

JOLIE'S WAR

EMPIRE GOES ON SET WITH ANGELINA JOLIE
TO UNCOVER THE 50-YEAR MAKING OF EXTRAORDINARY
WORLD WAR II SURVIVAL STORY UNBROKEN

WORDS NEV PIERCE



THE BOMBER SITS high on a scaffold in a soundstage echoing with the thumps, bangs and chatter of a crew moving kit. Superman is painted on the cockpit, though the Man Of Steel himself has less trouble in the air. This

model, the B-24

Liberator, was so unreliable that airmen nicknamed it the 'Flying Coffin'. The tailgun is being tampered with, preparing to fire. In the belly of the plane, the ball turret sticks out from the fuselage, looking like World War II's answer to R2-D2.

"That's Star Wars," says a woman's voice, behind us. "They just took it right off!"

Empire turns around. It's Angelina Jolie. January 2014, at Village Roadshow Studios near Australia's Gold Coast, and unsurprisingly, Jolie seems more than at home on set. Surprisingly, she won't be on screen here. *Unbroken* is her second feature as director, a \$65 million take on a story that has flummoxed filmmakers since Universal first snaffled the rights to the autobiography *Devil At My Heels* in 1956. Back then, Tony Curtis was being lined up to star as Louis 'Louie' Zamperini, an Italian-American tearaway who ran from trouble so fast, he ended up at the 1936 Olympics. Though he missed out on a medal, he was still young, still developing, and was expected to excel at the 1940 Tokyo Games. War destroyed that dream. He ended up in Japan in vastly contrasting circumstances — via the air force, a crash-landing, 47 days adrift on the Pacific and two years as a prisoner of war. It is, it's fair to say, a pretty incredible story. Almost too incredible to film.

"There were certain things you couldn't put in because in a movie they'd seem too much," says Jolie, smiling. "Like him punching a shark in the face. It happened, but we thought, 'In a movie it's going to feel like one too many, so maybe he's flailing and he's climbing and he's getting away from it, but it's more of an accidental kick than a direct punch.'"

"I really wanted to punch that shark as well," says Jack O'Connell, laughing. You wouldn't bet on the winner. Wired and wiry, the Derby-born Brit is a coiled presence, all energy and edge, enjoying filming the pre-crash sequences, when Louie still had an Olympian physique. They started production with the scenes adrift at sea, where he had to appear emaciated (he lost two stone to prepare),



BRIEFING

UNBROKEN

RELEASED: December 26

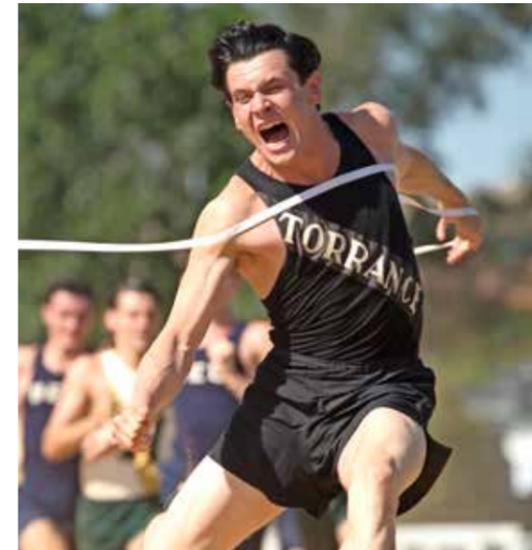
DIRECTOR: Angelina Jolie

STARRING: Jack O'Connell, Domhnall Gleeson, Garrett Hedlund, Jai Courtney, Luke Treadaway

STORY: The life of Olympic runner Louis Zamperini (O'Connell), who joined the air force during World War II, was shot down over the Pacific, picked up by the Japanese and made a prisoner of war.

DON'T THE COEN BROTHERS HAVE SOMETHING TO DO WITH THIS? Yes indeed: they've worked on the script version of this remarkable true story, along with Richard LaGravenese (*The Fisher King*) and William Nicholson (*Gladiator*).

