

THE WAY THEY WERE

JEFFREY HUNTER: THE EYES HAVE IT

By Walter H. Hogan

Success and hypnotic good looks never changed the young star who left behind a legacy of some of the most solid performances seen in Hollywood.

When the eyes of Hollywood are upon you, three pair come immediately to mind—the eyes of Elizabeth Taylor, Paul Newman and Jeffrey Hunter. As a matter of fact, it was the near hypnotic effect of Hunter's blue blue eyes (along with his sincerity, rugged strength, and personal integrity) that won for him, over scores of candidates, the role of the Savior in Samuel Bronston's 1961 production of *King of Kings*.

Henry H. McKinnies, Jr., was born in New Orleans, La., on November 25, 1927—the year Paramount released Cecil B. DeMille's silent version of

King of Kings, starring British-born H.B. Warner as Christ. And thirty-three years later Henry, known to family and close Hollywood friends as "Hank" and to marquees and fans as Jeffrey Hunter, would be in Spain heading an international cast in the role many critics would consider the most noteworthy of his career.



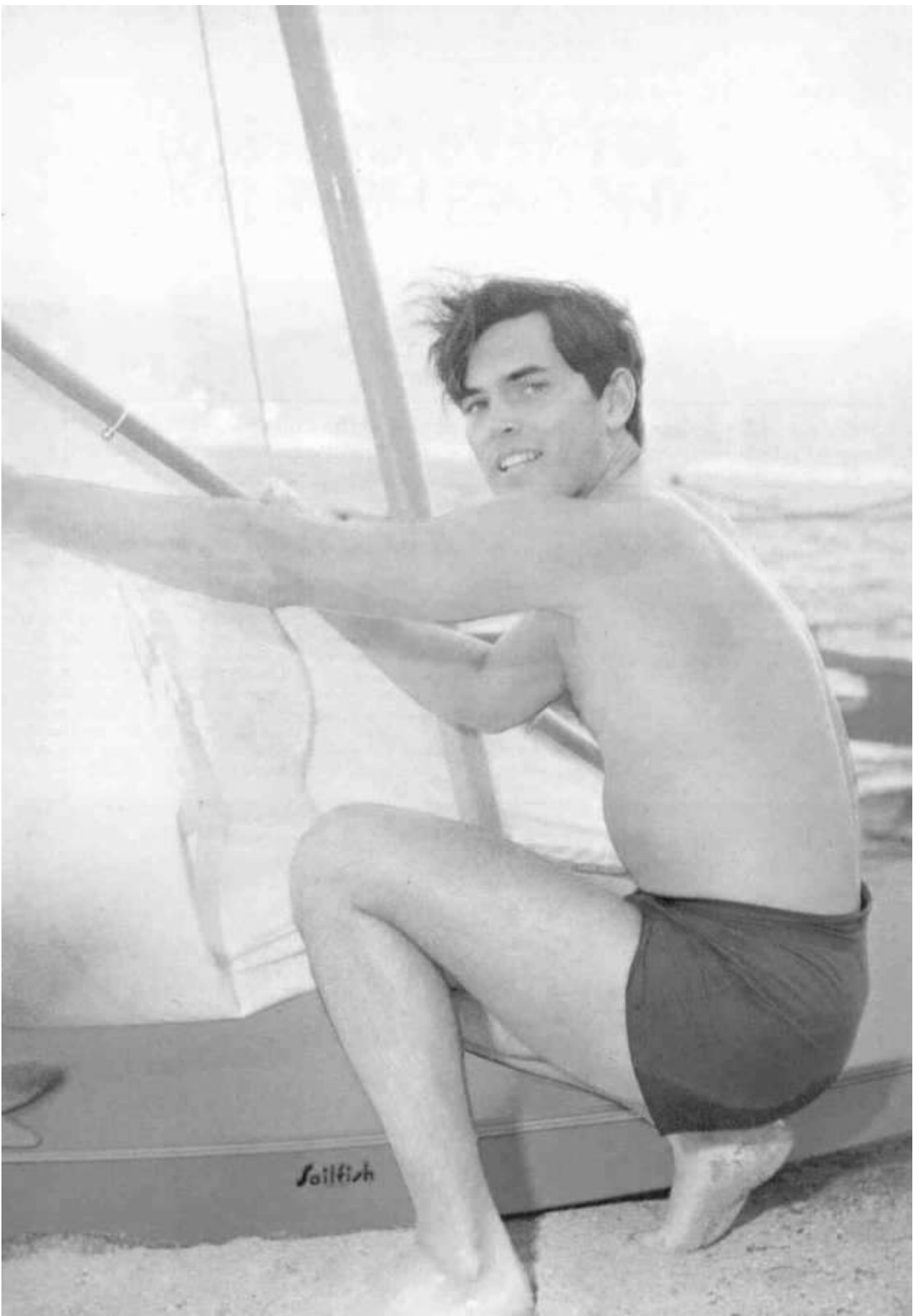
Hunter and wife attend a Hollywood affair.



