

1

The Water



ON THE WATER'S EDGE, from a ramp leading from Interstate 10, I looked out on a vast span of still but deadly black water surrounding a New Orleans neighborhood. It was like a scene out of *Waterworld*, a postapocalyptic science fiction film. The off-ramp had been transformed into a boat launch. The silence was otherworldly.

Driving to the area that morning meant passing by one of the city's oldest cemeteries not far from the French Quarter, with its aboveground nineteenth-century marble, brick-and-mortar, and stone tombs topped with Christian symbols of angels and crosses. The scene was eerie as the flooded tombs appeared to float in the watery sludge.

It was September 11, 2005. Parked on the ramp and sitting on the tailgate of his truck was Captain Scott Shields of the New York City Fire Department, famous for the courageous efforts of his search-and-rescue dog, Bear, at the World Trade Center. Captain Scott was with special boat teams deployed to the Gulf Coast region on behalf of the Bear Search and Rescue Foundation in memory of his dog, who, like many other working canines, passed away from health complications developed after searching Ground Zero following the September 11, 2001, terrorist attacks.

Before we set out on a boat to look for stranded pets, the captain looked around at the Best Friends Animal Society team. Then he asked us to take a moment to remember those lost on 9/11. There, standing amidst the rubble of Hurricane Katrina with the black water just a few feet from us, we bowed our heads, and not a sound was heard. No cars. No lawnmowers. No birds. No planes. No trains. No voices. Not even the couple of dogs

rescued and then tied with leashes to the off-ramp railing, awaiting transport, uttered a sound. It was as if, at that brief but somber point in time, they, too, acknowledged the loss of life. It was a poignant moment, observing those lost in the largest terrorist attack on American soil while we were in the thick of rescuing animals in the wake of the biggest natural disaster in U.S. history. The Crescent City was devoid of life, except for those of us out rescuing that day and, of course, the animals left behind.

Leaving in boats were Jeff Popowich, Ethan Gurney, and Mike Bzdewka, all with the Best Friends organization, and volunteers Ken Ray and Tracey Simmons. Volunteer veterinarian Debbie Rykoff stayed on the ramp to treat the pets brought in from the water.

I stepped into a small, aluminum jon boat—stable and flat-bottomed—with Mike and Tracey, and we motored away from the freeway toward the nearby houses, maneuvering around felled trees, fallen street signs, water-logged cars, and whatever else was in the water. We boated out to a five-block area and stopped at Myrtle Street.

It was my first run of the day and Mike and Tracey's second. Mike cut the engine, and we sat in the boat with silence all around us. "Watch this," Tracey said as she started barking. "Woof, woof, woof." The street lit up with the sounds of animals. We heard a cat meow from three blocks away. On Myrtle, a dog barked, and then we heard another cat. At the intersection, Mike stepped out of the boat to pull us past large debris and tree trunks, and then he jumped back in and continued motoring.

It was an older neighborhood of wooden row houses, and the water was just above the porches. We boated to the first house on the corner, where we'd heard a cat meow from inside. Mike stepped onto the porch, opened a window, and grabbed the cat. He put the cat in a pillowcase, because we didn't have a carrier, and handed it to me as he got back in the boat. I set the cat next

to me on the bench seat so he wouldn't get wet from the polluted water on the floor of the boat.

Midway down the street, a dog barked from a backyard. We moved toward the narrow driveway on the side of the house and saw a gray Poodle mix on a car roof next to piled-high debris that used to be a garage. Mike got out and waded to the house next door while I stayed in the boat with the cat. I held onto a porch railing with one hand and petted the cat through the pillowcase with the other. Tracey stepped out and, wearing rubber hip waders, began making her way down the driveway. Halfway, she abruptly stopped and let out a moan.

"Are you okay?" I called out.

"No," she hollered back. "Something's in the water." She was quiet for a moment, and then she said, "I think it's a body."

"If it was a body, it would be floating," I told her.

"It's bubbling. It just moved," she said, lifting her arms above her head.

I knew she was spooking herself even more, so I tried to change her focus. "Look around you, Tracey," I said. "See the tree branches sticking out of the water? It's just a tree trunk."

