

AIR WAR COLLEGE

AIR UNIVERSITY

A STRATEGY TO INCREASE UNITED STATES AIR FORCE
FIGHTER PILOT RETENTION AND MORALE

LEGENDARY ACE ROBIN OLDS ON THE SILVER SCREEN

by

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Biography

Lieutenant Colonel Chad A. Balettie is assigned to the Air War College, Air University, Maxwell AFB, AL. Previous to this assignment he was the Headquarters Air Force, A5R-C Air Superiority Division Chief, responsible for developing, documenting, and coordinating Air Superiority and Force Application requirements for all fighter platforms, advanced platforms, and advanced air and surface munitions.

Lieutenant Colonel Balettie received his commission in 1995 from the United States Air Force Academy. He completed Aircraft Maintenance Officer School at Sheppard AFB, TX in 1995 and served as a maintenance officer for six years. In 2002, he completed Joint Specialized Undergraduate Pilot Training at Vance AFB, OK followed by A-10 training at Davis-Monthan AFB, AZ.

As a maintenance officer, Lieutenant Colonel Balettie supported Operation Allied Force from Camp Darby, Italy. As a pilot, he has flown with the 81st Fighter Squadron, Spangdahlem AB, Germany, the 358th Fighter Squadron, Davis-Monthan AFB, and the 25th Fighter Squadron, Osan Air Base, Republic of Korea. He has deployed several times in support of Operations Enduring Freedom and Iraqi Freedom, flying a total of 91 combat missions.

Prior to his Air Staff assignment, Lieutenant Colonel Balettie was assigned as the Commander, 51st Operations Support Squadron, Osan Air Base, Republic of Korea.

Abstract

The United States Air Force currently faces several complex and compounding challenges. To address these issues the Air Force requires a significant increase in funding and a shift in resource prioritization, both of which will take a considerable amount of time. These challenges have manifested in reduced warfighter readiness which has resulted in low morale and reduced fighter pilot retention.

As a potential short-term and low-cost solution to increase fighter pilot morale, the Air Force should consider approaching the motion picture industry to produce a film about the life of Legendary Ace Robin Olds. This approach could capture his heroic efforts and the Air Force's warrior spirit providing inspiration to generations of air warriors.

The Air Force has a history of teaming with Hollywood during times of crisis such as in WWII and the Cold War. Current conditions do not allow quick solutions and therefore a minimal cost option must be investigated. Teaming with film producers is a valid way to promote the history of the Air Force, shaping a positive public image, and celebrating a heroic and iconic Air Force hero. Joseph Campbell's monomyth formula is well suited for the heroic life of Robin Olds. The result could be a viable stop-gap in low morale and retention until budgets stabilize and readiness rates improve.

Introduction

The United States Air Force faces several complex and compounding issues. To address these challenges, the service requires a significant increase in funding and a shift in resource prioritization, both of which will take a considerable amount of time. These challenges tend to have a negative effect on morale. As a solution to increase Air Force warrior morale, the Air Force should consider approaching the motion picture industry to produce a film about the life of Legendary Ace Brigadier General Robin Olds. This approach could capture his heroic warrior spirit and serve as an inspiration to generations of Air Force warriors.

This paper uses a five-part approach. First, it describes the complex challenges the Air Force faces due to funding prioritization resulting in a low morale and low retention. Second, this essay examines Robin Olds's heroic story and suggests the Air Force should consider soliciting assistance from Hollywood to make a film about his life as a boost to fighter pilot morale. Next, this paper details past Hollywood films that benefited the Air Force and proposes a framework to adapt Olds's story into a film using Joseph Campbell's monomyth heroic formula. The fourth section examines the feasibility of approaching Hollywood to produce a heroic film and the risks of not pursuing a low-cost and expedient solution to increase warrior morale. The last section of this paper offers additional recommendations to capitalize on the positive morale after the film's release.

It is unlikely the Air Force will receive required funding to meet all its requirements in the next decade. Therefore, new solutions must be inexpensive and able to implement quickly. The Air Force has many heroes, but one stands tall as an iconic warrior. Celebrating Robin Olds's life animates Air Force heritage and invites comparison with similar frustrations shared by the service today.

Thesis

This research paper purposes a solution to increase Air Force fighter pilot morale and retention within current funding and time constraints. The Air Force should consider approaching the motion picture industry to produce a film about the life of Legendary Ace Robin Olds as a stop gap measure.