*He shares a scene with Dan Dailey in
Call Me Mister.*

And though he never hit superstardom in his cut-short life (he died May 27, 1969 at the age of 41), he left behind a pretty strong list of solid, believable, convincing performances that garnered more critical ayes than nays over the eighteen years.

"When you see *The Searchers* you'll agree with me that Jeff Hunter is a fine actor," wrote Louella Parsons in May of '56. "He shares honors with John Wayne and is just as good as Duke, which is no faint praise. On the strength of this picture and other past performances, 20th Century-Fox is building Jeff to top stature."



He was always fond of saying, "Luck is preparedness when it meets with opportunity," and it proved an aptly chosen motto for his film career.

Writing of Walt Disney's *The Great Locomotive Chase* in June of the same year, Bosley Crowther said in the *New*

York Times: "The actors all do very well... Jeffrey Hunter's positively staggering as the valiant Confederate conductor who leads the chase."



He was heroic in Princess of the Nile.

In the *New York Herald Tribune* in May, 1960 Paul V. Beckley wrote, "*Sergeant Rutledge* may not be John Ford's masterpiece, but it is a sweet breeze among current films... Jeffrey Hunter turns in under Ford's influence the best performance of his young career."

Hunter's career started early, in Milwaukee, where his parents moved when he was about four. "We had a big backyard," he once said, "and I was always putting on a carnival or circus. I had a puppet show, too, and I also did magic tricks." He made his thespian bow playing a 60-year-old man in "Goldilocks and the Three Bears" for the Children's Theatre in Milwaukee. And he must have been pretty good.

"I always expected perfection from Hank," said his mother in an interview in *Photoplay* (July 1956), "but I wasn't conscious of it at the time. What mothers are? Naturally, I wouldn't do it again. It isn't fair and I'm sure it put a great strain on him... above all, we wanted him to be a fine person."

Referring to his happy, harmonious home life, Jeff once told an interviewer, "I was blessed. My parents are two very devoted people."

In Jeff's childhood, his father was out of town much of the time because of his business as a sales engineer, but Jeffrey recalled that when his father was home they had a great time together, playing ball or working on electric trains. When he was older, there were fishing trips to

Wisconsin and one time up to the Lake of the Woods in Canada.

"I remember one time Dad and I fished for fourteen hours straight without getting a single bite, but we still had a swell time together." And when his first son was born (mother: Barbara Rush), he said, "Those are things I want to share with Chris, too, seeing this great country of ours, fishing, swimming, playing tennis."

But football was a big thing in Jeff's life from the age of 11 when he won a state-wide contest held by the *Milwaukee Journal* for passing, kicking, punting and placekicking in the juvenile football division. In Whitefish Bay High School he became co-captain of a championship team. He was president of his high school class, president of the student body, recipient of a Citizenship Award and a scholarship in radio for his freshman year at Northwestern University, where he later became president of his fraternity, Phi Delta Theta.

