



18th Annual City Tech Poster Session

Sailors: The iconography of an all-American homoerotic symbol

Kel R. Karpinski Library Department

Through a new critical reading and analysis of images found in the magazines *Young Physique* and *Physique Pictorial*, I examine how the sailor has become a homoerotic icon. Looking at these magazines in the post-World War II and pre-Stonewall period, I'm specifically interested in how sailors in the popular imagination are viewed as the epitome of all things American and yet simultaneously occupy a distinctly queer space of desire. Sailors are a gay icon in the mythology of American culture and an object of gay fetishization and fantasy. For queer men, who were seen as outside of mainstream culture or "on the fringe," what does it mean for their object of desire to be such a patriotic symbol of masculinity? What are the implications or race and class inherent in these depictions of sailors in the medium of physique magazines?

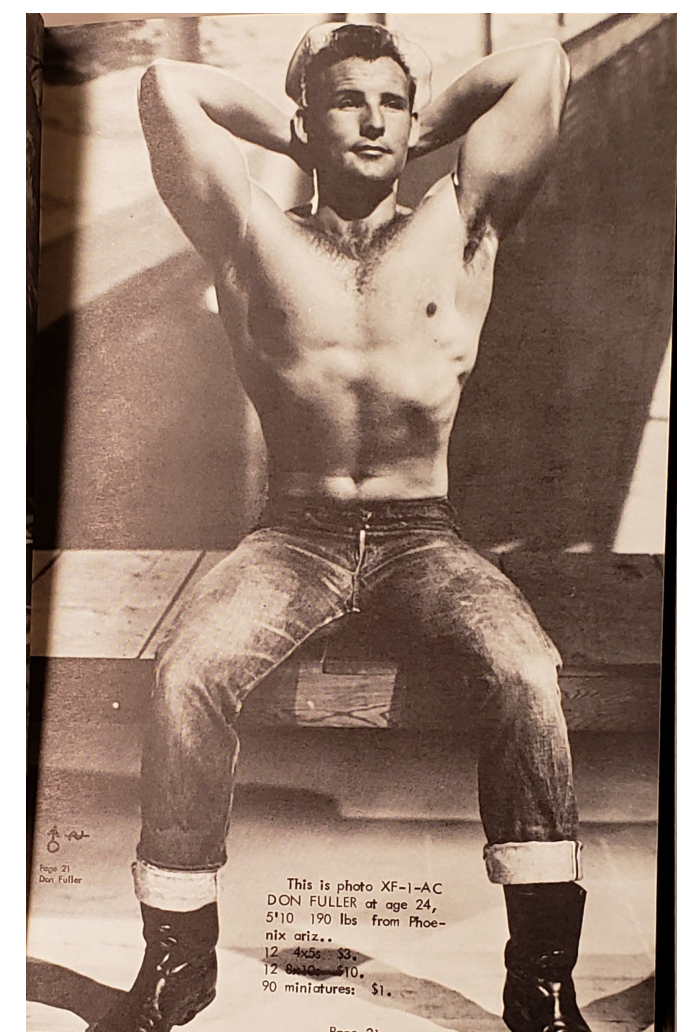
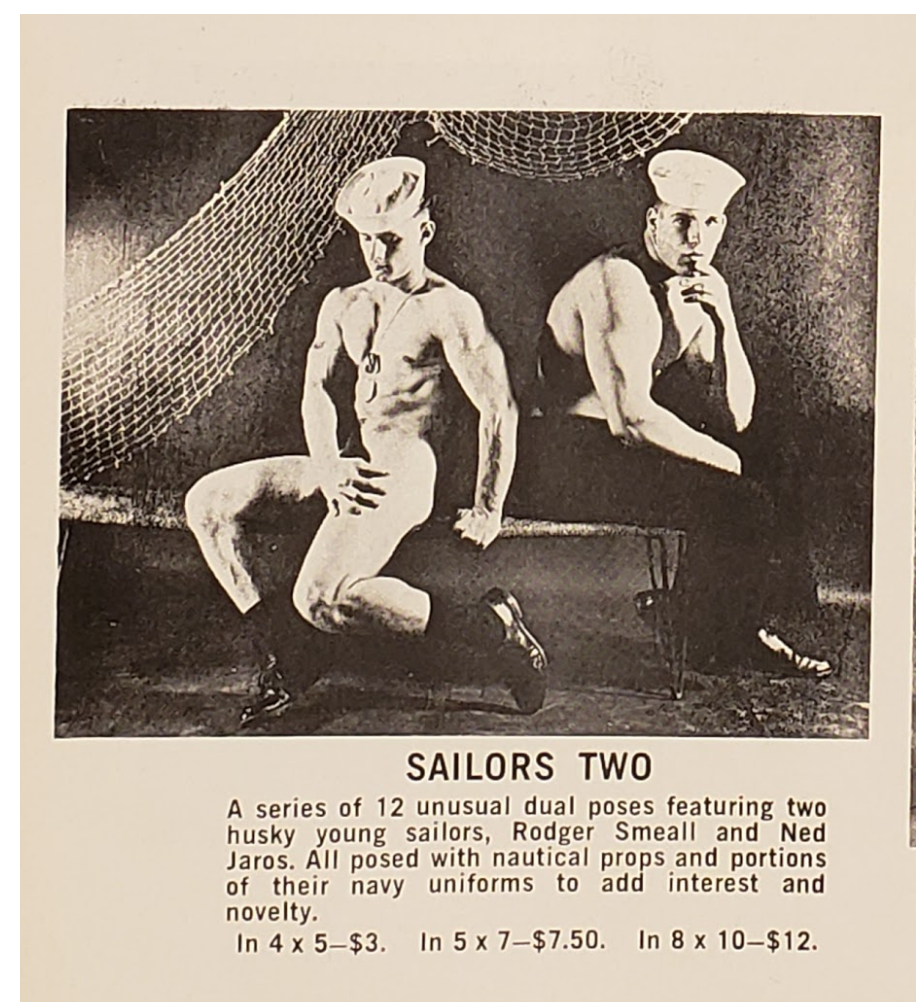
I chose these two magazines because of their popularity at the time (and *Physique Pictorial's* continued popularity and legacy) but also because they were based out of major port cities. Many US sailors during WWII would have either deployed from one of these port cities or perhaps visited them on shore leave after the war. Many sailors also returned to port cities to live after the war having fond memories of the big city. Sailors on liberty looking to make extra money might serve as a model for a photo shoot for one of these magazines. While some of the men in the magazines are noted as having served in the Navy, many are still enlisted, and thus if they were posing in these magazines most likely were doing it while on shore leave.

