

A Military Force To Be Reckoned With

RESCUING THE POPULAR DRAMA *JAG* FROM EARLY RETIREMENT SHOWED GREAT JUDGMENT

★ **As the adage goes, write what you know.** And so, at the late-blooming age of 41, former Marine Corps Sgt.-turned-ad man Don Bellisario penned his first episode of network television, an installment of the short-lived NBC war drama *Baa Baa Black Sheep*. Three years later in 1980, Bellisario created the CBS hit *Magnum, P.I.*, wherein Tom Selleck's famously mustachioed private detective was also a former military man. And in 1995, the former Marine proved to have the golden touch when his longest-running CBS hit to date debuted—on NBC.

An hourlong drama about an elite subunit trained to investigate and prosecute those accused of crimes within the armed forces, *JAG*—military lingo for Judge Advocate General—starred David James Elliott as Navy Cmdr. Harmon “Harm” Rabb, an ace fighter pilot turned lawyer. Six years earlier, Bellisario had dreamed up the sci-fi favorite *Quantum Leap* for the Peacock Network's then-president Brandon Tartikoff. But, by the time *JAG* stormed the airwaves, its biggest supporter, Tartikoff, had left the network and the show foundered in an ever-changing series of prime-time slots.

A NEW TRAJECTORY

In the spring of 1996, with the *JAG* team in the midst of shooting its 22nd episode, intended as a season-ending cliffhanger, word came that NBC had canceled the fledgling drama. Shortly thereafter, Bellisario was on a flight to attend the networks' annual fall programming “upfront” presentations in New York when he got a midair call that CBS—the network where another of his military hits, *Airwolf*, had flown in the '80s—would give *JAG* a second chance.

The switch proved to be an auspicious one for *JAG*, which prospered for nine more seasons under the Tiffany Network's aegis, ultimately becoming one of TV's longest-running dramas and the most successful transplanted show



David James Elliott starred as Navy Cmdr. Harmon “Harm” Rabb opposite Catherine Bell, who played Lt. Col. Sarah “Mac” MacKenzie.

LIKED JAG? CATCH *NCIS*, CREATED BY THE SAME WRITER, TUESDAYS AT 8 P.M. ET/PT ON CBS.

of all time. “*JAG* was a show that grew at CBS because [network president] Les Moonves put his own personal stamp on it,” Bellisario explains. “He backed it. He talked about it. He pushed it. He promoted it.”

MAKING IT HIS OWN

“On CBS, I got to make the show I wanted to make,” says the veteran writer. Whereas NBC had insisted on amping up *JAG*’s action, the show’s new network allowed an equal emphasis on the law. And although NBC had insisted on casting a blond female lead to play off the dark-haired Elliott, now Bellisario was able to bring in his original choice, Catherine Bell, to play Lt. Col. Sarah “Mac” MacKenzie. Her unrequited chemistry with Harm, played against the rigid discipline of the military judicial system, would keep viewers tuning in for more. “They never got together,”

Elliott says with a laugh. “But we teased them with it, and it worked.”

By 2005, Elliott felt that Harm’s character trajectory had reached its peak, and so *JAG* was grounded, even though it was still soaring in the *Nielsens*. Bellisario went on to create another ever-growing CBS favorite in *NCIS*, while Elliott, a married father of two, has since



been busy starring in network miniseries and the upcoming movies *Gooby* and *The Rainbow Tribe*—all, not so coincidentally, aimed at a family audience. And with *JAG* so recent and vivid in fans’ memories, Elliott says, he’s still constantly reminded how much the show meant, especially to America’s servicemen and -women. “I think the show put a brave and honest face on the military,” the actor explains. “The comment I get most from people is, ‘Thank you guys for being as real as you were.’” — Jim Colucci



WISHLIST

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