

TV REVIEW

Waving the flag as they bust a gut

'Stars Earn Stripes' celebs show they can work and fawn; 'Get to Work' is a bit more real

BY HANK STUEVER

Adding a celebrity quotient to the military-industrial complex is nothing new — Bob Hope taught us that — but NBC's reality competition show, "Stars Earn Stripes," enthusiastically melds warfare and fame into a fairly solid drill exercise in gung-ho rituals. It's a lot of *hooah* with a bit of puffed-chest *hooley*.

It also feels about five years too late, in both its reality-TV tropes and its message of pride. It harks back to the "Mission Accomplished!" era of attacks and setbacks in the Middle East.

After watching the first hour of Monday night's two-hour premiere, I began to wonder whether "Stars Earn Stripes" would have had more resonance during the darkest days of the Iraq war, when, for reasons that crossed the ideological spectrum, we all could have used a deeper understanding of military ops.

But now that we've become inured to the standard-issue "hero" appellation given to each and every enlistee — when even some returning soldiers complain that gratitude isn't backed up with real benefits — "Stars Earn Stripes" feels too much like a "Be All You Can Be" advertising refrain. If you're antiwar to the core, then the show is just more empty jingoism.

If, however, you have an abiding

her father's footsteps as a professional boxer; and Todd Palin, whose celebrityhood is better than C-list but nevertheless requires a giant asterisk) are paired up with highly trained military and law enforcement veterans, including a Green Beret, a SWAT officer, two Marine sergeants, a retired member of the Delta Force and two Navy SEALs.

Under the orders of the show's co-host, retired Gen. Wesley Clark, the teams try to outdo one another during strenuous, timed combat exercises. In the first episode, they have to leap out of a helicopter into a lake while weighted down with automatic weapons and full gear; swim to a motorized raft; wade ashore under enemy fire; destroy a lookout tower with a grenade; shoot at paper "enemy" targets with live rounds; wade through mud to seize the enemy's ammo cache and then, finally, blow it all to kingdom come.

The goal is to complete the mission and earn a stripe, which means a donation to a military-related charity of their choice; the ultimate winner will get \$100,000 to donate.

Why are they doing this? For the troops, of course — to raise awareness about how hard our fighting forces work, how much they sacrifice, and so on and so on, until it begins to sound like nebulous praise. "Stars Earn Stripes," which bears the imprimatur of executive producers Dick Wolf ("Law & Order") and Mark Burnett ("Survivor," "The Apprentice," "The Voice"), is draped in the verbal equivalent of too much bunting. The celebrities are awkwardly effusive to their new heroes/BFFs; even

Chris Kyle, a SEAL sniper who boasts a confirmed-kill count of 160 (and wrote a best-selling memoir about it), starts to feel self-conscious when Cain, his teammate, won't stop fawning over him.

Fawning, of course, is the point. "Stars Earn Stripes" sticks to a narrative in which our nation's military personnel still go chronically unnoticed and underappreciated. This could certainly be argued in terms of federal benefits, but only a mountain hermit would have missed the positive media attention, flag-waving and deeply appreciative troop deployment ceremonies and homecomings of the past decade.

Still, once they stop jawin', the competitors in "Stars Earn Stripes" put on quite a show, and that's the only point of reality television. "[He] is an animal! Good God!" one of the professional soldiers shouts, watching live video feed of a four-time Alaska Iron Dog snowmobile race champion charge up the hill during the operation. "He's just straight-up Rambo!... Next time I go to war, I want Todd Palin on my side."

Me too, I guess.

'Get to Work'

Meanwhile, in another kind of boot camp in a San Diego office park, a roomful of ex-convicts, recovering addicts and other Americans with spotty (or no) résumés gets drilled in workplace etiquette on Sundance Channel's intriguingly honest new docu-series, "Get to Work" (also premiering Monday night).

This journey into the lower depths of the nation's unemployment statistics focuses on a back-to-work program called Second



Chance, which is based on the Strive training model, which has helped thousands of people find jobs since it began in Harlem in 1984.

At Second Chance, strict counselors first break their adult students down emotionally, while teaching these men and women the most basic survival skills of cubicle land: eye contact, firm handshakes, clear conversations and positive attitudes. (Nothing, alas, can be done about the neck tattoos snaking up from the buttoned shirt collar.)

In each episode, “Get to Work” zeroes in on a few personal stories, as the students struggle to overcome their inhibitions and histories of failure. The first hurdle is simple timeliness, as half of them wander back late from a midmorning smoke break. Others flunk the program’s mandatory drug tests.

Even though the producers keep their sights on happy outcomes, “Get to Work” is depressing stuff, made more so by the economy that awaits these job seekers. It’s all so real it verges on the mundane, but the show is also strong and necessary medicine for these times.

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STARS EARN STRIPES

(two hours) premieres Monday at 8 p.m. on NBC.

GET TO WORK

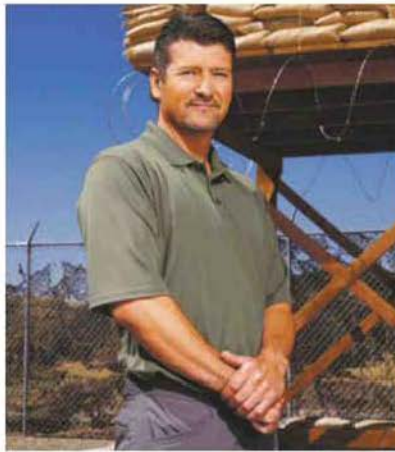
(one hour) premieres Monday at 10:30 p.m. on Sundance Channel.

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CHRIS RAGAZZO/SUNDANCE

JOB HUNT: Rob Smith in “Get to Work,” a docu-series about helping the chronically jobless.



CHRIS HASTON/NBC

‘STRAIGHT-UP RAMBO!’ Todd Palin won praise from a soldier-trainer on “Stars Earn Stripes.”