

Editorial reviews and reader commentaries

Deep connectedness and affection between men during times of war

Reviewer 1:

“Books such as *The Greatest Generation* have eloquently argued that the men and women who survived World War II played a crucial role in determining America’s national culture; to some extent, Bachner agrees with this thesis. “Our current image of American masculinity was formed at that particular moment in time,” he writes in the introduction to this moving book of duotone photos. But the image that was passed down most often suggested that Real Men were loners, rugged individuals who relied on no one. According to Bachner, however, the photographic record “flatly contradicts that notion.” During his six years of research in the Still Pictures Branch of the National Archives and Records Administration, *he unearthed a trove of Navy photos that “display a tender regard and closeness among men largely alien to our contemporary culture.”* Most of these images were taken by the Naval Aviation Photographic Unit, which was commanded by the famous photographer Edward J. Steichen for most of WWII. Many have never been published. Why were these servicemen able to form such affectionate friendships? In answer, Bachner quotes John D’Emilio: “Living in close quarters, not knowing whether they would make it through the war, and depending on one another for survival, *men of whatever sexual persuasion formed intense emotional attachments.*” Whatever the reason, these gorgeously composed, evocative images suggest that men then, as now, could let down the John Wayne stance to share a cigarette, laugh over a joke and do a little roughhousing.”

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Reviewer 2:

“*Starred Review* In the brief, cogent introduction to this remarkable photo album, Bachner posits that these images of young sailors and marines shaped the ideal of manhood prevalent in American culture since World War II. The men depicted by the members of the Naval Aviation Photographic Unit (all professionals before the war) are preponderantly in their late teens and early twenties, and whether on or off duty, at ease in that they aren't in combat. It's hot where they are in the Pacific or Mediterranean sun, and they're commonly shirtless, in shorts, or both; when bathing, infrequently when sunning, and in one striking image of a gunner returned to his post after a rescue, they're naked (no explanation survives for the gunner's nudity, but he is wet as from swimming). Youthfully slender, toned from training, unselfconscious in their leisure or work, they seem, given the military context, effortlessly heroic. Exhibited singly, if at all, the pictures were available to magazines, newspapers, and advertisers to use as is or as models throughout and a little after the war. *They look, as Bachner says, as if they'd been taken this morning, except for the physical contact, often obviously affectionate, that the men often and innocently make with one another. It was a different time, eh? Ray Olson*”

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Reader commentaries:

[Taken at random between both books]

“Without a doubt this book will touch the memories and hearts of everyone who pauses to slowly peruse these casual photographs of men at sea in World War II. Without the overtones of trying to make a statement about the camaraderie that accompanies men off at war, these photographs simply follow a healthy group of sailors resting on board ship, working at their tasks, bonding in the bunk rooms and in play on the decks and the foc'sle. ***There is an obvious physical relationship that is transmitted in the gentlest ways, further proof that men together find the emotional and physical support so needed in the time of isolation from the world.***”

“It is to Evan Bachner's credit that he shares this truly sensitive body of work with the public at a time when we all need to understand not only the plight of the men away at war today, but of the common threads of pansexuality that have never been a threat but only a solace in a world infected with prejudice. Grady Harp, December 2004”

“I absolutely "loved" this book from the first moment I picked it up and opened its first page. ***The photographs captivate a time when men could show affection without the worry of not being masculine enough.*** Thank you Evan Bachner for sharing your vision and putting together these marvellous photographs of this celebrated time in History. My dad was in the Navy during World War II and lived on a destroyer, and he has just recently started telling me some of "his" stories of being out at sea, sometimes for months at a time. I came across photographs years ago when I was just a young man of my dad and his ship-mates, and his photographs could easily been a part of this beautiful collection that Evan Bachner has displayed in "At Ease". I look forward to "At Ease,part Two."”

“I loved this book, which consists of large, high-quality photos of Navy men in the Pacific during World War II, showing the fellows working or relaxing during non-combat times. They're all beautiful, and heroes to me. The book was published a while ago, so I can only add to what earlier reviewers have said - I completely agree. Many of the photos have stories behind them (not told here - the book is "just" photos with their original official Navy captions). For example, the beautiful young men relaxing on page 156 are aviators of the Navy's amazing VF15, including ace Lt. Harry Andrew "Dirty Eddie" March, Jr. of Tom Blackburn's Jolly Rogers; he had just turned 25 in this Feb 1944 photo. Most photos I've seen of the Jolly Rogers are in their flight suits, so it's great to see them just sitting around in camp like this. The story behind the man on page 17 per the photographer Horace Bristol (a member of a Navy unit of photographers who wound up on a plane rescuing people from Rabaul Bay in Papua New Guinea) is: "We got a call to pick up an airman who was down in the Bay. "The Japanese were shooting at him from the island, and when they saw us they started shooting at us. The man who was shot down was temporarily blinded, so one of our crew stripped off his clothes and jumped in to bring him aboard. He couldn't have swum very well wearing his boots and clothes. As soon as we could, we took off. We weren't waiting around for anybody to put on formal clothes. We were being shot at and wanted to get the hell out of there. The naked man got back into his position at his gun in the blister of the plane." It's just a lovely book.”

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“This book can bring back memories of this difficult time when we only had each other, when *we were able to show affection, comfort each other and even express our sexual beings.* We not only found company, we also found love of the heart. Otherwise we would have gone crazy.”

“It is unbelievable for someone 40 or under to realize that these pictures were not seen as "homoerotic" at the time. The author has put together a great collection of photos here.”

Book covers of each publication:

