Revista Brasileira de Estudos da Canção – ISSN 2238-1198
Natal, n.5, jan-jun 2014. Disponível em: www.rbec.ect.ufrn.br

# Live To Fly, Fly To Live:
# The Myth of the Battle of Britain in Iron Maiden's "Aces High"

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**Abstract:** Throughout its career, Iron Maiden has released several songs about war, most of which present a critical stance towards it. However, "Aces High", a 1984 song from Powerslave, seems to differ in this aspect. This article intends to present and explain this substantial difference in perspective, under the light of contemporary studies in war literature, especially the concept of "war myth" as devised by Samuel Hynes and of "functions of war literature", proposed by Catherine Brosman, and to discuss the historical significance of the Battle of Britain in 1940, upon which "Aces High" was based.
Keywords: War literature; Battle of Britain; Myth of War; Iron Maiden.

**Resumo:** Ao longo de sua carreira, o Iron Maiden lançou diversas canções sobre guerra, a maior parte das quais apresenta uma postura crítica. "Aces High", uma canção do álbum Powerslave (1984), contudo, aparenta ser diferente nesse aspecto. Este artigo pretende apresentar e explicar essa diferença substancial de perspectiva, sob a luz de estudos contemporâneos em literatura de guerra, especialmente do conceito de "mito de guerra" como concebido por Samuel Hynes e de "funções da literatura de guerra", proposto por Catherine Brosman, e a discutir a significância histórica da Batalha da Inglaterra em 1940, na qual "Aces High" é inspirada.
Palavras-chave: Literatura de guerra; Batalha da Inglaterra; mito de guerra; Iron Maiden.

When studying war, especially through the lenses of literary criticism – which confront us with the inner conflicts and traumas of its victims – one cannot help but wonder: after all the horrors of modern warfare, the trenches and the mustard gas of the First World War, the Blitz, the massacre of My Lai, why do young people still willingly join the armed forces and go to war?

This is, of course, not a simple question. Though no easy answer can be given, one must note the apparent fascination that war exerts in the popular imagination. Despite the fact that wars account for hundreds of deaths every year, something about them seems to have a hold on people's imagination. James Winn (2008), as cited by Luiz Gustavo Vieira (2013) uses an excerpt of the W. B. Yeats poem "Easter 1916" to present a beautiful metaphor for the representation of war: "A terrible beauty is born" (VIEIRA, 2013, p.19). The oxymoron "terrible beauty" seems to account for the seductive and yet terrifying nature of war.

Norris (2000) mentions how war stories – films, books, myths, songs – play a determinate role in crafting the willingness to go to war. When going to war, soldiers take with them their own expectations and illusions of war, often crafted by their readings. Norris cites Stephen Crane's *Red*

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*Badge of Courage*, in which the "soldiers mentally carry Homer's *Illiad* into the Civil War with them" (NORRIS, 200, p.24). The American journalist Michael Herr also illustrates this feature well:

> I keep thinking about all the kids who got wiped out by seventeen years of war movies before coming to Vietnam to get wiped out for good. You don't know what a media freak is until you've seen the way a few of those grunts would run around during a fight when they knew there was a television crew nearby; they were actually making war movies in their heads, doing little guts-and-glory Leatherneck tap dances under fire, getting their pimples shot off for the networks. (HERR, 1980, p. 223)

Apart from the fascination created by war stories in general, the grandiloquence of the event of war must also be accounted for the "beauty" of the "terrible beauty". Vieira (2013) cites Hemingway's letter to F. Scott Fitzgerald, in which he explains why war is "the writer's best subject": "it groups the maximum of material and speeds up the action and brings out all sorts of stuff that normally you have to wait a lifetime to get"(HEMINGWAY *apud* VIEIRA, 2013, p.20).

Whatever the reason for the allure of the war theme, the fact is that, in art, it has inspired generations of poets, writers, musicians, painters and all sorts of cultural products. Heavy Metal was not an exception. From the early days of the genre, heavy metal featured war as one of its dominant themes. From Black Sabbath's "War Pigs" (1990), first released in 1970, to Sabaton's "A Lifetime of War" (2012), going through Marduk's "Panzer Division Marduk" (1999) and Saxon's "Machine Gun" (2009), first released in 1980, the link between the genre and the theme is undeniable. Iron Maiden, the most influential band of the New Wave of British Heavy Metal, does not escape from this tradition: on the contrary, it is one of its most illustrative examples.

