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The Reality-Challenged Action of 'Top Gun: Maverick' Is Enjoyably Ludicrous

Eric Tegler Contributor 

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Irascible Naval aviator, Pete "Maverick" Mitchell zooms up through a tight line-abreast Super Hornet ... [+]

PARAMOUNT PICTURES OFFICIAL TRAILER

"Top Gun: Maverick" will hit the big screen in late May. The sequel to the classic "Top Gun" retains Tom Cruise and, according to military savvy reviewers, the necessity to suspend your disbelief — maybe even more than with the 1986 original.

Paramount PARA -4.7% held a debut screening of the movie late last month and early reviews were [surprisingly positive](#). Of course, mainstream movie critics tend to view feature films as creative vehicles in which real-world detail ranks second (or third or tenth) to a compelling story. But among their number at the screening were a few knowledgeable reviewers including Alex Hollings, a former Marine and editor in chief of military news site [Sandboxx.us](#).

"I'll be honest with you," Hollings quips. "The movie is ludicrous but it was a good time."

Many a door-slammng farce has been characterized as a good time and for "Top Gun: Maverick" the fluff starts with the storyline.

The Plot

Trouble is brewing again in the Middle East in this flick whose premise is that the U.S. needs to take out an Iranian nuclear facility that is heavily defended by non-specific surface-to-air missiles and aircraft. The threat of Iranian nuclear weapons and a mission to take them out with fighters was possibly inspired by [Israel's 1981 airstrike](#) on Iraq's Osirak nuclear research reactor using F-15s and F-16s to partially destroy the facility.

Why Captain Pete "Maverick" Mitchell and a crew of his own Top Gun-trained pilots in F/A-18 Super Hornets were assigned this daunting task rather than using stealthy 5th generation aircraft like Navy F-35Cs or USAF F-35As/F-22's or B-2s simply isn't explained. Nor are the possibilities of using cruise missiles or even a cyber exploit like the one Israel used to attack Iran's Natanz nuclear site in 2020 raised.

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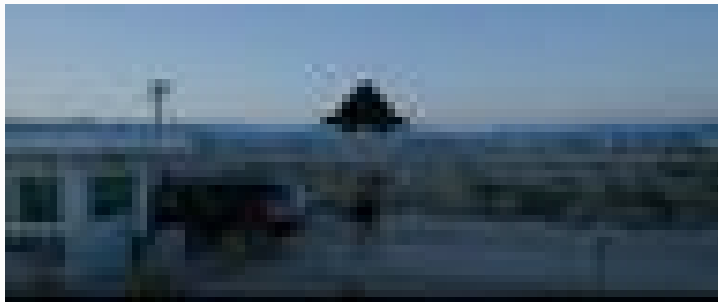
By [Amy Danise](#) Editor



"It's one of the least realistic parts of the movie," Hollings says. In any case, the balance of the film sees Maverick train up and eventually lead a cadre of young naval aviators, including the son (callsign Rooster) of his dear-departed Tomcat back-seater Goose, on this desperate mission.

Mind you, he gets the assignment *after* stealing an experimental hypersonic aircraft called "Darkstar." As the movie opens, Maverick is a Mojave, CA-based Navy test pilot flying in the Darkstar program which has been cancelled because Navy leadership thinks drones are the future, manned aircraft aren't viable, and because Darkstar has failed to achieve its goal of Mach 10 speed.

Justifiably peeved, Maverick hops in the hyper jet without approval and flies it to *beyond* Mach 10 to prove 'em wrong. In the process, Darkstar breaks up and Maverick somehow survives the ensuing high-speed holocaust - how we're not shown - and regains consciousness on the desert floor. He then walks to a nearby diner to use the phone. So, a pretty standard day really.



A screen-grab from a recent Top Gun: Maverick trailer hints at Lockheed Martin's SR-72 hypersonic ... [+]

PARAMOUNT PICTURES TOP GUN: MAVERICK

"It honestly makes for a pretty cool scene," Hollings admits. "The Mach 10 number makes it seem silly but it's a pretty realistic looking aircraft. The filmmakers

actually worked with Lockheed Martin's LMT +1.9% Skunk Works to build a full scale mock-up which seems to be based on Lockheed's [SR-72](#) reconnaissance/strike aircraft."

Instead of a career-ending stint in the brig for commandeering Darkstar, Maverick is rewarded (punished?) with the responsibility of training up a cadre of Super Hornet pilots to strike the nuke facility, finding a way to do so without getting them all torched before even entering enemy airspace.

Details Schmeetails

That enemy flies what appear to be Russia's vaunted Sukhoi Su-57 Felon 5th generation fighters which Moscow has conveniently supplied to Iran, a scenario perhaps now more plausible (if still remote) than when the movie was in production. Though the film never specifically references the Su-57 (it's just called a 5th generation fighter), it is presented as a dominating foe the Super Hornets must avoid at all costs for fear of getting smoked while other threats are generally left out of the equation.

"This is a pivot point for Maverick," Hollings affirms. "They really present it as there being no way to survive contact with an Su-57. Our only hope is to not engage them at all, just to get out of there before the Su-57s arrive."

