



Mission: Jimmy Stewart and the Fight for Europe

By Robert Matzen



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In March 1941, Jimmy Stewart, America's boy next door and recent Academy Award winner, left fame and fortune behind and joined the United States Army Air Corps to fulfill his family mission and serve his country. He rose from private to colonel and participated in 20 often-brutal World War II combat missions over Germany and France. In mere months the war took away his boyish looks as he faced near-death experiences and the loss of men under his command. The war finally won, he returned home with millions of other veterans to face an uncertain future, suffering what we now know as PTSD. Younger stars like Gregory Peck were now getting roles that might have been Stewart's, and he didn't know if he would ever work in Hollywood again. Then came *It's a Wonderful Life*.

For the next half century, Stewart refused to discuss his combat experiences and took the story of his service to the grave. *Mission* presents the first in-depth look at Stewart's life as a Squadron Commander in the skies over Germany, and, his return to Hollywood the changed man who embarked on production of America's most beloved holiday classic.

Author Robert Matzen sifted through thousands of Air Force combat reports and the Stewart personnel files; interviewed surviving aviators who flew with Stewart; visited the James Stewart Papers at Brigham Young University; flew in the cockpits of the B-17 Flying Fortress and B-24 Liberator; and walked the earth of air bases in England used by Stewart in his combat missions of 1943-45. What emerges in *Mission* is the story of a Jimmy Stewart you never knew until now, a story more fantastic than any he brought to the screen.

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Editorial Review

Review

“Even before Hollywood legend Jimmy Stewart went off to war, he was a fighter, working hard to prove his passion for military aviation to the U.S. government. In this meticulously researched book, film historian Matzen (*Fireball: Carole Lombard and the Mystery of Flight 3*) provides the rich, detailed backstory of Stewart’s time as a WWII bomber pilot. He delves deep into Stewart’s restless spirit, chronicling his family’s legacy of war service, his rise to movie stardom, the many women in his life, and his struggles to fly and serve his country. Matzen paints a revealing picture of a man who defied bureaucratic and health obstacles to become a U.S. Army Air Force squadron commander. He depicts the excitement and horror of life in a bomber crew as Stewart commanded a series of missions over Germany, interspersing his story with those of other WWII survivors, such as radio operator Clem Leone and Gertrud Siepmann, who was a young child in Germany during Hitler’s rise to power. He also shows that, although considered a war hero, Stewart had difficulty getting reestablished as an actor until Frank Capra cast him in *It’s a Wonderful Life*. Military and movie buffs alike will revel in this vivid portrayal of a man who successfully straddled two worlds.”

—*Publishers Weekly*

“Unlike many Hollywood stars, James Stewart (1908–97) didn't make morale-boosting combat films during World War II; he was busy flying combat missions over Europe. Like many veterans, he preferred not to talk about his experiences when the conflict was over. One of the first major studies of the actor's risky missions over Nazi Germany, this title chronicles Stewart's improbable rise from small-town life in Indiana, PA, to his college years at Princeton, where he acquired his love for acting and befriended Henry Fonda, Joshua Logan, and Margaret Sullavan. His shy persona attracted the likes of actresses Marlene Dietrich, Olivia de Havilland, Norma Shearer, and Loretta Young. The bulk of this book covers Stewart's stay in England, his relationships with fellow crew members, who dealt daily with fear, loneliness, mud, and bitter cold. Stewart returned from Europe a changed man, reflected in his edgy, sometimes angry antihero roles in 1950s westerns and Alfred Hitchcock films. Author Matzen relies on extensive research and the cooperation of surviving crew members; however, as in his *Fireball: Carole Lombard and the Mystery of Flight 3*, small details and comments about the subject's thoughts must be taken on faith. VERDICT: Overall, an illuminating, recommended look at a hidden chapter in Stewart's life." —*Library Journal*

“Exhaustively researched, exceptionally well written, *Mission: Jimmy Stewart and the Fight for Europe* is as informed and informative as it is thoroughly 'reader friendly' in organization and presentation. While certain to be an enduringly popular addition to community and academic library American Biography collections and a 'must' for all Jimmy Stewart fans, it should be noted for personal reading lists that *Mission: Jimmy Stewart and the Fight for Europe* is also available in a Kindle format." —*Midwest Book Review*

"Great gift for anybody like me who just loves Jimmy Stewart and loves a good story of history that you've

never heard before."—Glenn Beck

"This week's must-read books...A revealing look at the wartime service of one of America's most beloved actors." —*New York Post*

“As Jimmy Stewart’s children, we have always known that our father’s service during the war was the most significant event of his life, although he rarely spoke of it. This book gives us the best glimpse we will ever have of what that experience was like for him and the men he flew with. Thank you, Robert Matzen.”
—Kelly Stewart, daughter of Jimmy Stewart

About the Author

Robert Matzen is an American author who specializes in Hollywood history. He spent 10 years with NASA and his avid interest in aviation-related topics resulted in the bestsellers *Mission: Jimmy Stewart and the Fight for Europe* and *Fireball: Carole Lombard and the Mystery of Flight 3*. He lives in Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania. **Leonard Maltin** is a film critic and historian who can be regularly seen on ReelzChannel and Turner Classic Movies. He is the author of the long-running *Leonard Maltin's Movie Guide* and its companion, *Leonard Maltin's Classic Movie Guide*. He lives in Los Angeles, California.

Users Review

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