

Flight fever

Superstar and self-confessed aeroplane nut John Travolta tells **Gabrielle Donnelly** about his twin passions for acting and flying, and how lucky he is that both of these childhood dreams have come true

WHEN JOHN TRAVOLTA was a child in Englewood, New Jersey, he would lie in bed at night, listen to the planes flying overhead from the three nearby airports – La Guardia, Teterboro, and Newark – and dream of being on them, either piloting them or simply travelling in them to exotic locations. To say that his dream has come true would be putting it mildly.

Not only is he one of the most famous movie stars in the world, he is also an experienced professional pilot of more than 30 years' standing, and a fully qualified first officer with Australia's Qantas Airlines, for whom he is also 'Ambassador-At-Large': he flies with the Qantas livery on his personal Boeing 707, which in 2002 he used on the airline's behalf to make a Spirit Of Friendship tour, hitting ten countries around the globe, to showcase the Australian flag-carrier worldwide. He has logged more than 5,000 hours of flying in his career, is certificated to fly eight different aircraft and owns an extensive and ever-changing fleet that, over the years, has included three Gulfstream jets, a Learjet, and the Boeing.

It's an unusual extra-curricular activity for a movie star – many actors fly small planes for recreation, but only John has taken it so seriously as to get professional certification. But, he says, it's as natural for him to do the one as the other, and always has been.

'The ideas of flying and acting came to me at the same time,' he remembers. 'My family were actors, and I always wanted to be part of that. But, because of the thespian lifestyle, they were also travelling all over the country to do theatre and so on – so I really did associate the excitement of acting with the excitement of air travel. They were kind of just the same idea for me, and it's been that way since I was five years old.'

John grew up as the youngest of the six children of Salvatore Travolta, a former athlete turned car-tyre salesman, and his beautiful blonde wife, Helen, an acting coach, who was, John has often said, the inspiration behind his seeking the better things in life.

'Plays and books were part of our home. Mom loved literature, loved theatre. When she put us to bed at night, she wouldn't read us fairytales, but excerpts from plays instead. It would be: "Tonight we're going to read from Noel Coward." Or she'd read from *Light up the Sky*, or *George Washington Slept Here*. It was an interesting upbringing.'

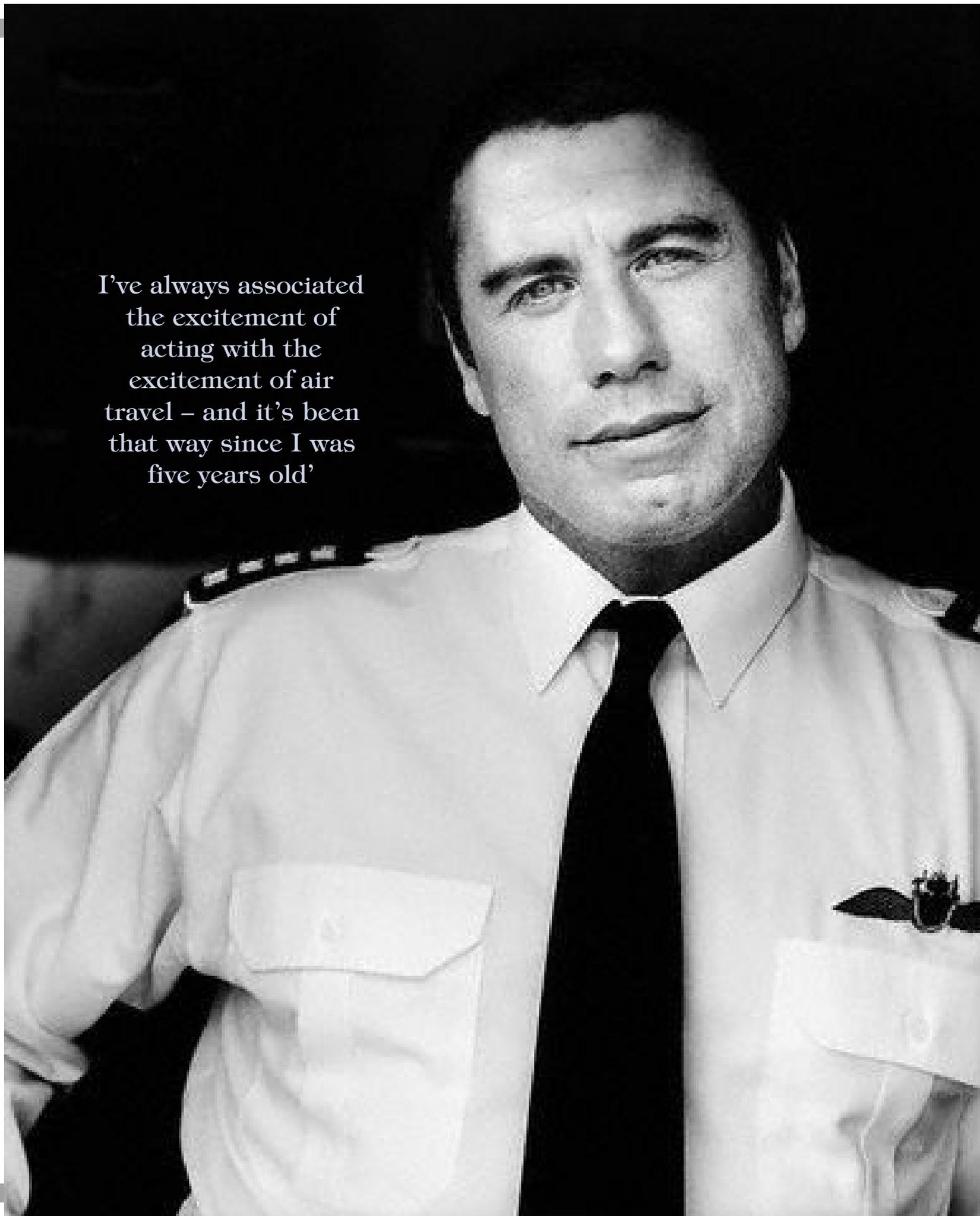
'My father was terrific, too. He always used to say to me something that his father had told him, which was to "always take things in moderation. Don't overdo anything, and don't underdo it either – just do it right and you'll be happy". I never understood that as a kid because I was a very extreme, all-or-nothing type. But now that I'm an adult I do see that it was good advice.'