Engage them they do. Hollings says there's no explanation of why the F/A-18E/F is a good choice to penetrate a GPS-denied environment populated with deadly Sukhois, Maverick just suggests it would be a "good choice" when asked.

The movie also presents Maverick and the Top Gunners as being in a San Diego setting similar to the 1980s movie where NAS Miramar provided the backdrop - never mind that the Navy's Fighter Weapons School (i.e. Top Gun) has been based at Naval Air Station (NAS) Fallon, Nevada, since 1996.

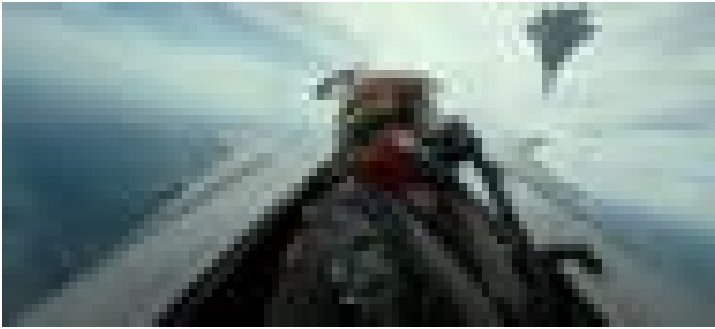
This smallish discrepancy is one of far too many to recount here but there are some notable eye-rollers worth highlighting. T.R. "Wombat" Matson, a former Navy Hornet pilot and author of *Treason Flight*, has not seen the entire feature but the film's trailers and some leaked clips raised his eyebrows.

Among the most notable action featured therein is a quick sequence in which Maverick sneaks up from below on a couple of the Super Hornet pilots in training for the strike. Flying in a semi-tight line-abreast formation, the pair are shocked into next Thursday (and hard diverging breaks) as Maverick zooms vertically between them in full afterburner. The Blue Angels, who also fly Super Hornets, don't perform such a maneuver in their choreographed routine, let alone in air combat training.

Neither has Wombat Matson. "Prior to being married," he jokes, "if I was at the bar talking about what I did for a living, I did this kind of stuff every day! In reality, we had a specific term for a maneuver like that. It's called either a fireball or a [career-ender]. If you don't hit the other two planes and everybody dies, when you land they're going to rip your wings off your chest."

“That scene as well as a number of others are all just to underline the fact that Maverick is capable of doing things with this aircraft that nobody else is physically able to do,” Hollings observes.

And he does. Upon seeing his fellow Super Hornet pilot, Rooster, about to get shot down as they strike the nuclear facility, Mav maneuvers his aircraft in between an in-flight Su-57 missile and Rooster’s airplane, absorbing the missile and ejecting.



Maverick just passes "the merge" with one of the bad guys' computer-generated 5th-generation Su-57s. ... [+] PARAMOUNT PICTURES TOP GUN: MAVERICK OFFICIAL TRAILER

“I would always, and still do, call myself as average a pilot as you can get,” Matson quips. “The ability to make that decision and execute it is far greater than anything I’ve ever done. This is a dogfight scenario where you’re already task-saturated. We’re on a 10-G ejection-stretch on that one. That’s pure big-screen drama!”

The drama continues as Rooster gets shot down, joining Maverick on the ground fleeing helicopters and reaching the Iranian Air Force base conveniently next to the nuclear site. It’s already been struck by a volley of Tomahawk cruise missiles, taking out the runway (why the Tomahawks weren’t used on the nuke site itself is boring detail).

There, they find an Iranian F-14A Tomcat in a hangar, manage to start it and takeoff on a taxiway. Maverick and Rooster use the Tomcat’s Vulcan cannon to make a guns-kill on a purportedly invincible Sukhoi. It’s just like the old days with Maverick and Goose - and it proves every F-14 pilot’s boast that the Tomcat was/is better than any Hornet, Super or not. “It gets absolutely bonkers,” Hollings laughs.

Matson, who’s been out of the Hornet for several years reckons he might be able to jump in one and get airborne without much problem. Getting a 70s vintage Iranian Tomcat, questionably maintained, going while under fire might be a bridge too far. “Finding a mission-capable, armed F-14 sitting in a hangar is kind of out there,” he chuckles.

But both Hollings and Matson think it doesn’t matter in the end.

“The real plot of the movie I would argue, despite the Top Gun training backdrop, is about Maverick having this really bad relationship with Goose’s son and working to resolve it,” Hollings affirms. “They just happen to be flying airplanes.”

Hollings adds that he doesn’t think the movie can have the same recruiting impact the original did given the vastly different national culture in 2022. It’s less than flattering portrayal of a Navy that manages to triumph despite dubious senior leadership and potentially second-place technology may have a ring to it these days.

Matson, who’s engaged with the Navy’s approval-authority for entertainment via his book, says its basic attitude is that, “As long as good prevails, that’s the message they want. It is a good message. A 10- to 16-year-old is going to miss the nuances but there’s still the impression that they could be that super hero. There’s still value in that.”

If “Top Gun: Maverick” is a ludicrous good time, as Hollings says, those in the know may well overlook its reality-challenged action but they’ll struggle. “If you’re

a mechanic, going to see 'The Fast & The Furious' will drive you nuts. If you're a naval aviator, the movie will probably frustrate you."

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