From as early as the band's third album, *The Number of the Beast* (2002), originally released in 1982, the band's songs have often featured lyrics which deal with the theme of war – be it medieval wars, as in "Invaders" (2002), or very contemporary conflicts like the Gulf War, in "Afraid to Shoot Strangers" (2002), originally released in 1991. The band's leader and bassist, Steve Harris, seems to be responsible for a large part of this tendency, as he wrote many of these songs.

A recurring aspect of Harris' lyrics about war is a somewhat critical stance towards it. Unlike some metal bands such as Manowar or Dark Funeral, several of Iron Maiden's lyrics attempt to convey the horrifying nature of war, especially for the young soldiers who take part in them. "Afraid to Shoot Strangers" (2002), "Paschendale" (2003) and "The Trooper" (2002), originally released in 1983, are a few examples.

However, one exception stands out: "Aces High", the opening track of the 1984 album *Powerslave* (2002). Dealing with one of the most important battles of the Second World War, the Battle of Britain (1940), in which the British Royal Air Force (RAF) resisted bravely against the

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German occupying air force, the Luftwaffe, "Aces High" doesn't bear in its lyrics any element of the critical stance present in other songs. This article will attempt to explain this fact.

In order to present and discuss "Aces High" and compare it to other Iron Maiden songs about war, I will draw on already existing theory of war literature and war narratives, especially Samuel Hynes' concept of "myth of war", as present in his books *The Soldiers' Tale: Bearing Witness to Modern War* (1997) and *A War Imagined: The First World War and English Culture* (2011). By exploring the "myth" of the Battle of Britain and of the fighter pilots of the RAF during the Second World War, I will attempt to evidence how strongly a myth of war might influence the attitude of an artist born long after the war's end.

**The functions of war literature**

Catherine Brosman (2009), in her article "The Functions of War Literature", proposes four different categories which describe certain "functions" that war literature might assume: aesthetic, social, moral, and psychological. These functions are not all self-excludent and, in fact, several texts present two or more of these functions together. Neither are they limited to describing war "literature", but several different expressions of war narratives.

A thorough description of each function is not necessary for the purposes of this article, since only one of them will be used. However, these four functions can be loosely summarized as such:

- Aesthetic function: a function which is "intrinsic to and underlines" war literature, it can be summarized as the function of attempting to convey through form the subjective experience of war, as opposed to official "war history", which often leaves the subjectivity out of its representation (BROSMAN, 2009, p. 85-86);
- Moral function: simply put, it describes the function of "exhorting" people to war, by glorifying and mythologizing human conflicts, so as to create – especially in young men – a willingness to go to war, inspired by these narratives and their characters. (BROSMAN, 2009, p. 87-89);
- Social function: quite the opposite of the "moral" function, it is present in narratives which attempt to denounce and expose the injustices, contradictions and horrors of the war – often by claiming to tell war "as it is", and not as it is supposed to be. (BROSMAN, 2009, p. 89);
- Psychological function: in the words of Brosman herself, it is "literature as a way of resolving, or attempting to resolve, war experiences whose recurring trauma must be relived, reexamined, and, through an apparent catharsis, accepted" (BROSMAN, 2009, p. 90).

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As previously mentioned, most Iron Maiden songs take a critical stance towards war, and often denounce it – not rarely by using rather explicit poetic images. As an illustration, a few examples can be cited: "The Trooper" ("And as I lay there gazing at the sky/My body's numb and my throat is dry/And as I lay forgotten and alone/Without a tear I draw my parting groan")(2002); "Paschendale" (Blood is falling like the rain/its crimson cloak unveils again/the sound of guns can't hide their shame/and so we die in Paschendale)(2003)[2]; or "Fortunes of War", originally released in 1995 ("I'm scared for life/But it's not my flesh that's wounded/So how can I face the torment alone/The vivid scenes and all the recurring nightmares/I lay there and sweat until it gets light")(2002), for instance.

