

American Top Gun fighter pilot academy set up by British

The American Top Gun fighter pilot academy was inspired by the Royal Navy elite flying instructors, a new book has revealed.

By Thomas Harding, Defence Correspondent
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Despite the all-American hero imagery of the film starring Tom Cruise, the US Navy's expertise was in large part due to their instruction by aviators from the Fleet Air Arm.

When British pilots arrived at Miramar airbase in California in the early 1960s the Americans were losing a large number of dogfights in their multi-million Phantom fighters to the enemy's relatively "cheap" MiG 21s.



The British contribution of a dozen instructors was a substantial help to the Americans struggling for aerial success over Vietnam

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The tuition from the British pilots, all graduates of the intense Air Warfare Instructors school in Lossiemouth, Scotland, led to the Americans dominating the skies, the military historian Rowland White has revealed in Phoenix Squadron.

It was then that the their Naval Warfare Academy became known as Top Gun.

"Through the instructors on exchange at Miramar the AWIs methods made their way into perhaps the most well-known programme in the history of naval aviation: Topgun," he said.

Foremost among the Royal Navy pilots was Lt Commander Dick Lord's whose work on the tactics group was

the founding on which the "original eight Topgun instructors built their course".

The British pilot, originally from South Africa, introduced simple things such as writing notes on the knee pad of his flying suit during air combat exercises

The Americans trusted Lord enough to give him access to a secret document that played a key part in his writing the Air Combat Manoeuvring manual for the US pilots.

As shown in the film Top Gun the pilots at Miramar were given a structure on air-to-air combat that finished with a final sortie of two pilot instructors against two students. In the film this was when Tom Cruise lost his observer following a difficult manoeuvre which occasionally happened as pilots flew their aircraft to the limit.

Lord's expertise was so well regarded that he was asked to give lectures to US fighter pilots all along the West Coast.

While the former Royal Navy officer, who married his British wife at Miramar, said he enjoyed the film he did not recognise the characters until his wife told him that the big-talking naval fighter pilots were most accurately depicted.

Although the British did their best to fit in their humour prevailed. Rather than call signs of Viper and Maverick they came up with Dogbreath, Alien and Cholmondley

White's book is the first to reveal the British role in Top Gun.

"It is remarkable that any history book on Top Gun studiously avoids any British involvement," Lord, 72, told The Daily Telegraph. "One finds this quite a bit on American history and certainly here they have not given us due justice."

Lt Cdr Paul Waterhouse, 72, another Fleet Air Arm officer at Miramar with Lord, said the British contribution of a dozen instructors was a substantial help to the Americans struggling for aerial success over Vietnam although it went unnoticed by Downing Street.

"We were helping these guys in the Vietnam war because they were going straight from Miramar to fight the enemy who were flying pretty useful Mig 21s.

"If Harold Wilson knew he would not have been happy."

He added: "The Americans did not have the experience to use the Phantom properly and you cannot train experience

"I felt a swell of pride when I first saw the Top Gun film because I knew that we were behind it."

Another British instructor, Cdr Doug Macdonald, 67, said the Americans "were delighted to have experienced people teach them".

He added: "I think the movie Top Gun is great but it's thanks to us Brits that they could make the film."

Soon after the Top Gun course began a Phantom flown by one of the first students shot down a MiG-21, the first time a US Navy had succeeded in aerial combat in two years.