Democracy Goes to War: *Air Force* (1943)

Michael Paris

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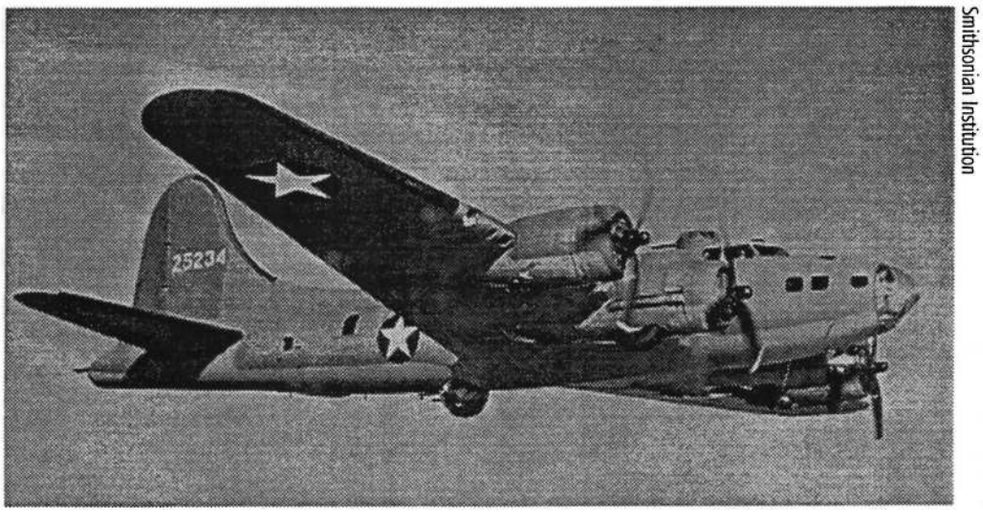
Michael Paris
University of Central Lancashire

Democracy Goes to War: *Air Force* (1943)

Air Force (Dir. Howard Hawks) is the story of an Army Air Force B-17 Flying Fortress, "The Mary Ann," and her crew in the Pacific theatre at the time of the Japanese attack on Pearl Harbor. While the feature has subsequently been hailed as one of the director's greatest works, bearing all the hallmarks of Hawk's concept of the group built on "shared values, common purpose, intuitive sympathy, and mutual independence,"[1] the film was subjected to some criticism at its time of release. The Office of War Information, for example, fearing it would reflect badly on the precarious position of loyal Japanese-Americans, complained of its stereotypical portrayal of *all* people of Japanese descent as treacherous, blood-thirsty savages. On its release, in March 1943, the Columbia University sociologist R.M. MacIver also protested at its"unfair and inaccurate" portrayal of Japanese-Americans.[2] However, the negative anti-Japanese bias of *Air Force* is only part of the story: a device to intensify the real focus of the film–a demonstration of the very positive image of the cohesive, civilized, and democratic nature of the crew of the "Mary Ann."

As Thomas Doherty has pointed out, a persistent theme of World War Two combat films has been the notion of the group–the squad, platoon or company–as a "melting pot," a homogenized ethnic and religious mix of individuals united in the struggle against totalitarian regimes.[3] From *Gung Ho!* (1942), in which a Marine Colonel (played by Randolph Scott) orders his racially mixed unit to "cast out prejudice, racial, religious, and every other kind," to *Pride of the Marines* and *A Walk in the Sun*, (both 1945), the combat group has stood as a metaphor for a democratic society. Somewhat less attention has been focused on the manner in which air force films reflected the same democratic ideals. However, examination of such a feature as *Air Force* clearly reveals that the bomber crew–a tightly-knit, sympathetic group totally dependent upon each other's skills–was indeed a perfect symbol for a democratic society at war.