• **Top:** Internees line up in the Japanese POW camp. **Here:** The three crash survivors adrift in the Pacific.



whereas now he can properly eat. "Thankfully we did the worst bit at the beginning when we were still enthusiastic enough to really hurt ourselves!"

O'Connell will be unknown to most US audiences. Even at home, while he's shown movie-star charisma in *Tower Block*, *Starred Up* and '71, he's probably still most recognised for TV series *Skins* and as the swaggering teen who terrorises Michael Fassbender in *Eden Lake*.

For Jolie, the part was a bastard to cast. "It was very hard because you have to find somebody who has enough of a connection emotionally — that *really*

can go to those very heavy places — and be the kind of man that you really care about. Because the wrong type of person is so perfect and so cool, nobody cares."

Back in 1998, when producer Matt Baer saw a CBS documentary on Zamperini and resurrected the idea of a big-screen take on his story, Brad Pitt was considered, then Nicolas Cage attached. Jolie looked beyond marquee names, watching tape after tape of would-be Louies. "A lot of the struggle was to find that person who had that heart but then also could physically run the races, physically go in and out of the raft and

do all the stuff he has to do, do great fight scenes," she says. "It is the hardest thing I've ever seen an actor do, everything he's had to do. To have that balance of a real soulfulness, but be a total street fighter. A man's man — in a young boy. Because today there's a lot of young men that are wonderful, but there's something very classic, old-school, about Jack."

His tape stood out — auditioning actors had to talk about grief in their life, and pretend they were locked inside a box — and they met, worked through scenes, before doing a screentest in London. "Angie had this belief in me that she found early,

• **Top:** Clarence Douglas (Stephen J. Douglas) and Harry Brooks (Spencer Lofranco) man their stations. **Above:** Angelina Jolie directs prisoners on the Naetsu set. **Right:** Jack O'Connell as Torrance High School's short-lived running champ.

and I guess she had to convince a lot of people that I was the right man," says O'Connell. "It's a studio film and they wanna guarantee bums on seats and I ain't got a following. So I've definitely benefited off her faith and trust, and hopefully it's reciprocated by what I do here."