Several other examples could be described, but they are beside the point for now. The point is that most Iron Maiden songs fit really well into the category of "social function" defined by Brosman. In fact, when describing the several ways authors achieve the "social function", she mentions the approach to gore and destruction, which features prominently in those songs:

> Insisting lengthily upon the gore, the fear, the terrible conditions of existence, the wanton destruction – as so many writers of World War I and the Vietnam conflict did – at the expense of the supposed rationale for war and its possibilities of value or redeeming features goes even farther than an objective tone to undercut the notions of heroism and legitimate national interest (BROSMAN, 2009, p. 90).

But among all these critical lyrics, one song (at least) seems to be an exception: "Aces High". Its portrayal of the air conflict of the Battle of Britain sounds more like an action movie than like a war drama, to draw a simple comparison. In this sense, it seems to fit more in the "moral" function than in the "social" function, if one is to use Brosman's categories. For the argument's sake, it is better to present the entire lyrics before discussing them:

> There goes the siren that warns of the air raid
> Then comes the sound of the guns sending flak
> Out for the scramble we've got to get airborne
> Got to get up for the coming attack.
>
> Jump in the cockpit and start up the engines
> Remove all the wheel blocks there's no time to waste
> Gathering speed as we head down the runway
> Gotta get airborne before it's too late.
>
> Running, scrambling, flying
> Rolling, turning, diving, going in again
> Run, live to fly, fly to live, do or die
> Run, live to fly, fly to live. aces high.
>
> Move in to fire at the mainstream of bombers
> Let off a sharp burst and then turn away

2 For a more thorough semiotic analysis of "Paschendale", cf. YAN, 2013.

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Roll over, spin round and come in behind them
Move to their blindsides and firing again.

Bandits at 8 o'clock move in behind us
Ten ME-109s out of the sun
Ascending and turning our Spitfires to face them
Heading straight for them I press down my guns
(IRON MAIDEN, 2002)

In a first reading of the lyrics, several elements of differentiation from the other songs can be identified. The aforementioned "gore" and "destruction" elements of songs such as "Paschendale" and "The Trooper" are gone. We see no "bodies" or "corpses"; the conflict seems to be depersonalized. The enemy soldiers are not "people", "soldiers" or "Germans"; they are "bandits" and "ME-109s" (a reference to the Messerschmitt ME-109E, one of the most important Luftwaffe fighter planes, widely used in the Battle of Britain)(SULZBERGER, 1966, p.442).

While death is dramatized in all its horror in "Paschendale" ("blood is falling down like rain") and "The Trooper" ("my body is numb and my throat is dry"), it is not even cited in "Aces High". Even the act of killing, very personal in "The Trooper" ("You'll take my life, but I'll take yours too") is completely void of the "human element" in "Aces High": "Heading straight for them I press down my guns" - while "them" does not refer to "people", but to "planes" – the ME-109s.

Even the preparation for war, which is portrayed as terrible and unjust in "Afraid to Shoot Strangers"(1992) ("Lying awake at night I wipe the sweat from my brow/But it's not the fear/'cos I'd rather go now/Trying to visualize the horrors that will lay ahead/The desert sand mound/a burial ground") is seen as somewhat thrilling in "Aces High", as if taken from an action film montage: "Jump in the cockpit and start up the engines/Remove all the wheel blocks there's no time to waste/Gathering speed as we head down the runway/Gotta get airborne before it's too late!".

The song's chorus is itself very different from the other songs; while the strongest verse in Paschendale is "We die in Paschendale"; and in "Afraid to Shoot Stranger" and "Die with your Boots on" are the titles themselves, "Aces High" most prominent verse is "Run/Live to fly/Fly to live/Do or die". Combat, here, is not a terrible and senseless burden that inevitably leads to death; it is quite the opposite: the condition not to die.

The question remains, though: why does "Aces High" seem to fall under the category of "moral function" of war literature while other Iron Maiden songs about war can be defined as belonging to the "social function"? In order to attempt to answer the question, it is necessary first to contextualize exactly what the Battle of Britain was.

