

The Sun-Herald

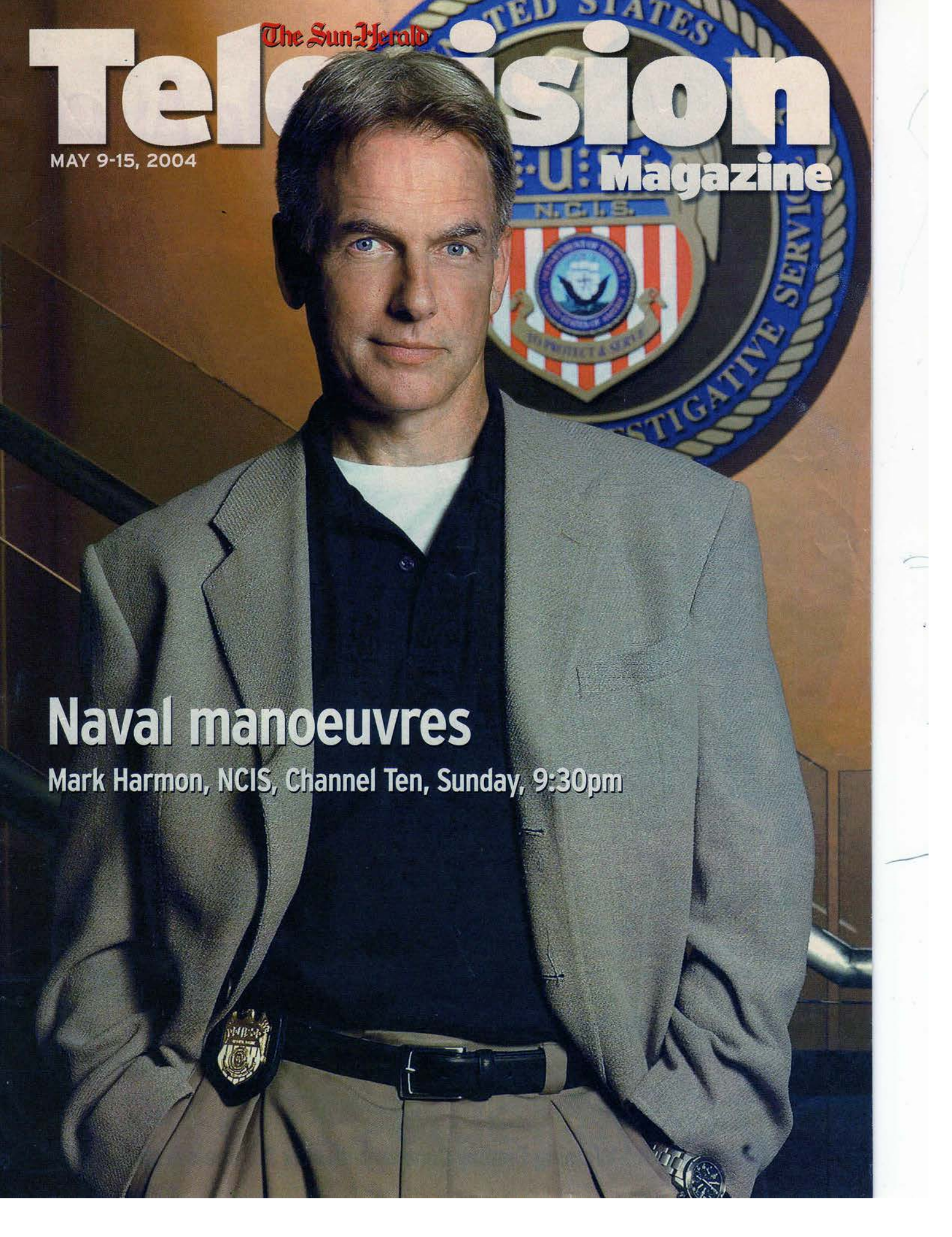
Television

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Magazine

Naval manoeuvres

Mark Harmon, NCIS, Channel Ten, Sunday, 9:30pm





HELLO, SECRETIVE SAILOR: *NCIS* stars Sasha Alexander and Mark Harmon work for the navy in civvies.