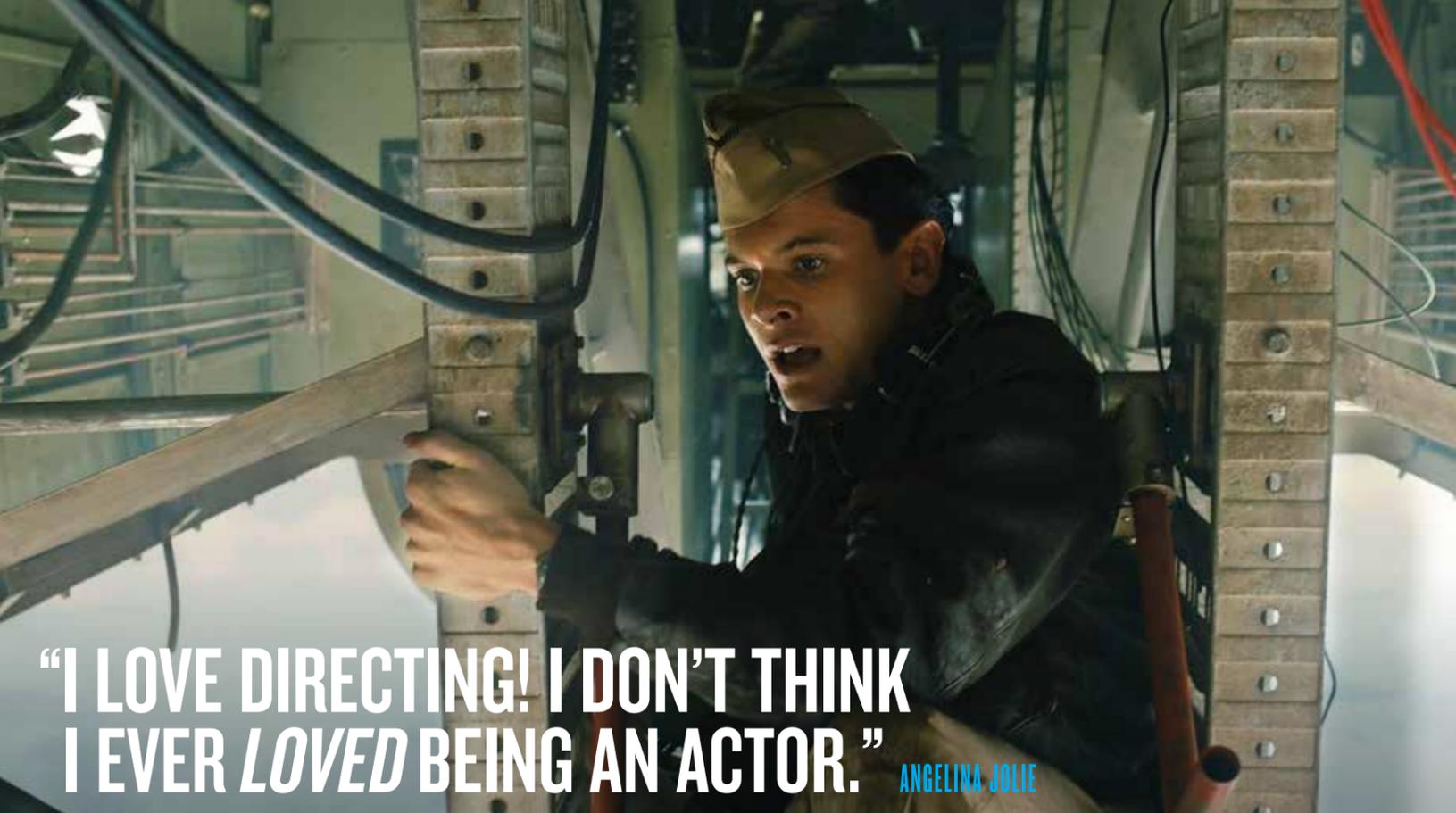
FEW PEOPLE SAW

In *The Land Of Blood And Honey*, Jolie's first film as director (which has never been released in the UK), but those who did won't easily forget it. A twisted love story set against the Bosnian War, it

is far from perfect, but is distinct and uncompromising, with an arresting point of view; within a few minutes you know you're in the hands of a proper filmmaker.

"Just to hear you say that makes me so happy and a bit shy," says Jolie. And, yes, she's a world-class actress, but the insecurity tastes sincere. "I feel the responsibility of it, to get it right for all these people who are working on this and trust me. I'm working that much harder because I haven't convinced myself yet I'm a director."

The career shift was not long-planned or anticipated. She wrote *In The Land Of Blood And Honey* after visiting Bosnia as >



“I LOVE DIRECTING! I DON’T THINK I EVER LOVED BEING AN ACTOR.” ANGELINA JOLIE

part of her work for the United Nations, then directed it because she wanted “to protect the material”. She enjoys having more control than she does when on screen (“I’ve done quite a few I’ve not been happy with”), yet has almost become a filmmaker by accident. “But I can’t believe it, I love it so much! I love working with crew, I love history, I love spending the day learning everything I can about everything from lighting to *why* they did this in the plane. I love working with actors. And I don’t think I ever *loved* being an actor.”

Still, it has been “daunting”, and even someone as experienced as Ethan Coen — who Jolie brought in to script, with brother Joel (final credits are still to be confirmed) — has described the movie as “a motherfucker, a difficult production thing. There is aerial combat stuff, dogfight stuff, stuff on a lifeboat on an open sea.”

It feels like several films in one. “It’s funny, we actually had a list of ‘what it’s like,’” says Jolie, “because there are so many different references. We’ve gone from Chariots Of Fire to Jaws to Bridge On The River Kwai to Cool Hand Luke.” (Sidney Lumet’s *The Hill* was another telling reference point, and Jolie speaks glowingly of his book about directing, *Making Movies*.) “This film is so complicated,” she continues. “It really could have been a more established director!” She laughs. “Even Brad, I was showing him some things and he was going, ‘It is kind of amazing that you can do this.’ He just didn’t realise, even reading

• **Top:** The path of Zamperini’s life changes forever. **Right:** Jolie The Director reviews the rushes. Baseball cap and beard just out of shot.



it you don’t realise [the scale]. Thank God we have such a great team of people.”

