

AirSpace Season 3 Episode 7: Danger Zone

Intro Music in and under

Matt:

Welcome to AirSpace from the Smithsonian's National Air and Space Museum. I'm Matt.

Emily:

I'm Emily.

Nick:

And I'm Nick.

Matt:

Top Gun, The Right Stuff, Red Tails, military aviation has been a star on the silver screen for basically as long as there's been movies and airplanes.

Nick:

The first film to win an Academy Award for best picture was a World War I flying epic called Wings. Fast forward to today, and Captain Marvel has put women's Air Force stories front and center.

Emily:

We're diving into how the Department of Defense works with Hollywood to translate real military stories into the fantasy of a box office smash, coming up on AirSpace.

Music under and out

Emily:

So I'm going to go ahead and say spoiler alert, but if you haven't seen Top Gun yet, that's not our fault. And if you haven't seen Captain Marvel yet, maybe that's not our fault. If you haven't seen it, go see it. We're probably going to spoil some things here. But it'll probably just make you want to see it more.

Nick:

Yeah, honestly, I'm going to go ahead and posit if you haven't seen Top Gun yet, that's on you and we're going to punish you for that oversight now by spoiling some parts of it.

Emily:

But if you're interested in seeing some of the movies that we're talking about today, Top Gun is streamable through Amazon Prime and Captain Marvel can be got through Disney+. But things like The Right Stuff and Wings are rentable across probably your favorite platforms.

Musical transition

Nick:

If anyone recalls, we did an episode about a little movie called Armageddon, and this is not that again, but part of that episode was investigating how NASA works with Hollywood films. And it turns out that there's an office, and a person. There are kind of equivalent liaison offices for Hollywood films in each of the branches of the military. Is that right?

Emily:

Yeah and so essentially their job is to work with TV, film, I'm assuming the interwebs these days, to make sure that you get that collaboration with the military to be able to exercise your creative license in all the right places, and make sure you get your facts in all the important places.

Matt:

There's an office at the Navy that keeps an eye on making sure that Top Gun is accurate enough, but also makes you kind of want to be a fighter pilot if you're going in that direction. And there's an Air Force equivalent.

Emily:

But what I think is really interesting is that this isn't new. Right? This isn't just something that the military started doing when the Top Gun movie came out, right? They actually were started after the movie Wings won the Oscar, when it came out in 1927. So they actually started working together in this more official capacity. And so, this isn't like a new invention with the digital age. It's been around for a long time.

Matt:

And if you think about it, it makes a lot of sense for them to have an office like that. Not only would they want to be depicted accurately and also, you know, positively, but films and TV, this is where most of us get our impression of what the military actually does, and what operations actually look like.

Nick:

Yeah. And they not only ensure that Hollywood has access to things, like if the producers ask nicely, we might be able to arrange a couple of F-18s to appear in your movie. And of course, Hollywood's got to pay for the gas, the taxpayers don't underwrite that. But also ensuring that you can film near sensitive areas without revealing classified information. For instance, in Armageddon, in the scene in the hangar where all of the stealth aircraft are parked, you only see them from the front because that was the stipulation. The guards in that shot are actual guards ensuring that the cameras don't go around behind the aircraft because that's where all the classified stuff was that they didn't want appearing in the movie.

Emily:

Well, and you have to imagine from a filmmaker standpoint, you want as much access as possible, right? Because the more access you have, the less CGI you have to work with, the more that you can make real, the better.

Movie Clip-Top Gun

Maverick (Tom Cruise): I've got good tone, good tone. I got tone, I got tone, firing!

Emily:

So if we're not going to talk about Armageddon more, we should talk about Top Gun more because I'm very excited about the new Top Gun coming out. In part because I'm really excited to see what the new version of Top Gun looks like. Is it just going to be another big like bro show? I'm hopeful that it won't be because in 1986, women weren't allowed in the Top Gun school like they are now. But what I think is really exciting about this new film, and was really exciting about the first one, was that so many of those scenes from inside the cockpit were shown not just from inside the cockpit, but from the air, right? They were scenes shot in the cockpit while those airplanes were being flown by actual military pilots.

Matt:

Top Gun is an excellent example of that. And it really makes Top Gun feel real in a way that seeing Tom Cruise against a green screen, just kind of pitching his body back and forth as though he was in the air, wasn't going to cut it. That goes a long way back in Hollywood as well. It's something that absolutely makes a difference when you're filming onboard aircraft. And I can't wait to see the new Top Gun for a very similar reason.

Emily:

I can't imagine being an actor, who's probably not a pilot, sitting in a cockpit experiencing what it's like to be in a very fast airplane. I mean, taking off and landing in a commercial airplane makes me nauseous, right? You will not find me in a fighter plane. There was a lot of changes in innovation that needed to be made in order to make it all look real, and that included actors in cockpits of planes, "pulling Gs," you can't see my air quotes. Just like Nick can't y'all, I don't feel like I can quote, unquote, say "pulling Gs" in a legitimate way.

