

Fighting Fit

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Dripping with homoeroticism, a new book reveals the US Navy sailors
of World War II in a sexy new light.
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Gallery At Ease > Text Steven Zeeland
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WHAT is more homoerotic than a classic black-and-white photo of a half-naked sailor? A classic black-and-white photo of a hundred half-naked sailors.

Of all men in uniform – anytime, anywhere – the sailor remains the most enduring homoerotic icon. Many authors (including me) have sought to explain this mystique in words. What the new book *At Ease: Navy Men Of World War II* delivers is pictures – 149 of them, carefully chosen and discretely packaged for the delectation of an unnamed but not-so-subtly targeted audience.

Included are a good two dozen shots of sailors either bending over (in skin-tight “whites”; in dungarees; and in the gloriously seductive shorts still worn today by US Navy SEALs), or bare-ass naked. Something of a revelation is the lack of any button on the yawning fly of vintage Navy-issue boxer shorts. But the very best photos here are those that show young sailors unselfconsciously engaged in “grab-ass” horseplay, paired off as buddies sleeping on the deck, or – for me at least, most lump-in-throat inducing – cuddled up like kittens.

For those of us who delight in candid, “authentic” images capturing “unstudied” homoeroticism among (presumably) straight men, *At Ease* is, despite certain troublesome shortcomings, probably the singlemost satisfying collection of sailor photos ever published.

The most spectacular photo (reproduced over the page) is the one editor Evan Bachner cites as his inspiration.

“The image was labelled ‘Horace Bristol, PBV Blister Gunner, 1944,’” Bachner writes. “I had never heard of Horace Bristol. I didn’t know what a ‘PBV’ was. Yet something about the image was immensely compelling. It was a war photograph, to be sure; I sensed there was a battle or some other danger outside the aircraft. At the same time, there was a great deal more going on within the frame. This image was about the man: his alertness,

his masculine competence, his bravery. I knew that I had to track down the source of that photograph to find more examples of the photographer’s work. I wanted to see the picture he took before this one, and the one he took after. If there was more work of this quality, I definitely wanted to see it.”

Symptomatic of the trouble with *At Ease* is that Bachner reproduces Bristol’s buck-naked, dripping-wet gunner without offering any context. Indeed, *At Ease* would be a stronger book had Bachner found the courage to include even one image of *the war*. Ironically, the lightheartedness Bachner seeks to convey is undermined by a disturbing sense of what’s not represented: a missing dark truth. More than a few South Pacific islands mentioned in the captions are synonymous with nightmarish battles in which great numbers of troops were slaughtered, no doubt including some of the men depicted in *At Ease*. And this book comes at a time when too many current portraits of young Navy men appear in obituaries.

Of course, most other photo books on WWII show nothing but death and destruction. With *At Ease*, Bachner does help balance out the overall record – and fulfils the instruction given to the Navy photographers by their director: “Photograph everything that happens, and you may find that you have made some historic photographs. But above all, concentrate on the men.”

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At Ease (Abrams) is distributed in Australia by Thames & Hudson, RRP \$75.00.



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Steven Zeeland is the author of four books on homoeroticism in the military, including *Sailors and Sexual Identity: Crossing the Line Between “Gay” and “Straight” in the US Navy* (Haworth Press). www.stevenzeeland.com

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