

A Short Jimmy Stewart Biography

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Abstract

This is a short biography of James “Jimmy” Stewart. This biography gives details on his time and experience with acting in high school, college, and Broadway before he started his acting career with movie studios. It then covers a little bit of his military service during World War 2 and his time in the Air Force Reserves. After World War 2, this biography details the rest of his acting career and the remainder of his life.

James “Jimmy” Stewart was the first child of Alexander and Elizabeth Jackson Stewart. Jimmy was born on May 20th, 1908 in his parent’s house in Indiana, Pennsylvania.

After completing ninth grade, Jimmy went to Mercersburg Academy in Mercersburg, Pennsylvania. At Mercersburg, he got his first role in a stage act. It was in an act called The Frog Prince. Jimmy graduated from Mercersburg Academy in 1928. That same year in the fall, Jimmy attended Princeton University.

At Princeton, Jimmy majored in architecture. While still at Princeton, Jimmy was in a stage production of The Golden Dog. The next year, Jimmy and Josh Logan (who would later be a producer and director) worked together on a production of The Tiger Smiles. Even though Jimmy was involved with performing stage productions, he was planning on going onto graduate school to further study architecture (Jimmy Stewart Museum, 2006). While they were still at Princeton, Josh Logan once asked Jimmy if he had considered an acting career. Jimmy said "Good God, no! I'm going to be an architect!" (Millner, 1988). He graduated from Princeton University in 1932.

The stock market crash in 1929 and the Great Depression made Jimmy worry about finding work as an architect (Jimmy Stewart Museum, 2006). After graduating from Princeton, Jimmy went to help his dad Alex with his hardware store during the summer (Millner, 1988). Less than two weeks later, Jimmy's friend Josh Logan asked Jimmy to join him and the University Players. The University Players were a summer stock group of actors. Jimmy agreed to join them (Jimmy Stewart Museum, 2006). Years later Jimmy said "I hadn't seriously considered being an actor, even up to that day I walked across campus en route to get my degree in architecture. I figured I'd go home in the summer and work in my father's hardware store, then go back to school and get my master's degree. That's when I ran into Josh. I suppose it was the most important moment

in my life." (Millner, 1988). Josh Logan at first had Jimmy do a few minor walk-on parts for stage productions. Jimmy also helped as a stagehand, designed sets, and was learning about how the theatre business worked.

Later that same year, they went on to do stage productions of *Carrie Nation* on Broadway. Jimmy had several small roles for this production, but it was during this time that critics began to notice Jimmy. After *Carrie Nation*, Jimmy had roles in Broadway productions of *Goodbye Again*, *Spring in Autumn*, and *All Good Americans*. During these Broadway productions, the critics were giving Jimmy favorable reviews. In 1934, Jimmy filled the role of Sgt. O'Hara in *Yellow Jack*. Jimmy's performance got Metro-Goldwyn-Mayer's (MGM) attention and Jimmy did a screen test with them. Soon after that, Jimmy did a screen test for the FOX movie studio also. Jimmy was casted in his first movie. A Warner Brothers comedy *Art Trouble*. After *Art Trouble* was completed, Warner Brothers and FOX didn't offer Jimmy a contract and he still had not heard back from MGM yet. Jimmy decided to go back to his home town. Two months later, MGM called Jimmy and offered him a role in a short film. Jimmy accepted the offer. In 1936, Jimmy had the role of a cub reporter in the short film *Important News*. Soon MGM gave Jimmy the role of a reporter named Shortie in the movie *Murder Man*.

From 1935 to 1939, Jimmy had roles in 29 different movies. In 1939, Jimmy played the main role as Senator Jefferson Smith in the movie *Mr. Smith Goes to Washington*. This got him his first Academy Award nomination for best actor. Jimmy had roles in another 9 movies before taking the role of a reporter named Mike Conner in *The Philadelphia Story* in 1940 (Jimmy Stewart Museum, 2006). This got him his first and only acting Oscar award (Smith, 2013). Jimmy sent that award to his father Alex, his father then put it up in the window of his hardware store and it kept it there for 20 years (Sweeney, 1998).

On September 16th of 1940, Congress passed the Selective Service Bill, also known as "the draft". Jimmy was drafted in February of 1941. Jimmy was 5 pounds under the minimum weight requirement for his height. Jimmy wanted to enlist and get into the Army Air Corps and he had only 3 months before he would be too old to enlist into the Army Air Core (Jimmy Stewart Museum, 2006). To gain weight, he began to eat spaghetti twice a day along with steaks and milkshakes (Hayes, 2011). Jimmy came back in early March to try to pass again (Thompson, 2009). Jimmy was just 1 ounce short of the minimum weight requirement, but Jimmy talked the doctors into adding a few ounces (Hayes, 2011). In March he got his orders to report for duty just seven days after he got the Academy Award for Best Actor for his performance in *The Philadelphia Story* (Thompson, 2009).

