

**FLYING FOR THE SILVER SCREEN**

**AND**

**THE IRISH STORY**

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Kelly who had been 2nd Unit Photographer on "Lawrence of Arabia" (1962) and had also been the aerial cameraman on "The War Lover". (5)

The success of "Those Magnificent Men In Their Flying Machines" encouraged 20th Century Fox to enter the WW 1 genre but this time to investigate it from a German perspective. The studio could plan this production with confidence based on the experiences and techniques developed in the previous film. The combination of the availability of Ardmore studios, the uncluttered airspace in Ireland, the Irish Government's offer of facilities including 1,000 trained troops for the ground battle sequence and Irish Air Corps pilots for background formations, was what finally swung the decision to use Ireland as a location for "The Blue Max." The head of the London production branch was Elmo Williams, who looked after all the films produced outside the United States by 20th Century Fox and was executive producer of "The Blue Max". Williams selected John Guillermin to direct the film which had been based on Jack D. Hunters novel. Guillermin was a British director who had started in second features before graduating to direct big budget epics. He had a background in aviation having flown in the RAF during WW11. (6) Guillermin worked out all the camera movements which were translated into a storyboard by the Art Director. These were shown to Air Commodore Wheeler who was air consultant for the picture and he advised on the safety and practicality of these proposed shots

from a flying perspective. Tony Squire director of the Aerial Unit worked out the aerial briefings in consultation with the air consultant, the pilots and the filming helicopter.

All the aircraft types as required by the script were single engined biplane replicas and were constructed in Germany, England and France. They were all fitted with modern engines. Some original aircraft were also hired to fill in for the background action shots. Four Tiger Moths and a Stampe were painted up to represent WW1 German fighter aircraft. A French Luciole Caudron was painted in English markings to represent the British observation aircraft which was shot down by Bruno Stachel in the film. The Morane 230 monoplane represented the new German silver monoplane which crashes with Stachel at the end of the film. The two full scale SE5a replicas were constructed by George Miles. The two German Pfaltz D-111s were constructed by Peter Hillwood and Douglas Bianchi. The two Fokker Triplanes and the non flying mock up which was fitted with a small engine to turn a small propeller on the ground were constructed in Germany by Josef Bitz. The three Fokker D-V11 replicas were constructed by Claude Rousseau in France, and he proved the airworthiness of the craft by flying them from France to Ireland. The other replicas were flown to Ireland in crates on the Aer Lingus Carvair and reassembled at Baldonnel. (7) The mock up aircraft for close up studio work were constructed at Ardmore Studios.

The aircraft were given clearance by the Department of Transport & Power to operate on 'Permits To Fly' from the country of manufacture, and an exemption from carrying nationality markings, as all the planes were camouflaged in WW 1 paint schemes. Clearance was also given for the aircraft to engage in low flying and aerobatics and formation flying in designated areas. (8)

In a letter to the Department of Defence on 21st June 1965, the producer Christian Ferry set out the requirements for the Irish Air Corps pilots who were to fly in the film. "Up to 8 experienced pilots who are able to fly in formation, perform loops, rolls and low flying. They will initially fly the four Tiger Moths and Stampe aircraft, and eventually the SE5a and Fokker D-V11 replicas. The eight pilots will be available to us from 2nd August to 16th October, with possible extensions for four of the pilots thereafter. The eight pilots are to be selected by our air supervisor and one of your appointed officers, after training on our Tiger Moths and being given flight tests in the period from 28th June to 30th July. We will assign an instructor with Tiger Moth experience for the purpose of training your volunteer pilots." (9) The company also requested eight aircraft mechanics to supplement their own staff of aeronautical engineers to help service and repair the planes. Hangars were also required to house the film aircraft. Roger Kennedy, son of Captain Darby Kennedy owner and operator of Weston Airfield, where most of the flying sequences would be shot, delivered the Tiger Moth aircraft to Baldonnell and training commenced under the direction of

the Air Corps Chief Flying Instructor, Commandant Tim Healy. They were hard pushed to complete the training in the allocated time, with weather restrictions and the limited number of machines available. All this activity was in addition to their normal military duties.

Flying in these canvas open cockpit biplanes was quite a departure from the modern, closed cockpit, metal monoplanes they were used to operating. Pat Cranfield (10) felt that it was like going right back to the early days of aviation again, wind in the wires, leather jacket helmet and goggles with silk scarf trailing in the slipstream. It was also freezing cold. Eight Air Corps pilots were to spend over eight hundred and eighty two hours in these cockpits over the course of shooting the film. At the end of the training period eight pilots were selected by Cmdt Healy and George Lowdell, a qualified instructor and technical assistant to A/Cmd Wheeler, and were assigned full time to take part in the film. (11) The trained Air Corps pilots were joined in mid July by the English civilian pilots who had all flown in "Those Magnificent Men In Their Flying Machines", and had been engaged to fly the replica aircraft and carry out the more dangerous aerial stunt work. (12) Derek Piggott was the stunt pilot who flew the Triplane under the Railway bridge at Fermoy for one of the most exciting scenes in the film where Willi Von Klugermann meets his end. One of the cameras for this shot was fitted to the back of the triplane to give a pilot's view of the manoeuvre as he swooped under the bridge.

