

USA TODAY

Media glare is on former Marine as he joins ranks of Al-Jazeera
Rushing expects criticism in new career after Corps

By Mark Memmott

WASHINGTON — Marine officers are taught to think ahead. So Josh Rushing, a captain in the Corps until last October, anticipated the unpleasant questions.

Is he a modern-day Tokyo Rose, the nickname GIs in World War II gave to the women they heard on Japanese radio trying to turn them against America? Is he a propagandist set to tear down the country he once served? A collaborator aiding the enemy?

Rushing, 33, has taken a job reporting for a new channel for Al-Jazeera. That's the Qatar-based network that Defense Secretary Donald Rumsfeld said is “perfectly willing to lie to the world” and has “a pattern of playing propaganda over and over and over again” for its 50 million viewers, most of them in the Arab world.

Fox News Channel's Bill O'Reilly branded it a “propaganda network ... bent on encouraging violence and sympathetic to terrorists.” And Iraq's new government temporarily closed the network's offices in Baghdad, saying that Al-Jazeera incites insurgents by showing video of attacks and statements from Osama bin Laden and his deputies.

But Rushing, who will appear on a global, English-language news channel the network hopes to start by spring, considers his decision to work for Al-Jazeera noble, not seditious. “I've given my entire adult life to the health and well-being of this nation,” Rushing says. “I wouldn't do anything to threaten that.

“What the Marines trained me to do was to represent the best of what America stands for to a foreign audience. That's exactly what I'm going to do.”

The network, heavily subsidized by the emir of Qatar, says it presents news from all sides in a part of the world in which most Arab media outlets are government mouthpieces.

Rushing views Al-Jazeera's English-language channel as a forum for reaching millions of Muslims, many of whom may not understand the America he knows, and for reaching millions who he thinks know little about the Muslim world, including Americans.

“The gravity of it sets in all the time,” he says during an interview in the dining room at the private Army and Navy Club, two blocks from the White House. “It puts me where the good fight is — at a station that's going to bridge America and the rest of the world.”

Not everyone agrees with his reasoning. “I don't see how in good conscience he can work for Al-Jazeera,” says Cliff Kincaid, editor of the conservative Accuracy in Media Report. “It incites Arabs and Muslims to kill Americans.”

Another former Marine also is concerned. “I wish I could count on him to further our efforts” in the war on terrorism “rather than hinder them,” says Keith Delp of Louisville. He spent five years in the Marines, leaving as a corporal in March 2004 after a seven-month tour in Iraq. Delp writes the weblog Kadnine. In an e-mail, Delp says he will “be watching Josh closely.”

So will others, says the author of a book about the network.

“Al-Jazeera has been judged already and found guilty already in the eyes of most Americans and particularly the (Bush) administration,” says Hugh Miles, a British freelance journalist and the author of *Al-Jazeera: The Inside Story of the Arab News Channel That Is Challenging the West*. “Many people will see Josh Rushing as collaborating with an enemy propaganda outfit.”

Rushing's response to such criticism: “I believe in America so dearly and the values that it stands for that I'm in no way threatened by the kind of information this station's going to put out. ...

“Besides,” he explains, “once a Marine, always a Marine.”

How Rushing, a self-described “blue-eyed, American son from Texas,” has wound up working for Al-Jazeera is something of an only-in-America tale.

Rushing grew up in Lewisville, Texas, just north of Dallas. He played high school football until he hurt his wrist and led what he calls “a normal suburban life.” At 18, he enlisted in the Marine Corps. His rationale? “I was immature enough I wouldn't have made it (through college) and just mature enough to realize that.”

On Sept. 11, 2001, Rushing was serving as a public affairs officer based at what is now Marine Corps Air Station Miramar, north of San Diego. He was at a seminar with other public affairs officers when terrorists attacked New York and Washington. “How could you watch 9/11 and not say, ‘Life is different now?’ ” Rushing asks. He says he pressed commanders at the Pentagon to send him overseas.

In early 2003, when U.S. Central Command (CENTCOM) set up a media operations center in Doha, Qatar, for the war in Iraq, he was ordered to go there.

Though he was one of the youngest public affairs officers, he was made liaison to Al-Jazeera.

“I wanted to learn Arabic,” Rushing says, “and when the Al-Jazeera guys showed up, they were the first Arabs I'd run into. ... So I would go by each day and learn a phrase from them.

“There were so many reporters in the media center, and we only had nine spokesmen, we divided them up into accounts. The boss said, ‘Rushing, you've got a pretty good relationship with those Jazeera guys, why don't you take them?’ ”

The assignment would bring Rushing unexpected attention.

When Egyptian filmmaker Jehane Noujaim first came to CENTCOM's media center in Doha, Rushing and the other public affairs officers thought she was making a student film about the media's coverage of the war. Instead, her documentary, *Control Room*, gained worldwide attention and

brought Rushing a modest amount of fame. He's the only American who figures prominently in the film, which focuses on Al-Jazeera's coverage of the war's early days.