**"So many owe so much to so few"**

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By July of 1940, France had succumbed to the advances of the Third Reich's war machine. The USA kept their policy of not intervening in Europe's conflicts. The Molotov-Ribbentrop Pact, the non-aggression pact between Germany and the USSR, was still standing. England stood alone against Hitler's army.

The *American Heritage Picture History of World War II* summarizes the scenario as such:

> On July 16, the *Führer* ordered secret preparations for Operation Sea Lion, a landing on England's southern coast. (…) After a heavy *Luftwaffe* raid on [British] Channel convoys and southern British ports, it became clear that a new kind of battle, a purely aerial assault, had been launched against the resolute British.
>
> The numerical odds were most adverse. Churchill's R.A.F. had but 704 serviceable aircraft, 620 of which were taut little Hurricane and Spitfire fighters. The Germans possessed 1,392 bombers and 1,290 fighters deployed for immediate action. (...)Nine days later, Göring decided that 50 percent of British Fighter Command had been destroyed, and he began to throw the Luftwaffe against London itself. (...)he hoped to smash the huge imperial center. And indeed, he nearly succeeded. When the *Luftwaffe* shifted to night bombing tactis on September 7, almost one fourth of the R.A.F.'s pilots had been lost (SULZBERGER, 1966, p. 98).

This became known as the "Battle of Britain", and was summarized by Churchill in one of his most famous wartime speeches: "Never in the field of human conflict was so much owed by so many to so few" (SULZBERGER, 1966, p.110). Indeed, the heroic efforts of the RAF pilots allowed them to take down two German fighters from each one they lost – a fact also made possible by the use of the then-novelty technology of radar. (SULZBERGER, 1966, p. 106) Eventually, the Luftwaffe changed tactics and started the *Blitz*: the systematic bombing of civilian and industrial regions (especially London and Coventry), with the purpose of lowering civilian morale. But, as the *American Heritage* tells it, "London and its people had more staying power than the German Air Force; though battered, the city was alive and vital when all *Luftwaffe* raids ceased in June, 1941" (SULZBERGER, 1966, p. 112).

Or so the story goes. This description of the conflict does not encompass the entirety of the event. By reading the paragraphs above, one cannot perceive that these efforts were, in fact, a defeat for the British – though they resisted long. One also cannot understand the condition under which Londoners lived before and how the Blitz left them, and the impact which the Battle of Britain had on the RAF. The paragraphs above tell the "Myth" of the event, but do not tell the event itself. The concept of "war myth" will be explained shortly, but firstly it is advisable to analyze another side of the conflict.

The events of the British resistance (the Battle of Britain, the Blitz and, a little before that, the Dunkirk evacuation) became a symbol of the British people's alleged resilience, captured in the

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now-famous wartime British motto "Keep calm and carry on". However, contemporary historiography seems to suggest otherwise:

> The standard story is that Britons 'took it' all because of their intrinsic virtue and their commitment to king, country, empire and freedom. But research discovers 'a massive, largely unconscious cover-up of the more disagreeable facts of 1940-41' (HARRISSON, p.25). Very many instances of panic, despair and disaffection are recorded. Vera Brittain remarked that bombed-out people may appear calm on newsreels, but 'if people who have lost their homes, been blown up, injured, burned or buried were to be interviewed forty-eight hours later, the results would not always be so useful to the Sunshine Press" (BRITTAIN, p.145) Even this is naive: material for newsreels was carefully selected (Marwick, *Social Impact*). One government anxiety was that people would stop going to work. However, as Harrisson points out, people were so poor and unemployment with such a fear that they had to work to earn, whether they felt patriotic or not (SINFIELD, 1997, p. 8-9).

How come does Alan Sinfield's description differs so much from that of the *American Heritage*? And, more importantly for this article, why does Steve Harris fail to contemplate any of these negative aspects of the facts of 1940-41' in the lyrics of "Aces High"? The answer is that, all in all, "Aces High" doesn't achieve a rupture with the "myth" of the Battle of Britain.