Air Force Dilemma

This section examines the Air Force's budget challenges that manifest in decreased readiness, low warrior morale, and reduced fighter pilot retention. Recent budget declines have driven hard choices between readiness and modernization. After slashing deep into modernization funds, readiness has been the next available target. When readiness declines, low morale naturally follows. These issues further compound into the decline of effectiveness due to poor decisions by inexperienced people. This perpetuates a downward cycle of even lower morale, which drives increased separations, resulting in even less experienced personnel, which results in a cascading decline of morale and mission effectiveness. Unfortunately, this cycle has manifested in the Air Force fighter pilot community.

The current Air Force dilemma encompasses a resource constrained environment driving reduced readiness, morale, and retention. These complex challenges often overlap and no viable solutions exist because the current path is unaffordable and unsustainable yet operational tempo increases due to uncontrollable world events.¹ This "do more with less" situation creates an environment that has negatively affected morale. Additionally, the Air Force's five mission sets, Air Superiority, Intelligence Surveillance and Reconnaissance, Global Mobility, Global Strike, and Command and Control have not changed since the inception of the Air Force in 1947.² However, technology has changed over time, and these missions are now increasingly expensive.

The 2014 Budget Control Act implemented draconian spending cuts across the Department of Defense and have placed the Air Force in a situation where it can no longer accomplish its mission. As the Chief of Staff of the Air Force (CSAF), General Mark Welsh, stated before the Senate Armed Service Committee (SASC) in 2015, the effects of the Budget Control Act “make it impossible for us to meet the operational requirements of the Defense Strategic Guidance.”³ The Air Force’s dilemma is that it is simply over tasked and underfunded. General Welsh emphasized this point in his 2015 congressional testimony saying, “Today’s Air Force is the smallest and oldest it has ever been...and a high operational tempo, paired with a constrained and uncertain budget environment, only accelerates this trend. The Nation must invest in new technologies, in training, infrastructure, and personnel, if it intends to continue operating as a global superpower.”⁴ Also, the Air Force operates in a complex environment that is difficult to explain and understand which compounds its challenge. To highlight the complexities of airpower, distance is not measured in miles, but rather in time due to the speed and range of its platforms and weapons effects. Further compounding the situation, the Air Force is a victim of its overwhelming success which has shifted the perception that US air dominance is assumed rather than achieved and maintained. As Secretary of Defense Robert Gates said in 2011, “There hasn’t been a U.S. Air Force airplane lost in air combat in nearly 40 years or an American soldier attacked by enemy aircraft since Korea.”⁵ America no longer has a reason to desire air supremacy, it already has it. However, the US has forgotten that the cost is significant.

Decreased readiness affects the morale of the fighting unit, which if left unchecked can manifest in further decreased retention. As the CSAF stated to the SASC, “less than half of our combat-coded units are fully combat capable.”⁶ It bears worth repeating; over half of the combat units, mostly made up of fighter squadrons are not ready to do their job. Pilots must continually

hone perishable flying skills to maintain mission readiness. In addition to their diminished readiness, there is also a psychological effect. If fighter pilots are not allowed to do their job, morale will continue to erode which can drive decisions to separate from the service. Air Force fighter pilot retention is forecast to decline.⁷

There is significant strain on the system because the Air Force is short 520 fighter pilots.⁸ Declining retention rates could not be at a worse time due to upcoming additive F-35 squadrons which are forecast to exacerbate the shortage by an additional 333 pilots by 2022.⁹ Additionally, the US Airline industry is hiring an estimated 13,000 pilots over the next four years due to Federal Aviation Administration mandated retirements.¹⁰ This draw will entice pilots to separate to increase their standard of living while striving to decrease their professional frustration.