The pre-war public perception of the airman, created in no small measure by the air force itself, was of a carefully selected, intellectual and physical elite.[4] Thus, when war came, it was essential that the service was seen as just as democratized as any other branch of the armed forces: perhaps more so in the light of USAAF selection policies which prohibited Blacks and Hispanics from aircrew training. It was also essential that, for the serious business of total war, Hollywood cast out the individualistic aces and "lone eagle" misfits that had been the stereotypical central focus of 1930s aviation movies and adopt new role models that fitted more comfortably into the conception of a democracy at war. Thus, the "organization man"—the team player—was adopted and nowhere were communitarian values more needed than among the bomber crew—and such examples provided a valuable object lesson for the nation. While these pictures helped prepare the public for "total" war, they also answered Mr. and Mrs. Joe Public's question, "exactly what had the expensive and much-vaunted air force actually been doing since Pearl Harbor?" And this helps to explain General H.H. "Hap" Arnold's interest and support for the film. It seems possible, according to Hawks' somewhat confused recollections, that the original idea for the film came from Arnold[5]. Certainly the General ensured that the air force provided every facility for Hawks and on occasions soothed the ruffled feathers of senior officers when the filmmakers were too demanding. Arnold also authorized Hawks to interview air force personnel and the final script, written by Dudley Nicholls, was an imaginative composite of individual experiences. Part of Hawks' strategy to achieve a documentary feel to the picture was to use actors who were relatively unknown (Only John Garfield had "star" status and he had specifically requested a role in the film[6]). Filmed in Hollywood with some location work in Florida, *Air Force* was released on March 20 1943.



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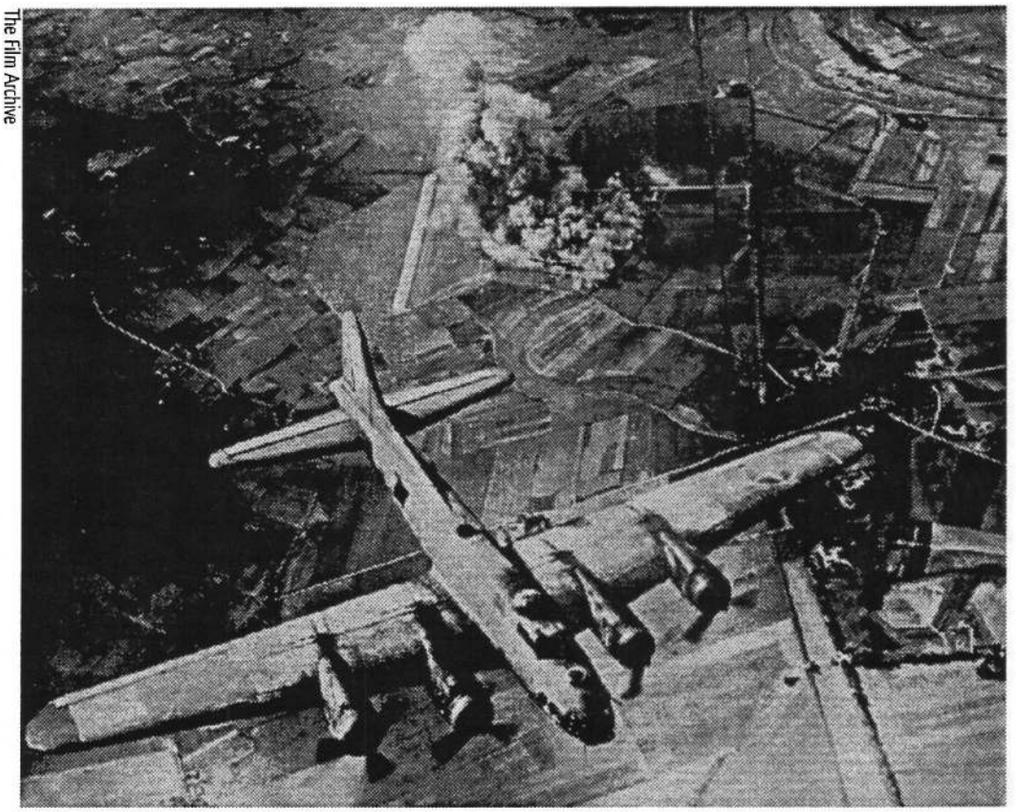
The majestic B-17 in flight.

