

Robert Young

What Happens Next – 06.19.2022

Larry Bernstein:

Rob, today we are going to discuss the influence that the movie Top Gun had on your generation of air force pilots. But before we really get into it, I want to hear about why you joined the air force and chose a career in aviation.

Robert Young: I had my private pilot's license, junior year of high school, long before some of my friends even had their driver's (laughs) license. I was involved in general aviation flying up at Hanscom Air Force Base, and we'd see Weekend Warriors. The first airplane I ever saw there was a C-5. I'm like, "Wow. Anybody who must fly this has got to be the best pilot in the world," and, three weeks later, a pair of F-16s pulled in, and, staring at these, just Ferraris. I was fascinated by the fighter jet and watching Top Gun fueled that idea that, "Wow, you want to fly fighters if you want to be a real pilot," That was transformative.

Larry Bernstein:

What was the reaction of the air force recruits to the release of Top Gun?

Robert Young: It had a pretty dramatic effect on a lot of people in terms of piquing their interest. It glamorized and made it look easy, right? That's the whole point of the movie was that it, "We're just going to show up, brief a little bit, fly some, and then hang out, have a barbecue, play some volleyball, and drive our motorcycles around base." Like, nothing could be further from the truth (laughs) that way.

Larry Bernstein:

What are you talking about?

Robert Young:

Top Gun, it just looked like, "Oh, this is the life, but nothing could be further from the truth in terms of daily life of a fighter pilot. Between my sophomore and junior year of college, I did an Air Force ROTC internship down at Homestead Air Force Base, and I got two rides in the backseat of an F-16.

It was 45 minutes of the most thrilling time ever. But the preparation and the work that went into just one mission was unbelievable. That's when I realized the contrast between (laughs) Top Gun movie and the reality of being a fighter pilot in the Air Force. We started our briefing at 0500. It was 12 hours of work for a 45-minute flight, and then the debrief itself was even longer. So, it's extraordinary what the reality of flying a fighter jet entail versus what was portrayed.

Larry Bernstein:

There are these debriefing scenes in both the original Top Gun as well as the new Maverick film. In Top Gun, Maverick's love interest played by Kelly McGillis aka Charlie analyzes

Maverick's flying performance in detail with the entire squadron. How real to life was that evaluation?

Robert Young:

In real life, it's extremely competitive, and there's an old adage that, "You don't win the flight, you win the debrief."

They'll send a 4-ship up of F-16s on a training mission, and they'll do a bombing run, and they'll score every single practice bomb hit to the target, and they will critique each other. It is as competitive as any environment you can imagine. In one debrief of this particular bombing run called a dive toss, and they go straight up, roll over, pull, roll in, and then drop their bomb, and pull out. So, it's almost like a roller coaster S-turn, and certain parameters have to be met, speed, altitude, and the more altitude you gain here, the more time you have to acquire your target.

I remember the debrief. He went up probably two or 300 feet too high that gave him more time to acquire the target. So, he might hit the target maybe three feet off when the others were outside the circle, and they'd critique and say, "Yeah, well, hey, slider, you broke the altitude. You went 300 feet higher. Of course, you had a better angle. So, we're not going to give you that," and then he'd go in there and go, "No, that's total horse shit."

I didn't go that high, and they would literally argue down to the foot. They would go back and look at the tape and prove each other wrong, and this went on for hours. This was a three-hour debrief where they nitpicked each other and competed down to the last bombing run for a score, and then whoever won the debrief basically won the day, and they'd start over and do the same thing the next day.

Larry Bernstein:

In sports and business, learning from past experiences is critical. Is this the case in the military as well?

Robert Young:

There's an element of diminishing returns. Preparation-wise, I understood. You wanna make sure that you cover all scenarios for anything that can happen, but in the post-flight, I was amazed at just the stuff they wouldn't let go. (laughs) Three-hour debrief for a one-hour flight.

Same could be said for post-mission analysis or large-scale exercise. We would run a special operations mission and we'd break it down afterwards. Sometimes, that would take three days of analysis. "What could we have done better in the planning, in the execution, and the mission objective? Was it achieved or not?"

You can plan down to the gnat's ass, but when something throws a wrench, can we pivot quickly enough?

And so that's part of the analysis. In a real-time war environment, you don't have that luxury.

It's critical and we do it very well in the Air Force. The overall accident rate versus the hours flown, it's incredibly low given the complexity and the danger of the mission.

Larry Bernstein:

In Top Gun, the pilots and even the instructors get call signs. How do you get your call sign?

Robert Young:

When you get stuck with one early on, it stays with you throughout your career, especially in that fighter world. Usually, they developed in training. The first rule (laughs) about a call sign is don't react to it. If you hate it, it will stick forever (laughs).