**The myth of war**

The concept of "myth of war" as used in the present article is drawn from Samuel Hynes, and is better understood through his own words:

> By "myth" I don't mean a fabrication or fiction; I mean rather the simplified narrative that evolves from a war, through which it is given meaning: a Good War, a Bad War, a Necessary War. Myths seem to be socially necessary, as judgments or justifications of the terrible costs of war, but they take their shape at the expense of the particularity and ordinariness of experience, and the inconsistencies and contradictions of human behaviour. The myth of a war tells what is imaginable and manageable" (HYNES, 1997, p. xiii).

In his book on the First World War, *A War Imagined*, Hynes gives a slightly different definition, complementary to this first one:

> I use that phrase [Myth of the War] in this book to mean not a falsification of reality, but an imaginative version of it, the story of the war that has evolved and has come to be accepted as true. The construction of that story began during the war, and grew in the years that followed, assimilating along the way what was compatible with its judgements, and rejecting what was not. The Myth is not the War entire: it is a tale that confirms a set of attitudes, and idea of what the war was and what it meant.(...)
>
> This story [the Myth of the First World War] has been told in many ways: in histories of the war, in fictions and memoirs, in poems, in plays, in paintings, in

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> films; but its essential elements remain much the same.(HYNES, 2011, loc. 72-83)[3]

The myth of war is, then, a powerful ideological and historical narrative. A quick summary of the myth of the First World War as described by Hynes is, for example, very much compatible with the lyrics of "Paschendale":

> (...) a generation of innocent young men, their heads full of high abstractions like Honour, Glory and England, went off to war to make the world safe for democracy. They were slaughtered in stupid battles planned by stupid generals. Those who survived were shocked, disillusioned and embittered by their war experiences, and saw that their real enemies were not the Germans, but the old men at home who had lied to them. They rejected the values of the society that had sent them to war, and in doing so separated their own generation from the past and from their cultural inheritance. (HYNES, 2011, loc. 72)

The myth of the Second World War, however, differs greatly from that of the First World War. The scale of the horrors perpetrated by the Third Reich – especially the Holocaust – has made the conflict be historically acknowledged as a "Good war", an "everybody's war" or, at the very least, a "necessary war." Unlike the loose ideas of "country" and "democracy" that attempted to win over the public's and soldier's minds in the First World War, the conflict of 1939-1945 managed to present a more palpable and drastic enemy to be fought: fascism. Once again, Hynes description is helpful and accurate:

> There was also a difference in moral authority. The First War began in idealism, but lost its moral certainty as the fighting ground on. The Second War began with a clearer sense of moral necessity, and never lost it. Most people accepted that Nazism was evil and, to a lesser degree and later, that the men who ran Japan were evil too. A war against those enemies was a "Good War" – a phrase that never became an oxymoron, not even at the end, though by then sixty million human beings had died. (HYNES, 1997, p. 111)

This fact might explain why the lyrics to "Aces High" have such a different approach to war than those of "Paschendale": each lyric is coherent to the myth of its own war.

However, this can be contested: several Iron Maiden songs are critical of wars other than the First World War, and not all of them are held by their myths as "unjust wars". An example worth a second look is the already discussed 1992 song "Afraid to Shoot Strangers".

In the live album *Live at Donington* (2002), recorded in 1992 (but released in 1993), during the *Fear of the Dark Tour*, Bruce Dickinson briefly explains the lyrics of the song, by saying that

3 For the writing of this article, I have used an e-book version of *A War Imagined* for the e-book reader Kindle. Since the typography of its software is variable, there is no specific "page" to be cited – instead, there are "locations", since page numbers vary. As there are still no standardized ABNT or MLA norms for the citation of Kindle excerpts, I have chosen to cite them as "loc.", as in "location".