The narrative begins on December 6 1941 when the "Mary Ann" and eight other B-17s leave San Francisco bound for Hickam Field, Honolulu. As the flight nears its destination, the crew learns of the Japanese attack on Pearl Harbor and the unarmed planes are ordered to land at emergency airfields. The "Mary Ann" comes down on Maui and here, from the garrison, the crew discover the full extent of Japanese treachery, as supposedly "friendly" Japanese immigrants attacked military installations and weakened the American defense of the islands. The "Mary Ann" itself is shot at by saboteurs and manages to escape to Hickam Field. Here the crew is ordered to Manila via Wake Island to reinforce air force units in the Philippines. The bomber is severely damaged on its first mission out of Manila and the pilot, Captain Quincannon, (John Ridgely) is killed. Despite being ordered to destroy the disabled aircraft, the crew and a handful of Marines desperately attempt to repair the "Mary Ann" before the Japanese take Clark Field. As the first enemy troops appear at the airfield, the repairs are completed and the bomber escapes for Australia. Near the Australian coast, the crews sights a Japanese invasion fleet "heading south." They radio its position and wait for air force units to arrive. The destruction of the Japanese fleet provides the climax of the film. Severely damaged after taking part in the action, the "Mary Ann" crash lands on an Australian beach. In a final scene, the surviving members of the crew—now serving with another squadron—are seen being briefed for the first B-17 bombing mission against Tokyo. Certainly, as Bosley Crowther pointed out in his review of the film, this is a "far-fetched," but also a "tremendously entertaining and morale-boosting picture."[7] Indeed, throughout the picture, the armed forces are seen as hard-pressed by the ferocity of the Japanese onslaught but, at the same time, they never break and they do strike back. It is, however, the constant repetition of the democratic nature of American society, as seen through the mi-



Post-bombing.

crocosm of the crew of the "Mary Ann" which is really at the heart of *Air Force.*

The scene is set with a prologue from the "Gettysburg Address," Lincoln's great reaffirmation of the basic democratic principles upon which the Constitution of the United States had been built. This device reinforces the rather anonymous cast list which contains no character names, simply the functions of the crew—"Captain": John Ridgely; "Co-Pilot": Gig Young; Navigator:" Charles Drake, and so on. When the names of the crew members are all revealed it comes as no surprise that they include the usual ethnic and religious mix advocated by the Office of War Information: "Quincannon" the pilot is of Irish descent; "Xavier Williams" the co-pilot hints at Hispanic roots; "Hauser" the navigator appears to have German origins; and "Weinberg" is the Jewish gunner. "Winocki," another gunner, has a Polish name—but one that has an almost Native American ring to it. The grizzled, veteran crew chief, "Sergeant White" (veteran actor Harry Carey) acts as a firm but benevolent father figure for the crew; indeed, it is his commonsense and faith in the "American way" that provides a powerful cohesive force for the crew.

The emphasis throughout the picture is on the team—a constant repetition of the simple fact that only when every man performs his particular role to the best of his ability can the bomber operate properly. Just before the flight leaves San Francisco, for example, the mother of the young radio operator asks the pilot to look after her son. But Quincannon tells her, "In a way, he'll be looking after me; that's how the crew of a bomber functions." The central importance of teamwork is further explored during the long trans-Pacific flight. In this sequence, Winocki, the gunner, is shown burning with resentment because he failed to make the grade during pilot training. Blinded by a false image of the glamorous and dashing pilot Winoki is so embittered by his failure to "make the grade" that he rejects all notions of team work. His cynicism and anger earns a rebuke from Captain Quincannon,

It takes all of us to make this ship function. We all belong to this aeroplane. Everyman has got to rely on every other Man to do the right thing at the right time. You play football Winocki, you know how one man can gum up the whole works. You got to play ball with us and play the game!

