

Document Citation

Title	Aces high
Author(s)	Jack Pitman
Source	<i>Variety</i>
Date	1976 May 26
Type	review
Language	English
Pagination	18
No. of Pages	1
Subjects	
Film Subjects	Aces high, Gold, Jack, 1976

Variety

Aces High (BRITISH-COLOR)

World War One aerial dog-fights overshadow study of men under stress. Fine action sequences. Looms a good b.o. prospect.

London, May 20.

EMI Films release (Cine Artists in U.S.-Canada) of an S. Benjamin Fisz production, produced by S. Benjamin Fisz. Stars Malcolm McDowell, Christopher Plummer, Simon Ward. Directed by Jack Gold. Screenplay, Howard Barker (inspired by R.C. Sheriff's play, "Journey's End"); camera (Technicolor), Gerry Fisher; aerial photography, Peter Allwork; editor, Anne Coates; music, Richard Hartley; set decoration, Syd Caine; special effects, Derek Meddings; associate producer, Basil Keys; assistant director, Derek Cracknell; technical advisers, Air Commodore Alan Wheeler, Group Capt. Dennis David. Reviewed at ABC-1 theatre, London, May 19, '76. Running time: 114 MINS.

Gresham	Malcolm McDowell
Sinclair	Christopher Plummer
Crawford	Simon Ward
Croft	Peter Firth
Headmaster	John Gielgud
Lt.-Col. Silkin	Trevor Howard
Col Lyle	Richard Johnson
Brig. Whale	Ray Milland
Thompson	David Wood
Bennett	David Daker
Wade	Elliott Cooper
Croft's girlfriend	Pascale Christophe
Chanteuse	Jeanne Patou

Anyone for World War One air warfare nostalgia? Devotees of same should dig "Aces High" which offers splendidly-staged dogfight footage, the best since "The Battle of Britain." Largely on the basis of those aerial acrobatics, the S. Benjamin Fisz production, fortified by strong male casting, is likely to reap nice early returns in the general market, though its ultimate boxoffice fate seems more uncertain.

The Anglo-French feature, shot entirely in England, was meant as a study of men under stress and how they cope. The human interaction, however, is less arresting than the aerial ditto. Howard Barker's scenario is polished story-telling but lapses into oldfashioned narrative habits and some rather pat characterization. Jack Gold's direction, while competent, seems without distinction.

Pic is based on R. C. Sheriff's 1929 London and Broadway stageplay, "Journey's End," a classic on the theme of the futility and boredom of trench warfare in which some men cracked up while others found ways — like the bottle — of averting crackup. "Aces High" packs little of the involving emotional credibility and impact of the play, which was revived in London a few years ago.

Characterization in the film is without sufficient ambiguity and dimension. Thus, the young British airmen of 76 Squadron are either bushy-tailed rookies (Peter Firth), disciplined but emotionally soft (Christopher Plummer), or scared stiff and bucking for medical discharge (Simon Ward). As their squadron leader, Malcolm McDowell is both brave and scared — and dependent on whisky to sustain him as a credible leader of machine-gun fodder.

How they act, react and interact is virtually foregone over the seven days covered by the story, which ranges from battle to base bonhomie to rest-and-recreation nights with booze and mamselles in a nearby French town. Some touching, amusing or depressing vignettes transpire, but overall the pic doesn't generate the same tension or expanding sense of war's folly that the play developed.

But what it lacks on those counts may be compensated for, in spades, for most audiences by those crackling dogfight sequences as photographed by Peter Allwork and directed by Derek Cracknell. The best of the bunch, naturally, is saved for the climax — a corker that

culminates with a head-on collision between German and English fighter craft, killing young Firth.

McDowell may strike some as a bit young himself for the part of squadron leader, but he pours a lot of conviction into it just the same. Firth's character as the callow pilot is perhaps the most appealing, also the best-shaded under Gold's direction, while Ward struggles earnestly to create a certain sympathy for his one-note character. Plummer, who also gets killed, is the squad's number two in command, an avuncular chap (even nicknamed "Uncle"), which means he plays piano for community singing when he's not befriending Firth.

There are brief "special guest appearances" by John Gielgud as a pious school headmaster, and by Ray Milland, Trevor Howard and Richard Johnson as GHQ brass poring over field maps or dining in gluttonous style — a harkback to "Paths of Glory" which created a dramatically stronger sense of aloof and cynical military leadership.

Excellent in support are David Wood and Elliott Cooper as fellow airmen, David Daker as a corporal-factotum, and Pascale Christophe as a sexy French lass who delicately brings Firth's virginity to an end.

Much of the pic was photographed at an abandoned military airfield in England, with interiors at the EMI Elstree lot in suburban London. Gerry Fisher's photography and Syd Caine's set decoration make it atmospherically impressive. Richard Hartley's score consists mostly of martial airs, presumably meant to counterpoint the human grief and waste.

— D.+