Whether these models themselves were heterosexual or homosexual (or somewhere in between on the Kinsey scale or the Kinsey mosaic per Thomas Waugh in *Hard to Imagine: Gay Male Eroticism in Photography and Film from Their Beginnings to Stonewall*) isn't actually what's important—it's important that they seemed sexually available to the men who were buying and reading these magazines. In many instances, "trade" or even "straight-seeming" men were desirable or part of the fantasy.

Scholar Tracy D. Morgan in "Pages of Whiteness: Race, Physique Magazines, and the Emergence of Public Gay Culture" writes, "What gave so many of these magazines their respectability, their ability to traverse gay and straight worlds with little or no opprobrium, was their glorifications of a particular kind of masculinity: patriotic, strong and white."

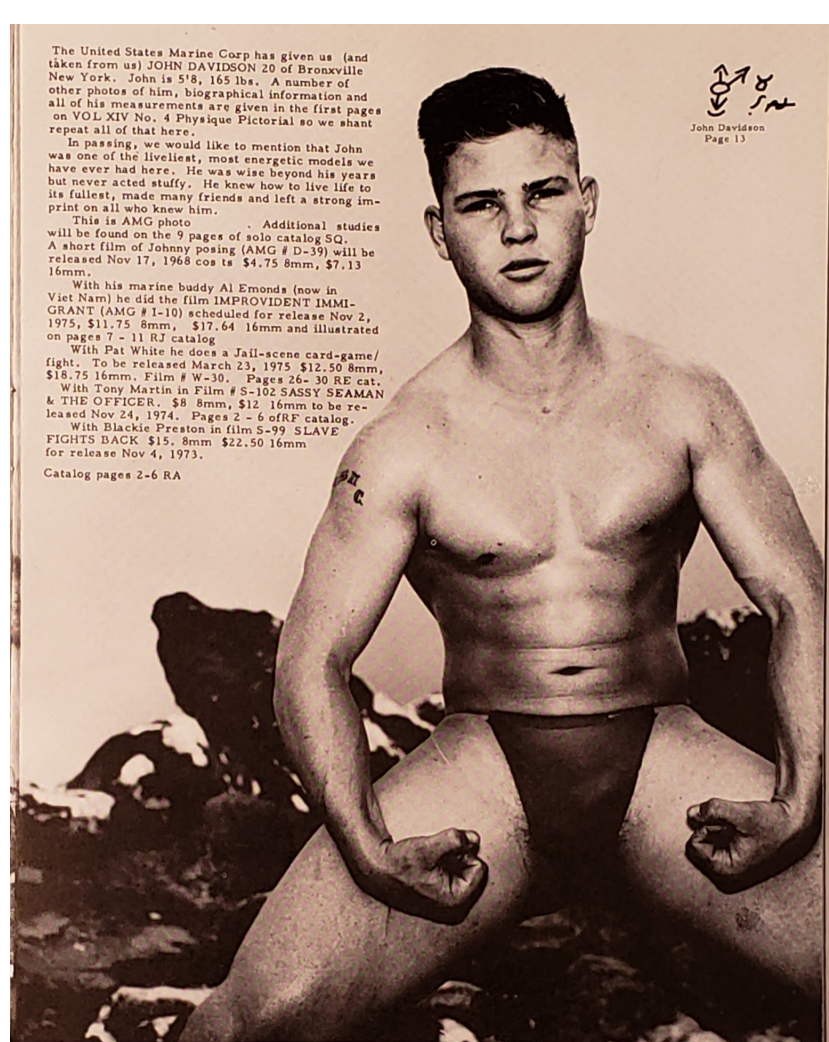
In a letter to the editor in the July/Aug 1965 issue of *Young Physique* the reader asks why there aren't more Black models featured in the magazine. In that issue they then feature three Black models but overall there were very few Black models or models of color in these magazines in general.

In the 27 years and 59 issues I surveyed of *Physique Pictorial* there are only 21 instances total of photos that include models of color. In the 10 years and 35 issues of *Young Physique* I surveyed, there are only 9 photos that feature models of color including the 1965 spread just mentioned. Why aren't there more Black models? Other men of color are also largely not included as models though there are some Latinx models and one American Indian model (which are included in the above counts).