Later, the resentful gunner learns that both the navigator and bombardier had also wanted to be pilots but had failed for one reason or another, unlike him, accepted alternative duties. In fact, the navigator is the son of a famous World War I "ace" and had even more pressing reasons for wanting to qualify as a pilot. When the crew eventually learns the extent of Japanese treachery and actually sees the devastation at Pearl Harbor, Winocki is the most obviously distressed. His attitude is dramatically re-defined by the experience and he begins to understand that only through team work—by every man playing his particular role—will this vicious enemy be defeated.

The subsequent adventures of the "Mary Ann" in the Pacific highlight the importance of the special skills of the crew: the consumate skill of the pilot who lands the powerful B-17 on jungle

airstrips without damage to the delicate mechanism; the co-pilot who, when Quincannon is killed, takes on his role; the navigator who, during the two-thousand mile flight from Pearl Harbor to Wake Island, works by dead reckoning to bring the aircraft safely to its destination. "Boy! What a Navigator!" says an awed Weinberg. The gunners, of course, are constantly engaged in battle with Japanese fighters but their skill and team work take a steady toll of their attackers and successfully defend the aircraft. When the "Mary Ann" is so badly damaged in the Philippines that the crew is told to burn the remains, the crew chief calmly takes charge and, through his expert mechanical knowledge, directs the repair work that enables the bomber to once again take to the air. When finally the crew gets the chance to strike at the Japanese invasion fleet, the bombardier comes into his own, directing the flight path over an enemy warship and ensuring that every bomb hits it target. Once war begins, every man in the crew contributes expertise, without which the bomber could not function. Even Lt. Rader, the swashbuckling and highly individualistic fighter pilot who is rescued by the "Mary Ann" in the Philippines, is incorporated into the crew and becomes a vital element, taking over the co-pilot's seat. In the final scene, Rader transfers to a bomber squadron and has been chosen to lead the B-17 on their first mission against the Japanese mainland. By then his individualistic view of war has given way to the appeal of working as part of a team.

Nor should the "Mary Ann" herself be overlooked. As the crew constitues a study in the collaborative effort of a democracy at war, so the bomber—the finest creation that American technology can produce—is another essential member of the team. Despite rough landings and battle damage, the "Mary Ann" continues to function, to carry the crew on their missions and back to safety. The ship has almost human characteristics: at one point the pilot even refers to the automatic pilot mechanism as the "mechanical brain" of the aircraft.

The flawless perfection of the democratized crew working together for victory in *Air Force* was paralleled by other air features reinforcing the same theme. *Rear Gunner* (1943) has the diminutive tail-gunner (Burgess Meredith) learning the value of his position in the bomber crew and finding an "acceptance and stature he never knew on the ground."[8] *Aerial Gunner* and *Bombardier* (both 1943) similarly highlighted those roles albeit in more B movie terms and with less Hawksian control. *Desperate Journey*, a slightly uneasy cross between a "star" vehicle for Errol Flynn and a rollicking, patriotic adventure, did nevertheless tell the story of an international crew (Australian, Canadian, American, British and Anglo-Irish) serving together in the British Royal Air Force. Here the emphasis is not so much on the interdependence of crew functions but on the alliance between democratic nations united against the tyranny of fascism.

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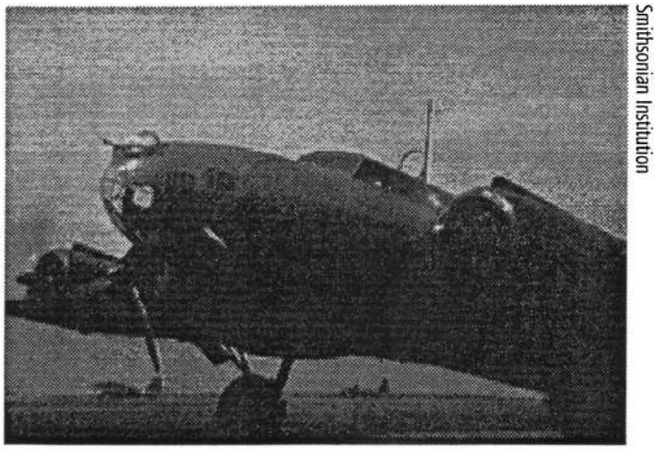
The cohesion and democratic ideals of the fictional air force crews suggested by these movies received confirmation from official documentaries such as William Wyler's fine filmic evocation of the final mission of the Eighth Air Force B-17 *The Memphis Belle* (1944). Here there were no actors but real-life Quincannons, Weinbergs, and Winockis, taking the war to Germany and demonstrating the importance of each man's role to the overall success of the mission. *Target Tokyo* (9145), demonstrated the same democratic spirit in naval aviation.