At Northwestern he couldn't play college football, because of a broken arch bone suffered in a late high school game, so he switched his interest to

skiing, tennis, swimming, and archery. Also at Northwestern he made his screen debut—as an unbilled member of the cast headed by Charlton Heston in a student production of a 16mm film of *Julius Caesar*.



As John Brown's son with Debra Paget and Raymond Massey (Seven Angry Men).

"After I had my A.B. degree from Northwestern," Jeff said, "I came to UCLA [this incidentally on a scholarship too] to study for my master's degree in educational radio and was doing little theatre work, too, when I was given my screen test."

Jeff had acted in student productions of *Years Ago* and *The Rivals* among other plays, but it was in the role of Chris in Arthur Miller's *All My Sons*

that he was discovered. The play opened May 7, 1950, and two talent scouts in the audience (from 20th Century-Fox and Paramount) wanted to screen test him. Hunter, who was always fond of saying, "Luck is when preparedness meets opportunity," was signed to a contract by 20th that very month.

"Although there was some variety in the roles Jeffrey Hunter portrayed, he usually left the impression of the serious, tall, dark-haired, clean-cut American youth he played in a brief romantic interlude with Debra Paget in *Fourteen Hours*, in which he made his debut in 1951," said *The New York Times* obituary, adding:

"A dedicated performer who carefully studied his roles, Mr. Hunter was perhaps best known [besides for his role of Jesus in 1961's *King of Kings*] for his portrayals of Frank James in the 1957 *True Story of Jesse James*, as an American raised by Japanese Nisei in the 1960 war drama, *Hell to Eternity*, as the newspaper nephew of Spencer Tracy in the 1957 *The Last Hurrah*, and as a son of John Brown in the 1955 *Seven Angry Men*."

In his second film, Hunter had a brief scene as a barracks buddy of Dan Dailey in *Call Me Mister* ('51), then played a college fraternity snob who lost sorority girl Jeanne Crain to Dale Robertson in *Take Care of My Little Girl*.



As he appeared in The Searchers (1956).

Jeffrey got his first featured billing in his fourth film, *The Frogmen*, which starred Richard Widmark. And he received star billing for the first time

(after Widmark and Constance Smith) in his fifth film, *Red Skies of Montana*, in which he played a young forest ranger with a grudge against Widmark. The picture had a spectacular forest fire—and Jeffrey—in Technicolor, and the studio knew it had a new teen-age idol on its lot.

Critic Irene Thirer called Hunter "violet-eyed and handsome in color film" when she reviewed *The Proud Ones* (1956). "Hunter is an extraordinarily handsome—almost pretty—actor, but such looks can be a drawback and a distraction in poorly developed roles," wrote *Variety* in its review of *No Man Is An Island* (1962).

"Did Hunter's good looks make him arrogant, overbearing and hard to work with?" asked Jim Meyer in his article, "Notes on Jeffrey Hunter and His Films" in *Filmograph* (Vol. IV, No. 2) and then gave this answer: "Possibly not, when one recalls that Jean Peters, a co-star of his, once went out of her way to observe that his courtesy toward and consideration for her would be remarkable anywhere but especially in Hollywood." Miss Peters co-starred with Jeffrey in *Lure of the Wilderness*

('52) and then later was the Mrs., then ex-Mrs. Howard Hughes. Said Meyer: "Hunter's tentative love scenes with Miss Peters were extraordinarily touching."

Many people agreed with Miss Peters in her thoughts on Hunter. And one friend once said, "He's the first good-looking actor I've met who wasn't hopelessly in love with himself."

Hunter himself once quipped, "This face of mine. Shouldn't the ravages of time be doing something to it?"



Hunter starred with Robert Ryan in a Technicolor western, The Proud Ones.