"Are you sure?" she asked.

"Positive," I told her, not sure of anything at that point. "Just focus on the dog. Keep looking at the dog and step over the tree."

She slowly started moving again. It seemed like it took an eternity for her to reach the car. When she did, the dog jumped over the rubble behind him and into the murky water. Finally, she cornered him, plucked him from the muck, and carefully waded up the driveway and back to the boat. Tracey said she thought it might have been an alligator, because there were reports of sightings, but we doubted a gator could survive in that murky muck.

The still-wet dog, who turned out to be a Cockapoo we later named Goofy, sat on my lap and didn't move, even with the cat next to him. We got a second cat from next door, and then went to a few more houses on the street. Tracey followed Mike into one house, but she didn't have a good feeling and turned around. When Mike emerged, he told us that five dogs had been tied in

the yard, and it looked like they had all drowned when the water rose higher than their leashes could reach.

In silence, we motored away from Myrtle to Elder Street, to where a cat was walking on a rooftop. We called to him, but he walked even higher to the roof's peak. The fence was down, and there was no way for us to climb up. He was out of reach, so we headed back to the boat ramp, hoping another team with more gear could get him.

That scene played out every day on rescue duty. So did the sight of animals who hadn't made it. On the front of one house in Lakeview, spray-painted in black were the words "4 dead dogs on log chains in back yard." The teams learned to celebrate the successes and not dwell on the animals we could no longer help. It was the same with the people who had died and whose bodies were floating in the water. There wasn't anything left for us to do for them.

Because floodwater was steadily receding from neighborhoods throughout the city, rescue teams geared up for door-to-door searches on land where the waterline was dropping and for boat searches in areas where the water was still waist deep.



I had arrived two days earlier, on September 9, 2005, when my plane landed in Jackson, Mississippi. By noon the next day, I was at Camp Tylertown, where Best Friends had set up an animal triage center. I immediately went to work on the fifty-acre grounds of the St. Francis Animal Sanctuary, a place that was alive with activity.

Assignments often lead journalists in their careers. Stories of the military have taken me to Somalia, Saudi Arabia, and Panama. In the case of Katrina, instead of human strife, the plight of helpless animals took me to the hurricane-ravaged Gulf region. When the opportunity arose to travel to New Orleans, Biloxi, Waveland, and Gulfport to cover the largest animal rescue effort in history, I jumped at the chance. Within a day and a half, I was there, recording the events and stories of the displaced pets of Katrina.

I stayed from September to November 2005, returned a month later, and then returned again in January 2006. I went back for one last trip in May 2006 to cover Best Friends' pullout from the region.

I'll never forget being told by Kristi Littrell, an adoption coordinator at Best Friends Animal Society's Utah headquarters, where 1,800 animals live on any given day: "Watch over the little ones for me." And I did, as best I could, almost from the start.

That first afternoon I went inside Kitty City, a cabinlike building that was used as a cattery. The rooms, except for two in the back, had been emptied to make space for a dual-purpose office, triage overflow area, and storage for medical supplies. On a screened-in patio at the back of the building, where the temperature was about 110 degrees, some crates housed a handful of small dogs in triage, because there was nowhere else to put them.

A volunteer and I walked through in search of a red Pomeranian whose owner was desperately looking for her. Inside one of the crates, we found the dog, whose name was Brooklyn. She was in good shape. I was about to leave the patio to notify the command center that I'd located Brooklyn when I noticed another small dog, this one a thin, balding, friendly four-pound Chihuahua puppy inside a nearby kennel. She wagged her tail and was so happy to see me, despite her pink skin, itchy from fleabites, and the mucus on her nose and eyes. She was panting, but she also sneezed and appeared to have kennel cough. I retrieved her from the crate and walked her over to the small building next door that was dubbed the M*A*S*H Unit—a makeshift emergency hospital—and asked a veterinary technician if I could keep her with me.

