

# TOP GUN: MAVERICK

Directed by Joseph Kosinski  
Produced by Jerry Bruckheimer, Tom Cruise, Christopher McQuarrie, and David Ellison  
Distributed by Paramount Pictures  
Released in 2022

Building on his iconic 1986 antecedent, Tom Cruise delivers the goods. *Top Gun: Maverick* boasts even better flight sequences, and the story builds gradually, ratcheting up the intensity to a fever-pitch. In *Top Gun* we had Maverick wrestling with the (apparently) shameful actions of his dead fighter-pilot father, then with the death of his best friend, Goose. It is spelled out that Maverick is an iconoclastic risk-taker because of his father; he flies with reckless abandon because he has something to prove. But when Goose dies on a training flight and Maverick narrowly escapes punishment, he becomes withdrawn and hesitant, even (somewhat inexplicably) rejecting the ministrations of his civilian instructor-girlfriend Charlie (played by Kelly McGillis). And yet, buoyed by his discovery of what really happened to his father, that he was an unsung hero, Maverick is given a shot to (somewhat inexplicably) join an emergency squadron to combat a belligerent enemy (meant to be the Soviets), shooting down three planes. Then, his demons exorcised, Maverick tosses Goose's dog tags in the sea and reunites with Charlie. For the first time, he is whole.

And yet...after thirty-some years, Maverick, the old hot-dogging fly-by showboat, is still defying orders and risking his life, not in dangerous missions, but on mere test flights! His career has stalled, and it's only through the good graces of old pal Admiral Kazansky (the "Iceman") that he has stayed in the Navy. So why is Maverick still 'living on the edge'? And, more importantly, why is he still upset about Goose's death? Obviously, it's a storytelling conceit, so that Maverick can lock horns with Rooster, Goose's bitter son.

Another development that undermines the original film is the absence of Charlie. Sure, the years, apparently, haven't been as kind to Kelly McGillis as they have to (the thirteen-year-younger) Jennifer Connelly. But why didn't they stay together? Interestingly, Penny's daughter reproves Maverick for being irresponsible, pleading with him not to lead her mother on like he did before. That's a nice, back-door way of (perhaps) explaining why Charlie is out of Maverick's life.

But if he's lacking in commitment, and Maverick still needs to grow, why doesn't he give Penny an engagement ring at the end of his adventure? It would help justify her (almost superfluous) character and demonstrate that Maverick is finally learning.

It's also frustrating that the film begins by establishing fighter pilots as relics, that drones are the future; but then this compelling man-versus-machine idea is dropped unceremoniously. Once Ed Harris is out of the picture, we never hear about drones again. The movie raises the question, but never answers it. Why can't drones accomplish this almost-impossible canyon strike? Maybe there is some issue involving radar detection, or the drones not being fast enough. Somehow, this issue must be addressed, but it is not. And for that matter, it's a little hard to believe that the aviators, all of whom fail the practice course, succeed in the real

mission, and all because Maverick proved it could be done. The film is asking us to accept not only that they believe, but that they're Maverick's equal.

Amidst all this explosive action, the best scene is actually the slowest, when Maverick is summoned to Iceman's house. Despite its construction-by-cliché—*I can't do it/Yes, you can; Let me fly the mission/No, you teach; I'm no longer useful/The Navy needs Maverick*—because it is achingly quiet (Iceman can hardly speak any more), and because there is a deft balance between admiration and competition (it's settled—obviously Maverick is "better," because he can still actually fly), the scene is a delight. It provides a realistic pivot for Maverick similar to the scene in *Top Gun* where Viper tells him the truth about his father in Viet Nam.

The scene reinforces the theme of the film—that's why it resonates. Drones are taking over; fighter pilots will soon be a relic of the past. The obsessive canyon run they're cramming for is a second-by-second crucible of chaos; it makes unconscionable demands on mind and body, luring each pilot to an early death, making a mockery of their insatiable (to reference the first film) "need for speed." Maverick looks like he's barely aged; Iceman is falling apart. In his first lesson, Maverick instructs his charges, "Your greatest enemy is time." When Maverick tells Iceman that he can't handle these kids, that Rooster hates him and Iceman needs to find someone else, Iceman replies, "There's still time." And there is—for Maverick, at least. Iceman is dead within a couple days. It all ties together.

The *real* tension in the film is not whether the mission will succeed. Maverick is forced to train Goose's son. Rooster hates Maverick because he thinks Maverick was responsible for his dad's death, and because Maverick delayed his admission to the Naval Academy. What Rooster does not know is this: Maverick blocked him because Goose's widow wanted to protect her son from a similar fate. Maverick was man enough to keep her out of it—he preferred that Rooster hate him rather than hate his mother. Now he's concerned that Rooster just doesn't have it—he's not aggressive enough. If he keeps Rooster from the mission, that hate will double. But if he is allowed to fly on what looks to be a sure suicide mission, that's worse. There is no escape. Maverick's best hope is that he be allowed to fly the mission. Then *he'll* die and it will all be over. This is dark stuff for a flag-waving action-adventure spectacular!

In the end, for reasons not readily apparent, Maverick makes Rooster his wingman. Maverick saves his life, then Rooster saves his, and they shoot their way out of some foreign hell hole in a stolen F-14! Then Hangman, who was left behind on the flight deck (probably because he abandoned his wingman in their first training exercise, something Maverick learned the hard way you *never* do), swoops down out of nowhere like Han Solo at the Death Star to save the day.

You feel like you've seen it all before, but never like *this*. From the opening shots on the aircraft carrier punctuated by Kenny Loggins's "Danger Zone," to Maverick motorcycling onto base *sans* helmet, to Maverick bedding his lady at a seaside cottage, to Maverick standing at attention before befuddled admirals, to Maverick bonding with his team while playing on the beach, to Maverick flying upside down, to Maverick breaking the hard-deck rules of his training exercises, to Maverick making the most of every white t-shirt he can get his hands on, *Top Gun: Maverick* is a high-octane nostalgia blast. Sure, it's not perfect, but it's better than the bilge Hollywood has been regurgitating for the past decade.

That's not high praise. That's gratitude.