After an interview with Hunter when he'd just returned from Chicago, where he'd played *The Rainmaker* at Carl

Stone's Pheasant Run Playhouse, Florabel Muir wrote in *The Daily News* on May 31, 1967: "I talked to Jeffrey Hunter, whose eyes seem to get bigger and bluer with the years, and whose prematurely graying hair is making him even more handsome than when he was younger."



Hunter played an Indian in White Feather with Robert Wagner and Debra Paget.

To interviewer Sally Hammond for an article in *The New York Post* in September of '68, Barbara Rush called Hunter "the handsomest I've ever seen" and said it was love at first sight, she was quite sure, because of his blue eyes. Hunter and Barbara, a Paramount starlet then, eloped on Dec. 1, 1950. Barbara

still remembers "with a tinge of bitterness," said Hammond, that Jeffrey had to go on location the very day their son Christopher was born. But she doesn't blame him, only "the fact it had to be." They separated after nearly four years of marriage and were divorced in '55. He said, "Barbara and I basically disagreed on everything. We rarely fought, we just disagreed... two careers and long separations never helped a marriage." She called Hunter "emotionally immature for marriage" and said he "kept telling me how much better his mother could cook and keep house." In 1957 Hunter and Barbara appeared in a movie together, *No Down Payment*, which starred, among others, Joanne Woodward. Patricia Owens played his wife, and three years later played a stiff-necked date at a marine party in *Hell to Eternity*. Finally, after enough drinks and fury at Hunter, she does a sizzling strip tease down at least to a black bra. In *Movies Are Better Than Ever*, Andrew Dowdy wrote: "*Time* hinted of things to come when it reported on double-shooting: by disclosing that American viewers... would not see Jeffrey Hunter unfasten

Patricia Owens' brassiere or most of the wild party leading up to the scene. But maybe next year." Well, viewers got to see him, during a passionate kiss, *start* to unfasten the bra. And they also saw a picture in which, *Variety* said, "Hunter delivers a thoroughly believable characterization of Gabaldon, playing the role with sincerity and conviction." Said Howard Thompson in *The New York Times*: "Mr. Hunter finally comes into his own with the best acting of his career." The picture came out in '60.

Five years before that, feeling his career on the slide, Hunter had told Bob Thomas of the Associated Press: "I have a certain value now as a teenage commodity, but who knows how long this will last? So I've always studied the production end of this business, spending long hours in cutting rooms and elsewhere trying to learn how pictures are made. My Fox contract permits me to produce one outside picture a year." And that year with William Hayes he produced a 33-minute documentary short subject in Technicolor and Cinemascope called *The Living Swamp*, filmed in Georgia's Okefenokee swamp, where his *Lure of*

the Wilderness had been made.



He played opposite Constance Towers in John Ford's Sergeant Rutledge.

In *The Sunday News* of August 12, 1956, Dorothy Masters wrote: "It was less than two years ago that a promising young actor, frustrated with a deluge of unearned salary checks, proposed a cessation of his contract with 20th Century-Fox. At this point the bosses administered a heartening backslap and persuaded Jeffrey Hunter to stick around for a while, something would turn up. So many things did turn up that Jeff is now blanketing the nation's theaters with four pictures." They were *The Proud Ones*, *The Great Locomotive Chase*, *A Kiss Before Dying*, and *The*

Searchers, called by *Cue* "first rate, rousing entertainment... for its astonishing wealth of minute detail and honest, strikingly natural characterizations."

With *The Searchers*, Hunter felt he'd finally made the grade ("I was told I had really arrived," he once said, "because they gave me almost as much ammunition as they gave John Wayne"), but he almost didn't get the part he so desperately sought—the role of Martin Pawley, a part-Indian boy. Director John Ford flatly told him, "You're not the type." But the next day, appearing in dark make-up and slick black hair, he went to Ford again. Ford let him test for the role—and gave it to him. *The New York Herald Tribune* said, "Jeffrey Hunter is excellent as the boy who shares his [Wayne's] relentless search. He is far more emotional and likeable, and he matures over the five years from a naive kid to a man who can take care of himself in tough situations." Hunter has many fine scenes, but when it comes your way on TV, watch for the scene where he's asked to read Wayne's last will and testament.