I later learned from Pam Perez, who cofounded the St. Francis Sanctuary with her daughter, that they had picked up the puppy, along with five other Chihuahuas and four Basset-and-Beagle-mix dogs, from a yard on the outskirts of Franklinton, Louisiana, about twenty miles south of Tylertown. It was a run-down wooden home on a corner lot where the residents had

been breeding dogs in their backyard . . . literally. According to neighbors, they'd moved three weeks before the storm, taking some of the animals with them but leaving twenty-one alone in the yard. The Chihuahua puppy and the others toughed out the hurricane by themselves on that lot. Pam rescued ten, and another rescue group in the area took the remaining eleven.

A volunteer and I gave the puppy a bath in antiseptic shampoo and put aloe on her flea-bitten skin, and I took her under my wing. Even so, that first night, she scratched her skin for hours, and neither of us slept. Because the power was still off at the St. Francis Sanctuary, the dog and I spent those first two nights in a sleeping bag on the porch of the main building, which was also cabinlike. The next day, I gave the puppy an oatmeal bath to help relieve the itching. It worked, and her skin began to heal. Dr. Pema Mallu, a holistic veterinarian and Buddhist nun from Arizona, gave the pup a probiotic to relieve her kennel cough symptoms and boost her immune system.

The little dog rested on my lap as I sat on the porch, writing articles that chronicled both the rescue efforts and life at Camp Tylertown. I named the little Chihuahua Lois Lane, because I looked at her as my cub reporter. Once the power—and the lights—were back on, Lois Lane and I moved into the building and slept on the floor of the laundry area.

Each morning during that first week, Lois Lane got up from under the covers of our bed on the floor and picked a spot on a lower shelf where towels and sheets were stacked against a wall, making herself a cozy bed as she patiently waited for me to get ready for the day. She became quite a hit with the volunteers. I couldn't put her down on the grass to walk her in front of the buildings because of the bacteria and diseases the animals were bringing in from the streets, so I carried her everywhere with me, except when I'd put her down on the lawn across from the gravel road that ran through the sanctuary. Lois Lane stayed with me during my first deployment—a two-month stint—in Tylertown and later went home with me as a foster dog. She was eventually

adopted out to Best Friends employees Pat and Larry Donoho, who had her treated for heartworm after we learned that Lois had tested positive for the disease.



Two days after I'd gone into the field for the first time, a team picked up a stray Shih Tzu mom during a sweep of a neighborhood. With her was a male terrier mix. Elissa Jones, a Best Friends staff member, discovered the mother and took her to Dr. Debbie Rykoff, who accompanied the team that day in the van. Dr. Deb knew instantly that the female dog was still nursing. "She has puppies somewhere," she told Elissa.

So Elissa walked the mama dog on a leash to where she had first spotted her. Sure enough, the mother led Elissa straight to her two newborn pups on the second floor of a house, out of sight from the street. The puppies looked to be about ten days old and in good condition. That evening, Elissa and the team took the mother and pups to Camp Tylertown.

Three days later, on September 16, another team deployed by Best Friends, accompanied this time by a couple of professional responders along with a Best Friends rapid response team, went into St. Bernard Parish, located south of New Orleans, where most of the area was flooded with between four and fourteen feet of standing water.

The Best Friends team was the first animal rescue group allowed into the area after the storm. Prior to that time, officials wouldn't let anyone besides law enforcement into St. Bernard Parish, despite the thousands of pets still alive in and around homes. That first day, the rescue team pulled sixty pets from the area, twenty-nine of which were cats. Despite what they'd been through, the animals were in relatively good shape, surprising everyone.

Best Friends' first water extraction team was in the water a little more than a week after the storm and continued into the third week when it gradually went from a water operation to a ground operation. In some spots in those early days, there were islands of

dry ground. In other areas, a combination of water and thick oil coated the streets.



Paul Berry, then chief operating officer for Best Friends, had arrived in New Orleans the morning the first levee broke. When Paul, who grew up in New Orleans, saw the extensive damage and learned that residents hadn't been allowed to take their pets when they evacuated, he quickly dispatched a Best Friends rapid response team to help the animals. That phone call prompted a domino effect that resulted in the creation of Camp Tylertown, the base site on the grounds of the St. Francis Animal Sanctuary where volunteers soon arrived in droves wanting nothing more than to help. At the Best Friends headquarters in southern Utah, a command center, run by Anne Mejia, was simultaneously put in place and staffed.