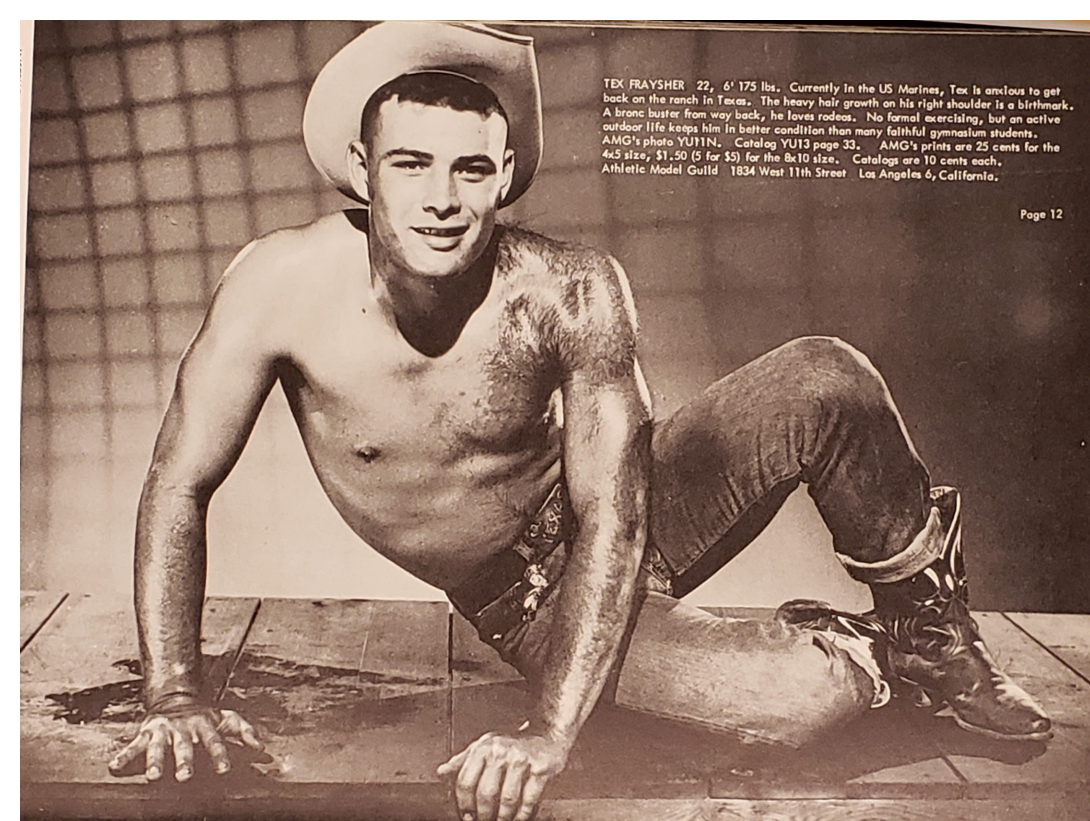


Young Physique magazine ran from 1959-1968. Based in Union City, NJ, *Young Physique* also utilized many photographers and models from the port city of New York City.

These magazines included men in the Navy as well as many men dressed as sailors who had not actually served in the Navy. They do include some sailors and Marines actually in uniform. One issue (Fall 1956) even includes a Marine dressed as a cowboy (shown below) as if one American archetype of masculinity were not enough, the magazine layers these fantasies.