False claims point toward mismanaged personnel policy and increased airline hiring as the root causes of the pilot shortage. It is possible both claims may contribute to the shortage, however, they are far from definitive because neither the airlines nor policy discriminates between fighter and mobility pilots. It is difficult to dispute that combat aviators are separating at a greater rate than other pilot career fields because the Air Force mobility community is overmanned by approximately 800 pilots.¹¹ One indicator is the Air Crew Incentive Pay (ACIP) program, commonly referred to as the 'pilot bonus,' which pays individuals in specific career fields to sign-on for an additional commitment once they have completed their initial 10-year commitment. The current fighter pilot ACIP acceptance rate is 47 percent, compared to 63 percent in 2013.¹²

Due to the fighter pilot shortage, Air Force Personnel Center policy mandates that only top individuals can compete for a staff assignment. Therefore, half of the staff billets which require fighter pilot expertise are left unfilled due to the Air Force Rated Staff Allocation Plan

which limits fighter pilot staff manning to 50 percent.¹³ As a result, staff work which would normally be completed by a fighter pilot is either being lumped onto the pilot filling the seat of two to three people, completed by someone without the requisite skill set, or worse, not being accomplished at all. This methodology drives poor decisions and policies that result in increased warrior frustration which directly feeds increased separations. This downward spiral self-perpetuates into lower morale and further separations.

Additionally, policy limits fighter pilot broadening opportunities to mentor aspiring officer candidates. The three Air Force commissioning sources are the US Air Force Academy (USAFA), Officer Training School, and the Reserve Officer Training Corps. Few fighter pilots have the opportunity to participate in the education of cadets which reduces combat fighter pilot exposure to aspiring pilots. This lack of exposure is significant because the Air Force has a very small percentage of officers specifically trained for combat operations compared to other services. Fighter pilots make up the bulk of the Air Force's offensive warriors yet they are only 3.8 percent of the entire officer corps.^{14, 15}

Unlike the US Army, the Air Force does not categorize its force structure into Combat Arms, Combat Support, and Combat Service Support.¹⁶ Rather it designates its officers as Line, Medical or Dental, Biomedical Sciences Corps, Medical Service Corps, Nurse Corps, Chaplain, and Judge Advocate (Lawyer), which translates more broadly into four categories: Line, Medical, Chaplain, and Lawyer.¹⁷ The implication is that all Line officers are the same which is a gross and dangerous overgeneralization. When individuals untrained in the art of aerial combat make decisions about warriors and combat platforms, the results are unhealthy and potentially dangerous. For example, when untrained personnel assume they understand the complexities of air battle, despite their lack of requisite experience, the results can exacerbate frustrations and

manifest in low warrior morale, which can drive increased separations. Further, when trained and experienced warriors separate, decisions are referred to unqualified people who can often make decisions that are a detriment to combat mission effectiveness. These disadvantages put lives at risk because they operate in harm's way.

Clearly the Air Force has significant challenges and limited resources. A different low-cost approach is required to help alleviate the pressures of decreased budgets and marginal readiness which result in decreased warrior morale and increased separations. A change in the momentum is required to stem the tide of eroding combat expertise. A potential approach is to promote the Air Force's rich combat heritage while celebrating a real-life Air Force hero.

Robin Olds Morale Boost

In order to retain warriors and recruit quality people, the Air Force should consider soliciting assistance from Hollywood to make a film about the life of Brigadier General Robin Olds. Robin Olds is revered in the Air Force fighter pilot community because he faced similar frustration throughout his career but overcame bureaucracy and raised morale and combat effectiveness as a warrior leader in Vietnam. This section of the paper first describes the highlights of Olds's life which parallels the evolution of airpower then it examines his relevance which serves to depict him as an inspirational, heroic leader, and warrior.

Robin Olds developed a lifelong strategy to make a difference in the Air Force. Additionally, he directly contributed to the evolution of US airpower during the unique span of his military career. Similar to the style of the movie *Forrest Gump*, Olds provides a front row seat and perspective of many formative moments in the history of the Air Force. His story spans several decades from his early childhood in the 1920s through his retirement in 1973.¹⁸ His mother died at an early age, and he was raised around the Army Air Corps because his father was

a pilot in WWI and later an aide to Brigadier General Billy Mitchell; who is often referred to as the father of the Air Force.¹⁹ Olds's father and other founders of the Air Force were Robin's main influence while growing up and listening to heroic war stories.²⁰ This propelled him to enter West Point and graduate in 1943, during which his dying father told him that he learned something every time he flew and to "Never, ever think you know it all."²¹ Olds took this lesson to the next level and applied it to every aspect of his career.

