kubrick's Cold War satire showed was not men at the mercy of machines, but machines at the mercy of men," the flawless deterrents being misused by a few flawed individuals (Ebert).

The paranoid and mentally unstable General Jack Ripper initiates a nuclear strike on the Soviet Union. In his state of paranoia, he assumes the "Combies" will try to capture and torture him for the nuclear strike recall codes; valiantly, though foolishly, Ripper commits suicide. U.S. President Merkin Muffley contacts the Soviet Premier to discuss the urgency of the matter and devise a strategy to bring down the dispatched B-52s, but the 'serious' phone call ("Dimitri, one of our generals, well, he went and did a silly thing. . . . No, don't say you're more sorry, I'm capable of being as sorry as you") reduces the social conflict of nuclear war to nothing more than a children's quarrel. When the Russians complete the Doomsday Device, the ultimate nuclear deterrent incapable of being deactivated, the Premier neglects to inform the world, waiting for just the right moment to break the news; "You know how much the Premier likes surprises," the Soviet ambassador reasons to the President. The message seems clear. Virtually every character in this film is portrayed as insane—though to different degrees—suggesting that the modern perspective of war is the product of a mental illness, one that began decades—if not centuries—ago and slowly, permanently, conditioned its way into the human mind.

Kubrick's machines are more than just innocent bystanders. The Soviet Doomsday Device is treated like a real character of the movie; like the giant boards of flashing lights in the American War Room, it is capable of functioning entirely on its own. However, the Device is mistreated by mankind and forced to destroy the world. Similarly, when a soldier shoots a coke machine to take its coinage by force, the machine reacts by not only spitting out quarters but also a steady stream of cola right

at its aggressor's face. Kubrick's audience is compelled to sympathize and rally around these mistreated machines, to love them despite all the trouble they ultimately cause.

Romanticism, again, is the central tool used to create affection towards these machines. From the soothing introductory music accompanied by footage of a bomber squadron to the movie's closing montage of mushroom clouds as Vera Lynn sings "We'll Meet Again," Kubrick's choice of beautiful music helps to emphasize the beauty of his wartime footage. In "one of the most famous moments in modern film" (Ebert), Major "King" Kong, a B-52 pilot in uniform but a wild western cowboy at heart, is feverishly attempting to force open the jammed hatch underneath his plane to release the hydrogen bomb. Accidentally, he is dropped out of the plane along with the bomb as soon as the hatch is opened. Caught in the excitement of the moment, he begins to hoot and holler, waving his oversized cowboy hat in every direction, like a rugged cowboy riding a bucking bronco. Again, the romanticism is perfectly captured in Major Kong's display, and the nuclear weapons directly responsible for nuking the Soviets, triggering the Doomsday Device, and rendering all life on Earth extinct, are seen as the misused tools of an overly malicious bombardier. Furthermore, Maj. Kong's character is masterfully employed to offset any similarity his ride may have to Japan's kamikaze warfare; the Japanese are remembered as evil and Kong, heroic.



Dr. Strangelove, 1964

However, Kubrick's characters are much deeper than the superficial insanity they display. If the movie were meant to criticize the social and political atmosphere of its time for falling in love with warfare, then we would expect the dangerously malicious Major Kong to at least make his audience flinch, yet even in this movie's darkest moment, as Major Kong unknowingly destroys the world, the audience can't help but laugh at his cowboy-like antics. The characters are not remembered as villains, mass murderers, or future embodiments of Adolf Hitler (the title character, Dr Strangelove, constantly represses his mechanical arm from performing the Nazi salute). Instead, they are remembered as loveable—though hapless and ignorant—heroes.

Perhaps the film argues that the only thing that could cause thorough annihilation is if the entire world were to go insane at exactly the same time, like the coincidence that Russian scientists build a Doomsday Device the very week an American general

psychologically breaks down. In which case, we have little to fear. We can love Major Kong for his noble intentions, and we can laugh with the president and his loony generals as they fumblingly try to save the world, though they sometimes forget that the Communists aren't the most immediate threat anymore ("Boy, I've got to get me one of those Doomsday Devices!").

Dr. Strangelove is much deeper than a warning of the dangers of falling in love with war. Machines alone, Jackson Burgess concludes in his essay on Kubrick's film, may be "beautiful, functional, and absolutely reliable, but mindless and heartless" (11). The American nuclear strike protocol and the Russian Doomsday Device function exactly as planned, and neither beauty nor efficiency necessarily translates into successful military strategy. The only thing that holds the reality of a nuclear holocaust at fair distance is "Man—sloppy, incompetent, unreliable, but full of hope and courage" (11). Machines, such as atomic bombs or warplanes, are dangerous when left to function on their own; but when partnered with a courageous and caring person, the weapon can assume a new and virtuous persona, much like John Wayne's righteous pistols.

Perhaps what transforms the most deadly war machines into "vehicles of romance" is not only the subjective beauty of aesthetic destruction, like the perfectly rounded mushroom clouds of the atomic bomb, but also the recognition of something potentially upright and just. Perhaps what makes these personified warplanes "vehicles" is not just their ability to transport two-thousand-pound bombs to battleships or submarines, but rather to serve, as living soldiers do, as the efficient and practical manifestations of our most noble desires. So long as the warplane's awesome power is not misused, but rather thoughtfully harnessed, it can truly embody and relate to Man's most honorable aspirations on a very personal level, thus rendering the danger of disaster and midair malfunctions an ultimately cause worthy risk. Captain William Pye's proposal was eventually rejected, and warplanes served a primary role on both sea and land in America's triumph over Nazism, fascism, and the Axis regime in World War II.

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