

# Strategic Air Command

In 1955, Paramount Pictures released the second film in their new VistaVision format (film shot horizontally, exposing eight perfs instead of the standard four) – the first film had been *White Christmas*, which was a fairly set-bound film. But *Strategic Air Command*, with its extraordinary aerial footage and location shooting, VistaVision would really come into its own. The film was, in a word, breathtaking. Add to that a great cast headed by James Stewart, June Allyson, Frank Lovejoy, Barry Sullivan and Harry Morgan, the great cameraman William H. Daniels and a terrific screenplay by Valentine Davies (book and film of *Miracle on 34th Street*, *The Bridges at Toko-Ri*, *The Benny Goodman Story*, *The Glenn Miller Story*) and Beirne Lay Jr., and you had a recipe for success.

*Strategic Air Command* was one of less than a handful of films actually shown in true VistaVision (with special projection equipment) at their premiere engagements. James Stewart and Anthony Mann had done eight films together, all of them solid, entertaining and wonderful movies – *Winchester '73*, *Bend of the River*, *Thunder Bay*, *The Naked Spur*, *The Glenn Miller Story*, *The Far Country*, *The Man from Laramie*, and their final film together, *Strategic Air Command*. Theirs was a unique collaboration and one that was very rare in the film industry. Stewart and Allyson had also been paired on two previous occasions, for *The Stratton Story* and *The Glenn Miller Story*.

Briefly, *Strategic Air Command* is the story of Robert “Dutch” Holland (Stewart), a pro baseball player with the St. Louis Cardinals, who is also a member of the United States Air Force Reserve. He finds himself recalled for a twenty-one month stint of active duty. He reports to Carswell Air Force Base in Forth Worth, Texas, where he’s given a staff job with the bombardment wing. There, he becomes hooked on flying and the job he’s doing. Wife Sally (Allyson) joins him, but there is tension between them, as she had not really ever thought of a life as an Air Force wife, with all the absences and risks involved for her husband. Ultimately, to Sally’s dismay, he decides to stay in the Air Force rather than return to baseball at the end of his active duty. From there, much drama ensues, both personal and in the line of duty. Even though the film’s char-

acters and events are fictionalized, Stewart’s character was based on the real-life military career of Brigadier General Clifford Schoeffler.

Interestingly, James Stewart was a colonel in the Air Force Reserve, was later promoted to brigadier general and continued to fly well into his later years. He was determined that the movie give an honest but sympathetic portrayal of the SAC, which it does. Anthony Mann’s direction is superb and the flying sequences are breathtaking, with some of the greatest aerial photography ever filmed, rendered even more spectacular in Vista-Vision. The production values were A+ throughout. The film was made with the complete cooperation of the United States Air Force.

*Strategic Air Command* was the sixth-highest grossing picture of 1955. The *New York Times*’ Bosley Crowther began his review with, “Never, in many years of looking at Air Force and aviation films, have we seen the familiar wide blue yonder so wide or so magnificently displayed as it is in the VistaVision process used to project *Strategic Air Command*.” He continued to rave, “And what, one may ask, of the story that is told in this scenic display? That, too, deserves a share of the credit for the total impact of this film. For it is an adroitly sentimental and personalized tale of the sort that creates a nice dramatic profile of warm emotions against the background of machines. But above all, there are those airplanes, the roaring engines, the cluttered cockpits, the clouds and sky. These are the things that make your eyes bug out and your heart leap with wonder and pride.”

And one of the primary reasons the heart leaps with wonder and pride is the film’s stunning musical score by Victor Young. Young, born in 1900, moved to Hollywood in the 1930s, where he was musical director for many of Bing Crosby’s Decca recordings. He began his illustrious film career in 1936, eventually becoming one of Hollywood’s finest film composers. His body of work is astonishing, and includes such great scores as *Golden Boy*, *Reap the Wild Wind*, *The Glass Key*, *The Palm Beach Story*, *The Uninvited*, *The Great Moment*, *Ministry of Fear*, *Love Letters*, *To Each His Own*, *Golden Earrings*, *The Big Clock*, *State of the Union*, *The Paleface*, *The Night*

*Has a Thousand Eyes*, *Samson and Delilah*, *Gun Crazy*, *Bright Leaf*, *Rio Grande*, *Scaramouche*, *The Quiet Man*, *Shane*, *Three Coins in the Fountain*, *Johnny Guitar*, *The Country Girl*, *Around the World in Eighty Days*, and that is only the very tip of the Victor Young iceberg. He was certainly one of the most prolific composers in Hollywood history, sometimes scoring as many as ten films in one year. He received an astounding twenty-two Academy Award nominations and on two occasions he was nominated four times in a single year. More astoundingly, Young never won the Oscar in his lifetime – he died at the young age of 56 and won his only Oscar (for *Around the World in Eighty Days*) posthumously. He also composed the music for many hit songs which are now standards, including such classics as “When I Fall in Love,” “Moonlight Serenade,” “My Foolish Heart,” “Street of Dreams,” “Stella by Starlight,” “I Don’t Stand a Ghost of a Chance With You” and many others.

Young’s score for *Strategic Air Command* is one of his greats. It has everything you’d want in a score – a rousing main title march, beautiful and emotional music for the drama, and, above all, some of the greatest “flying” music ever written for the screen. Young’s scoring of the flying scenes virtually turns those sequences into ballets of flight, a sky symphony of enduring beauty.

This is the world premiere release of *Strategic Air Command*. The music masters were mono (the film was also mono, but its original engagements used the Perspecta soundtrack, a kind of fake stereo) and mostly in very good condition, housed in the Paramount vaults. A couple of tracks only existed on acetates (which we cleaned up as best we could), and a couple were too damaged to use at all.

There have not been nearly enough Victor Young scores released on CD, and we’re especially thrilled to bring out this particular example, as it presents all of Young’s strengths as a film composer and a brilliant melodist. They don’t come much better.

— Bruce Kimmel