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"[this song] was written about the people that fought in the Gulf War. It's a song about how shitty war is, and how shitty war is that it's started by politicians and has to be finished by ordinary people that don't really want to kill anybody" (IRON MAIDEN, 2002). This is received with cheerful applause by the audience, which seems to be in resonance with widespread protests throughout the USA during the time of the war and with a feeling of revolt felt by journalists and war correspondents due to the widespread censorship in American media coverage of the conflict, as seen in articles and headlines of the time such as "AFTER THE WAR; Keeping the News in Step: Are the Pentagon's Gulf War Rules Here to Stay?" (DePARLE, 2014) or "WAR IN THE GULF: Antiwar Rallies; DAY OF PROTESTS IS THE BIGGEST YET" (APPLEBOME, 2014), both originally published in 1991. However, although there were anti-war segments of the population, both articles admit that the American public opinion was majorly favorable towards the conflict, as evidenced in excerpts like "the broad public support for the war effort may have accounted for the scarcity of officials and public figures who attended the protest in Washington today"(APPLEBOME, 2014).

In "Afraid to Shoot Strangers", then, Iron Maiden presents an anti-war song, released contemporaneously to the conflict it deals with, in a time when public opinion seemed to be favorable to the war. One might argue that, being a British group, Iron Maiden was not that much influenced by the war propaganda machine that was the US media at the time, which would allow them to go against the "myth in the making" of the Gulf War – this is a valid argument. The "national" element would seem to work alongside the "mythical" one in the shaping of the song lyrics.

However, if that was the case, a song like "The Trooper" would also be uncritical towards war, since it deals with a conflict involving British troops: the Crimean War. Its lyrics are, however, considerably full of gore, destruction and disillusion. How come?

The fact is, though some verses of the song hint at a criticism of "war itself" by attempting to "equalize" the speaker with the enemy, ("but it in this battlefield no one wins", "you'll take my life but I'll take yours too"), this approach doesn't go too far in the song, since further mentions of the Russians seem to identify them as aggressors: "The horse he sweats with fear, we break to run/The mighty roar of the Russian guns"; "We hurdle bodies that lay on the ground/ And the Russians fire another round"; and "We get so close near enough to fight/When a Russian gets me in his sights/He pulls the trigger and I feel the blow/A burst of rounds take my horse below". This might be explained by the fact that "The Trooper" is actually inspired by Alfred, Lord Tennyson's poem "The Charge of the Light Brigade", which describes a failed offensive of the British army in the Crimean War which resulted in heavy casualties. This poem became, possibly,

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the most well-known narrative of that war, and the event itself was adapted twice into movies, one in 1936 and the other in 1968, both named after the poem. With this is mind, it is possible to say that, once again, the lyrics of the song are still coherent with the "myth" of the battle, since their tone is considerably similar to that of Tennyson's poem.

The "national" element, in itself, then, does not explain the peculiarity of "Aces High". An alternative would be to argue that the myth of the "Good War" which surrounds the Second World War is so strong and ingrained that the myth itself might be solely held responsible for the song's tone. Even so, counter-examples still can be found.

"The Longest Day", a track from the 2006 album *A Matter of Life and Death* deals with the D-Day, the invasion of Normandy by the Allies, which began the final decisive Allied advance that would ultimately lead to the end of the war in Europe. The theme of the song can be inferred by a few different elements: the title, which has become an epithet for the Normandy landings (present, for example, in a 1959 book by Cornelius Ryan and a 1962 film based on the book, which deal with D-Day); the description of the approach to the beaches during rainy weather (the arrival at Normandy was during the rainy season) (SULZBERGER, 1966, p. 483); and the verse "Overlord, your master not your god", which hints at the official name of the offensive: Operation Overlord. (SULZBERGER, 1966, p. 307).

But even though "The Longest Day" deals with the same war as "Aces High" – and with an event as mythologized as the Battle of Britain –, the 2006 song presents several elements of the "horrors of war" that are absent in "Aces High". To cite a few excerpts: "And we rush with the tide/Oh the water is red,/With the blood of the dead/But I'm still alive, pray to God I survive"; "The rising dead, faces bloated torn/They are relieved, the living wait their turn/Your number's up, the bullet's got your name"; "These wretched souls puking, shaking fear/To take a bullet for those who sent them here"; among others. The same aforementioned elements which link other songs to the "social function" of war stories are present here. Apparently, the distinctive element that sets "Aces High" apart from the other songs is not the myth of the "Good War" which surrounds the Second World War either.