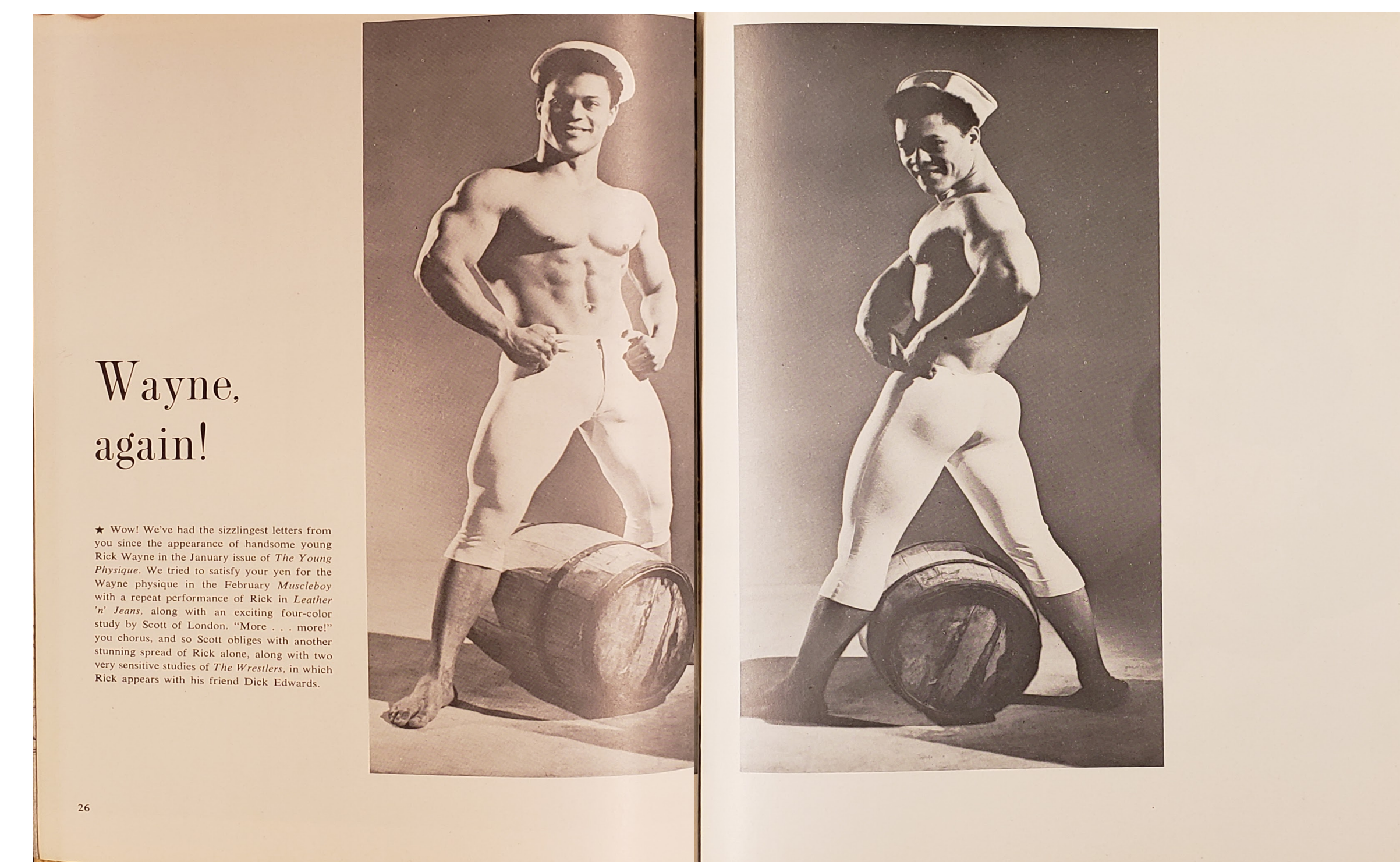
On your right: Photo UB-4-V. Scene from AMG film L-14 Jim LASSITER and Tex HILL. Seen in \$11.50, 16mm \$17.26/ Catalog pages 11 thru 14 of UB catalog: \$1.
This film has comedy and comic-wrestling. Though neither of these men are massively muscular, both have good natural builds and have an easy-going self-assurance that projects through. They play their "drunken sailor" roles quite convincingly, but were stone sober all the time.
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SO MEN WITH MILITARY BACKGROUNDS MAKE BETTER MODELS? Most emphatically, yes! Though we haven't made a formal count, a rough tabulation would show next the army and after that the Air Corp. The Marines, of course, have the toughest physical standards and their training regime quickly brings any youth up to the optimum physical development for his body type.
An additional advantage from our point of view, is the strict disciplining received the military suggestion is followed quickly and accurately. By contrast, some of the street bums that are occasionally brought in to us often tend to have a "delayed reaction time" before following any posing and not street-talk is used. If his decision time in the affirmative, he must then try to determine shoulder, etc. As often, at not by the time all this takes place he has usually forgotten the basic command, and the photographer himself has long since ceased to care.
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Physique Pictorial begins in 1951 and at first (between 1952 and 1953), there are many references to models in the Armed Forces (generically) as well as some in the Air Force. Not until late 1953-early 1954, do sailors and men in the Navy begin to dominate the narrative. After 1954, models who served in the Navy and Marines outnumber the rest of the Armed Forces nearly 10 to 1.

Historian Nathan Bryan Titman in "The Drift of Desire: Performing Gay Masculinities through Leisure, Mobility, and Non-Urban Space, 1910-1945," contends that sailors were a "safe" alternative to soldiers during WWII meaning that sailors had a better reputation and were less associated with the violence and horrors of war yet were still very much a part of the US imperial project. Is the appropriation of the sailor as a gay icon problematic to him as a symbol of US imperialism?



Of the hundreds of white models dressed a sailors, there is only one instance of a Black model dressed as a sailor in either magazine. There are two spreads both of Rick Wayne in *Young Physique* in the January-February 1964 and March-April 1964 issues. In the first, Wayne is featured with model Brian Melloy as the "Transatlantic Twosome" (as they both at the time lived in London). Wayne seems to be such a popular model that when he's featured the next time he's given a solo-spread and it's called "Wayne, Again!"