Patricia Owens (shown left) performs a tantalizing strip tease for shy marine Jeffrey during the wild party scene in Hell to Eternity (1960).

Hunter got his role in *The Great Locomotive Chase* after a strong sales pitch to the executive producer, Walt Disney. Of the film that *Life* called a "Civil War thriller," Hunter said: "Try leaping on and off an old locomotive with worn-out Civil War brakes! It took the toughest cast of characters Disney could collect." Asked how it was to be in a movie with no women, he said, "We didn't have time to tell."

In July of '57 Hunter married Joan (Dusty) Bartlett—it was the second marriage for each—and he adopted her son Steele. Not long after they were

married, he became very ill with infectious hepatitis, and attributed his recovery after a long illness to her care and nursing at home. They had two sons, Todd and Scott.

Dusty, Steele and Todd were with Hunter in Spain—"We had a very comfortable apartment in Madrid"—from May 1 to November 1, 1960, while he was making *King of Kings*.

How did he get the part? "I don't really know who selected me," he told Kate Cameron. "I hadn't met Bronston before the start of the picture, but had known Nicholas Ray, who directed it, and I did hear that my good friend John Ford had suggested me to Ray."

His casting immediately set up controversy. The reason: his blue eyes. But some historians concluded there were blue-eyed people among Palestinians. In the preparation of the screenplay by Philip Yordan, outstanding religious scholars of all faiths were consulted; and producer Bronston was granted an audience with Pope John XXIII, with whom he discussed the script.

Hunter undertook the role with great trepidation. He didn't see DeMille's

version. At first he intended to ask for a screening, then decided against it to eliminate the possibility of imitation.

Of the attitude of the cast and crew, Jeffrey said: "At first there seemed to be timidity, then almost complete withdrawal of the usual banter and fun-making on the set. Seldom did anyone engage me in personal conversations. Eventually, I simply went to my dressing room between scenes, resting and studying my lines until the cameras were ready."

Of the director Ray, Hunter said, "He is gentle and kind and has an intelligent approach to his job which in this instance was a labor of love. Working under Ray's direction was a truly pleasant and inspiring assignment."

Then came the reviews—some truly pleasant, others not so. Bronston's carefully researched yet highly controversial production elicited both high praise and caustic commentary.

Variety (October 11, 1961) called it "a major motion picture by any standard—as a production, as a script, for masterly management of scenes by its director and as entertainment. *King of Kings* wisely substitutes

characterizations for orgies.

"Foremost among the players must be Jeffrey Hunter as the Saviour. Did he not carry conviction one may only imagine the embarrassment. But he comes remarkably close to being ideal. His blue orbs and auburn bob (wig, of course) are strikingly pictorial."



In the title role of King of Kings.

Crowther in the *New York Times* said, "Mr. Hunter wears his makeup nobly and performs with simplicity and taste."

Henry Hart, who was "incapable of imagining Jeffrey Hunter as Christ," said in *Films in Review* (November, 1961), "The production as a whole is in good taste... And Jeffrey Hunter's face is made up and photographed so as to be, at least to my mind and heart, the kind of Christ image that stirs mankind."

On October 27, 1961 came *Time's* review. Review? It seems not so much a criticism as a crucifixion via typewriter—pounding out words that drive in the nails with a sledgehammer. *Time* called the picture:

"The corniest, phoniest, ickiest, and most monstrously vulgar of all the big Bible stories Hollywood has told in the last decade... The imitation of Christ is little better than blasphemy. Granted that the role is impossible to cast or play... whatever possessed producer Bronston to offer the part to Jeffrey Hunter, a fanmag cover boy, with a flabby face, a cute little lopsided smile, baby-blue eyes, and barely enough histrionic ability to play a Hollywood marine?

