

STAR TREK'S FIRST CAPTAIN: JEFFREY HUNTER

BY JAMES VAN HISE

Before William Shatner became Captain James Kirk in the pilot "Where No Man Has Gone Before", there had been another pilot with a different captain. STAR TREK'S first pilot starred the very fine actor Jeffrey Hunter in the role of Captain Christopher Pike of the U.S.S. Enterprise. Although this pilot, which is usually referred to as "The Cage" (although it contained no actual episode title on film) was very fine, it was rejected by NBC as being "too cerebral". But rather than rejecting the series outright, based on this pilot they requested another pilot, although Jeffrey Hunter was unavailable for it. Had Jeffrey Hunter gone on to star in the STAR TREK series instead of William Shatner, Hunter would most probably still be alive today. But more on that later.

Jeffrey Hunter was born Henry H. McKinnies, Jr. in New Orleans on November 25, 1927. He later changed his name when he entered films, which was often done before the current era of realism struck Hollywood and

actors like Henry Winkler decided they'd prefer to remain with such an un star-like name.

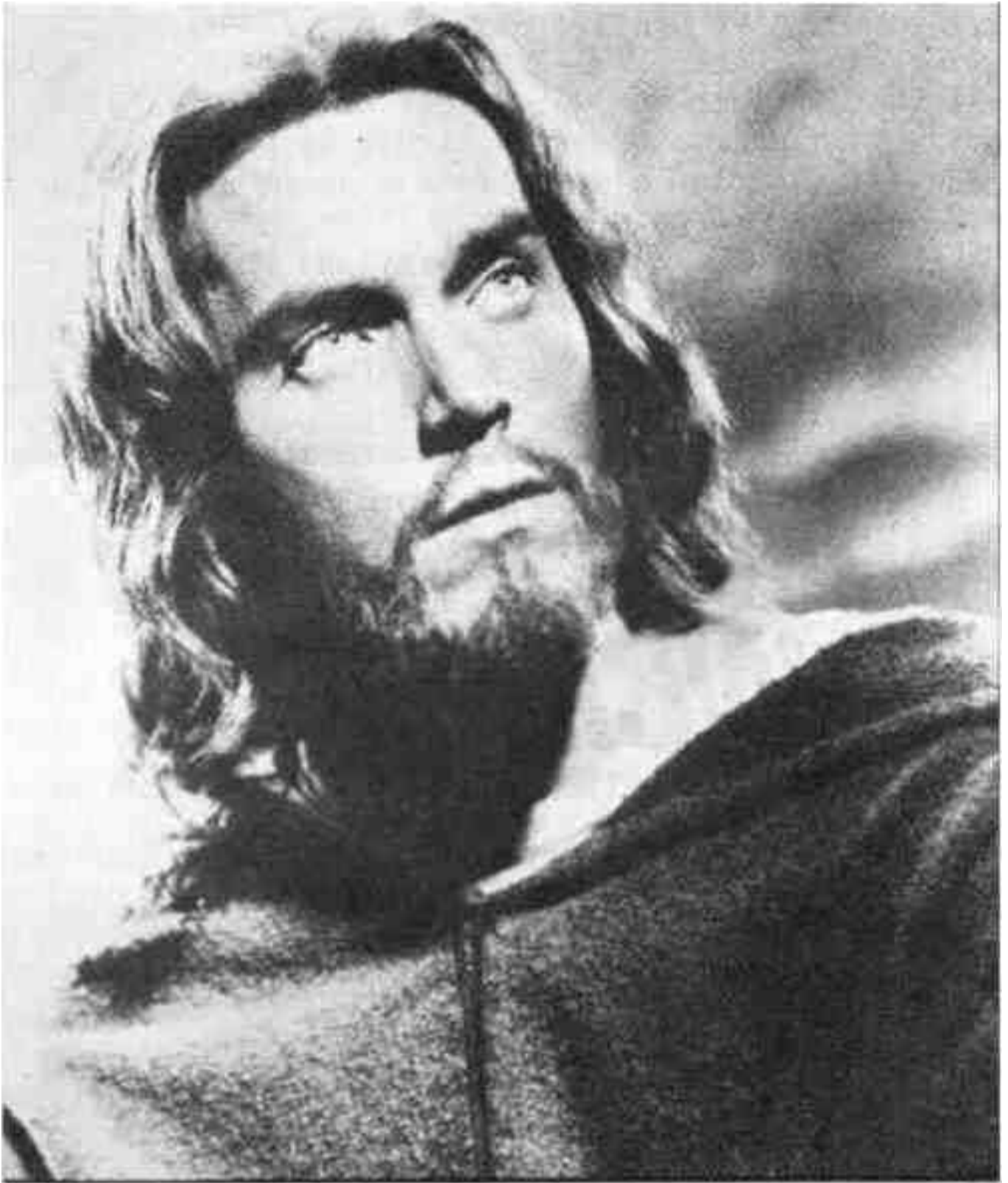
Jeffrey Hunter was discovered by a talent scout for 20th Century Fox in 1950 while he was performing in a UCLA campus production of "All My Sons". He was immediately signed to a long-term contract.

He made four films which were released in 1951 although it was only in the fourth one, "The Frogmen", that he had a starring role. In most of his films, Jeff played the clean-cut, all American boy, although in "White Feather" in 1955 he played an Indian. But that was hardly his most unusual role.