A new pilot joined the group towards the end of the film. This was George Peppard, who played Bruno Stachel. George held an American pilot's licence and was keen to do a lot of his own flying in the film. Darby Kennedy had been giving Peppard lessons early in the mornings before filming started for the day in his Tiger Moth at Weston. For obvious reasons 20th Century Fox was not keen for Peppard to take to the air in the film until it was almost completed. The short promotion film shot by Vincent Corcran for "The Blue Max." shows Peppard doing some formation flying for the film. (23) He had one exciting moment when he took to the air in the single seater replica Pfaltz. His take off and flight were fine but according to pilots on the ground at the time, he had some exciting moments getting it back down again.

Flying for the film ended on the 27th November 1965. A telegram was received from 20th Century Fox just before Christmas by the Air Corps pilots. It said that Darryl F. Zanuck - head of the studio - had just come from a first screening of the film and has expressed extreme satisfaction of the work especially the terrific air action. Elmo Williams, John Guillermin and Christian Ferry were elated. (24)

In 1967, Ardmore was brought by Englishman Lee Davis. Using his contacts in the film world, he attracted Paramount to Ireland with its film "Where were you on the night you said you shot down Baron Von Richthofen" or as it was released, "Darling Lili" (1969 ) (25)

This big budget film was shot over two years and all the flying sequences were shot in Weston and the surrounding countryside, utilising the "Blue Max" replica aircraft. Six more SE 5a smaller sized replica aircraft based on the Curry Wot airframe were constructed by Slingsby in England. These were required for the British Eagle squadron with which the main character of the film flew.

Burch Williams, who was Elmo's brother, had formed a company, Shillelagh Productions, and was now operating the fleet of replica aircraft on hire to Paramount Pictures for the film. In April 1967 he sent a letter to the Department of Defence requesting ten military pilots who would fly with the two civilian pilots brought in for the film. (26) Training of the pilots started in May and filming started in June. Due to script changes by the director quite a few of the exciting aerial sequences were not used in the film. Ken Byrne recalls one sequence he flew in early July which did make it. Byrne was doubling for British Pilot 'TC' who liked to drink when he flew. He had to fly low over the Grand Canal hopping over the bridges while swinging the whiskey bottle to his mouth. Unfortunately he forgot the slipstream effect and broke his front teeth with the bottle. On another occasion the control stick on the full size SE5a replica came off in his hand as he was on a take-off roll. He just missed the hedge and ditch at the end of the field as he came to a halt. (27) They finished flying in early September having flown 664 hours over 139 days.

Paramount wrote to the Department of Defence on 2nd February 1968, requesting 10 military pilots for the second year on this film. Six mechanics to service the aircraft were also requested under the supervision of Johnny Maher. Aerial direction, as in 1967, was by Tony Squire. (28) Air Corps pilot Peter Mc Mahon recalls one incident at Carton House at Maynooth where he landed the SE5a for a scene involving Rock Hudson (Major Larabee), who had landed to rescue 'TC', a downed British pilot. The final shot involved a close up of Hudson taxiing the SE5a up to the camera and turning left. McMahan gave him the instruction as how this was to be carried out, emphasising the need to apply full rudder and a lot of power to make the turn before he overran the camera position, as these aircraft did not have brakes. When it came to the point of turning, Hudson did not apply enough power and as the craft ran towards the camera he put his hands over his face and it was left to the ground crew to rescue the situation. (29) The exciting attack scene was filmed on the Navan railway line in July 1968. Filming ended on 24th August with the military pilots having flown 1,548 hours over the two years of the film.

Cliff Robertson hired the aircraft from Burch Williams company Shillelagh Productions, to shoot some footage for a story he was developing with the title "How I Shot Down The Red Baron, I Think". As it was now becoming increasingly difficult for the Air Corps pilots to be released from their military duties, the pilots took leave for the three weeks required to shoot the footage. The film was

shot at Weston, with Cliff Robertson both starring in and directing the film, which was probably why the flying scenes did not work out too well. The pilots remember Robertson dashing out to them in his jeep to change the agreed manoeuvres as they were taxiing to take-off for a sequence. The film finally ran out of money and the sequences did not finally see the light of day until incorporated in the film "Ace Eli And Rogers Of The Skies." (30)

Horror film director Roger Corman came to Ireland in 1970 to direct his B film for United Artists, "Von Richthofen & Brown (1971) which was produced by his brother Gene. Using the full collection of aircraft operated by Burch Williams and the by now experienced military pilots supplemented by a few civilian pilots, Corman set out to shoot a mini "Blue Max" on a paltry budget of \$1 million. (31) Corman stated that the film was the longest he had shot to date with an eight week shooting schedule. He was exploiting the Irish pilot's experience which had been gained on previous films as well as the availability in Ireland of the collection of British and German aircraft which he required for the story.

Filming started in the middle of July and was based at Weston, which doubled for both the British and German airfields. Having visited the set at Weston, Peter Strick (32) recalled that "the crews were kept busy and had a distinctly breathless look. Even as we watched, four sequences of the film were being shot simultaneously". Over ten Air Corps pilots flew in the film over the