As for the St. Francis Sanctuary, the storm touched down in Tylertown at daybreak on Monday, September 1. "The sun was coming up and it was bearing down on us," sanctuary cofounder Heidi Krupp said. They found out how bad it was in New Orleans by listening to their car radios. They had no electricity and, because the pumps needed power to run, they were without water. "My mom drove out to Tylertown and McComb looking for bottled water to give the animals," Heidi said. They had roughly six hundred animals already living at the sanctuary when the storm hit. Even so, Heidi said, "We made an agreement right away with Paul that animals he rescued would come here."

That's what happened almost immediately. On Friday, September 2, Jefferson Parish Animal Control officers delivered more than a hundred evacuated dogs and cats that were being temporarily housed in crates at the county fairgrounds in Franklinton, Louisiana. Once they were moved to base camp, some dogs were placed in available runs at the sanctuary. Others were kept in their kennels, waiting for fencing to arrive with the

Best Friends team members, who were on their way. The cats were placed inside at the sanctuary's Kitty City.

A day and a half later, on Sunday morning, the Best Friends team—Ethan Gurney, a former Marine; Troy Snow, a photographer; and Russ Mead, the general counsel and crisis manager—drove a trailer, a van, and a truck, respectively, onto the sanctuary grounds. The vehicles were loaded with temporary fencing, food (for people and animals), generators, satellite phones, and fuel. The first thing the team did was erect the fencing so the dogs delivered from Jefferson Parish could be moved from crates to runs.

Also that day, the first volunteers arrived at the St. Francis shelter. “At eleven thirty at night, these people pulled into our lots with a trailer behind them,” Heidi said. “They had two trucks, and they were full of dog food.”

The following Tuesday, when Alabama volunteer Ken Ray arrived with his boat, the team hit the water, putting the boat in from on- and off-ramps along Interstate 10. That began the steady three-month flow of rescued animals arriving each day at base camp from New Orleans, where volunteers were streaming in.

In the field, National Guard and Coast Guard members were doing what they could, too. One dog—a seven-week-old black Lab puppy—was plucked from the dark water by the Coast Guard. A rescue team that included Dr. Debbie Rykoff was in the field that day and met up with the Coast Guard officers at an off-ramp by I-10 not far from the 610 Freeway. The only sign of life for miles, the puppy clung to a clump of weeds, a tiny black speck in the toxic soup. The soldiers fed her scraps of food left over from their rations of Meals Ready to Eat (MREs). “The weeds were the only thing that saved her from drowning,” said Dr. Deb, who eventually took the puppy she named Surreal back home with her to Chicago.

While Camp Tylertown was still being set up, Best Friends, through an agreement with the Jefferson Parish shelter's temporary site in Tarlington, pulled animals from the parish's shelter and took them to base camp. As they arrived, workers from both

Best Friends and St. Francis, along with a few volunteers, quickly erected temporary fencing. While at the Jefferson Parish shelter a week after the storm, Paul witnessed a female American Pit Bull Terrier nursing two different litters of puppies. The scene, he later said, captured the spirit of what was going on throughout the Gulf Coast region: neighbor helping neighbor.



After Katrina hit, 80 percent of New Orleans and many of its neighboring parishes were left underwater. The majority of rescues were carried out from small boats, picking up dogs and cats from rooftops, off floating debris—sometimes having to use wire cutters to extricate the pets—and from second-floor windows and attic openings. Many residents were fishermen who used their working boats to retrieve neighbors and their pets stranded in homes and on rooftops.

Ripper and Domino, Pit Bull mixes, were two such pets, stranded on a car roof in a driveway behind a mangled chain-link fence near the city. As the Best Friends boat turned the corner onto the dogs' street, Ripper wasn't taking any chances. He dove into the dark water and met his rescuers. What Ripper did not realize was that the boat, with rescuers Jeff Popowich, Ethan Gurney, and Troy Snow on board, was already headed their way.