Most of John's older brothers and sisters had followed their mother into the acting life, and he says that, ever since he can remember, it was what he wanted to do, as well. 'In fact, I was pretty obnoxious about it!' he admits, laughing at the memory. 'By the time I was seven, I was totally precocious and was desperate to become a child actor. I'd say to my mother, "Mom, why aren't you a pushy stage mother like Gypsy Rose Lee? Why aren't you taking me around the auditions like all the other stage mothers in town? Get out and push me!" But she never would. I finally got a job on my own when I was 15 or 16. But I'd wanted it for years beforehand.'

His first job was in a local production of *Who'll Save the Plowboy?* and after that he was hooked. He dropped out of high school to go to New York and spent the next few years paying his dues with bit parts on the stage and the odd TV commercial, and – prophetically – the small part of nerdy kid Doody in the national touring company production of *Grease*.

'I remember one Christmas I was on the road and I didn't even have enough money to fly home,' he says. 'My elder brother said, "But you've just got to come home or Mom and Dad will be tremendously upset – let me buy you a ticket." I said OK, and I got the very cheapest ticket I could – it was on Eastern Air Lines, and it took me four stops

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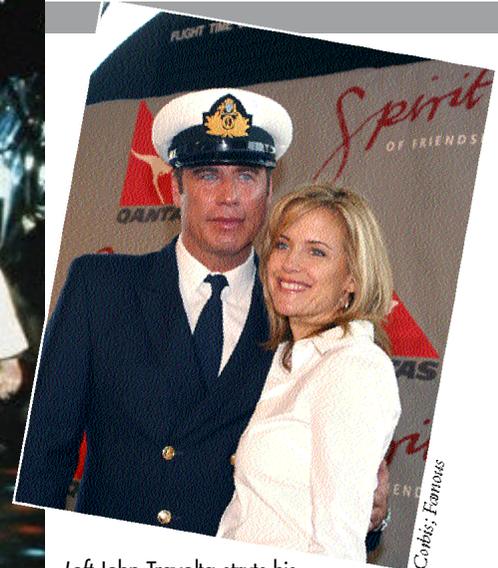
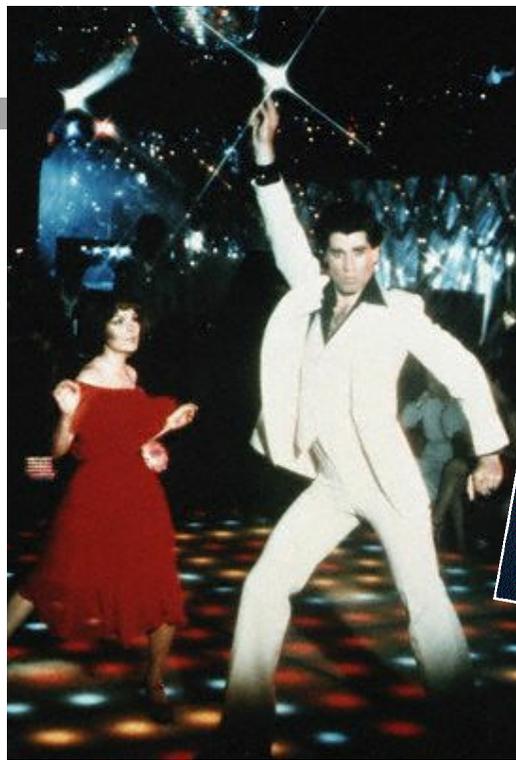
to get across the country! But I finally did arrive home for Christmas.'

