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MAY 01, 2011

# AMERICAN WAY

AMERICAN AIRLINES + AMERICAN EAGLE



My Name Is

# Steve Zahn

You recognize him from films like *That Thing You Do!* and *You've Got Mail*, but you should remember him for his work on the HBO series *Treme*

TWICE MONTHLY

# In the Treme

ON OUR COVER IS STEVE ZAHN, A TALENTED actor who, in my opinion, broke out last year with the debut of the HBO series *Treme*, which is set in post-Katrina New Orleans. Zahn plays rebounding musician Davis McAlary with precision and perfection, and he captures the anguish of Katrina survivors, the chaos on the ground and the frustration of a nation at the slow pace of reconstruction. Those are precisely the feelings I wanted to convey with this column — because I was there. I was a reporter with *Time* magazine who was given very specific orders: Get into New Orleans any way you can and report on everything you see. Problem was, there was no way into New Orleans. I did ultimately get in when Associated Press photographer Haraz Ghanbari and I talked our way into the 4th Infantry Division and onto a Chinook helicopter.

After several drafts of this column, I still failed to capture the mood right after the flood. But I did find the story I filed to my editor at 3:32 a.m. on Sept. 2, 2005, from a stranger's home in Baton Rouge. With hopes of conveying the tenor of the times and as a nod to the spot-on depiction of the disaster on *Treme*, here's what I wrote, errors and all, as there was no time to spell-check or proofread:

## THE GREAT FLOOD

The scene at the Baton Rouge Airport National Guard wing was controlled chaos. Three National Guard units from Louisiana, Texas and Georgia continually flew missions throughout the day. Black Hawk helicopters plucked people from rooftops and came back to the base for some quick rest. By midday, the Border Patrol showed up in brand-new SUVs — still unmarked — right off the lot. As more news trickled in that the scene in New Orleans was becoming increasingly ominous, the 4th Infantry Division out of Fort Hood arrived with 250 troops and a field doctor.

The helicopter pilots of the various National Guard units, many of whom are already battle-hardened from a tour in Iraq, were anxious. They were told not to speak to the media by their commanding officer, but on background, they said that what they were seeing in New Orleans rivaled anything they saw in Baghdad.

"I just got back from a year in Baghdad, and this situation is twice as bad," said a Black Hawk pilot with Louisiana National Guard. "We're at critical mass. I flew plenty of missions over there, but every time we go out here, we're having to save more souls. They just keep on coming. This is the worst [chaos] I've ever seen."

Another soldier from Fort Hood said that this situation was eerily similar to one from 1993. "This is Somalia all over again."

Capt. DeVry Anderson, a doctor in the 4th ID,

was preparing to fly into New Orleans late Thursday afternoon. He was not aware of the situation in the streets, nor was he aware of the medical needs of the people still stuck in the city. Also fresh back from Iraq, Anderson said that although he couldn't comment on the condition of the locals, he was uneasy that they didn't have a clear-cut plan with what to do with the injured.

"I do not see the right organizational structure yet," he said. "In Iraq, we always had a plan and a place to evacuate to. There may be a plan now, but I just don't know what it is."

The next day, and by the dawn's early light, the Baton Rouge Airport was bustling. Various wings of various National Guard installations prepared to fly their Black Hawk and Chinook helicopters 70 miles away to rescue the thousands of people still stranded



**SEPT. 1, 2005:** U.S. Army flight surgeon Capt. DeVry C. Anderson holds a small dog named Chip after it was rescued with its owner in New Orleans. On either side of Anderson are victims of Hurricane Katrina who were evacuated from the Superdome.

on bridge embankments and other highlands. As a light fog rolled over the bayou, six members of the 4th Infantry Division stood bedside their Chinook and had a preflight meeting. The skies were going to be uncommonly congested today. And while these seasoned pilots were not leery of air traffic, they were concerned about the sheer number of units and military branches — not to mention Cessna civilian sightseers and news choppers — that would be circling high above the city that was New Orleans. The captain instructed everyone — including me — to keep their eyes peeled for errant copters and small planes.

As we rumbled into New Orleans at 1,000 feet, two plumes of smoke flanked the Crescent City. One was white and smelled of sulfur; the other was black and smelled of rubber.

We made another rescue run into New Orleans, this time to the Superdome. We filled the cargo bay with even more human chattel as the pandemonium ensued around the damaged stadium and on adja-

cent I-10. Hundreds of people remained marooned in downtown and in the outlying neighborhoods. They motioned for our helicopter to stop and pick them up, but there was nothing we could do for the individual. We were on rescue, meaning that we needed to tend to the masses who made it to a rescue depot. The situation was dire for everyone, not just the unfortunate souls on the balconies and rooftops.

We picked up a load of hospital patients at the Superdome, the lot of who looked lethargic and crestfallen. All but three were wheeled onto the Chinook, and the ones that did walk were heavily assisted. The elderly were panting like heat-stroking animals, their mouths agape and their tongues heavy and swollen. They were terrified not only of their predicament, but of the booming helicopter. One paraplegic woman was completely fried, her motionless legs beet red on the front and ghostly white on her calves.

We pulled up from the Superdome while mothers screamed for rescue, holding their children close. Other units were coming for them. The sun was lowering and reality set in. We and the other airborne units would not be able to rescue everyone tonight. We flew to a baseball field whose parking lot had been converted to a food depot. We loaded our Chinook with MRE's, hundreds of MRE's, and bottled water, then flew to some of the bridges where people were camped out. Since we couldn't get to them, we did the next best thing. Chief Warrant Officer Ramon Sandejas from the 4th ID lowered the hulking craft as much as he could to the highway, and we heaved all of the contents in the chopper onto the bridge. People went for the rations like a school of goldfish to breadcrumbs.

The looting appeared to have finally stopped, perhaps because there was nothing left to steal. Homes and shops all had busted out windows, trash collected in the streets like leaves on a swimming pool. Hordes of thugs no longer tromped through the water and plundered at will. Either the massive military presence in the city scared them off, or they were just waiting for nightfall, when the only lights around are those emitted by the burning sulfur plant.

NOTE TO NY: I'm on good terms with the 4th ID. They're heroes in every way. They said they'd take me back into New Orleans tomorrow morning. I'm looking for more stories all night tonight. I have no way to call, as cell phones are down. I can receive text messages only. Greg [Fulton, my editor] knows how to get ahold of me. I'm hanging out with the AP photog. His satphone is working.

*Adam Titluk*  
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