After graduating from West Point, Olds became a fighter pilot and entered WWII. His combat experience was a huge factor in shaping his leadership style and perspective. During the war, he was airborne and perched above the landing at Normandy performing armed overwatch for the D-Day invasion.²² Similar experiences shaped his drive on a personal level but later matured his motivation to focus on the Air Force's potential. WWII culminated with his selection as a Squadron Commander with the rank of Major.²³

Olds then shaped the first fighter jet unit while his aggressive personality and attitude manifested in frustration toward the Air Force as an institution.²⁴ While stationed in California he helped form the first Air Force aerial demonstration team, one that later became the Air Force Thunderbirds, which assisted in his introduction to a movie star named Ella Raines, who eventually became his wife.^{25, 26} Despite volunteering for combat duty in Korea, he was not allowed to participate in the war. Subsequently, he worked through several staff assignments which allowed him an inside view of the Pentagon's deterrence strategy during the Cold War.²⁷

Olds's frustration with Headquarters Air Force further molded his drive. He often attempted to overcome the Air Staff's notion that airpower only had a nuclear mission and their refusal to acknowledge the potential for any future conventional application in war.²⁸ While working in the Pentagon, he was once told to dismiss the notion of conventional weapons

training and employment because the Air Force “would never fight a conventional war again.”²⁹ Irritated by this collective notion, he was emboldened to convince his service of the error of their view, which fueled his passion for mission effectiveness. Then, at the age of 33, he was promoted to Colonel and selected to lead a Fighter Group and later a Wing in England.³⁰ Olds experienced the apex of his career in Vietnam. Shortly after his arrival, he knew he must earn the right to lead his men in combat. He then set out to be not only the best fighter pilot, but also the best leader for his Wing. Simply put, he was driven to be the most competent leader and warrior.³¹ By the time Olds took command of the 8th Tactical Fighter Wing on 30 Sept 1966, Vietnam was already an unpopular war.^{32, 33} His Wing was affected by this crisis, and it manifested in poor mission effectiveness and low morale.³⁴ However, Olds was convinced that he could improve both. His leadership was infectious and inspired camaraderie. Shortly after taking command he conceptualized Operation Bolo, the largest air-to-air battle of the Vietnam War.³⁵ During Operation Bolo, Olds and his Wing destroyed nearly half of the North Vietnamese MiG-21 fleet.^{36, 37, 38}

After his fourth MiG kill, Olds was encouraged by higher-ups to become the first Ace of the Vietnam War. However, becoming an Ace would result in his removal from command and combat due to the publicity attached to the title. Olds was not about to leave his men, and in spite of orders he continued to fly combat missions. He “deliberately chose not to shoot down number five” and had at least nine more opportunities to shoot down enemy fighters. Instead, each time after setting up the bandit, he moved aside and let his wingman take the kill which allowed him to continue to lead in Vietnam. The pre-Bolo crisis of poor mission performance and low morale was cast aside for an effective warfighting team which continually strived for improvement until his last day in command.³⁹ As John Quincy Adams said, “If your actions inspire others to dream

more, learn more, do more and become more, you are a leader."⁴⁰ The turn-around of his Wing possibly makes him the most relevant Air Force senior leader during the Vietnam War.

Success during Bolo and Vietnam resulted in his promotion to Brigadier General and selection as Commandant of Cadets at the USAFA.⁴¹ In 1968, cadets faced going to pilot training after graduation and onward to the Vietnam War. They understood the chance of getting shot down and fate as killed in action or as POWs for a war the US public did not want or appreciate. These hard facts were causal to their low morale. However, they were well aware of Olds's results in Vietnam. His reputation was an inspiration to the cadet wing, half of which hung his picture in their rooms.⁴²

Olds's competence as a credible pilot and leader is difficult to dispute. His warfighting skill was displayed by his confirmed aerial victories in both WWII and Vietnam as an Air Force triple ace, the first and only with kills in both wars.⁴³ Olds' story is engaging because rather than being shaped by the events during his career, he shaped the history of the Air Force. Today's warriors can identify with Olds based on his consistent frustration with Air Force bureaucracy. He never gave up and was a relentless advocate for his people and better training, better equipment, and increased combat mission effectiveness. His dissent was most notable after Operation Bolo's success. In silent protest of Vietnam, he grew an out of regulation mustache as a visible yet silent protest of the strategy of the war, a clear signal to all general officers and politicians directing the war.⁴⁴ Unlike others who grew mustaches, when Olds returned home, he was told to remove it by the CSAF.⁴⁵ As potentially one of the most successful leaders in Vietnam, the legend of Robin Olds is still applicable and could prove profitable for Hollywood and the Air Force by telling his heroic life story through a movie.