Control Room captured Rushing's growing respect for Al-Jazeera's staff, particularly senior producer Hassan Ibrahim, with whom he had many philosophical debates. In one scene, Rushing talked about how revolted he was by Al-Jazeera showing dead American soldiers and interviews with American prisoners of war. Then he noted that he had seen video of Iraqi casualties on the network and not been affected by what he saw.

“It upset me on a profound level that I wasn't as bothered as much the night before,” he said in the film. “It makes me hate war.”

When the film was released in 2004, reviewers commented on Rushing's candor. Rushing told *The Village Voice* that American media don't tell the whole story when they cover a war. “In America war isn't hell — we don't see blood, we don't see suffering. All we see is patriotism, and we support the troops. It's almost like war has some brand marketing here,” he said in that interview.

Soon after, Rushing was ordered not to talk to the media about the film. “I didn't think it was appropriate for him to be speaking about this documentary — almost promoting it,” says Lt. Col Stephen Kay, deputy director of public affairs for the Marine Corps. “It was purely a decision I had to make as his commanding officer.”

Rushing had been debating whether to apply for training to be a Marine foreign affairs officer or to leave the Corps. He decided it was time to leave.

Al-Jazeera approached him earlier this year about joining the new channel, Rushing says. He was out of work, giving speeches while trying to decide what to do next.

The network has been hiring staff for more than a year. A spokeswoman, Katie Bergius, said in an e-mail that the channel is “over halfway there” in hiring the “hundreds” of people it will need. In past statements, the network has said it will need about 200 staffers.

So far, Bergius said, Al-Jazeera has hired reporters and producers from several Western competitors, including the Associated Press, the BBC, the Canadian Broadcast Corp., CNBC, CNN and Fox News.

Nigel Parsons, the channel's British-born managing director, was previously director of sales for Associated Press Television News and before that worked for the BBC. Will Stebbins, an American, is Washington bureau chief. He also came from AP Television News. Riz Kahn, who will host a talk show from Washington, previously worked at the BBC and CNN.

Rushing is the most prominent American hired so far. Exactly what he'll be doing remains undecided, but it probably will involve a combination of in-studio work and field reporting. In announcing Rushing's hiring, Parsons said the American “understands the importance, as well as the consequences, of providing news from all sides of the issue, a core value of the channel.”

Rushing won't say how much he's being paid, except that his salary is more than the \$70,000 a year in pay and housing allowances he earned as a Marine captain and roughly what he could have expected to earn if he had gone into public relations.

The English-language channel will have broadcast centers in Doha; Kuala Lumpur, Malaysia; London and Washington, where Rushing now lives. It has yet to reach any agreements to be carried by cable systems and satellite operators that serve the USA. A spokesman, Mike Holtzman, said Al-Jazeera is confident it will sign such contracts in time to be on the air in the USA next spring.

Rushing says his new bosses will not try to dictate his commentary.

“One of my big questions coming in was, would they want to control what I was going to say? Or my perspective?” he says. “(There's been) no sense of that at all. Editorially, you say what you want.”

Kay says he still considers Rushing a friend. “He's a talented guy. ... I think very highly of him,” Kay says. “I'm sure he'll do a fine job and be very successful at Al-Jazeera.” As for the network, Kay says, “It's obvious Al-Jazeera is probably not the most objective news organization.”

Jim Wilkinson, now senior adviser to Secretary of State Condoleezza Rice, was director of strategic communications for CENTCOM when Rushing was in Doha. Although he has “strong negative feelings” about Al-Jazeera, Wilkinson says no one should question Rushing's loyalty to his country.

“Josh has served his country with honor and distinction in uniform, and he did a good job, a fantastic job,” Wilkinson says. “If Sept. 11 taught us anything, it taught us that we simply have to engage more with the Arab media. Josh clearly did a good job of engagement with their media.”

Giving Rushing a job “is a smart move on (Al-Jazeera's) part,” and taking the job is “a gutsy move on Josh's part. Both sides will come under some criticism.”

Rushing says he's ready for that. “I'd like to go on Fox News as much as possible to explain what I'm doing,” he says. He says he knows he'll be asked about his politics. “I'm not registered with either party,” Rushing says. He won't say who he voted for in 2000 and 2004, but says he voted for Ross Perot in '92.

He predicts that critics also will question whether he believed in the military's mission in Iraq.

He says he “bought into all the reasons we were going — that Saddam was horrible ... that there were weapons of mass destruction that might get into the hands of terrorists.”

But though he's “glad Saddam Hussein isn't there anymore,” Rushing says he sometimes thinks “maybe we did the right thing for the wrong reasons” because it's “clear” there were no weapons of mass destruction in Iraq.

What he hopes critics will understand, Rushing says, is that he believes he's doing what a Marine officer is trained to do.

“We're taught to ‘turn the map around,’ ” to see things from the enemy's perspective, Rushing says. He hopes he can help people around the world see America differently, and help Americans see the world in new ways.