Eventually, John made it to Hollywood, where a role in the popular TV sitcom *Welcome Back, Kotter*, followed by hit movies like *Saturday Night Fever* and *Grease*, made him not only rich and famous, but also a teen idol, with his face on posters and magazine covers, a flourishing fan club, and girls sometimes literally beating down doors to be near him. A handsome young actor's dream come true? John says he hardly noticed – he was too busy learning to fly.

'Every cent of my first pay checks went towards flying lessons,' he says. 'In fact, I was flying before I was famous. I did Broadway, and then went to fly a plane. I did TV commercials, and then went to fly a plane. There is such a beauty and art form to flying. You're responsible for a machine that is going through the air at 600 miles per hour, you have emergencies thrown at you all the time and you have to be responsible for your reactions. That's very romantic to me.'

It is also, admits the canny kid from New Jersey, an excellent investment opportunity – if you happen to know something about the business. 'I've owned planes since I was in my twenties, and they have been the best investments I've ever made. I'm not big on risks in investment – I'm pretty conservative and I've seen so many people buy, for instance, apartment buildings and then lose their shirts, that I've never pursued that. But because I do know about planes, I am able to buy the one that will actually grow in value. Other people buy planes, but because they don't really know what to look for, they'll quite often make a mistake. But I'm very serious about the planes I buy. And, inevitably, the ones I have bought have gone up in value, so that eventually I can sell them for a profit.'

John's business acumen has obviously paid off – these days, he is living the life his childhood self could only have dreamed of. Rich enough at 52 never to have to work again unless he chooses, he owns houses in California, Main, and Hawaii. His main home base – which he shares with his actress wife, Kelly Preston, and their children, Jett, 13, and Ella, five – is in the exclusive



Left John Travolta struts his stuff in *Saturday Night Fever*. Above With his wife Kelly Preston on the Spirit of Friendship around-the-world tour

aviation community of Jumbolair, just north of Ocala, Florida. This large house is specially designed to look like an airport, complete with its own 1.4-mile airstrip leading, literally, right to the front door. 'It's not what you'd call a cozy house,' he admits with a laugh. 'But I guess if you're an airplane nut like myself, it's more exciting to live in than somewhere cozy would be!'

The Travoltas' hospitality is legendary. Both John and Kelly come from large and close-knit families and believe in spreading their good fortune around with lavish house parties, whose hallmark is tables groaning with food. John gives some examples: 'One day we might have Beef Wellington, which is one of my own favourites, rare, with veggies around it and some potatoes... and a pasta dish on the side, maybe with lobster or crabmeat, in case anyone who is visiting me doesn't want beef. Then, the next day, there might be sushi or Chinese food. And the day after that, we might all have lobster brought in from a restaurant... and, of course, there will be a selection of several desserts afterwards. You know, people try to embarrass you about eating, but I love food and I'm not embarrassed about it. You've got to eat to live, and the way I see it, you might as well enjoy it. When I first got to Hollywood, my friends were the old movie crowd – Jimmy Cagney, Barbara Stanwyck, Fred Astaire, Gene Kelly and so on. They all liked to eat – we'd go out to Chasen's, or to The

Palm, and have a decent dinner. Nobody was self-conscious about it in those days!'

John is currently shooting *Lonely Hearts*, a detective movie based on the true story of the notorious 1940s 'Lonely Hearts killers', a pair of murderers who found their victims through newspaper personal ads. But when he's not making movies or entertaining, John is up in the air. He tries to fly every day and aims to log at least 300 hours a year. In order to maintain his officer's rating and ambassador status with Qantas, he is required to take an intensive month-long refresher course every year.

'Basically, they beat me up for a month!' he laughs. 'And I love it, of course. I've always admired Qantas because, in my opinion, they're the finest airline in the world, with an impressive safety record. I was very honoured that they chose me to be their ambassador, and when they did, they said, "We like the idea of your working with us, but in order for us to feel good about you flying with our name on your plane, you have to be trained up to our standards."

'So, as long as I'm ambassador, I have to go back to them for one month in 12 to refresh my training. It's the toughest school in the world, and the month I spend there is very hard work indeed. But every year they make me a better pilot, and I'm really privileged and lucky to have them train me.'

Rumour has it that Qantas is pretty pleased with the arrangement, too. ■