In 1961 he played Jesus Christ in the all star Hollywood production of "King of Kings". Like many actors, he was sensitive to reviews and although most, such as **Variety**, **The New York Times** and **Films in Review**, were kind, Time's review was scathing in the extreme and referred to it as "I Was A Teenage Jesus".

Hunter's always youthful appearance was both a help and a hindrance to him. Although it insured that he would undoubtedly be able to secure leading man roles for many years, it also limited those roles to ones which often exploited his youthful look.

When he was approaching forty, he often said, "This face of mine. Shouldn't the ravages of time be doing something to it?"



ABOVE: JEFFREY HUNTER IN THE TITLE ROLE OF "KING OF KINGS".

Although his hair did begin to turn prematurely gray, he always kept his youthful good looks.

Unlike some film stars who disdain working in television, Hunter enjoyed it. It gave him a chance to play roles which were different than the ones constantly offered to him in movies.

In 1964 Jeff's own production company put together the series "Temple Houston" based on the life of Sam Houston's lawyer son. It was projected for 1964-65 but got an earlier airing when NBC wanted it to fill the gap of another cancelled series. Unfortunately, this series didn't last long either. It did last long enough though for an interesting article on Hunter to appear in the January 11, 1964 issue of TV GUIDE for those collectors in the audience.



ABOVE: JEFFREY HUNTER WITH JACK ELAM IN A SCENE FROM THEIR SHORT LIVED "TEMPLE HOUSTON" TV SERIES.

Other TV work done by Hunter included a guest starring appearance on the debut episode of "The FBI" in 1965, as well as one on "The Green Hornet" in 1966.

It was in this same period, 1964 actually, that he did the first STAR TREK pilot for Gene Roddenberry.

Hunter brought an ease and a determination to the role of Christopher Pike which added considerably to the intensity and the realism of the story. As Pike he was the grimly determined commander who rarely smiled and who carried the burden of command heavily. And yet it was a character of depth and believability, as well as power. Had Hunter remained as the Captain in the series I think it would have been a bit different, as Hunter came across as a brooding man of intense emotional reactions. Where Captain Kirk was a man of action, Captain Pike was a man of violence. When he gains the upper hand over the Talosian Keeper, he threatens the Keeper's life three times over a very short period in order to secure his escape, and his threats are in the most menacing tones, i.e. "Stop this illusion or I'll twist your head off", "Would you like me to try that theory out on your head?", and "To start by burying you?". Captain Kirk would not have seemed like Captain Kirk saying those things.

Conversely, I think that had Hunter remained with the cast that scripts would have reflected this powerful, domineering character as evidenced by Captain Pike.

But alas Hunter did not remain as he became once more involved in doing feature films.

Lest you think Hunter let previous roles influence his choice of later roles, the man who played the Biblical Christ in 1961 did a nude scene (from behind only) in his last released film "Sexy Susan Sins Again" in 1969. It received less than enthusiastic reviews.

In May of 1969, Jeffrey Hunter returned from filming in Spain. He had been injured there in an accidental explosion which had knocked him down and injured his head. He suffered from dizzy spells after his return to this country. It was apparently one of these dizzy spells which caused his death. He was found unconscious at the foot of a stairway in his home. He had apparently stumbled at the top of the stairs and fallen all the way down. He was rushed to Valley Hospital where he underwent brain surgery and died. He was only 41 years old. Had he remained with STAR TREK for the three years it ran, he never would have been in Spain making a film in early 1969. But such is fate.

Jeffrey Hunter never achieved superstar status but he was much admired and his talent and ability is most sorely missed.

THE FILMS OF JEFFREY HUNTER

- 1951 FOURTEEN HOURS, CALL ME MISTER,
TAKE CARE OF MY LITTLE GIRL, THE
FROGMEN
- 1952 RED SKIES OF MONTANA, BELLES ON
THEIR TOES, DREAMBOAT, LURE OF
THE WILDERNESS
- 1953 SAILOR OF THE KING
- 1954 THREE YOUNG TEXANS, PRINCESS OF
THE NILE
- 1955 SEVEN ANGRY MEN, WHITE FEATHER,
SEVEN CITIES OF GOLD
- 1956 THE SEARCHERS, THE GREAT
LOCOMOTIVE CHASE, THE PROUD
ONES, A KISS BEFORE DYING, FOUR
GIRLS IN TOWN
- 1957 THE TRUE STORY OF JESSE JAMES, THE
WAY TO THE GOLD, NO DOWN
PAYMENT, GUN FOR A COWARD
- 1958 COUNT FIVE AND DIE, THE LAST
HURRAH, IN LOVE AND WAR, MARDI
GRAS
- 1960 SERGEANT RUTLEDGE. HELL TO
ETERNITY, KEY WITNESS
- 1961 KING OF KINGS, MAN TRAP
- 1962 NO MAN IS AN ISLAND, THE LONGEST
DAY
- 1964 GOLD FOR THE CAESARS, THE MAN
FROM GALVESTON

- 1965 BRAINSTORM, MURIETA, DIMENSION 5
- 1967 A WITCH WITHOUT A BROOM, A GUIDE
FOR THE MARRIED MAN, THE
CHRISTMAS KID
- 1968 CUSTER OF THE WEST, THE PRIVATE
NAVY OF SERGEANT O'FARRELL
- 1969 SEXY SUSAN SINS AGAIN