Still, Ripper dove into the murky floodwater with his purpose clear; he wasn't letting the boat leave without him. His look said it all: *Not here, not today*. A few minutes later, Ripper was pulled from the water and lifted to safety, and then the team continued toward the car to retrieve Domino.

Once at Camp Tylertown, Ripper's caregivers knew him at Pooch Alley, a section of base camp where Pit Bulls were housed, as the vocal dog who talked to them in a high-pitched bark. Some called him Screecher. He was also the dog who ripped apart a kiddie pool each time it was put in his run and filled with water—thus the name Ripper.

"He was still very puppyish in his behavior," said Sherry Woodard, an animal expert who oversaw animal care at base

camp. “He would climb all over people and be very sweet. But he would eat any kind of plastic bowl and put teeth marks in metal bowls.”

What he needed, Sherry said, was direction. “I knew that if he didn’t get into the right hands, he would be in trouble.” So Sherry sent him home with Leah Purcell, who runs Spindletop Pit Bull Refuge in Houston. Leah knew a trainer who could foster and work with Ripper.

Ripper, who was about ten months old when he was rescued, “now knows how to control himself,” Sherry said. “He’s a trained tracking dog.” He also went through extensive obedience training. Because of the advanced training, coupled with his young age, Sherry said he’d be a good candidate for police or search-and-rescue work.

Ripper will continue to live on several acres with his foster mom, no matter how long it takes to place him. “I visit him on a regular basis,” Leah said. “He gets to run a lot during the day, playing with his indestructible ball.”

Domino, the black-and-white Pit Bull who had been stranded with Ripper on the roof of the car, went to Spindletop as well, and was adopted out a couple of months later to a north Texas family with two teenagers and a male dog named Jagger.

Two other Pit Bulls—Piglet, a white, pink-nosed female, and an unnamed male with a brown-marble-colored coat—were also together, but on a sinking boat still attached to a trailer in a driveway when they were rescued. Doctor Deb, with the crew that day, waited in her rented SUV on the ramp for the dogs and cats to be boated to her so she could treat them. Piglet was dehydrated and had superficial cuts on her face and head, so Deb immediately hooked her up to IV fluids. Collapsed on a blanket in the SUV, Piglet lay there quietly as Dr. Deb worked on her.

Once at Camp Tylertown, workers took good care of Piglet. Volunteer Momi Ford, who worked Pooch Alley with a group of five women, remembers naming her. “Piglet was in the first pen right next to our supply tent, which we dubbed the Monkey Lounge,” Momi said. “I was going down the rows coming up with

names for the dogs when another volunteer, Jan Mintun, was pulling a hose down in the opposite direction. Piglet was so excited to have our attention, she would smile and snort and wiggle when we came near. As Jan pulled the hose down the row, she looked back and said something to her like, ‘You’re just a little Miss Piggy, aren’t you?’ I looked at her, and the image of Piglet from *Winnie the Pooh* came to mind immediately.” After that, everyone called the dog Piglet.

Each day during her ten-day stint at camp, Momi applied sunscreen to Piglet’s skin to protect her from the harsh sun. “I went into her pen first thing every morning and again during the day to put suntan lotion all over her,” Momi said. “She loved it. I’d go up to her pen with the bottle of lotion and ask her if she wanted some sunscreen rubbed on her. She would give me that great, huge smile of hers and just wiggle and snort. It was impossible to keep her clean, though, as she would just wriggle around in the dirt in ecstasy from all the attention.”

Piglet, who had heartworm disease, was fostered by volunteer veterinarian Karen Michalsi, who drove the dog from base camp to Serenity Animal Hospital in Sterling Heights, Michigan. After heartworm treatments, Piglet eventually passed an intermediate obedience course, and, just before the first anniversary of Katrina, she was adopted to Angenette Graham in Detroit, where she is the only dog in the house.

