

THE UNKNOWN CAPTAIN

Despite years of searching, Jeffrey Hunter only briefly visited the stars.

By GLENN A. MOSLEY



In late November 1964, for the very first time, the Captain of the *U.S.S. Enterprise* strode the Desilu Studios soundstages. As Captain Christopher Pike, actor Jeffrey Hunter played more the doubting Hamlet than the charming swashbuckler of his successor. Pike was clearly a firm leader of men and a fearless explorer, pushing the boundaries of the United Federation of Planets further out through the galaxy.

As such, Pike's place in Starfleet history is assured. But that hasn't necessarily been the case with Hunter's role in the pop culture chronicles of *Star Trek*.

"He was a very soft-spoken, thoughtful, easy-going gentleman," Leonard Nimoy wrote in *I Am Spock*, echoing similar statements made by those who worked with Hunter throughout his Hollywood career. But Hunter died young—he was only 43—long before *Star Trek* reference books, video documentaries and SF cons. He never had the chance to ponder in public on his unrealized role in the *Star Trek* phenomenon.

By the time Hunter went before the Desilu cameras as Captain Pike, he had appeared in more than 30 motion pictures and had, for one season, starred in his own TV Western, *Temple Houston*. Additionally, Hunter had the good fortune to work in three pictures for legendary director John Ford (1956's *The Searchers*, 1958's *The*



In the first *Star Trek* pilot, "The Cage," Jeffrey Hunter had command of the U.S.S. *Enterprise* as Captain Christopher Pike.

Last Hurrah and 1960's *Sergeant Rutledge*) and two more for director Nicholas Ray 1957's *The True Story of Jesse James* and 1961's *King of Kings*). His was a solid career that many actors might envy but which was, in 1964, beginning to show signs of stalling.

Enterprising Beginnings

Born Henry Herman McKinnies Jr., in New Orleans, Hunter moved with his family to Milwaukee at a young age. "Hank," as his friends called him, graduated from Whitefish Bay High School and became a prolific radio performer.

Enrollment at Northwestern University in 1946 followed his Navy service, leading to summer stock work and graduate school at UCLA. Hollywood talent scouts spotted him on stage at UCLA in *All My Sons*, and he was signed to a contract at 20th Century Fox, where production chief Darryl F. Zanuck named him Jeffrey Hunter (though the actor never legally changed his name). From 1950-55, he was married to actress Barbara (*When Worlds Collide*) Rush.

Though Hunter flourished at Fox throughout the '50s, he fought constant battles about the parts he was offered. Almost too good-looking, he was often cast in what he described as "cotton candy, college-sophomore roles," but he proved immensely popular.

He clawed his way into better pictures. While he's remembered for his performance

as Jesus Christ in *King of Kings*, his best role was undoubtedly Martin Pawley, the one-eighth Cherokee cowboy who accompanies Ethan Edwards (John Wayne) on a grim quest in *The Searchers*. Describing that part in the Western classic as his personal favorite. Hunter once said, "I knew I'd arrived when they gave me as many bullets as they gave John Wayne."



A memorable Jesus Christ in *King of Kings*, Hunter made Westerns like *The Searchers* (above) and war films before his sojourn into science fiction.

His roles in *King of Kings*, *The Searchers* and the 1965 thriller *Brainstorm* (as an unbalanced scientist who kills his lover's husband) really catch the actor at his best. Hunter's better TV appearances included

parts in *Combat*, *Checkmate* and *Suspense Theatre*.

There were good films like *Hell to Eternity* (1960, with George Takei), *Key Witness* (1960, with a young Dennis Hopper), *The Great Locomotive Chase* (1956) and the multi-star epic *The Longest Day* (1962), but by the early 1960s, Hunter was dissatisfied with the roles being offered him in films.

More and more, he turned to TV for better adult parts.

In 1962, that meant one of the first episodes of *The Alfred Hitchcock Hour*. Hunter played a college professor pursuing an on-campus killer in "Don't Look Behind You," and called the part one of a series of TV roles that he had playing "handsome, not quite right types."

Eventually, Hunter found his way to *Star Trek*, although he was on NBC's short list of actors they did not want to star in the pilot. His 1963-64 Western *Temple Houston* hadn't found much of an audience, and NBC wasn't certain he could carry a series. Other actors were also considered,

but Hunter got the part. Roddenberry biographer David Alexander reported that Roddenberry swapped memos with NBC's Standards and Practices Division to secure his lead actor.

Hunter toiled 16 days in the *Star Trek* Universe, and collected \$10,000 for his

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Hunter dropped out of *Trek*, possibly persuaded by his then-wife that an SF-TV show was beneath "a movie star."



Searchers photo: Copyright 1956 Warner Bros. Inc.