Another possible argument is that "Aces High" deals with a specific kind of combat – aerial combat – which is deeply impersonal, and would therefore allow a narrative which disregards the gruesome and horrifying aspects of war. The action doesn't take place between two soldiers, but between planes. This argument indeed finds resonance in Hynes' discussion of fighter pilots narratives:

> The essential fighter pilot's story is there [in D.M. Crook's novel *Spitfire Pilot*]: the rush of the attack, the fascination with the kill, the invisible dead. And as so often in those stories, the thing that dies, the "he" of the passage, is not the German pilot

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> but the plane. In the wars between machines, it's the machines that are mortal.(...) The Spitfire in particular became more than a machine in the Battle of Britain; it became an animate, courageous combatant. (HYNES, 1997, p. 125)

But even this aspect does not explain by itself the peculiarities of "Aces High", since "Tailgunner" (2002), originally released in 1990, is also a song that deals with aerial combat in the Second World War – more specifically, with one of the functions in bomber planes, that of the "tail gunner", the soldier who mounted a machine gun in the rear part of the plane in order to shoot down enemy planes. In the song, the tail gunner seems to have taken part in at least two of the most important bombings of the war: the bombing of Dresden in 1945 (SULZBERGER, 1966, p. 420) and the bombing of Hiroshima, as evidenced, respectively, in the verses "Trace your way back fifty years/to the glow of Dresden – blood and tears" and "The Enola Gay was my last try" – the Enola Gay being the B-29 bomber which dropped the atom bomb in Hiroshima (SULZBERGER, 1966. p. 616). And even though "Tailgunner" is a song about aerial combat in the Second World War, it manages to bring up elements of criticism that are absent in "Aces High". To cite a few: "Who shot who and who fired first?"; "Nail that Fokker, kill that son./I'm gonna blow your guts out with my gun" and the chorus itself, which can be read as a comment on the uncritical attitude of soldiers following orders: "Climb into the sky never wonder why / Tailgunner / You're a Tailgunner". The song's final lines also denounce contemporary war and hint at the horrors of nuclear conflict: "Now that this Tailgunner's gone,/ No more bombers, just one big bomb".

But even if both "Aces High" and "Tailgunner" seem to deal with the same subject (aerial conflict in the Second World War), the fact is that the former deals with the perspective of a fighter pilot, which is substantially different than that of a bomber crew, which is the case of the latter. Hynes, once again, discusses the subject:

> War in a small machine could be romantic; war in a big one couldn't. For the men in the heavy bombers, the Lancasters and Liberators and Flying Fortresses that put the concept of strategic bombing into practice, flying was more fearful than exciting. Their stories do not tell the pleasure of simply being up there, or of the satisfaction that lies in the pure skill of flying or of the adrenal rush that an attack on an enemy plane gives. The acts of war in which they engage are not personal.
>
> These differences are inherent in the kind of war that the bombers waged: many men in a crew, only one of whom has control over the machine that carries them; many planes in a formation that is itself like a huge machine, fixed and symmetrical, each plane maintaining its position in the pattern, opening its bomb doors when the plane ahead does, dropping its bombs when the leader drops, returning home still in formation.
>
> (...) It's not surprising that the men who were there in the bombers didn't feel the exhilaration of battle or think as [Richard] Hillary [author of *The Last Enemy*, a fighter pilot novel] did, about killing well. To judge from their narratives, they flew

Revista Brasileira de Estudos da Canção – ISSN 2238-1198
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> in a spirit of tense waiting, maintaining it through the long hours of those flights until the burst of action over the target, when the flak and the ME-109s came up. (HYNES, 1997, p. 130-131)

Although the difference between "fighter pilots" and "bomber crews" might account for the disparity between "Aces High" and "Tailgunner", the fact is that "Tailgunner" does not contemplate in its lyrics the aspects of "bomber crew" narratives exemplified by Hynes. None of the technical aspects on the excerpt above are noticeable in "Tailgunner". Furthermore, the idea of killing and of death itself present in the song ("Dripping death to whet the bloodthirst"; and "I'm gonna blow your guts out with my gun") is very different from most narratives of air war – including both fighters and bombers, as Hynes points out:

