Forget Top Gun: Maverick—let's settle Blue Thunder vs. Airwolf once and for all

Enlarge / Look at this crap I used to do in elementary school.

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In June 2020, the nostalgia-industrial complex will pump out *Top Gun: Maverick*, which will undoubtedly feature hotshot pilot Tom Cruise slaughtering a few dozen foreigners in order to complete his character arc. Cruise may do the hardest salute you've ever seen, but the real star of *TG:M* could just as easily be his F/A-18 Hornet fighter jet.

The movie is a sequel to 1986's *Top Gun*, which was part of the 1980s' obsession with turning cool vehicles into movie and TV stars. Depending on how pedantic you feel like being, this subgenre/cycle/craze kicked off with either *The Dukes of Hazzard* (1979) or *Knight Rider* (1982) and continued through *Firefox*, *Iron Eagle*, *Black Moon Rising*, and no less than 10 *Knight Rider* remakes/sequels/video games before culminating in *Knight Boat*. Even *Magnum, P.I.*'s Ferrari and *The A-Team*'s van were more recognizable than any of their actresses. (I know I just rattled off more Gen X signposts than a season of *Family Guy*, but bear with me.)

Attempts to revive the genre have been mixed. Why? Because now

that you can sit down at a computer and make thousands of spaceships out of pixels and Red Bull, the idea of building an entire franchise around one vehicle seems silly. It was only in the ’80s—which came after the rise of the summer blockbuster but before CG-everything—that the vehicle show could flourish. (The closest analogs currently on the market are the *Fast & Furious* movies, which have the technology and budgets to create a world in which muscle cars outnumber people 10 to 1.)

Anyway, thanks to the renewed interest in cool-vehicle franchises spurred by Mr. Cruise’s latest money-printing endeavor, we at Ars decided to settle one of the greatest debates of the subgenre. I have taken it upon myself to decide, once and for all, which is the superior ’80s murder-copter: Blue Thunder or Airwolf?

Editor’s note: **Spoilers for 30-year-old IPs throughout.**

- Blue Thunder’s entrance is pretty sick.
- Here’s a clearer pic of BT in action.
- Roy Scheider’s LAPD pilot Murphy combines a no-nonsense working-class attitude with the simmering anxiety of a veteran with undiagnosed PTSD.
- Airwolf. Note the wingtip machineguns and the belly rocketlauncher.
- Jan-Michael Vincent plays protagonist pilot Stringfellow Hawke; this could be from any episode of *Airwolf*, and he could be saying anything.

Thundering wolf

You remember *Blue Thunder* and *Airwolf*, right?

Blue Thunder was a 1983 movie starring an experimental, machine-gun-toting police helicopter that eventually tears up Los Angeles. My parents took me to see it when I was five. I

cried at the end. (Then they got me a gnarly Blue Thunder toy that could accommodate my GI Joe figures.)

The movie's human star is an LAPD helicopter pilot (played by Roy Scheider) whose name is Murphy, because all movie cops are named Murphy. Murphy uncovers a conspiracy involving the chopper that leads him into the aforementioned aerial dogfight over the streets of LA.

Airwolf, by contrast, was a *totally different thing*. It was a TV show that ran on CBS from 1984 to 1986 before squeezing out one more season on the USA network. It also involved an experimental military chopper flown by a sullen ex-Army pilot with the shockingly preposterous name "Stringfellow Hawke" (played by Jan-Michael Vincent). Like Murphy, Hawke has also stolen his chopper—but he is allowed to keep it as long as he runs missions for a CIA-inspired agency called The Firm (sometimes styled "The F.I.R.M.").

While *Blue Thunder* ends with Murphy destroying his chopper after deciding that it might too easily be abused by Big Brother, Airwolf is a force for good. Hawke is given license to machine gun nefarious Commies, Libyans, Mexicans, rednecks, and other sundry ne'er-do-wells week after week, kind of like a flying *Knight Rider*.

Got it? Good. Now let's turn to the important questions these two helicopter franchises raise. One: which machine is more awesome? And two: would I emerge from this project with my sanity intact?

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