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EMMERDALE MAN AIMS TO TURN IRAQ TV INTO RATINGS WINNER

How do you turn a fledgling Iraqi TV station into a surefire ratings winner to compete with the likes of Al-Jazeera and Al-Arabia?

It's a tall order, but the British Army reckons it has found just the man to make Basrah-based TV Nahrain the channel everyone wants to watch.

Captain Miles Pennett of the Queen's Own Yeomanry has been asked to come up with a successful format for the embryonic station. And Territorial Army officer Pennett, 25, knows a thing or two about ratings winners: in his civvy job he's an assistant director on the hugely popular TV soap Emmerdale.

"Making TV Nahrain a hit is a big challenge, but I have to say it's easier than working six days a week on Emmerdale," laughs Capt Pennett, who is based at the southern headquarters of the Coalition Provisional Authority.

Pennett, whose other TV directing credits include Countdown and BBC Question Time, joined Leeds-based Yorkshire TV as a runner 18 months ago but quickly made his mark to land a senior role behind the cameras.

He "thoroughly enjoys" working on Emmerdale, not least because it has given him the chance to work with one of TV's hottest young actresses, Amy Nuttall, who plays Chloe Atkinson as well as established stars like Peter Amory (Chris Tate).

The show, originally called Emmerdale Farm, was transformed in the 90s with an injection of glamour and racier storylines. (It is currently the top-rated imported programme in Finland, scoring higher ratings than either ER or Sex and the City).

Iraqi viewers of a more sensitive persuasion can rest assured that Captain Pennett is not about to unleash a bonkbuster on Basrah and beyond.

"We just want to find ways of making it more popular," he modestly explains.

Capt Pennett, who grew up in York and was educated at the Manor CofE School and York Sixth Form College, first got involved with the Army when he joined the Officer Training Corps at Strathclyde University.

He spent two years on Full Time Reserve Service in 2001-2 in Kosovo, where he served with the Royal Scots Dragoon Guards and Queen's Royal Hussars, and in Bosnia, where he served with the 2nd Battalion of the Royal Gurkha Rifles and the Welsh Guards.

Outside the Army, it's his ambition to write and direct his own comedy show. He says he was inspired to do this after watching Phoenix Nights, the Channel 4 programme featuring Lancashire comedian Peter Kay.

So don't be surprised if TV Nahrain turns out not only to be the most successful station in Iraq, but also the funniest.

NB: Captain Pennett is required to wear civilian clothes rather than uniform at the CPA.

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