

James Stewart

HOLLYWOOD'S GREATEST AVIATOR

JAMES STEWART'S TWO FLYING LIVES

One of the most famous screen actors of his generation, James Stewart combined the two abiding loves of his life — acting and aviation — in a long and illustrious career that took advantage of his considerable talents for both. **JAMES KIGHTLY** joins us in the front row for a look at the parallel passions of this Oscar-winning air combat veteran

BORN IN INDIANA, Pennsylvania, on May 20, 1908, James Maitland Stewart was passionate in equal measure about acting and aviation from an early age. His interest in the latter was sparked by a flight of a few minutes with an itinerant barnstormer. Inspired, the teen Stewart built (and crashed) his own aeroplane, thankfully without injury or dampening his ardour. In 1927 Charles Lindbergh's solo transatlantic flight captivated the young man. While studying to qualify in architecture at Princeton University (also his father's *alma mater*), he discovered an interest in acting — both theatrical and film.

GAINING WINGS

In the late 1930s, by now a success in Hollywood, and with more than 20 movies under his belt, Jimmy Stewart learned to fly at Mines Field (now Los Angeles International Airport), qualifying for his private pilot's licence in August 1938. In 1940 he bought his own factory-fresh Stinson 105, N26210, and continued to build his skills by also qualifying for a commercial pilot's licence.

Filming *The Philadelphia Story* with Katharine Hepburn in 1940, Stewart took her for a flight at her request. "From the time I started the engine, she asked about *everything*", he said. Given her previous relationship with Howard Hughes, she was well-informed, but didn't let up on Stewart with questions and advice. Her non-stop patter meant the distracted Stewart recalled the landing at the end was "more like a controlled crash".

At the same time, he invested (along with aviation-savvy Hollywood friends) in Southwest Airways to build Thunderbird Field at Glendale, Arizona, a commercial military pilot training centre for the US Army Air Corps (USAAC). While Stewart apparently took no active role in the development of Thunderbird Field (the buildings laid out when seen from the air form an Ancestral Puebloan Thunderbird), his university graduate architecture thesis at Princeton University had been the design of an airport.

THE FIGHT TO FIGHT

With Europe and much of Asia embroiled in war, and conflict likely to expand, Stewart was determined to serve to defend America — and in combat. All Stewart's forefathers had served in the military in times of war. Stewart was called up as No 310 in the very first of the re-established draft lotteries, called on October 29, 1940, later joking it was "the only lottery I've ever come close to winning". Although called, he was given a deferment as being underweight for his (significant) height. He was 6ft 3in (1.93m) and weighed only 150lb (68kg). Stewart appealed against the deferment, and enlisted in the US Army on March 22, 1941.

Already a pilot, he hoped to fly for the USAAC (US Army Air Forces — USAAF — from June 1941) but was still underweight for the latter's requirement; and, at 32, was beyond the cut-off age of 26 for pilot training. There are numerous anecdotes about how Stewart got past the Army's requirements, Stewart himself always being

OPPOSITE PAGE Jimmy Stewart didn't just act as a Strategic Air Command leader, he was one — Brigadier General James M. Stewart, USAF Reserve, circa 1968, late in his illustrious military career. Stewart was a keen advocate of aviation throughout his film career, his daughter saying "flying was an essential part of dad's soul".