On a dramatic quest alongside John Wayne, Hunter starred in director John Ford's classic, *The Searchers*.

work. While Roddenberry liked him in the lead, pilot director Robert Butler felt Hunter was too good-looking—a complaint the actor frequently heard in his career. Nimoy has said that he felt the cool demeanor that Spock eventually developed played better off Shatner's Captain Kirk than it would have off Hunter's Captain Pike.

Captain's Mutiny

What transpired has been extensively documented. NBC rejected the first pilot and called for a second, apparently deciding they disliked "The Cage," but liking the idea of the program overall. Hunter survived the network's call for an overhaul, but then decided not to continue in the part. Roddenberry set up a special screening of "The Cage" in March 1965 for Hunter and his wife, Joan ("Dusty") Bartlett, in hopes of convincing the actor to stick with the project. Later, Roddenberry claimed that it was Bartlett who talked her husband out of staying in *Trek*, believing that SF was beneath him, that he was "a movie star."

The most unfortunate thing about his decision is that Hunter seemed to really appreciate and enjoy *Star Trek*. In January 1965, he told a Hollywood columnist that he hoped the series would be picked up. His comments make it clear that he was aware of the program's potential:

"We run into prehistoric worlds, contemporary societies and civilizations far more developed than our own," Hunter said. "It's a great format because writers have a free hand—they can have us land on a monster-infested planet, or deal in human relations involving the large number of people who live together on this gigantic ship."

"We should know within several weeks whether the show has been sold. It will be an hour long, in color, with a regular cast of a half-dozen or so and an important guest star each week. The thing that intrigues me the most about the show is that it is actually based on the Rand Corporation's projection of things to come. Except for the fictional characters, it will be like getting a look into the future and some of the predictions will surely come true in our lifetime."

"With all the weird surroundings of outer space, the basic underlying theme of the show is a philosophical approach to man's

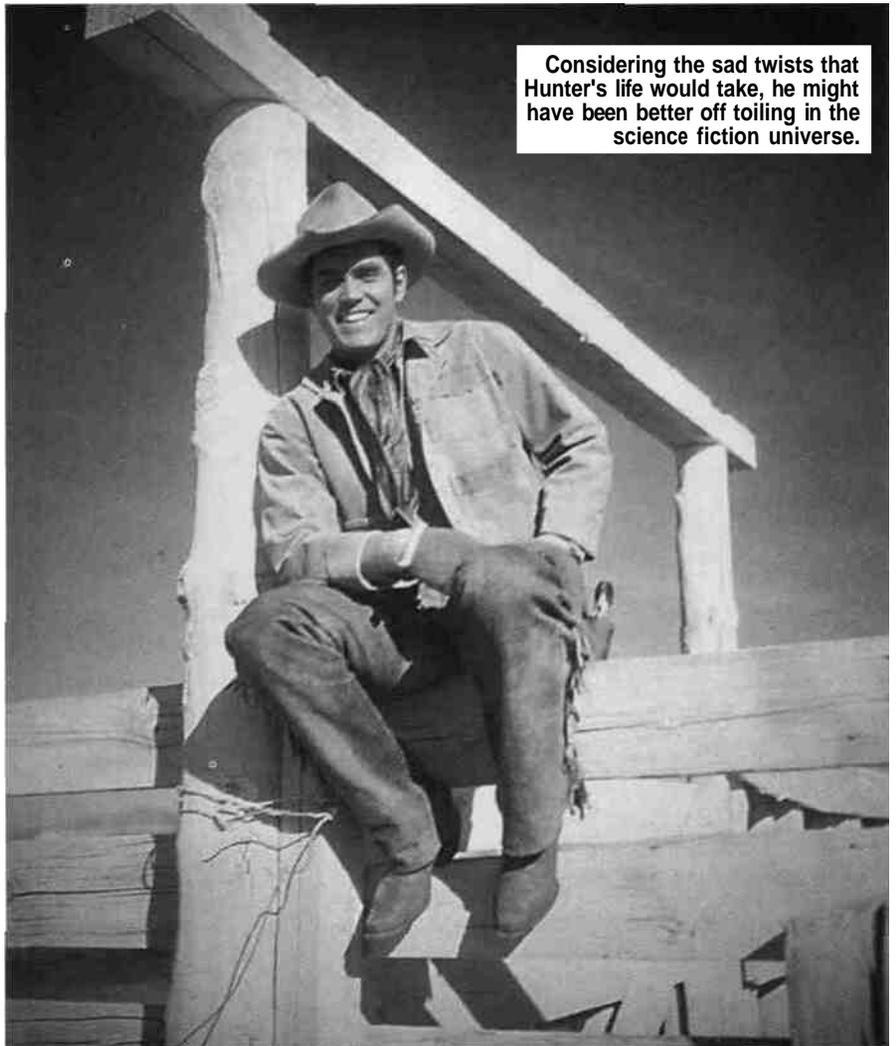
relationship to woman. There are both sexes in the crew, in fact, the first officer is a woman."