A friend of mine who flew F-15s, his name was Scott. He's a great storyteller. He loved to tell jokes. He always wanted to be called Joker. And he's always trying to champion himself to be my call sign's Joker. Nobody would give it to him. He was short and his name was Scott, so they called him Squat. He hated it.

But boom, it stuck with him and he's always been Squat. And then he flies at FedEx (laughs) and they still call him Squat.

Larry Bernstein:

What's your call sign?

Robert Young:

Mine was Farmer.

Larry Bernstein:

How'd you get that?

Robert Young: Four flights into pilot training, I was flying with an instructor. And I planted a few landings. He goes, "Goddammit, Farmer, you just plant these things on the soil."

"Your nickname is Farmer." So, Farmer was mine throughout training, and then when I moved over to a different aircraft in Special Operations, I was the new guy on the squadron. And I got handed a bunch of old stuff. I had one of the old dome World War II helmets that looked like Skyler from the comic strip Shoe. And boom, somebody looked at me, "You look like Skyler." For my special ops career, I was Skyler (laughs). That one stuck for a little while. That's how it generally goes. They're generally not something endearing, like Slider, Maverick, Goose, those are all cool. A buddy of mine was nicknamed Whiz.

He needed to use a piddle pack in an F-16 and he couldn't get to it (laughs) and he ended up making a mess and they called him Whiz throughout. So that was Whiz. Call signs are very, very important, great for camaraderie.

Larry Bernstein:

Camaraderie is a theme in both Top Gun movies. The original film had a volleyball scene and the new one has a football scene on the beach. The instructors are trying to create teamwork. How true to life is that?

Robert Young:

That is a very accurate. Volleyball and beach football are probably the Navy guys because they're closer to beaches. In pilot training, once a week, we had some sort of gym activity.

There was a game called Crud. And it's around the pool table. And it's an incredibly competitive game that started in the fighter realm. You can tackle. You can throw people into walls. There's lots of alcohol involved (laughs). The Crud matches were infamous in the armed forces.

Larry Bernstein:

Fighter pilots are uber competitive. You have this hostile dynamic between Iceman and Maverick, and we see similar relations between Goose's son and Hangman in the new movie. Is the fighter culture more competitive or mutually supportive?

Robert Young:

It's more mutually supportive. Certainly, the egos are involved. A guy like Hangman on a fighter squadron wouldn't last 30 seconds.

Larry Bernstein:

So, you weren't surprised when Maverick didn't pick Hangman to be on that critical mission?

Robert Young: There's always going to be the element of trust, no matter whether you like or hate the guy. Nobody trusted Hangman. And if that was real world, he wouldn't last very long in that squadron.

Larry Bernstein:

In the opening scenes of Maverick, some of the senior commanders are giving Maverick a tough time because he's been a fighter pilot for over 30 years. It seems that a fighter pilot is a young man's game. When do fighter pilots age out?

Robert Young:

Most pilots just want to fly the airplane. There are a handful that want to go into the ranked structure and do two tours, go to the Pentagon, and then squadron officer school, air command staff college and air war college and they wanna follow that progression.

And then the other guys after two tours usually find their way into the guard reserves and fly F-16s. And in the guard, guys fly forever.

Larry Bernstein:

Is there more burnout in combat?

Robert Young:

So, very good question.

Those missions are quite a bit different than any training mission. Because you're going up against a real enemy, people are shooting back at you and the bombs are real. There's a mental toll there that we're starting to understand what impact that's had on some of our veterans.

Larry Bernstein:

Did you enjoy the new movie, Top Gun Maverick?

Robert Young:

It's a great thing to see. They talk about fifth gen fighter going up against an F-18. That's actually real time. That was pretty interesting to watch them sort of address that.

In terms of that mission in particular, they borrowed pretty heavily from Star Wars. I kept thinking I was watching the Empire Strikes Back. These guys are going to have to launch two little darts into a tiny little hole and then the whole planet explodes.

About five days after the premier of Maverick, unfortunately an F-18 pilot was killed in a crash in a training mission over the desert in California. That's real world. That should serve as a reminder to everyone who might be thinking this is all fun and games. No, there are still real-life consequences to a highly dangerous mission.

Larry Bernstein:

In the original Top Gun, Maverick's partner Goose is killed in an ejection that goes awry. It really affects Maverick. He thinks about dropping out of Top Gun and questions what he wants to do in life. How typical is that when you lose your partner?

Robert Young:

So, in my experience, I've lost three- three- three friends due to military accidents. One of them was killed in Iraq. Another was killed in a 130 crash, and one of our flight engineers died on active duty back in 2000 in my squadron. And loss of a squadron mate, there nothing worse, Larry.