> Soldiers remember and retell the deaths of their comrades with a terrible exactness – where a man was hit, how he fell, the bloody details of spilled brains and dismembered limbs. Fliers don't do that, exactly: they remember the deaths of planes. In a battle of machines, it's the machines that are hit, stagger, fall to earth; it's their deaths that are visible and dramatic. The men who are in them die invisibly, and because machines die in flames, they leave no corpses. (HYNES, 1997, p. 134)

And this is not restricted to bombers:

> The passage I have quoted [from Elmer Bendiner's *The Fall of Fortresses*] is from a bomber narrative, but you will find similarly vivid accounts of the deaths of planes in fighter pilots' memoirs from both wars. (...)Accounts of the actual deaths of men, on the other hand, tend to be laconic and emptied of feeling: "From this flight Bubble Waterson did not return" and "There was no sign of him at all, and his body was never recovered. (HYNES, 1997, p 135)

Death, in "Tailgunner", is portrayed very differently from these narratives. It is a "dripping death" that comes by "blowing guts out" and "whets a bloodthirst". It is a very organic and gory death. It is the death of a human, not of a plane. There are no flames or metal, but plenty of blood and guts.

The critical tone of "Tailgunner", then, cannot be associated with the mere fact of it being a "bomber" narrative, because it features critical elements absent in the myth of air combat. Therefore, the distinctive characteristic of "Aces High" which renders its "moral function" does not reside in it being a song about aerial conflict.

The question that motivated this article remains, then, unanswered. Why is the approach to war in "Aces High" so different from that of most Iron Maiden songs about war? The fact is that there is no single answer. All the elements drawn in this article combine to form the underlying tone of the song. It is an uncritical song because it is surrounded by the myth of the "Good War";

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because it deals with a British conflict; because it is set in air combat; because it focuses on fighter pilots. All these factors work together in a way that actually can be summarized in one single distinctive element: the myth of the Battle of Britain.

**The myth of the Battle of Britain**

Throughout the article, I have presented several elements of the Battle of Britain. It was the first ever solely aerial combat in the history of human warfare. It was a heroic resistance, in a situation in which the odds were highly against the British. It shaped – along with the Dunkirk retreat and the Blitz – the very idea of a British national identity, evoked in the idea of the "spirit of Dunkirk": a resilience and ability to turn defeats into victories which would be considered a "British talent" (SINFIELD, 1997, p. 23).

Even though (as previously mentioned) this narrative of the events that took place between 1940 and 1941 does not correspond to the "truth", it has been successfully transformed into "myth". The RAF pilots became known as "a new breed of warrior" (SULZBERGER, 1966, p. 110), the RAF itself became a British symbol, being even adopted later by the "mod" movement in the mid-1960's. RAF memorabilia can be easily found in souvenir shops around London nowadays, and the Spitfire itself was even transformed into a beer motif.[4]

"Aces High" is another evidence of the sheer strength of the myth. Iron Maiden was never a band to avoid controversial topics. The cover of their early single album "Sanctuary" (1980) featured their mascot Eddie killing the British Prime-Minister Margareth Thatcher. They withstood accusations of being a satanist band, due to songs like "The Number of the Beast"(2002), originally released in 1982. The band even dared to position itself somewhat critically towards the conflict on the Malvinas Islands, in the song "Como Estais Amigos" (2002), originally released in 1998. But the Battle of Britain stands, even for a group such as this, as hallowed ground. It was not out of "fear" of disapproval or censorship that the song turned out how it did, though. It was due to the practically inevitable social and historical strength of the myth – so strong, not even a rock'n'roll group, forty-four years after the event, could escape its grasp.

The myth of war, as Hynes puts it, begins "during the war, and grows in the years that followed". "Aces High" is an example of how continuously and enduring is the construction of the myth.

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4 The "Spitfire Kentish Ale" was released in commemoration for the 50th anniversary of the Battle of Britain, as explained in their official website http://www.spitfireale.co.uk/

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