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Q & A

FULL METAL JACKASS

The *Daily Show's* latest recruit on life in the comedy trenches

By Joel Keller

DROP AND GIVE ME FUNNY Private Joker, reporting for duty

Rob Riggle knows all about bombing: He was kicked off *Saturday Night Live* after just one season. But what sets him apart from almost everyone else in comedy is that he's actually experienced real-life bombing, too. As an active duty U.S. Marine officer, he was deployed to hot zones like Liberia, Kosovo, and Afghanistan, eventually rising to the level of major.

When he wasn't defending freedom, he was cutting his teeth with Respecto Montalban, one of the Upright Citizens Brigade Theatre's most popular improv teams. Then, after playing a tough-guy in some Conan O'Brien sketches, Riggle got his big break on *SNL*. But it wasn't a love match. Now, at 36, Riggle has ascended the comedy ranks once again to become *The Daily Show with Jon Stewart's* newest correspondent. Still a Marine reservist, Rob spoke to *Radar* from his *TDS* office, where he told us what it's like to be a jarhead in a business full of punks.

So you were doing improv at the same time you were on active duty?

Correct. I was supposed to get out of the Marine Corps in 1997; I was going to be a waiter and study at Second City, take classes, because that was my dream. The Marines asked me to stay in, and I said no, because I was going to be a comedian, which they didn't understand at all. They asked, "What would it take for you to stay in?" I said, "Well, I know New York has a public affairs office, and I know Los Angeles has a public affairs office. And if you can get me orders to those places, you can extend my contract, and I will stay in." The next morning they had orders for me to go to New York City.

Operation Enduring Freedom happened after you moved to New York. What was your role during that engagement?

I was a public affairs officer. I would go out on patrols, I would go do things, but I was usually escorting the media folks. I had been to Defense Information School, so I understood journalism and journalists.

Out of sheer boredom, I would say obnoxious things to get a rise out of people in meetings, but then everyone would just look at me like I was a jackass, and I'd be like, Oh, yeah, I'm in the Marines now

You were in intense life and death situations in Afghanistan and then you were back in New York doing improv. Was that hard to resolve in your mind?

No, not at all. In fact, it was the best thing in the world, because a big part of my life is comedy and improv, and I need it to live, so to speak. I was doing it from 1997 right until 2001 every night of the week, in one form or another. Whether it was a rehearsal, teaching a class, taking a class, or performing, it's fair to say five to six nights a week I was doing something comedy related. And you can ask my wife, because we never left the city on the weekends. I had shows, which didn't make her all that happy.

I left active duty in 2000, and then in 2001 I got called back for 365 days and all of a sudden I was yanked out of New York, and I was overseas. I wasn't doing improv, and I wasn't doing any comedy. And that sucked.

Was there anything you could do over there to alleviate that?

[Laughs] No. You need people to improvise with. I mean, just out of sheer boredom, I would say obnoxious things to get a rise out of people in meetings, but then everyone would just look at me like I was a jackass, and I'd be like, Oh, yeah, I'm in the Marines now.

So it wasn't weird to go from hanging out with a bunch of laid back, creative-types to hanging out with Marines?

No. It really wasn't. People, in their minds, I think because they haven't experienced either, tend to think that those worlds are totally exclusive of one another. But the truth is, when I'm a Marine, I put on my Marine hat and I conduct myself as a Marine officer should. I know what my roles and my responsibilities are, and I know what I need to do. But it doesn't take away from who I am as a person. I'm still very reasonable, I listen, I don't have to yell; you don't have to do things like that.

Obviously there are huge differences. But as far as a liberal- or conservative-type thing, it's not as prevalent as you would think. And I'd think where people would be really shocked is, if they really did get to know their Marine or other military officers, I think they would find that they're very open-minded.

Really?

Oh, absolutely. You have to be. The military is just a microcosm of the United States' population. It's not some weird entity from another planet. They're your neighbors, they're your brother-in-laws, they're family members, friends, people you went to school with. They have the same background, the same interests, they watch the same shows, the same movies, they know the same stories. They're not that different, and if they see bad policy, they're going to say, "This sucks." You know, Clinton sent me to Kosovo and Bush sent me to Afghanistan. But to me it doesn't matter. It's not the role of the military to decide where we go; that's the administration's job. Our job is to do the best job we can when we get there.

Open-minded or not, a lot of people still associate the Marines with R. Lee Erme's character in *Full Metal Jacket*.

Well, of course, because that's the only exposure they have to Marines. And the truth is, yeah, there is that aspect of the Marine Corps, and it has its place. You know, your Marines are not going out there to sell Girl Scout cookies. They're going out there to win the nation's battles. That means fighting, and you have to train for that. So there's a certain amount of mental toughness that goes along with it.

Jon Stewart's the most sincere guy I've ever met. He's always been a hero of mine. He's a mentor to me and he doesn't even know it

When you came back to New York to do comedy, how curious were your colleagues about your time in the military?

Obviously, it is a novelty that I'm in the Marines and I do comedy. But, yeah, for the most part, they're very curious and they're very respectful, you know? I think they're all smart enough to know that it's not the military out there making the decisions. They'll criticize the administration, and that's fine with me. I don't have a problem with that.

As a reservist, you still work for the Motion Picture & Television Liaison Office. Does that mean Hollywood comes to you every time they want to depict the Marines?

A lot of times they'll make war movies or TV shows that involve Marines, and they'll need things from us. So we review the scripts and see if it makes the Marines look bad or good, and then we'll determine whether we'll support it or not.

THE FEW, THE PROUD Riggle's first assignment as a *Daily Show* correspondent

About that other well-oiled machine

you were a part of, *Saturday Night Live*, you were only there for one season. Was it a matter of you leaving, or was it a matter of them asking you to leave?

