

GREGG BRUNSON-PITTS ADVANCED AVIATION TEAM

by Matthew Wexler



Gregg Brunson-Pitts

From Frank Sinatra's 1958 release of *Come Fly With Me* to HBO's recent breakout hit, *The Flight Attendant*, our fascination with flying has long been embedded in nearly every aspect of our culture. Even the TWA Flight Center at New York City's John F. Kennedy Airport received a soaring restoration and reimagining a few years back, turning the long-abandoned structure into a retro hotel. But how we get from here to there can vary significantly in the aviation industry. For those looking to customize travel plans, elevate their in-flight experience, and avoid crowds at commercial airports, an on-demand private jet charter like those offered by **Advanced Aviation Team** provide perks both practical and posh.

The company's founder and CEO, Gregg Brunson-Pitts, brings decades of industry experience to the company,

including a fascinating stint as director of the White House travel office and some prominent previous guests. Though interested in aviation as a child, Brunson-Pitts "stumbled" into the industry through politics, first traveling the world to coordinate special events. "I loved it, you know, really, the fast pace of it, just visiting other places and being exposed to different cultures and different people," says Brunson-Pitts.

Brunson-Pitts then received an offer to work in the White House's travel office, focusing on logistics for the White House press corps and moving the aircraft in tandem with Air Force One, saying, "that was where I sort of cut my teeth into aviation and aircraft logistics."

Though circumstances change with each president, and certainly in a post-COVID travel environment, a charter flew with the president on nearly every trip during Brun-

son-Pitts' tenure, including up to 60 journalists for domestic travel and 150 passengers (including secret service and additional staff) for international trips. Overseas itineraries were months in the making and involved procuring hotel rooms and meeting spaces, as well as determining live-shot locales for reporters and managing budgets for major networks and publications. "Yeah, it was intense," reflects Brunson-Pitts. "It averaged out over the years to be about a \$20 to \$25 million per year travel operation."

If you're wondering if life on a press corps aircraft is like an episode of *VEEP*, Brunson-Pitts says the daily news cycle determined the onboard environment. Journalists could be deep in their laptops to file a story, or if it was the tail end of a trip or a light news day, more convivial. He was also tasked with the seating chart, and unlike a commercial

airline where you hope your frequent flier status gets you an upgrade, the networks and news wires were assigned on rotation to snag that coveted and comfortable first-class or business seats.

Brunson-Pitts says the end of his White House years “was a bit of a hard landing. The last year was super-intense, and I was really loving what I was doing. And then, all of a sudden, the end came and I really didn't know what I wanted to do professionally. It was really the only thing I had been doing since I graduated college,” he says.

Brunson-Pitts had worked extensively with private jet charter companies as a client on behalf of the White House, so he flipped the script and took a consulting position with a large charter company, then considered moving into public relations and even opening a cycling studio, having taught spinning. The entrepreneurial bug bit, and those early memories of his fascination with aviation returned.

“I started to fall in love with our industry again and thought, ‘I can do this myself. I have some skills and contacts.’ And so that’s how the idea of starting my own charter brokerage got going,” remembers Brunson-Pitts. “I wanted to be very customer-focused and customer-centric, and always with integrity. I knew that that would be my hallmark: just focus on the customer and always be honest.”

Brunson-Pitts says the private charter brokerage industry has “gotten a bit of a bad rap” due to lack of regulation, so he wanted to build Advanced Aviation Team based on reputation and referrals. And after flying around the world with the White House for more than four years, he had plenty. Most of the company’s bookings are on a contract basis, and when customers inquire with very specific needs, that’s where Brunson-Pitts and his team make their mark. “I think we really excel at complicated problems given my background,” says Brunson-Pitts.

That’s not to say Advanced Aviation Team doesn’t do its share of New York to Florida charters, but even familiar routes can require detailed planning to utilize a smaller airport, client-specific needs regarding luggage and pets, and the expected wow-factor that comes with celebrating a milestone birthday, anniversary, or other special occasions.