Another white Pit Bull was found on September 9 in a bright-blue boat near a freeway off-ramp. A Best Friends rescue team leaving the city for the day ran across a National Guard unit who told them a dog was inside a boat off Interstate 10. Someone had spray painted the words “Dog in Boat” in red letters on the side of the small vessel. When the rescue team (which included Paul Berry, Kit Boggio, and Troy Snow) spotted the boat just off the freeway, they headed toward it. A bag of dry dog food had been left in the boat, but diesel fuel had spilled into the hull and saturated it. The dog, too, was covered in fuel. She was sunburned and blistered. Back at base camp, she was cleaned up and named Diesel, and spent her first couple of evenings sitting on the porch

with Kit. She was eventually fostered out to an individual who volunteered at Camp Tylertown.

A picture of Diesel being rescued ran on the cover of a book by photographer Troy Snow and released by Best Friends titled *Not Left Behind*. After Coast Guard Lieutenant Brandon Guldseth saw the book, he tried to get in touch with someone who could give him more information about Diesel. Seeing a story I'd written about Diesel that was posted on the Internet, on March 1, 2007, the officer sent me an e-mail.

Hello,

My name is Brandon Guldseth, a Lieutenant Junior Grade Officer in the United States Coast Guard. I believe we were the first ones to find "Diesel" in the damaged blue boat alongside the highway in New Orleans. The first time that I saw her, she kind of startled me. We were using that on-ramp as a deployment point to effect Search and Rescue operations of people. I leaned against the boat and glanced into it. To my surprise, there was a dog in there and I took a step back. I was saddened by the condition of her. She had lesions and bumps all over her legs and was severely dehydrated. I wanted to take her right there and then, but our mission was a different one at the time and I knew that I could not take her. We tried to give her some bottled water, but she would not drink any. It was my crewman who spray-painted "DOG IN BOAT" on the side of the boat with a spray can that we found lying next to it.

I am a dog lover and I grew up with a Newfoundland and a German Shepherd. I was tortured mentally by the condition of the dogs in New Orleans and the way their owners would just abandon them, just as they did Diesel. I never knew what happened to her and I was fearful that she had died a horrible death. Just yesterday I was in a local bookstore in Belleville, Illinois, near St. Louis, Missouri, which is where I am stationed in the Coast Guard. Searching through the dog section, I noticed the book *Not Left Behind*.

Flipping through the pages in the book reminded me of the locations that still haunt me to this day. When I got to the middle of the book, I saw the expanded picture of “Dog In Boat.” I turned to the next page and saw “Diesel” being rescued. I wanted to cry right there in the middle of the store because I felt relieved and saddened all at the same time. Here in the pages of *Not Left Behind* was a beautiful Pit Bull whom I did leave behind. I purchased the book and openly cried in my car on the way home because I thought of the title of the book and then thought of Diesel along with all of the other dogs who I left behind in New Orleans.

I want to personally thank all of the rescuers who were on a mission to save the animals of New Orleans, something that I could not do during my two weeks of horror. They are the epitome of selflessness and I wish I could have saved those animals as well.

We currently have an all white American Bulldog, which we got when I returned from New Orleans. The vision of Diesel, who I thought was dead, was with me when we picked up our dog. I was hoping that you could tell me if you have found her a home. I would love to have her in my forever home if her disposition would allow her to bond to another female dog. If not, then I would love to hear if she has been placed into a loving home.

Thank you,
LTJG Brandon Guldseth
United States Coast Guard

It was a stunning letter, and it answered the questions we had about how Diesel came to be in the boat and who had painted those words, letting the rescue team know that a dog was hiding there. Her owner had not left her, as we’d originally thought, and her person had not painted those words on the side of the boat. Instead, it appeared she had taken cover in the boat, albeit next to a leaky diesel outboard motor.

In a telephone interview afterward, Brandon said it took him more than a year to adjust after he left New Orleans. “I was in a daze when I returned, not only because of what I saw,” he said, “but because of what I heard and smelled as well. I think it took me over a year to process all the information, which bombarded my senses. The suffering and death of people and animals most certainly had an effect on my psyche.”

Brandon was told that Diesel had been fostered out to a volunteer a week after she was rescued. For Brandon, knowing that Diesel was rescued and later placed in a home lifted the weight he’d felt all those months after having to leave her. Diesel, as the book Brandon stumbled across had shown, was not left behind after all.