Adaptation of a Heroic Warrior into Film

Robin Olds led an extraordinary life. Both the film industry and the Air Force could collaborate on a joint venture for mutual benefit to share his unique story. This is not a new idea, but it has been almost 20 years since a major motion film has been made about Air Force warriors. This section details the benefits of past Hollywood films about the Air Force, then it proposes a framework to adapt Robin Olds's heroic warrior life into an engaging and realistic film by using Joseph Campbell's monomyth heroic formula.

The film industry has an intertwined history with the military. The first movies were silent prior to WWI. However, in 1926 a major film was made that helped inspire and motivate the Airmen who would form the Air Force as a separate service 21 years later.⁴⁶ *Wings* was the first motion picture to capture an extensive amount of real aerial footage.⁴⁷ The film's enormous budget of \$2 million was a risk, but it paid off by winning two Academy Awards.⁴⁸ This inspirational silent-film captured the heroic airborne feats of WWI and inspired a generation of aviators including Robin Olds.⁴⁹

During WWII, military films were a popular way to tell the story on the battlefield, but also a way to build support for the war effort. The Army Air Corps, and later the Air Force, continued the tradition of gaining popular public support, by not only entertaining audiences, but also educating the public on this new form of warfare. This set the precedent for the Air Force's Strategic Air Command (SAC) to use movies to spread their message and ensure the public was aware of national security issues pertaining to nuclear weapons. This effort both informed the public and helped calm fears of nuclear hysteria.⁵⁰ General Curtis LeMay, embraced this practice through the 1960s, first as the SAC Commander, and then as the CSAF, courting Hollywood to make films such as *Strategic Air Command*, *Bombers B-52*, and *A Gathering of Eagles*.⁵¹

The most recent example of a military film benefiting the Air Force is *Top Gun*, released in 1986. Although this was a movie about Naval Aviation, it had a huge impact on the Air Force, similar to *Wings* for the current generation.⁵² The time is ripe to dust off the lessons of *Wings* and *Top Gun*. A new film about a larger than life Air Force legendary and heroic warrior would have an inspirational effect on past, present, and future Air Force warriors.

Joseph Campbell's monomyth heroic storytelling method is an avenue to approach this endeavor. Campbell's work, *The Hero With a Thousand Faces*, identifies a common trend or theme present in heroic stories across cultures because they all follow a similar methodology.⁵³ A screenplay could use Campbell's monomyth approach to adapt Robin Olds' life into a heroic movie. However, unlike most heroic mythical tales of fiction, Olds's rare true-life adventure sets his story apart from others.

Campbell's monomyth model in the "The Adventure of the Hero" contains 17 stages and three traditional acts: the departure, initiation, and return.^{54, 55} Other authors such as Christopher Vogler have modified Campbell's monomyth formula into 12 stages.⁵⁶ Table 1 below compares both models.

3 Act Structure	Joseph Campbell's <i>Hero With A Thousand Faces</i>	Christopher Vogler's <i>The Writer's Journey: Mythical Structure for Writers</i>
Act I: Departure Situation Back Story Character Intro 1 st Turning Point	1. The Call to Adventure 2. Refusal of the Call 3. Supernatural Aid 4. The Crossing of the First Threshold 5. The Belly of the Whale	1. Ordinary World 2. Call to Adventure 3. Refusal of the Call 4. Meeting with the Mentor 5. Crossing the First Threshold
Act II: Initiation Character Development Plot Development Complications Crisis 2 nd Turning Point	6. The Road of Trials 7. The Meeting with the Goddess 8. Woman as the Temptress 9. Atonement with the Father 10. Apotheosis 11. The Ultimate Boon	6. Tests, Allies, Enemies 7. Approach to the Inmost Cave 8. The Ordeal 9. Reward
Act III: Return Conflict Climax Conclusion	12. Refusal of the Return 13. The Magic Flight 14. Rescue from Without 15. The Crossing of the Return Threshold 16. Master of the Two Worlds 17. Freedom to Live	10. The Road Back 11. The Resurrection 12. Return with the Elixir

Table 1: Campbell & Vogler 3 Act Structure^{57, 58}

Many stories and films follow this basic structure. An example by Kristen Brennan applies Campbell's heroic monomyth structure to *Star Wars* and *The Matrix* as illustrated in Table 2. According to Douglas Mann, "*Star Wars*' creator George Lucas was an admirer of Joseph Campbell, and consciously patterned the *Star Wars* saga on the Hero's Journey. This use of a universal archetype of myth helps explain why *Star Wars* was so popular since it appealed to our unconscious patterns of thought."⁵⁹

