

## JEFFREY HUNTER: AN AMERICAN DREAMBOAT

by MARIA CIACCIA

(Jeffrey Hunter will be part of Maria Ciaccia's new book **Hollywood Hunks**, due to be published soon)

Jeffrey Hunter — dreamboat, teen idol, husband, father. Death at 42, the meteoric life of this mysterious actor has become a source of fascination for a new generation of film buffs and STAR TREK fans. Who was this man with the Adonis-like face?

"Jeffrey Hunter" began life as Henry "Hank" McKinnies, Jr. in New Orleans on November 25, 1926. The family moved to Whitefish Bay, Wisconsin, when Hank was five. His father, an engineer, was the inventor of the Gage-o-matic refrigeration device, and founded his own company, Henry H. McKinnies Co., in Wisconsin.

Growing up, Hank excelled at athletics and scholastic achievement. With the vivid imagination as an only child often acquires out of loneliness, Hank became interested in acting at an early age. He not only staged events in his backyard, but participated in a children's theater in Wisconsin. In high school, he often played character roles. He played a 60-year-old man in one production.



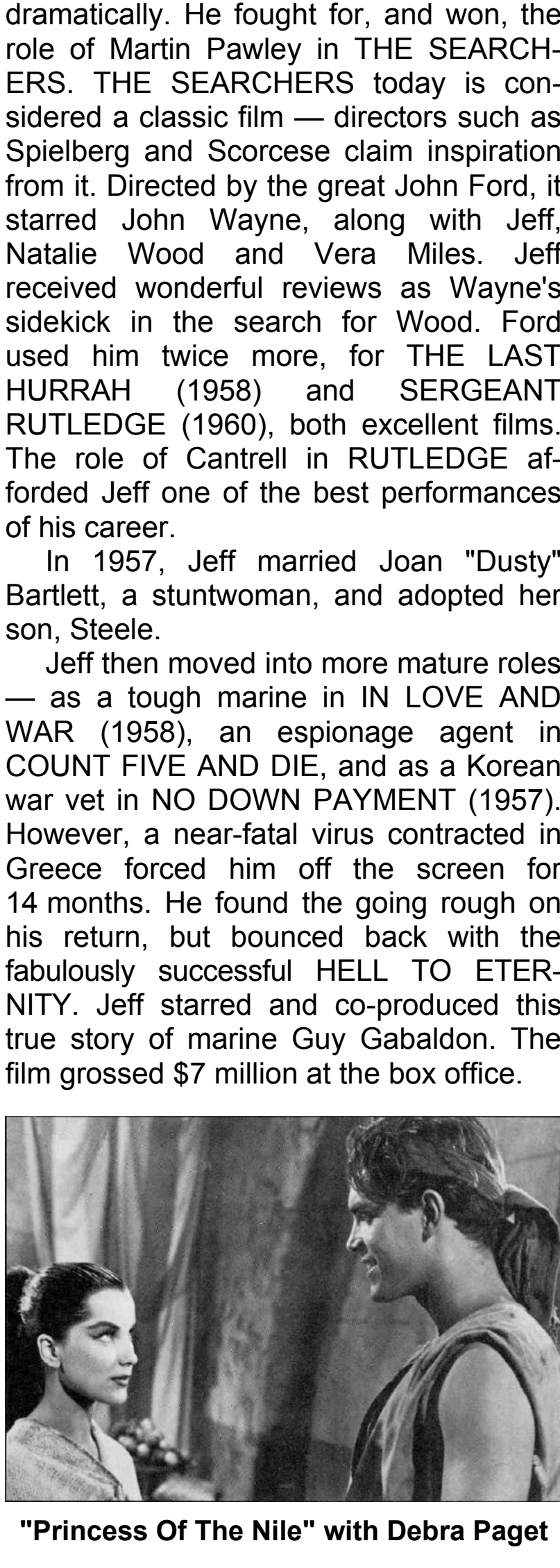
Hank McKinnies entered the Navy in 1945, and served for one year. At the end of his service, he attended Northwestern University and UCLA, majoring at the latter in speech and radio. In his final year at UCLA, he played the part of Chris in ALL MY SONS. It was the end of his quest for a master's degree. Talent scouts in the audience whisked him off to Hollywood before graduation, to test for Paramount. There, he tested in a scene from ALL MY SONS, in which Ed Begley played his father. Although Paramount did not sign young Hank, while waiting to test, he met his future wife, Barbara Rush, a young Paramount contract player. They were married December 1, 1950.