Jolie gives a lot of credit to everyone else, but there’s no doubt who is in charge. She’s warm and approachable, but her gentleness is combined with steel. While Jolie talks with DP Roger Deakins, preparing for a segment with more gunfire, *Empire* steps outside with Domhnall Gleeson, who plays another crash survivor, Russell Allen ‘Phil’ Phillips. “You can see [in *Blood And Honey*] that she doesn’t shy away from the reality of destruction if that’s what’s required,” he says. “She’s a general, and she does it in a very unassuming way.

But she’s a general and we’re all following her, and that’s the way it should be.”

We wander back into the darkness of the stage. O’Connell approaches, mock outraged. “You’re a line-stealer! Nicking my dialogue.” A snippet in the next scene has transferred from Louie to Phil. Gleeson deadpans: “I try and take as many lines as possible off the actors around me. It’s how I’ve made a career for myself. I’m not going to apologise, Jack! If you make it to 30 you’ll realise that’s what’s required.” O’Connell laughs — “You’ve inspired me!” — and the crewmates head towards the belly of the B-24 and their director.

WAR STORIES

FIVE AMAZING WORLD WAR II TRUE-LIFE TALES THAT SHOULD BE FILMED RIGHT NOW



• The remains of German battleship the Tirpitz.

WHITE DEATH

1939-1940: Fighting in the Winter War against the Soviet Union, Finnish sniper Simo Häyhä lurked in snow-bound landscapes alone for hours and notched 505 confirmed kills — making him the deadliest ever sharp-shooter. Nicknamed ‘White Death’, he was eventually stopped by a bullet in the face... but survived, living until the age of 96.

OPERATION CHARIOT

March 1942: Hoping to destroy German battleship Tirpitz while it was in dry dock at St. Nazaire, the British rammed an old destroyer packed with explosives into the dock gates — while commandos swarmed out to blitz other buildings. Many were killed or captured, but the raid was a strategic triumph.

PAVLOV’S PLATOON

September 1942: Soviet Sergeant Yakov Pavlov lead a platoon into a Nazi-occupied apartment building in Stalingrad... And all but four of his men were killed. Nonetheless they held the flats against all-comers, with a few reinforcements and an anti-tank rifle which Pavlov used to take out no fewer than 12 German tanks.

OPERATION JERICHO

February 1944: Aussie, Kiwi and Brit Mosquito fighter bombers buzzed ultra low across the channel to France to hammer Amiens prison — demolishing a wall so that French Resistance fighters could escape. One hundred-and-two prisoners were killed, 155 re-captured, but 258 escaped.

THE FILTHY THIRTEEN

US paratroopers, these blokes earned their mucky moniker by rarely washing and being astonishingly hard bastards, dropping behind enemy lines to blow up bridges and, well, Nazis. Obviously the inspiration for *The Dirty Dozen*, but more insane: in tribute to their leader — part-Native American Jake McNiece — they wore war paint into battle.

ON SET, JOLIE exudes a quiet authority. There’s no sense of celebrity: no minders or barriers between her and the crew. This isn’t always the case even with a workaday filmmaker, let alone someone who is still an A-list actress (*Maleficent* made more than \$750 million worldwide). Professionally, she is in a position that is arguably unparalleled. In terms of recent actor-directors, perhaps only Mel Gibson has had a commensurate budget for a prestige picture (and even he had to act in *Braveheart*). If you look at the shamefully low proportion of female directors, the achievement seems all the more significant — only Kathryn Bigelow has made movies of this size — while if you’re talking female stars-turned-filmmakers, Jodie Foster is the closest comparison. Before that, you’re back in the ‘50s with Ida Lupino. But then, Jolie is already an anomaly in that studios seem to consider her charisma more important than gender (her espionage actioner *Salt* was, after all, originally a Tom Cruise vehicle).