Nick:

This is a good time for us to talk about the idea that a lot of actors, who do you call it cockpit characters, where they're in a movie where they have serious aviation responsibilities do sometimes go on to become pilots. And that's something that we see with Tom Cruise and the Top Gun franchise, where Tom Cruise is not just a little bit of a pilot, Tom Cruise flies a lot of things. Tom Cruise flies helicopters, he flies airplanes. And he did a lot of the planning on how the training and camera work would go in Top Gun 2 because of the expertise that he has developed in that area over the decade, since the first Top Gun came out and forever put him in the mold of Maverick.

Matt:

Tom cruise is obviously very famous for doing his own stunts, right? That's what they always advertise with the Mission Impossible movies. And you get the impression that he's an actor who really takes his job seriously, to the point where he wants his body to be the body that's taking the blows and doing the things. And it makes sense that he learned to be a pilot as a result of Top Gun, and other roles. But it's really remarkable that for this upcoming Top Gun movie, he actually came up with a sort of training

course for the other actors in the film that were going to have to act in the cockpit to get them familiar with being natural, and being an actor under those incredibly extreme and irregular circumstances.

Nick:

Yeah. He didn't leave this one up to cruise control, so to speak. *All laugh*

Movie Clip-Top Gun

Goose (Anthony Edwards):

I hate it when she does that.

Nick:

One of the things that came out of the first Top Gun was an iconic idea of what Navy pilots look like.

Movie Clip-Top Gun

Viper (Tom Skerritt)

Gentlemen, you are the top 1 percent of all Naval aviators.

Nick:

And that presents us with, I think, an opportunity to say that's one of the commonalities in Captain Marvel. If Tom Cruise is the icon and the image of the popular 1980s Navy pilots in the minds of Americans, I think that from our experience with meeting some of the pioneering women flying U.S. Air Force hardware, Captain Marvel did a really great job of capturing what that looks like in those scenes in the movie. So I think it actually does, even though it's about a superhero with super alien powers, no less work in showing you what a high-performance combat pilot in, well, the 21st century, when the movie came out, but the 1990s where it's set, actually looks like.

Emily:

As somebody who is not particularly a DC or Marvel super fan, and that might be the understatement of the day. I didn't fully appreciate that Captain Marvel in the movie has a completely different origin story than Captain Marvel in the comic books. And I'm pretty sure you can Google to learn more, but I think maybe what's more important to the story here is that Captain Marvel really captures a really interesting moment in sort of military history where women are acting as test pilots, but they are not allowed to act as combat pilots.

Matt:

We should just say that as a superhero, Captain Marvel is sort of this incredible, indestructible, very powerful, probably one of the most powerful characters in the Marvel Universe, but as a fighter pilot in the initial stages of this movie, she is not that at all. She is still a human woman who is trying, along with other women, very talented pilots, to make their way in the Air Force.

Nick:

So yeah, in the movie, the eventual full-strength Captain Marvel character is so powerful, it puts Superman to shame from a how do you write this kind of standpoint? But...but, but, but to the extent that we need to touch on the origin story of Carol Danvers, who's the characters name before she becomes extraterrestrially powerful is that Carol Danvers is an Air Force pilot. That's the origin story that plays out in the film, and that's obviously the important part of what we're discussing today, and to prepare for how that character should be portrayed, Brie Larson worked with a real Air Force pilot.

Emily:

And not just any pilot, Brie worked with Major General Jeannie Leavitt, who was the first woman fighter pilot to fly for the U.S. Air Force in 1993. The Captain Marvel movie does a really good job of sort of capturing this moment in the 1980s when women are Air Force test pilots, but not fighter pilots. And they even referenced that in the film.

Movie Clip-Captain Marvel

Maria Rambeau (Lashana Lynch):

The Air Force still wasn't letting women fly combat, so testing Lawson's planes was our only shot at doing something that mattered.

Matt:

So in addition to basing the character off of a real woman pilot in the Air Force, Larson also, along with other actors and the filmmakers, visited Nellis Air Force Base, and got to actually talk to the pilots that are flying there now, as well as experience what it feels like to fly in the jets at the air force base.

Movie Clip-Captain Marvel

Maria Rambeau (Lashana Lynch):

Where's your head at?

Carol Danvers (Brie Larson):

In the clouds, where's yours?

Maria Rambeau:

On my shoulders, about to show these boys how we do it. You ready?

Carol Danvers:

Higher, further, faster, baby.

Maria Rambeau:

That's right.

