

# Freedom flyer

Brad Pitt, who plays Jesse James in his latest film, tells **Gabrielle Donnelly** about his own love of flying and how private air travel offers his family freedom from constant harrassment

**I** GOT MY PILOT'S licence a couple of years ago, and that was a big deal for me,' Brad Pitt tells me, when we meet in Los Angeles. 'Flying is this amazing marriage of human ability and nature and machine. There's freedom up there and also a real sense of accomplishment because something can go wrong at any moment, so there's a great need for focus and attention while you're in the air. It's a real pleasure to me, especially as I didn't learn to fly till I was past 40 – it's very rewarding to acquire a new skill at this age. I highly recommend it to anyone.'

It was his partner, Angelina Jolie, who introduced him to the world of aviation. She herself earned her own pilot's licence in 2004, reportedly at the insistence of her plane-mad son, Maddox, of whom she once said, 'If I could actually fly a plane, I'd be like Superman to him.' In 2005, she bought a Cirrus SR22 to transport herself and her ever-growing family on their trips around the world, and by the time she and Brad got together, later that same year, it seemed natural to both of them that Brad should learn to fly, too.

'We had this idea that we could throw the kids into the plane like you do into a car,' says Brad. 'It's really convenient; it means we have freedom – and it means we can't be followed by the paparazzi, which is the biggest plus of all!'

Brad has been dodging the paparazzi for well over a decade by now. William Bradley Pitt was born on 18 December, 1963, in Shawnee, Oklahoma, and raised, along with his brother Doug and sister Julie, in Springfield, Missouri, by his parents, William Alvin Pitt, who owned a truck company, and his wife, Jane, a high school counsellor. It was

a stable and happy upbringing for an all-American boy: he grew up playing sports, watching films like *Saturday Night Fever* ('I can still do the Hustle,' he notes today, proudly), following the Harlem Globetrotters, and idolising Evel Knievel.

Yet the difference between Brad and most of the other kids in Springfield was that Brad dreamed of something else. 'I'd only really seen my little corner of the world, which was Oklahoma and Missouri, and that was fine, but I knew from films and books that there were other ways to live, other ways to attack the world,' he says. 'It was a week before I was supposed to graduate from college that I decided to move away. I was studying at the

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Missouri School of Journalism in Columbia; everyone else on my course had applied for jobs and they were having offers and going for interviews and such, but I hadn't applied anywhere and I didn't really have a clue about what I wanted to do next. I'd always thought to myself, "Ah, I wish I'd grown up in New York or LA because there are such different opportunities there..." and one night it just occurred to me that I didn't have to sit around wishing, I could actually do it. I could go to the opportunity. Within the week, I

decided I was going to go to LA to work in film. I had no money, so I thought I'd work at whatever jobs I could take for a couple of weeks to get some pocket cash, then I'd load up the car and take off. And that's what I did. I didn't even finish my college course – I had a week's worth of classes left to take, but I didn't go to them, so I never graduated. And that's the way it went.'

He arrived in Los Angeles in 1987 with \$325 in his wallet and paid his acting dues for several years with small parts in small movies and TV sitcoms, supplementing his income with a little modelling work and, memorably, handing out free cigarette samples in front of a restaurant while dressed as a giant chicken. In 1991, he accepted a small role in the film *Thelma And Louise*, playing a young drifter who gave Geena Davis's Thelma her first-ever orgasm before making off with the contents of her bag. A career and a million women's lust-filled fantasies were born.

Beneath the corn-fed good looks, Brad is an accomplished and dedicated actor, who won an Oscar nomination for his work in *Twelve Monkeys*, and has proved himself as much at home playing a Northern Irish freedom fighter in *The Devil's Own* or a disaffected American husband in *Babel*, as he is in comedies such as *Ocean's 11* or *Mr & Mrs Smith*.

Nevertheless – and to his continuing frustration – it is his private life, rather than his professional, which has captured the public's attention. From 2000–2005, he and his wife, *Friends* star Jennifer Aniston, were featured in one or another gossip magazine almost every week, first being touted as the happiest couple in Hollywood, then dogged

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Clockwise from below: Brad Pitt and Angelina Jolie cruising on a motorbike while touring Ho Chi Minh City, Vietnam; Brad Pitt as Jesse James; at a press conference for the film *The Assassination of Jesse James*



by rumours of pregnancies which invariably proved false, and at last, sadly, by the news that they had split.

Then came the circus that is Brangelina and their ever-growing family. Brad is not about to complain about a life that he knows is one for which many would kill. But it is very far from a coincidence that his new film, *The Assassination Of Jesse James By The Coward Robert Ford* – the story of the last days of the legendary outlaw and his association with the man who shot him – is not so much a straightforward Western as an exploration of the notion of celebrity and the toll it can take on a person's life and character.

'Jesse James was a huge celebrity in America at one point,' Brad agrees now. 'Everyone was after him and towards the end of his life he didn't know whom he could trust, and this was what consumed him in the end. Even today, he's still a folk hero, in the way that Robin Hood is. He's been portrayed in film 125 times, which must say something. There are whole museums dedicated to him. There are apparently seven different guns out there all claiming to be the one that shot him! They probably all came from Robert Ford, the guy who assassinated him. He'd buy a gun and sell it off as the gun he used, and then he'd buy another one and sell that one off, too!'

In order to work on his own gunmanship for the film, Brad took lessons with Hollywood veteran Thell Reed, world champion live ammunition quick-draw artist who has coached stars from Steve McQueen to Sharon Stone. 'The guy's a living legend,'

says Brad, his eyes lighting up with interest. 'He's extraordinary. If you ever get the chance to see him in action, do – he can get off two shots and you literally can't even see the movement. I actually didn't have that much shooting to do in the film, but I needed to learn to be comfortable with a gun, because for these guys a gun was really more like another appendage, an extension of the hand and the arm that never left the body. I had learned to shoot as a kid, because I grew up in a place where it was a right of passage for a father to give a son a gun, and I got my first BB gun when I was in kindergarten. But, as an adult, Thell taught me to shoot from the hip. I was surprised by how do-able it actually is. You can do something that connects the geometry in the brain, so you can shoot from the hip and you can really hit things. I never tried to draw the way Thell does, though –

I was afraid I'd shoot myself in the foot!'

When he is not acting, Brad is concerned to use his celebrity to draw attention to troubled spots in the world, such as New Orleans, still undergoing reconstruction after Hurricane Katrina.

'The question is, how can we help these people? No, we can't bring back what they had before, but we can help them rebuild something that can give them back a better quality of life. This is where it doesn't hurt to be famous. Ange and I have an automatic spotlight on us all of the time – in fact, it's hard to get out of it – and it occurred to me a couple of years ago that, if I can't get out of it, and yet there are so many people in the world who need a little bit of it, maybe I can use my fame as a conduit for them. To be the people Ange and I are does open doors, so why not use that?' ■

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