But despite his obvious enthusiasm, Hunter opted not to star in the second pilot, forfeiting the renamed lead role to William Shatner. At one point in the negotiations, Roddenberry suggested the filming of a few additional scenes, comprising a new action sequence, with the idea of lengthening and strengthening the pilot for a theatrical release. Again, however, the Hunters expressed no interest.

Hindsight is, of course, 20/20. But it seems reasonable to suggest that with the sad turn that Hunter's life soon took, he might have been happier playing starship captain.

While we may never know for sure how much, if at all, Hunter regretted stepping aside, we do know that he enjoyed series television. Questioned in 1967 about the failure of *Temple Houston*, Hunter said he was sorry to see it end and hoped to have the opportunity to do another series. And, indeed, he did keep trying, starring in *Journey into Fear*, a 1966 pilot for an espionage series written by Eric Ambler for William (Batman) Dozier's Greenway Productions, as well as pushing hard a few years later for the role of Mike Brady in *The Brady Bunch*.

Journey into Fear creator Ambler, the noted suspense author, called the program a "one hour action-suspense-adventure-romance TV series." The program focused on



Considering the sad twists that Hunter's life would take, he might have been better off toiling in the science fiction universe.

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a brilliant scientist, Dr. Howard Graham, employed from time to time by a secret government group known as Special Executive Coordination (SEC). Graham's job was to verify and evaluate secret information secured by U.S. agents or being offered for sale. In Ambler's pilot story, "The Seller's Market," Graham and another SEC agent are sent to a South American country to investigate stolen plans for a missile guidance system. Future stories would have taken Graham all over the country and all over the world.

Dozier and Ambler were trying to catch the wave of popularity engendered by the James Bond films and the espionage TV shows already on the air. NBC declined to pick the show up, however, opting instead for, among others, *Tarzan*, *The Girl From U.N.C.L.E.* and, ironically enough, *Star Trek*, all of which debuted in September 1966. Hunter later guest-starred on Dozier's *The Green Hornet* ("Freeway to Death").

Unknown Journeys

Hunter's marriage to Bartlett, his second, ended in divorce in 1967, and the settlement helped devastate the actor's finances. In addition, a former business manager sued him in 1965. By early 1969, Hunter confessed he had nothing more to his name than an organ, a vacuum cleaner and an apartment in Brentwood, CA. In those last years, he had also developed an alcohol problem.

Now, the once rising star was forced to take whatever role came along in order to pay the

bills. Fewer and fewer good parts were offered, and his name no longer popped up in connection with the bigger pictures in development. Perhaps Hollywood producers believed his problems made him unreliable or that he was simply finished as the hard-working, dependable leading man he had once been.

Instead of commanding the *U.S.S. Enterprise* from 1966-69, Hunter spent his last years in unremarkable films: a spaghetti Western (*The Christmas Kid*), an exploitation flick (*Sexy Susan Sins Again*) and a routine Bob Hope vehicle (*The Private Navy of Sgt. O'Farrell*).

SF buffs will note that Hunter also starred in two other genre films: *Dimension 5* (1966), in which he played a time-traveling espionage agent trying to save LA from destruction, and *A Witch Without a Broom* (1967). In the latter, a witch falls in love with an American history professor (Hunter) and proceeds to send the two off on several misadventures through the past and future. Both movies were a long journey from the cinematic classic days of *The Searchers*.



Among his other films are *In Love and War* (with Hope Lange), *The Last Hurrah* and *The Longest Day*.

Friends recall Hunter as a kind and gentle man who really didn't belong in the cutthroat world of Hollywood. Good friend Lee Rioridan once called him "the finest, most decent man I've ever known." Popular with his fans and co-workers, Hunter had a successful career until 1965. After that, wrong decisions and personal difficulties sent his life into a downward spiral. He never got a second chance at stardom. Hunter died following a fall at his home in May 1969, a death, that although apparently mysterious to some extent, was declared an accident. At the time, he was married to actress Emily McLaughlin (Jessie Brewer on *General Hospital*).

Where a permanent role on *Star Trek* might have taken the actor and his life, the series and its phenomenon, of course no one can ever know. His was a different kind of captain, to be certain. His character can now only be briefly glimpsed—in "The Cage" pilot and the "Menagerie" two-parter (in which Sean Kenney portrayed the invalidated Pike) on video and in a new ongoing comic book series from Paramount Comics (debuting this fall).

Would the audience have embraced Hunter's Pike as they did Shatner's Kirk? Looking back, Shatner's characterization also began on a rather serious note, and loosened up several episodes into the series; perhaps Captain Pike would have, too. On the other hand, *Star Trek: The Next Generation* was extraordinarily popular, and its serious captain, particularly so.

Jeffrey Hunter, as Captain Christopher Pike, was the first hero of *Star Trek*. "I thought highly of him," Gene Roddenberry said years later. "He would have made a grand captain."

In another memorable John Ford movie, Hunter defended *Sergeant Rutledge* (Woody Strode), a man accused of murder.