Initial success

IF THERE'S something television producers seem to love, it's initials: Across the dial we have *CSI*, *JAG*, *ER* and *NYPD Blue*.

Anything to do with the FBI or CIA gets a start almost automatically and now, yet another shady American government agency with a bunch of initials is set to hit our screens.

This time it's the *NCIS*, or Naval Criminal Investigative Service, the branch of the US government that investigates any crime connected to naval and marines personnel – and don't feel too bad if you've never heard of them. That, said series star Mark Harmon, is precisely the point.

"The *NCIS* has been around since World War II, but it's a very selective and secret organisation," Harmon said. "They're only about 1200-strong worldwide – 20 per cent of them women – and their badge has the world as the background because that's their jurisdiction, the world.

"They're not like the CIA or

the FBI or the secret service, this is a very low-profile agency. They [the agents] like doing their work the best they can, but they don't care if nobody knows about it."

All of which, Harmon said, adds up to the setting for great drama.

"As an agency *NCIS* is by definition a police force and until the early 1990s it was under the jurisdiction of the navy, now they're independent and although it's not uncommon for agents to have a military or legal background they are, as individuals, civilians.

"This means they're not weighed down by any military protocols; they treat an admiral the same way they'd treat the average man on the street.

"As an actor this is great, because it means we have a great deal of freedom within the story-lines to cover all sorts of situations."

The creation of Donald P. Bellisario, the man behind *JAG*, *NCIS* is already living up to that "anything, any time"

promise, where episodes have featured stories of murder, smuggling, kidnapping, terrorism, drugs and (no kidding) role-playing games.

The first episode, set inside the US president's jet Air Force One, even features footage of real US president George W. Bush.

"He's a fan of the show," joked Harmon, "what can I say? But, really, a lot of the stuff we do is based on real events that have only recently been declassified.

"We have a recently retired *NCIS* agent on set every day and each of us has an individual contact agent and if we have a question we're able to call them and talk.

"It's all about making it as real as possible.

"But still it seems odd to think that somewhere in some cave in Afghanistan there's an *NCIS* agent speaking to a not very nice person and that person is leaning across the table saying, 'Do you really know [Harmon's co-star] Sasha Alexander?'"

***NCIS*, Channel Ten, 9.30pm, Sunday.**

Movies move on

WHILE *NCIS* (the agency) is saving the world, Network Ten is hoping *NCIS* (the series) will save Sunday night.

The decision to place the series in its new 9.30pm timeslot is a landmark move for the Australian television industry, the first time a network has abandoned Sunday night movies in favour of a regular drama.

Last week, following the premiere of *Big Brother*, the network offered up a double episode of *Law & Order* in place of a film.

In future the network's line-up will be *Law & Order* at 8.30pm followed by *NCIS*.

The decision follows similar moves in America and Europe where programmers found inroads made by the DVD and pay TV industries meant most "first run" films had already been seen by the time they made it to free-to-air television.

"Certainly DVD is definitely having a say in terms of what's happening on Sunday nights," said Ten's head of programming David Mott. "We're just not getting the audience numbers for movies.

"We're also seeing evidence that when you put on an alternative, you do pick up those numbers, either with a variety show, a special or a premiere Australian movie."

And hopefully a first-run drama.

"When you can see you're getting good audience numbers between 6.30pm and 8.30pm and then they drop, you have to ask why," Mott said.

"I believe it's because viewers want an alternative. The ABC does well with drama because it hasn't been seen before while we're talking about a movie that may be three years old.

"In the US, pretty well all networks have moved away from [Sunday night] movies and it's the same principal here. We're just providing a fresh alternative on Sunday night."