Campbell	Star Wars	The Matrix
I: Departure		
The call to adventure	Princess Leia's message	"Follow the white rabbit"
Refusal of the call	Must help with the harvest	Neo won't climb out window
Supernatural aid	Obi-wan rescues Luke from sandpeople	Trinity extracts the "bug" from Neo
Crossing the first threshold	Escaping Tatooine	Neo is taken out of the Matrix for the first time
The belly of the whale	Trash compactor	Torture room
II: Initiation		
The road of trials	Lightsaber practice	Sparring with Morpheus
The meeting with the goddess	Princess Leia (wears white, in earlier scripts was a "sister" of a mystic order)	The Oracle
Temptation away from the true path ¹	Luke is tempted by the Dark Side	Cypher (the failed messiah) is tempted by the world of comfortable illusions
Atonement with the Father	Darth and Luke reconcile	Neo rescues and comes to agree (that he's The One) with his father-figure, Morpheus
Apotheosis (becoming god-like)	Luke becomes a Jedi	Neo becomes The One
The ultimate boon	Death Star destroyed	Humanity's salvation now within reach
III: Return		
Refusal of the return	"Luke, come on!" Luke wants to stay to avenge Obi-Wan	Neo fights agent instead of running
The magic flight	Millennium Falcon	"Jacking in"
Rescue from without	Han saves Luke from Darth	Trinity saves Neo from agents
Crossing the return threshold	Millennium Falcon destroys pursuing TIE fighters	Neo fights Agent Smith
Master of the two worlds	Victory ceremony	Neo's declares victory over machines in final phone call
Freedom to live	Rebellion is victorious over Empire	Humans are victorious over machines

Table 2: Campbell Monomyth Structure in *Star Wars* and *The Matrix*⁶⁰

Similar to *Star Wars Episode V: The Empire Strikes Back*, *Top Gun* also follows the same plot sequence and monomyth model. The characters, places, and events are interchangeable as

noted by Kal Bashir in Figure 1.