I haven't talked about these guys except for a little bit over Memorial Day. So, my friend Ryan died in a crash in Iraq. His kids were 13, 11, and 9. His wife was wonderful. And I flew with him a bunch, and they think it was a sabotage. And then Greg Fritz, he passed away in a C130 crash in the mountains of San Juan, Puerto Rico. And then Carl unfortunately died unrelated to combat.

You rely on each other to such a degree that it's a death in the family. That's the best I can describe it. So that's real. That depiction.

Larry Bernstein:

On September 11th I had a business meeting at 7 World Trade Center, and I hit traffic heading downtown on the West Side Highway. When I got to 23rd Street, I saw that one of the World Trade Center buildings was on fire. So, I'm not making that meeting. I decided to go hang out at my old apartment where my brother was living on 14th Street. The doorman let me right in and as I entered the apartment, there you were Rob with your wife.

Robert Young:

Yeah.

Larry Bernstein:

Looking out the window, we saw both towers on fire.

Robert Young:

Yeah. Crazy right? Lisa and I were actually headed that morning to Windows of the World.

Larry Bernstein:

We witnessed the collapse of those two towers. My friend Michael Miller who worked at Cantor Fitzgerald died that morning.

It was shocking. But it was different for you. I was sad, but I would wake up and it would be another day. For you, it meant something else. You were to be called up for active military duty and sent to war.

Robert Young:

I had just finished my civilian training with Continental on September 6th. My last day of active duty in my special operations squadron was September 3rd. I came to a wedding, saw you guys on the 8th and the 9th, stayed with Bernie on the 10th. Lisa and I witnessed the second airplane hit the second tower. I saw it coming out of Newark and I thought, oh, okay a 737. That makes sense, they're probably re-diverting him to see if he can find out what's going on with the first building. And all of a sudden, we just see this thing drive into the back side of the south tower, it was just like oh my God. I mean instantly like anybody who saw it live or in real time on the news knew we were under attack.

I knew right then I was going to get recalled immediately. My active-duty squadron were deployed within two weeks to the Middle East. All the guard, all the reserve, everybody who flew my type of aircraft had deployed by November. They were there for the duration.

Larry Bernstein:

In the original film, the Top Gun squadron was an all-white unit. In the new film, the squadron is very diverse by gender, race, and culture. What's does the current Air Force look like?

Robert Young:

I would say in '86, that was accurate. My pilot training class was all white male. The first female fighter pilot her name was Jeannie Flynn. I think she flew the F-15. That was groundbreaking in the 1990s. That was glass ceiling shattering type stuff.

I don't think women were allowed to fly in combat until like '92, '93, '94. Interestingly enough, when I got to my special operations squadron, we had a handful of female pilots. Darcy Philips. I remember flying with Darcy. She was one of the best. She flies for Delta now.

In terms of ethnicity, Active-Duty Air Force has been doing a better job over the last 20 to 30 years of recognizing its shortfall. I think today's squadron standards, you'd probably find a similar mix as the movie Maverick. But certainly, Top Gun was indicative of the times for what the make-up of a squadron was.

Larry Bernstein:

In the first scene of Maverick, Ed Harris, one of the admirals opposes human flown aircraft and is a big fan of the drone. Is this a big issue in the Air Force?

Robert Young:

Do we really need single-seat fighter pilots anymore? Do we even need dual crews in an airliner? That was compelling when he says, "Look, dinosaur. We don't need you anymore. The future is now."

The use of drone technology is fascinating. And the argument can easily be made that you can fly an F-16 without a pilot and probably drop a bomb more accurately without putting that pilot at risk. They've been flying adversarial drones for target practice for 20 years.

With a pending commercial pilot shortage, there's certainly discussion about single-seat cockpits for airliners. Then if something was to happen to the captain, if he's up there by himself, you'd have means to land that aircraft via drone technology. It all exists.

Maybe in 20 years, we're going to look back, Ed Harris was right (laughing). I do think that's true. I do. I don't want to be up in an emergency trying to handle a flight by myself with 150 people. There are a lot of moments where you absolutely must have two people in the cockpit, so we're not there yet. I wouldn't be surprised in 20 years if you see commercial airliners with just one pilot.

Larry Bernstein:

I end each episode on a note of optimism. Rob, what are you optimistic about?

Robert Young:

From a military standpoint, I am excited about what our men and women do on a day-to-day basis. What does America do best? It builds weapons.

One thing that doesn't get enough coverage is the skill and the talent at all levels of our military. It's just unbelievable what we're capable of.