Hank was signed by Twentieth Century Fox shortly after his Paramount disappointment. Fox changed his name to Jeffrey Hunter, and he joined Dale Robertson, Robert Wagner, Debra Paget and Jean Peters as up-and-comings at Fox. In his first film, FOURTEEN HOURS, he played Debra Paget's love interest, and, as he said later, had more lines to say than Princess Grace, who also made her film debut in FOURTEEN HOURS.

After FOURTEEN HOURS, Jeff was shuffled from film to film. Most notable in these early years were: LURE OF THE WILDERNESS, (a remake of SWAMP WATER) in which he co-starred with Jean Peters in 1952; RED SKIES OF MONTANA (1952); and a British film, SAILOR OF THE KING (1953). He quickly became very popular with teens, receiving huge amounts of fan mail.

But it didn't last long. Robert Wagner quickly became the Juvenile Prince of Fox (literally, as well as figuratively, when he won the role of Prince Valiant). Jeff found himself often playing a supporting role to Wagner's lead. He realized, finally, that he'd become too complacent. Rather than campaign for parts he'd taken a back seat.

In 1954, career separations caused Barbara Rush to file for divorce from Jeff Hunter. They had one son, Christopher. Barbara claimed their marriage had been a mistake from the beginning, and lamented the fact that Jeff did not see Christopher for several months after his birth.

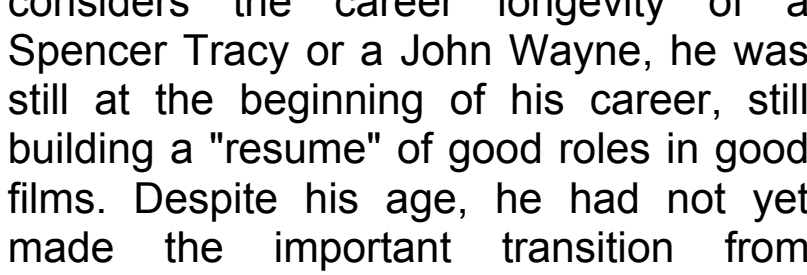


"Gold for the Caesars" (1964)

Then, Jeff Hunter's career changed dramatically. He fought for, and won, the role of Martin Pawley in THE SEARCHERS. THE SEARCHERS today is considered a classic film — directors such as Spielberg and Scorsese claim inspiration from it. Directed by the great John Ford, it starred John Wayne, along with Jeff, Natalie Wood and Vera Miles. Jeff received wonderful reviews as Wayne's sidekick in the search for Wood. Ford used him twice more, for THE LAST HURRAH (1958) and SERGEANT RUTLEDGE (1960), both excellent films. The role of Cantrell in RUTLEDGE afforded Jeff one of the best performances of his career.

In 1957, Jeff married Joan "Dusty" Bartlett, a stuntwoman, and adopted her son, Steele.

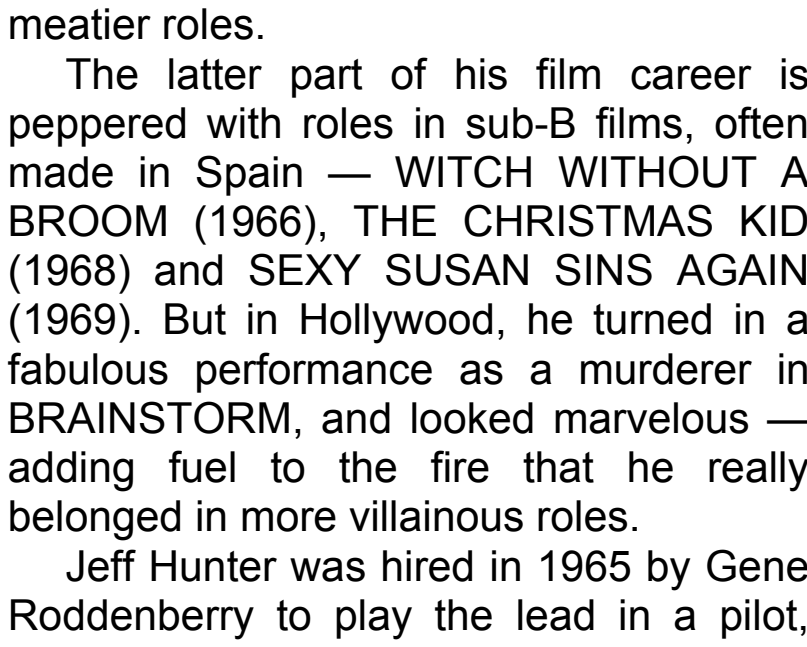
Jeff then moved into more mature roles — as a tough marine in IN LOVE AND WAR (1958), an espionage agent in COUNT FIVE AND DIE, and as a Korean war vet in NO DOWN PAYMENT (1957). However, a near-fatal virus contracted in Greece forced him off the screen for 14 months. He found the going rough on his return, but bounced back with the fabulously successful HELL TO ETERNITY. Jeff starred and co-produced this true story of marine Guy Gabaldon. The film grossed \$7 million at the box office.