I have no earthly idea. If they would have extended my contract, I would have stayed, put it that way.

Did you think you were progressing there?

Absolutely. I was the only guy hired that year out of a cast of 14. When you're the only new guy, trying to get one of the seven or eight sketches that make it to air every week is pretty doggone tough. I managed to get in a lot of sketches, and I managed to write a couple that made it to air. I managed to get one of my characters on air. People around me, everyone thought it was a very successful year. I thought it was a very successful year.

How do *SNL* and *TDS* compare as far as preparation is concerned?

Obviously, live-to-tape and live-to-live is very different. Both require a lot of focus, because with live-to-tape, you're still in front of a studio audience, and if you blow it, you can't go back and do it again, so you just get cut out of the show. I've never blown it, and I hope I never do, knock on wood. And live-to-air is pretty tricky, too [laughs]. I was there the night [on *SNL*] that Ashlee Simpson walked off stage.

I liked to go out and watch the bands, so I was standing next to some of the writers, we saw the whole thing unfold, and I watched her walk offstage. It was like my second or third show, and I was in a panic. I turned to one of the writers and said [breathlessly], "Does she know this is live!? This is live! Does she know this is live!?" And the guy was standing next to us was like [slowly], "This is unbelievable."

So what's the difference between working for Lorne Michaels and working for Jon Stewart?

Working with Lorne, the guy is a comedic genius, that's not in dispute. He runs a very difficult program. One of the differences is that I spend a lot more time with Jon than I did with Lorne. You know, just talking about bits, Jon will come in for a screening of a field piece ... we have conversations. I'll go in and have meetings with him to pitch ideas. I have a lot more interaction with Jon than I did with Lorne.

I like that Jon openly laughs on the air at the stuff you guys produce, like he's really enjoying himself.

Jon's the most sincere guy I've ever met. He's always been a hero of mine, and now that I've met him, he's even more so. He's a mentor to me and he doesn't even know it.

It seemed like a kind of a natural fit for you to be in there because of your UCB connection, but you had to audition for the part, right?

I had to go out to L.A. to Comedy Central. I never audition well; but for whatever reason I did a really good audition that day. I didn't hear anything from them for a while, thought it was over. I knew they were looking all over the place, so I figured, well, out of a thousand, my odds are pretty slim. Then all of a sudden I got a call saying they wanted me to come out to New York to audition in the studio with Jon, that they were bringing in a couple of other guys, and not to get my hopes up yet, but at least I was onto phase two.

If you've ever been in a refugee camp in Albania, or looked an Al Qaeda member in the eye, or seen starving children in Africa, [show business] is a joke

And I came in here, back in late July, and did the audition. Sincerely thought I blew it—I guess there were moments where I thought I did okay but other moments where I really felt like I fumbled. I went back in the green room, and I was kind of sulking. It's such a funny thing with comedians and actors, whenever you do a performance, and it doesn't go like you wanted it to go, you always sit there and think, Why am I even doing this? Why am I even in this fucking business? God, I should quit. I could go back on full-time in the military if I wanted to, couldn't I? Yeah, that'll work. You start making a whole life plan [laughs] that doesn't involve comedy. So, anyway, as I'm running through all that, [Executive Producer] Ben Karlin and those guys came in and said they really enjoyed the audition, they liked me, and they asked me if I wanted to be a correspondent.

How did you feel when you heard that?

Well, every instinct in my body wanted to scream curse words, because that's what I do when I'm happy [laughs]. So I had to maintain a lot of discipline. But I couldn't have been happier.

When you look back on your time on SNL, even though it was only for a year, do you think it helped you get to this point?

My year on *SNL* was so many things to me. It was a dream come true. I learned so much about the business, I learned so much about comedy. I learned so much about myself. I wouldn't trade a millisecond of my time on *SNL*. My picture's always going to be on the wall over at *SNL*, because when you go up on seventeen [where the offices are], they have every cast member's picture who's been on the show, including Ben Stiller, who was on for like six weeks. And my picture's up there, and I'm part of that alumni. And I'll always be grateful to Lorne Michaels for giving me the opportunity and making that dream come true.

It was wonderful. And at the same time, it was totally painful too, you know? It's never all good or all bad. And it did prepare me for *The Daily Show*, I think, and it's made me a lot thicker skinned. It's been a good thing.

Has your military training helped you in the comedy world?

Oh, yeah, absolutely. I really don't get wrapped around the axle on stuff. In show business, in general, they tend to get wrapped around the axle on stuff that just makes me laugh.

Like what?

Oh, anything. Somebody comes in and goes, "Great show." And then they leave the room and somebody else says, "What does *that* mean?" And I'm like, "Are you fucking kidding me? He means great show! Let it go!"

CAPTIVE AUDIENCE Riggle practices his interrogation techniques

If you've ever been in a refugee camp in Albania, or if you've ever been on a patrol in Kosovo, or driven through the streets of Mazar-i-Sharif, or looked a Taliban or Al Qaeda member in the eye, or seen starving children in Africa, in Liberia, if you've seen real fear, real hunger, real pain, real destruction ... all of this is a joke, what people get wrapped around the axle about here.

Do you ever tell people, "Listen, I've looked a member of the Taliban in the eye"?

No [laughs]. Because I don't want to come off that way. Every day I come into work here, I come with a huge smile on my face, because I get another chance to make comedy, to do fun stuff. What a gift; all day I get to hang out with funny people. Can it get any better than that? And then on top of that I get to go perform? And they pay me to do that? That's much better, *much* better, than being on patrol in Iraq.