"And why dress the poor guy up in a glossy-curly page-boy peruke, why

shave his armpits, and powder his face till he looks like a pallid, simpering chorus-boy Christ of the religious-supply shoppes?"

And finally from *Time*: "The definitive criticism of Bronston's Christ and indeed of his entire film is expressed in the snide subtitle by which it is widely known in the trade: "I Was A Teenage Jesus."

Yet *Variety* concluded its review with: "The final tribute to *King of Kings* is not that it succeeds as a spectacle. It does that, too. Rather it succeeds in touching the heart ... In short, it is a big picture."

The same year Jeffrey starred with Stella Stevens and David Janssen in *Man Trap*. Said *Variety*: "Earnest performances by all three leads are wasted." Janssen called Hunter "a fine actor... completely professional in his approach to his work."

In 1962, Jeffrey starred in *No Man Is An Island*, a true story about George Tweed, a USN radioman (Hunter had taken a course in radio engineering in the Communications Division during his own stint in the Navy) who managed with the aid of the people of Guam, to

stay out of the hands of the Japanese for 34 months when they occupied the island during WWII. *Variety* said Hunter played Tweed "earnestly, but the character as written is far from substantial."

Following a cameo role in *The Longest Day*, Hunter starred in *Gold for the Caesars*, playing a slave-architect "in the thick of an Italian-made spear-and-sandal saga," said Robert Salmaggi in the *Herald Tribune*. "Jeff, however, doesn't even muss one hair on his handsome head. . . . He even wears the most stunning thigh-length tunic with matching sandals."

Also in '64 Jeff was *The Man from Galveston*, produced by Jack Webb and directed by William Conrad, now TV's *Cannon*. In this he played a western lawyer named Timothy Higgins. Keeping the initials but changing the name, the show became TV's *Temple Houston*.

In September of '66 Hunter's wife filed for divorce, alleging that he drank to excess and was careless with money. In September of '67, columnist Sheilah Graham reported that Jeff and Sally Ann Howes, then doing *Chitty Chitty*

Bang Bang in London, were engaged and had set the date. But the date was not to be, for as Hunter once said, referring even to high school romances, "I've always gone for brunettes."



Hunter and Leonard Nimoy on an alien planet in an episode of Star Trek.

In '67 Hunter appeared in *A Witch Without a Broom*, which *Variety* called "silly... another link in Sidney Pink's chain of Spanish sausages for the U.S." And Jeff got into the current nudity swing of things when he was shown

naked (rear view only), starring with Terry Torday, who bared both breasts and bottom in *Sexy Susan Sins Again* ('69), a picture that seemed to be more of a sin against the audience.

In late May of '69, barely two months after he'd married Emily McLaughlin, toplined actress on the daytime TV show, *General Hospital*, Hunter fell at home. His wife was at ABC rehearsing, and he was found unconscious at the foot of a stairway by a friend. On May 29, the *Los Angeles Times* said, "A head injury that actor Jeffrey Hunter received while making a picture in Spain caused him to have dizzy spells that might have led to the accidental fall that took his life, police investigators said. Detective Sgt. Jesse A. Tubbs of the Van Nuys Division said ...Hunter had just finished filming in Spain, where he was injured in an accidental explosion. The scene called for an explosion aboard a train.

"The force of the explosion knocked Hunter down, injuring his head, Tubbs said. The actor had dizzy spells after his return to this country.

"Hunter apparently stumbled at the top of the stairway, overturned a planter, and fell to the bottom."

He underwent brain surgery at Valley Hospital, where he died.

His widow Emily said he had a premonition of his death just days before when he said, "If I should cross the bridge before you do, darling, remember, I'll be waiting for you on the other side."

Besides some fine performances on film, Hunter left his advice for aspiring actors: "Be natural, sincere and honest on and off screen and stage or radio. A good acting job must come from the mind and heart."

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
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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