For Baer, who had been trying to snare directors for 15 years, Jolie’s competence and enthusiasm were essential. He’d been through script after script, trying to crack the adaptation. “The constant question was how much of the story could you tell in a film version?” Hope flickered in 2002 when Laura Hillenbrand decided to write a book about Zamperini, but the Seabiscuit author suffers from chronic fatigue syndrome and her exhaustively researched, and quite brilliant, *Unbroken: A World War II Story Of Survival, Resilience And Redemption* would not be ready until 2009. At that point, Baer pushed it with Universal chief Donna Langley and adaptations were attempted. But while the script(s) didn’t snare Jolie, the book did.

“She made a real effort to get the job,” says Baer. “It was one of the most amazing, thorough, exciting things I’ve ever been a part of in my career — in terms of watching her use her charm, intelligence and passion. When she came in for her first meeting, she said, ‘Look, I think this is maybe the greatest untold story ever.’ And obviously I’m like, ‘Hallelujah! Somebody is saying what I’ve been trying to say for the last 15 years. Except she has power!’ For me, it (*the production*) is a fantastic combination of these two amazing women in Laura Hillenbrand and Angelina, who both fell hard for this amazing story of survival.”

“I just fell in love with it,” Jolie confirms. “I wanted to learn more about this man’s story and for more people to know about it. And I wanted to go on the adventure myself and learn from it.” Like a lot of the best directors, Jolie seems very interested in learning — she’s an engaged listener, attentive and curious. Regardless of whether the film is acclaimed or Oscar-nominated, the process has been hugely

rewarding. Not least in terms of meeting Zamperini, who she had, without realising, lived near for years, in the Hollywood Hills.

“I love him! The way he approaches life, the way he talks to people, and he’s *funny*,” she says, eyes glowing in the shadows of the set. “He’s everything you hope he would be. I didn’t have grandparents, growing up, I didn’t grow up with a father around my house, so I think I lean towards these extraordinary men, who teach me something about life. He’s taken me under his wing a bit, he’s taken care of me a little bit the last year and helped me through some stuff. He’s great.” (Zamperini met with key cast before shooting and was in regular contact with Jolie, who showed him the film on her laptop in hospital, before his death on July 2 this year.)

O’Connell describes the responsibility of playing Louie as “humungous”. He talks warmly of meeting the man, of how he feels more confident and capable of growing up now, “because I’ve got such a direct, flawless form of inspiration in Louie.” He pauses. “I guess flawless is the wrong term — he had his faults too, which helped me find a lot of comfort in moving forward. I’m extremely privileged to have met someone as inspiring as Louie and not only that, but to portray his life. I’ve got to take the positives from that. If not, I didn’t deserve the role in the first place.”

Zamperini’s personality, energy and determination got him through brutal experiences, while becoming a Christian got him through the aftermath when many would have been eaten up by hate. In Jolie he found a kindred spirit: another survivor, though of quite contrasting experiences, drawn to the hope of his story.

“He was a troubled kid and he really questioned faith, really didn’t believe in God, had just a real darkness, a *real* anger — not just in some kind of poetic way, in a very deep way,” she says, a few yards from where the crew are preparing a shot that will see a section of the plane violently shaken on a gimbal. “Through different stages of his life he *kept* questioning and weighing this light and darkness, and at some point he was able to be open and forgive and live in the light. That’s a universal message, that’s not specific to a faith. Bad things happen to all of us and we go through many things and we see many things, in our different ways, and we either let them make us a darker person and damaged and aggressive and angry and hateful, or we somehow find a way to rise above.”

She readies to go back to the plane, to shoot more shooting, to tell this stunning story of survival. She laughs. “The only way to save yourself is to rise above!”

nev@empiremagazine.com

UNBROKEN IS OUT ON DECEMBER 26 AND WILL BE REVIEWED IN A FUTURE ISSUE.