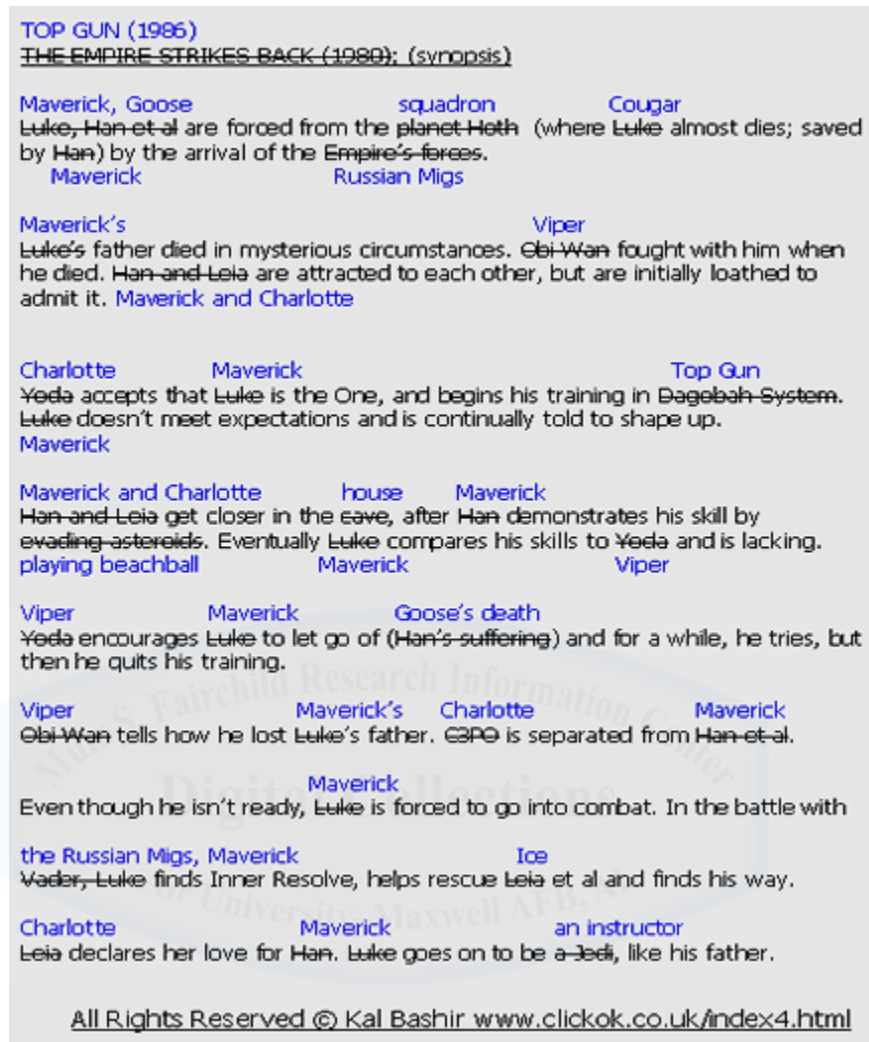


Figure 1: *Star Wars & Top Gun Monomyth Comparison*⁶¹

The obvious difference between Robin Olds and heroes such as Luke Skywalker, Neo, and Maverick is that Olds was a real person compared to purely fictitious characters. Olds' legendary life and adventures could be easily adapted into a major motion film. Audiences love a heroic story and even more so when the story is true. The elements of both Campbell's and Volger's heroic structure are well represented in Robin Olds' real life.

Zachary Hamby offers several tools to assist writing students with creating stories in the heroic genre. Hamby's template, "Finding a Hero's Journey," allows writers to "identify the

various stages of the Hero's Journey in a story from a film, video game, or novel of their own choosing.”⁶² Table 3 provides a simple application of Hamby’s template through an analysis of Olds’ life journey.

The Hero	Robin Olds with heroic fighter pilot qualities
The Quest	Fly in Combat
Ordinary World	Young Robin Olds wants to escape and join the military
Call to Adventure, Herald	World War II
Mentor	Olds’s father, commanders, Hub Zemke and General Carl Spaatz
Talisman	Special ability in aerial combat, his airplane(s), his ‘lucky’ socks
Threshold Guardian	Go to combat: first in WWII, later in Vietnam
Allies	Fellow likeminded warriors
Shadow	Antagonist or force, SAC minded Air Force
Tests	Assignments, promotions, staff positions in the Pentagon
Supreme Ordeal	Lead men in combat—as a Wing Commander in Vietnam
Reward	Validation of successful Combat Leadership
Wisdom	Leading men successfully is the most important skill for a warrior

Table 3: Adaptation of Olds as a Hero⁶³

Robin Olds’s life is a perfect fit into either Joseph Campbell’s monomyth or Christopher Vogler’s mythic blueprint structure. More importantly, this solution is a short-term option that is low-cost and low-risk for both the Air Force and Hollywood.

Feasibility and Risk

A feature film based on the heroic life of Robin Olds has several benefits and provides a low-cost solution for the Air Force’s dilemma. Additionally, this film could serve as a catalyst for other positive effects, such as recruiting a talented pool of officer candidates who will be the next generation of Air Force warriors. Further, this film would provide positive publicity for the Air Force. This section examines the feasibility of this approach in addition to the risks of continued low warrior morale. The Air Force would be well served to investigate this solution to increase fighter pilot morale and retention.

To help examine the benefits of an Air Force film about Robin Olds, it is important to

discuss its feasibility. The Air Force has shifted its focus from promoting major motion films solely about the Air Force, as it did in the days of SAC, to a supporting role in major action movies such as *Transformers*, *Iron Man*, *Terminator Salvation*, and *Green Lantern*. Current audiences are conditioned to seeing the Air Force on the big screen in a positive supporting role which offers an opportunity for a successful film about an Air Force hero. Additionally, computer generated imagery (CGI) allows recreating major battle scenes of WWII and Vietnam which would be difficult based on the limited availability of vintage aircraft. CGI can also significantly reduce the overhead and total cost of making a major combat aviation film.

Burdening the US taxpayers, via the Air Force, with the cost of making a film may have worked well in the past and paid dividends, but it is now unrealistic. Rather than concentrating on the funding structure of the past, other successful lessons of military movies can entice Hollywood to produce an Air Force film. It can be argued that audiences love a winner, and American audiences love to see America as a winner. The history of the Air Force is filled with American success which Robin Olds help create. Olds was a successful leader, warrior, and hero who audiences can relate to due to his grit, struggle, and perseverance to win.