As Robin Wood noted in his 1981 biography of Hawks, the crew of the "Mary Ann," "appears an ideal democracy in microcosm: the atmosphere is one of voluntary service, of discipline freely accepted; a perfect balance is achieved between individual fulfilment and the responsibility of each member to the whole. The crew enact the values they are fighting for ."[9] *Air Force* was not only a vehicle for a valuable lesson about a democratic nation at war, but— perhaps even more importantly—it presaged a worthwhile peace based upon democratic principles.

Notes



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[1]Robin Wood, *Howard Hawks* (London: BFI Publishing, 1981), 98.

[2]Clayton Koppes & Gregory Black, *Hollywood Goes to War: How Politics, Profits and Propaganda Shaped World War II Movies* (New York: The Free Press, 1987), 80.

[3]Thomas Doherty, *Projections of War: Hollywood, American Culture, and World War II* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1993), 139. See also, Jeanine Basinger, *The World War II Combat Film: Anatomy of a Genre* (New York, Columbia University Press, 1986).

[4]Ideas about the elitist qualities of the air corps are implicit in much of inter-war writing about air power. See for example, William Mitchell, *Winged Defense: The Development and Possibilities of Modern Air Power, Economic and Military* (New York, Putnam, 1925) and Charles Lindbergh, 'Aviation, Geography and Race', *Readers Digest* (November 1939). For a wider view of air force elitism in popular cinema see, Michael Paris, *From the Wright Brothers to 'Top Gun': Aviation, Nationalism and Popular Cinema* (Manchester, Manchester University Press, 1995). On the problems of African-Americans and military aviation see, Alan M. Osur, *Blacks in the Army Air Forces During World War II* (Washington, Office of Air Force History, 1977) and Stanley Sandler, *Segregated Skies: All-Black Combat Squadrons of WWII* (Washington, Smithsonian Institution Press, 1992).

[5]Joseph McBride, *Hawks on Hawks* (Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1982), 90.

[6]McBride, 92.

[7]Bosley Crowther, 'Air force', *New York Times,* February 4 1943. For the reality of air operations in the early days of the war see, Michael Sherry, *The Rise of American Air Power: The Creation of Armageddon* (New Haven, Yale University Press, 1987) and Ronald Schaffer, *Wings of Judgment: American Bombing in World War II* (Oxford, Oxford University Press, 1985).

[8]Doherty, 108.

[9]Wood, 95.

Michael Paris is a senior lecturer at the University of Central Lancashire. He took his Ph.D. in the Department of War Studies, Kings College, London and is a fellow of the Royal Historical Society. Currently preparing a book on popular militarism in Britain between 1815 and 1914, he is also the author of *Winged Warfare: The Literature and Theory of Air Warfare, 1859-1917* (1992) and *From the Wright Brothers to "Top Gun:" Aviation, Nationalism and Popular Cinema* (1995).

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The Area Chair is Robert Fyne. He is seeking participants for the next meeting—to be held in Orlando in 1998. March 31-April 3. Please note, this Orlando meeting will be a wonderful opportunity to meet with other Film & History enthusiasts one year from now—so plan early. Contact:

Robert Fyne, 63 Wick Drive, Fords, NJ 08863; RJFyne@aol.com

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(Bob Fyne is also our Book Review Editor and is always in search of reviewers for the journal.)