Typically, a customer will reach out to Advanced Aviation Team with a trip request, after which they’ll take those

specifics and research the market for available aircraft through their network of operators. “We’ll check all the needed boxes and then send you options,” says Brunson-Pitts. “We’ll then negotiate the terms of the pricing and see you from the beginning to the end of a trip logistically. Not all brokers do that.” Needs play an essential role in aircraft selection. A group of four dashing off to the Bahamas for the weekend requires a different jet than a party of 12 headed to Telluride for Gay Ski Week, equipment in tow.

Brunson-Pitt’s reputation helped him land

a particularly high-profile client last year, make that two: then-presidential candidate Joe Biden and fellow nominee Kamala Harris. The months-long campaign required a trusted aviation partner who could manage an exhaustive attention to detail. Advanced Aviation Team became the campaign’s primary provider, which included a dedicated charter (a painted and decal 737), great for photo opps, but also appropriately outfitted for up to 40 campaigners and security. Harris had her own itineraries and rarely did the two overlap. She’d often be transported on a



Gulfstream G550



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Gulfstream V, a long-range business jet, with support staff and secret service flying separately. While thoughtful catering ensured that both candidates and staff remained energized, Brunson-Pitt says mobile phone chargers in every seat became one of the most valued perks for fast-paced days and long hours. Collectively, Advanced Aviation Team completed more than 1,130 flights for the Biden-Harris campaign.

While Advanced Aviation Team's typical customer these days may not be two of the world's most renowned political figures, they're still treated to the same level of service, which isn't just about the aircraft, but who's also operating it. The company sources some of the charter industry's most well-respected pilots and flight attendants to ensure that each trip is safe, smooth, and seamless.

For those traveling with an extended entourage and deep pockets, the Gulfstream G650 and G650ER are some of the most coveted business jets in the industry, with a range of up to 6,500 nautical miles (and the record for the farthest and fastest flight in business aviation history). In addition, interiors can feature up to four separate living spaces and 16 panoramic oval windows.

The Falcon 8X is another large-cabin jet

choice for that "pride in the sky" party you've always dreamt of. Various configurations offer plenty of options for high-altitude rest or play, along with high-speed connectivity for Internet access and communication even over oceans, so you're always on top of your game, even if you're not running for president. Lighting, temperature, and window shades are all controlled by passengers via side-ledge controls or the Falcon app.

Heavyweights aside, Advanced Aviation Team sources a broad range of aircraft, whether you're heading cross country or just want to avoid highway gridlock to your favorite weekend destination. For example, Brunson-Pitts says Miami has been a hot destination during the past year, with East Coasters also taking advantage of the quick commute to the ever-popular Hamptons or Cape Cod. Often flying out of small airports, a private flight can reduce the points of contact from 700 to less than 30, according to an analysis by consulting firm McKinsey & Company.

Owning his own business has brought its share of sleepless nights for Brunson-Pitts, but for the past decade he's had a devoted partner to help him soar. His personal life was on the back burner for many years as he regularly clocked long hours in multiple time zones,

but post-White House he could dedicate more time to building relationships, and in 2011 met his now-husband Brooks.

"He's always been super-supportive of this business. I mean, I really started it on our kitchen island with my laptop," remembers Brunson-Pitts. "And I left a paying job with benefits, you know, all those things to start my own business. He's been amazing the whole time."

Brunson-Pitts approaches his business with the same kind of authenticity he brings to his relationship and family (the couple has two adorable children, Thomas and Abigail). He says he's "proud to represent as a gay business owner" but acknowledges that the aviation industry as a whole could do better. LGBTQ employee resource groups have emerged over the years among major U.S. airlines, and the National Gay Pilots Association has been working to "build, support and unite the LGBTQ aviation community worldwide since 1990," according to its mission statement.

With 30 percent growth over the past year, Brunson-Pitts sees a bright future for Advanced Aviation Team and even greater possibilities for LGBTQ representation in the industry. Flying into the sunset isn't just a wanderlust-driven dream, but a business plan that's soaring into the future. ■