"Princess Of The Nile" with Debra Paget

Then, another turn in Jeff Hunter's career — KING OF KINGS. According to KING'S director, Nicholas Ray, Jeff's mesmerizing blue eyes and personal charisma won him the role of Christ. During the filming in Spain, Jeff was often mistaken for Christ by peasants. Although reviews of his portrayal were mixed at the time, the film, and Jeff's performance, hold up very well today.

The demise of Jeff Hunter's career has often laid at the feet of Jesus. However, immediately after KING OF KINGS, Jeff starred as a hen-pecked thief in MANTRAP (1961), and NO MAN IS AN ISLAND (1962), a true World War II story, and also appeared in THE LONGEST DAY (1962).



"King Of Kings" (1961)

Jeff was by now 36 and, when one considers the career longevity of a Spencer Tracy or a John Wayne, he was still at the beginning of his career, still building a "resume" of good roles in good films. Despite his age, he had not yet made the important transition from juvenile to true leading man. Instead of continuing on his present path, he veered from it. Financial insecurity often forced Jeff to take roles that were not beneficial to his career. In fact, they were downright detrimental. Hollywood was making less movies in the '60s, so Jeff—as well as many other Hollywood actors—had to look elsewhere to keep working. He turned to television, doing a TV series, TEMPLE HOUSTON, for one year. In other TV roles, on ALFRED HITCHCOCK, THE MONROES, CHECKMATE, THE FBI, and others, he played, not heroes, but psychotics, thieves, and murderers! A wonderful actor, he could quite possibly have had a "second career" in character roles. His incredible good looks had kept him from this type of role early in his career. Television allowed him more versatility, and he was at last able to play meatier roles.

The latter part of his film career is peppered with roles in sub-B films, often made in Spain — WITCH WITHOUT A BROOM (1966), THE CHRISTMAS KID (1968) and SEXY SUSAN SINS AGAIN (1969). But in Hollywood, he turned in a fabulous performance as a murderer in BRAINSTORM, and looked marvelous — adding fuel to the fire that he really belonged in more villainous roles.

Jeff Hunter was hired in 1965 by Gene Roddenberry to play the lead in a pilot, STAR TREK: "The Cage". But due to the pressure on him to keep working, when NBC ordered a second pilot, Jeff was not available. The rest is history — for the STAR TREK actors. For Jeff, it was on to another bad film.

In 1965, he and Dusty separated, and later divorced. Their divorce was a bitter one and the settlement one which Jeff could not afford. The case was finally settled out of court, and Dusty gained custody of their three children, Steele, Todd and Scott. Jeff adored his children, and communicated with them and saw them often.

Jeff became involved with actress/singer Sally Ann Howes, but it did not lead to marriage. His third wife was Emily McLaughlin, Nurse Jessie Brewer on the daytime soap opera, GENERAL HOSPITAL. They married on February 4, 1969, 3 1/2 months before his death.

A series of accidents led to Jeff Hunter's death. The first one occurred on a film set in Spain. Jeff was seated in a car, and the scene called for an explosion to take place outside of the car. Instead, the charge exploded, injuring Jeff. Then, a commando friend gave him a karate chop to the head accidentally, causing another injury.

One can only surmise what happened the day before Jeff Hunter's death. On May 26, 1969, he was found unconscious at the bottom of some stairs in his home. A planter had been overturned, and the police surmised he had tripped over it and been knocked unconscious. He died the next morning, after brain surgery. An autopsy revealed he had suffered a stroke, then fallen. Several weeks earlier, he had been hospitalized for paralysis. This paralysis was attributed to a back problem and, when mobility returned, he was released. At the time of his death, he was 42. Devoted to his parents throughout his life, they both outlived him.

Jeffrey Hunter was part of the bland '50s and the studio system breakdown, but with his talent and looks, he could have easily survived. His personal problems caused him to make poor career choices. He may have played Jesus and looked like a god, but he turned out to be only human.