In March of 1941, Jimmy (Private James Stewart) reported to Fort McArthur and was sent to Moffett Field. Even though he was an experienced pilot, the Army Air Corps required that Jimmy had to get another 100 flying hours. Jimmy used a nearby airfield to get his 100 hours of flight time. In January of 1942, Jimmy was commissioned a 2nd Lieutenant (Jimmy Stewart Museum, 2006). The military had Jimmy do narrations for military training films, radio shows, and travel with war bond tours. At heart though, Jimmy didn't want to do this. He wanted more flight time and requested it (Hayes, 2011).

Jimmy went through training on how to fly bomber planes and four-engine planes. Jimmy had two assignments instructing pilots in training. Next Jimmy was given an administrative assignment, which he didn't like and requested a transfer. He was assigned as an Operations Officer, three weeks later he was reassigned as Squadron Commander. Shortly afterwards he was promoted to Captain. On November 11th 1943, Jimmy was transferred overseas.

Jimmy flew in 20 combat missions before being reassigned as an Operations Officer in early 1945. In April Jimmy was promoted to Colonel and was reassigned as Chief of Staff. For his combat missions, Jimmy was awarded 3 Distinguished Flying Crosses, 4 Air Medals, and the French Croix de Guerre. After World War 2, Jimmy transferred to the US Air Force Reserves (Jimmy Stewart Museum, 2006).

Jimmy came back to the U.S. in September of 1945. The war had left a mark on Jimmy. Many of the men that he commanded died during their combat missions and this severely affected him. At one time Jimmy had a mental breakdown, at the time it was classed as a case of shellshock, known as PTSD today (McNamee, 2006). When he came back to Hollywood later on, he already knew that he couldn't make any war movies (Burr, 1997) and wouldn't talk about his experiences during the war (French, 1997).

After the war Jimmy wasn't quite the same person that he was before. Jimmy thought that he might not be able to act anymore and wasn't sure if he wanted to go back to Hollywood. Jimmy considered going back to his hometown and working with his father Alex at his hardware store (McNamee, 2006). In 1946, Jimmy got his first movie role after World War 2. Jimmy's role was George Bailey in the movie *It's A Wonderful Life*. His performance in this movie reassured him of his skills as an actor and he even got an Oscar nomination for it. This was also Jimmy's favorite movie that he had ever acted in (Jimmy Stewart Museum, 2006).

In the summer of 1948, Jimmy was at a dinner party where he met Gloria Hatrick McLean. On August 9th, 1949 Jimmy and Gloria got married. It was nothing like the typical celebrity wedding, only relatives and friends were invited to the wedding (Churchill, 1997). In 1950, Universal Studios offered Jimmy a role in a movie version of *Harvey*. This got Jimmy an Oscar award for best actor (Jimmy Stewart Museum, 2006).

Fast forward to February 20th, 1966. Jimmy was still in the Air Force Reserves and was sent to Vietnam for an active duty reserve deployment. At the time he was a Brigadier General. Jimmy flew on a combat mission as an extra pilot (Thompson, 2009)(Hayes, 2011). In 1968, Jimmy retired from the Air Force Reserves. In June of 1969, Jimmy's step son, Ronald McLean, was killed in combat in Vietnam (Thompson, 2009). Jimmy and Gloria had just visited him during a USO tour two weeks beforehand (Jimmy Stewart Museum, 2006).

From 1971-1972 he played as himself in the T.V. show The Jimmy Stewart Show. From 1973-1974 Jimmy had the role of a defense attorney in Hawkins. This got him a Golden Globe Award for best actor (Smith, 2013). Jimmy began The Jimmy Stewart Relay Marathon Race in 1982. It has raised millions of dollars for St. John's Health Center in Santa Monica, California (Jimmy Stewart Museum, 2006). In 1991, Jimmy's did his last role for a movie, he was the voice actor for Wylie Burp in An American Tail: Fievel Goes West (Smith, 2013). Jimmy was in 77 movies during the 50 years that he had an acting career (Wahleithner, 1997).

In February of 1994, Jimmy's wife Gloria passed away. They were married for 45 years. On July 2nd, 1997, Jimmy himself passed away, he was 89 years old (Jimmy Stewart Museum, 2006).

Frank Capra (movie director) once said that Jimmy didn't have the temperament of other stars. He never expected to have caviar in his dressing room or to have a Rolls Royce supplied to him for his own personal use. Frank Capra also said "This man never demanded a thing He was just glad to be an actor. ... He was just one of the guys, and never found anything wrong with anything." (Sweeney, 1998).

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