In addition to feasibility, another factor to consider is the risk of continued low warrior morale. If untreated, the core of the Air Force's warfighting capability will continue to erode. The challenge is acting prior to passing an undefined tipping point which is only evident after the opportunity has past. Once past the point of no return, it takes decades to restore the skills and proficiency required to transform from a hollow force to a credible fighting entity.

There are several counter arguments to the hollow-force threat, such as the long standing fighter pilot shortage and that airpower is moving away from manned aircraft.⁶⁴ Both of these arguments are flawed. First, it is true the shortage is nothing new, but this fails to take into

account the forecast of additional requirements by the F-35 and the bow wave of mandatory retirements approaching from the airline industry. More importantly with only 3.8 percent of the officer corps trained in the art of aerial combat, the time to build and the recoup diminished capacity and expertise is significant. Current fighter pilot production falls short of the required sustainment goal by 18 percent. Unfortunately, this gap is forecast to expand in 2016 to a 20 percent shortfall.⁶⁵ This is a significant challenge when combined with the two-year lead time to produce an inexperienced fighter pilot. Conversely to replace the experienced fighter pilots exiting the service after their 10-year commitment, it requires a decade and millions of US taxpayer dollars. The shortfall's continued existence contributes to a huge combat capability risk.

The unmanned aircraft argument is also riddled with holes. While it is true the Air Force's Remotely Piloted Aircraft (RPA) community is now larger than any manned aircraft community, it is stabilizing.⁶⁶ RPA capability and capacity will be unable to match or replace fighter technology for 20 to 30 years based on the current sluggish Department of Defense Acquisition System. This is in addition to the funding challenges described in the first section of this paper. These counterpoints do not hold water and rather clarify the risks to the combat capability of the Air Force.

Recommendations

A viable low-cost and expedient solution is required to attack low warrior morale in order to counter the fighter pilot retention challenge.

- **First recommendation:** The Air Force should engage the film industry to investigate and scope the potential for an action film on the heroic life of Robin Olds.
- **Second recommendation:** In conjunction with film production, Headquarters Air

Force, A3 has produced a decision quality product comprised of 30 recommendations to redesign the Fighter Pilot enterprise.⁶⁷ Due to the cost and time to implement the recommendations, the Air Force should internally acknowledge the severity of the issue and announce a combined film and fighter enterprise redesign strategy.

Considering the Air Force's limited resources across its five technological and expensive mission sets, attacking low morale is required to combat the fighter pilot shortfall.

Conclusion

The Air Force's low fighter pilot morale problem is not new, but it is real. Based on low fighter pilot ACIP acceptance and near-term increased US airline hiring expectations, retention rates could further decrease. However, the additional near-term additive F-35 fighter pilot requirements could spell disaster not only for the Air Force but could have negative consequences for US National Security. It is understandable that declining budgets drive hard choices. However, these choices then manifest into low readiness rates, and low morale naturally follows resulting in quality people separating from the service.

The Air Force has a history of teaming with Hollywood during times of crisis, in WWII and the Cold War. Current conditions do not allow quick solutions and therefore a minimal cost option must be investigated. Teaming with film producers is a valid way to promote the history of the Air Force, shaping a positive public image and celebrating a heroic and iconic Air Force hero. Joseph Campbell's monomyth formula is well suited to the heroic life of Robin Olds. The result could be a viable stop-gap until budgets stabilize and readiness rates improve.

The timing of the decision is also important. Interestingly, the purported upcoming release of *Top Gun 2*, which would bring Maverick back to the big screen, offers the Air Force

an opportunity to capitalize on the US Navy's past success once again. As a final thought, Stephan Wilkinson once proposed the idea of pitching Olds's life story to Hollywood, but he dismissed the suggestion. He wrote that a film about a "maverick, a drinker, a mean sonofabitch in a bar fight" who was an All-American football star, triple-ace fighter pilot, and married a movie star would be too far-fetched to believe.⁶⁸ However, on the other hand, it is surprising what people will believe and, more importantly, what they are willing to pay for a top billed movie, especially one that honors a revered fighter pilot who helped shape the Air Force. As the CSAF said after Robin Olds died in 2010, "His influence upon who we are as an Air Force today can hardly be overstated."⁶⁹



Notes

- ¹ AU Research Discussion, SOS Polifka Auditorium, 28 Aug 15.
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