



IWC revamped its Pilot's Watches collection last year, introducing a stealthy new Double Chronograph model, in black zirconium oxide ceramic. Ultra-desirable, the 1,000 pieces were snapped up, now followed by this 'Top Gun' edition, which is 2 mm wider and bears the tactical fighter school's plane motif on the sweep-seconds hands.

Danger Zone

Feel the need, the need for speed? IWC leaves the world of vintage aviation and gets up there with the best of the best: Top Gun!

Simon de Burton

The slumbering citizens of San Diego probably assumed that the gleaming motorcade of one Humvee and six Chevrolet Escalades, all gloss-black and privacy-glazed, was rushing towards Coronado Naval Base on an urgent mission to avert an impending threat to homeland security. As such, they might have forgiven us for waking them at 6:30am with the wailing sirens of motorcycle cops, tasked with ensuring our smooth passage across the city.

Those same citizens might not have been quite so understanding had they appreciated that this scene, reminiscent of a scene from *All The President's Men* was actually taking place in honour of nothing more threatening than a new wristwatch.

This demonstration of authority, organisation and not a little two-wheeled bravado on the part of the cops was but a small component of what must have been the most

extravagant and improbable watch launch in the history of timekeeping: one that involved commandeering the *USS Ronald Reagan* - a 95,000-ton nuclear-powered aircraft carrier, currently the most powerful warship ever built.

From the story so far you might well be thinking 'Breitling', but you'd be wrong. The watch in question is the latest version of IWC's sinister, black ceramic-cased Double Chronograph, introduced around about this time last year. The 44 mm split-seconds chrono, supplied on a soft, fabric strap, was produced to enhance IWC's rather 'traditional' range of flying watches - intentionally redolent of WWII dogfights and bandits at 4 o'clock - with something more appropriate for the jet age.

This version of the Double Chronograph takes things a step further because it is not merely a tribute to jet pilots, but those whom we are led to believe are the

finest in the world. This is the watch that, had it been introduced 20 years earlier, might have been product-placed around the g-suit cuffs of movie heroes Maverick, Ice, Goose and Jester. Yes, it's the official 'Top Gun' watch (cue Eighties power-ballad guitar riff).

Buzzing the tower

It differs from the first Double Chronograph in being 2 mm larger in diameter and, of course, by adding some unique features such as a 'Top Gun' logo on the back and red-tipped split-seconds hands that, when aligned, create the jet-fighter symbol of the celebrated Nevada-based 'fighter weapons school.'

IWC allegedly spent two years negotiating to combine the launch of the watch with a visit aboard the *Reagan*. At the time of our arrival, it was more than 100 miles offshore 'somewhere in the Pacific' and to get to it from Coronado we were strapped in to a C-2A 'Cod' (carrier on board delivery) transport aircraft.

The first indication of just how tough an environment this is for a wristwatch (or a human being, for that matter) came when we hit the deck on landing. In order to stay in the air, the 'plane must approach at around 105 mph, but when it touches down and 'hooks' on one of the three available arresting cables the speed drops to zero in a mere two seconds. Believe me, that sort of deceleration brings a whole new meaning to the expression 'shock resistance', and getting airborne is no less extreme as the 'planes take just one second longer to travel from 0 to 128 mph.



(Above) On the deck of the *USS Ronald Reagan* (or CVN-76). Note the three arrestor cables across the strip, onto which landing aircraft hook to decelerate. Pilots confirm their aircraft type and fuel state beforehand, so the cables' tension can be set hydraulically for the plane's landing weight. Too loose, and it goes over the edge; too tight and the plane is damaged.



Technical Specs

Pilot's Watch Double Chronograph 'Top Gun' Edition

Movement: Cal. 79230 self-winding chronograph with split-seconds function; 28,800 vph; 29 jewels

Power reserve: 44 h

Case: Ceramic and titanium; 46 mm diameter; sapphire crystal with anti-reflective coating secured against displacement by drop in air pressure; inner, antimagnetic soft-iron case

Water resistance: 60 m

Price: TBA (standard 44 mm version £6,150)

Availability: Due to go on sale summer 2007 at the earliest. Production NOT expected to be limited.



(Left and below) F/A-18 'Hornet' strike fighters on the *Ronald Reagan*. *Reagan* is powered by two nuclear reactors driving four screws, and can sail for 20 years before refuelling. The flight deck covers over 4.5 acres (18,000 m²) and she carries more than 5,500 sailors and over 80 aircraft at a maximum speed of 30 knots.

After that rude introduction to carrier life we were allowed to watch in awe as a steady succession of fighter, reconnaissance, surveillance, cargo, AWACS and anti-submarine aircraft were launched from the deck with the aid of steam-powered catapults before being 'trapped' on landing by the arresting cables. The experience amounted to a nuclear attack on the senses thanks to the intense heat, deafening noise, the salt spray from the ocean and the all-pervading sense that disaster could strike at any second.

Lunching with a few of the pilots afterwards, it quickly became apparent that flying watches are not all for show. All of those we spoke to said they wore a mechanical chronograph both as a reliable back-up to the electronic cockpit instruments (which are not, apparently, as infallible as one might expect) and as a survival tool in the event of a forced landing.

Each to a man (and a couple of women) pronounced the 'Top Gun' Double Chronograph a hit, but IWC boss Georges Kern's idea of equipping every qualified flyer looks like stalling on take-off: no member of the US armed forces is permitted to accept any gift valued at more than \$20.

"But that," confided Kern, "is something we are looking for a way around." ◯

What is 'Top Gun'?

Most people associate the Top Gun name with the 1986 movie starring Tom Cruise and Kelly McGillis which, despite its many far-fetched and cringeworthy moments, was surprisingly accurate. The Top Gun course is run from Fallon, Nevada, by the US Navy (entirely independent of the USAF) with the aim of honing the skills of especially talented combat pilots who have already demonstrated a high level of tactical ability. Officially known as the US Navy Strike Fighter Tactics Instructor Course, its focuses on mock air combat missions that are conducted under highly realistic conditions. Dogfights are staged in which pupils fly F-16 and F/A-18 aircraft against 'threat pilots' in MiG 29s who are trained to emulate the specific methods used by various different enemies. Despite what *Top Gun* the movie suggests, beach volleyball and songs around the piano are not part of the real syllabus. The actuality consists of 10 weeks of relentless study that begins daily at 5am with a three-and-a-half hour briefing session. This is followed by a maximum of two hours flying and a debrief that routinely lasts up to five-and-a-half hours. Graduates are required to return to their fleet as instructors, so an aptitude for teaching is one of the pre-requisites of being accepted onto the Top Gun course. The average age is between 28 and 32 and around 40 students graduate annually. As in the film, pilots are known by their call-signs, which are usually based upon flying-related incidents. 'Skids', for example, was given to one hapless pilot whose braking system failed on landing, while 'Flats' was allocated to another who suffered a double tyre blow-out on touchdown. No explanation was given for one female pilot who goes by the call-sign 'Puddles'...

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