Emily:

A lot of the portrayal of military aviation specifically in these Hollywood blockbusters actually, sort of, serves another purpose. It's not necessarily the goal or the aim of these films, but it's an unintended consequence in a way, in that these movies have an incredibly powerful potential for bringing on recruits into military aviation. For example, after Top Gun came out in 1986, Navy enlistments jumped 500 percent because everybody wanted to be Maverick.

Nick:

And while it can be argued, that Top Gun was a two hour Navy recruitment commercial, and it has been argued, Captain Marvel actually, kind of, took a different tact with it. The Air Force was really intentional about reaching out to potential recruits to invite them to become a member of the 21st century Air Force with this strategy around the origin stories spot that played before the movies and elsewhere.

Clip-Air Force Commercial

Music and plane noises

Narrator:

Every superhero has an origin story. We all got our start somewhere. For us, it is the U.S. Air Force.

Nick:

A lot of the early screenings and premiere events had serious representation of Air Force officers in uniform because of their involvement in the film.

Matt:

Yeah, and you might imagine that the Air Force has trouble reaching women with the message that they belong in the air force as they had a nine percent jump in reported sexual assaults in 2019, the biggest increase across military branches. And those cases are vastly under reported.

Nick:

Yeah, it's worth noting that outreach and inclusions in various occupations and billets within the military, aren't going to fix every problem related to being a woman in the armed services. And that may not be what this episode is about. We're talking about more feel good inclusion, and representation, and role models, but it's worth noting that there are a lot of problems.

Emily:

And one recruitment advertisement ahead of one bad-ass action movie isn't going to eradicate a centuries old culture of toxic masculinity in the military.

Musical transition

Emily:

So, some of my favorite things that I rarely pick up on when I watch, sort of, comic- based movies are all the Easter eggs that are usually not there for me, but in Captain Marvel, they do spend a little bit of time in a place called Pancho's Bar. And this is a place that hearkens back to some of the early female aviators.

Matt:

If you've seen the movie The Right Stuff, Pancho's is also the bar where all of the test pilots from Edwards Air Force Base hang out and drink.

Emily:

And I've seen the movie The Right Stuff many times, it's one of my all time favorite movies. And it wasn't until we did our episode on the Ninety-Nines that I figured out who the bartender was in The Right Stuff, Pancho Barnes, super famous legend. And I do believe super famous legend qualifies for Pancho Barnes. She needs both of those accolades.

Nick:

Yeah. I would back up that. I would second super famous legend.

Matt:

Yeah. I think as a bartender, as well as as a pilot.

Movie Clip-The Right Stuff

Girl in Bar:

Hey, Poncho? I was looking at the pictures on your wall, and I was wondering how come a fancy pilot like Slick over there don't have his picture up there? What do you have to do to get your picture up there anyway?

Pancho Barnes (Kim Stanley):

You have to die, sweetie.

Nick:

Another thing that's in Captain Marvel, if you look closely enough, is a burning piano. And it turns out that burning pianos are connected with military pilots going back all the way to World War II. In this case, it was included as a tribute to a pilot who had been involved with the production of the film, but then passed away before the film was complete.

Matt:

And one other Easter egg in this film is the cat. You might not think that's an obvious Easter egg, but you know, this harmless looking little cat that eventually answers the question of why Nick Fury wears an eyepatch-

Movie Clip-Captain Marvel

Nick Fury (Samuel L. Jackson):

*How are you? Oh, my goodness just look at you! Aren't you the cutest little thing? Aren't you (fades out)
cat meows

Matt:

Is actually named Goose, which is the name, of course, of the co-pilot in Top Gun.

Nick:

Yeah. We promised you spoilers and it's the pilot who dies in Top Gun.

Matt:

I didn't say the pilot who dies.

Nick:

No, no, no. I was saying.

Matt:

You're spoiling it.

Emily:

Spoiler alert.

Nick:

I was saying, we promised you guys spoilers and Goose dies, heads up. Although, we did spoil that in the season one Episode.

Matt:

There you go. And Nick Fury loses an eye.

Emily:

Nick Fury loses an eye.

Movie Clip-Captain Marvel

Nick Fury (Samuel L. Jackson):

I will neither confirm nor deny the facts of that story.

Agent Coulson (Clark Gregg)

Understood.

Exit Music in and under

Emily:

That's it for this episode of AirSpace. AirSpace is from the Smithsonian's National Air and Space Museum. You can follow us on Twitter or Instagram @AirSpacePod. AirSpace is produced by Katie Maurier and Jennifer Weingart, mixed by Tarik Fouda. Special thanks to Andrew Fletcher. Distributed by PRX.

Exit music under and out

Matt:

We're going to make you go and play Beach Volleyball for two hours straight as your punishment.

Nick:

I hear that movie actually caused a huge spike in recruitment for men's beach volleyball teams.

Matt:

Yeah. A huge spike in spiking in men's volleyball.

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