

The Times

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A witness to Katrina's tragedy

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"I've been to hell before, but this was the worst," says Scott Shields, reflecting on his two long weeks of search and rescue work in the flood-ravaged streets of New Orleans.

And this from a man who scoured the rubble of the World Trade Center on Sept. 11 with his now-deceased rescue dog Bear and made history finding victims amid debris 30 feet high.

Shields, who lives in Princeton but travels wherever disaster work calls him, returned from the ruins of New Orleans on Monday, weary, saddened, frustrated and angry.



Captain Scott shields of Princeton and members of 82nd Airborne on patrol

For the past two weeks, except for a few occasional stolen hours of sleep, Shields worked day and night with marine search and rescue (SAR) teams put together with his help from members of the Army 82nd Airborne Division, steering their boats through the flooded streets of the city.

The upshot of their efforts was 847 live rescues, the evacuation of 4,106 people by boat and the saving of dozens of animals that had been lost or abandoned, he reports.

"The animals we rescued were sheltered next to the naval ship Tortuga, where the crew and Vets from Red Bank Animal Hospital set up a shelter," Shields said. "But hundreds of people died because they loved their animals more than themselves and wouldn't leave them," he adds. The law firm of Proskauer Rose founded the Bear Search and Rescue Foundation in his dog's honor, which funds and trains SAR teams across the country.

On Aug. 29, the day that Hurricane Katrina came ashore, he contacted the office of Louisiana's governor, Kathleen Blanco, to offer help through that network.

By the next day, he'd been authorized to head up an official response team requiring the Bear Search and Rescue Foundation to deploy teams for "Search & Rescue to Southeast Louisiana" under a formal proclamation carrying the governor's name.



Capt Shields & Bear's son Theodore(able) and members of 3rd Brigade 82nd Airborne special boat units he trained.

Shields brought along his golden retriever, Theodore, son of America's most decorated rescue dog Bear, who died as a result of World Trade Center injuries, to travel with him on the boats and "kick in doors of officials that got in the way of life safety" when needed.

Despite having worked with people of "great courage" at ground zero, Shields said he was overwhelmed by the "courage and commitment" of the soldiers beside him.

"I'll never go to hell again without a man in a red beret next to me," he said of the 82nd Airborne. "I never felt so safe in a bad place before. I saw the humanity deep at the heart of our military.

"These soldiers stand for democracy in an urgent way that the politicians don't begin to understand. They respect the Constitution. And I saw how they respected and revered every form of life, whether human or animal. "They had orders not to shoot unless hit and they lived by those rules of engagement. America's military is better at preserving life than the agency charged with it.

The aftermath of Katrina overwhelmed even Shields' expectations.

While he saw looting and heard gunfire, his work was concentrated on getting people out of homes where "some hadn't had food or clean water for a week.

"I saw people abandoned in the streets, homeless, standing waist-deep in toxic water," he recalls.

He insists that while "the Army was ready to throw everything they have at this, FEMA was incompetent and incapable."

The Federal Emergency Management Agency (FEMA) had yet to take action, he said, faulting the need for bureaucratic "paperwork" as part of the reason for their delayed arrival.

"We've become a nation run by lawyers and accountants. We've lost our heart," angered Shields said.



Bodies in Attic, most have not been recovered.

Like the World Trade Center attack, Shields said, Louisiana was a result of "lessons not learned." Shields one of the county's most decorated rescuers has been going around the country the last four years with a lecture entitled "Betrayed, Lessons Learned and not told about the World Trade Center". He also ran training in New York for 29 agencies for four days in June...the name of the training was "Responding to the Five Hundred Year Flood".

"I also know for a fact that the number of dead is being under-reported, and I blame the press for allowing them to get away with that," he said.

Using the national network set up through his foundation, Shields was able to alert and send 27 SAR teams they had funded or trained the last four years into the area, each rescuing an average of 220+ people, he said. The units of the 3rd Brigade 82nd Airborne that he led small boat teams (and brought the boats for) rescued just short of 6,000 people and hundreds of animals. But because the foundation has no federal or state funding and is supported by donations, Shields said its work for Katrina victims has left it totally without funds.

"We're wiped out," he said.

"We use our money for grants to SAR organizations and for training all over the country. But people just don't realize that most search and rescue teams answer the call out of their own pockets. They do the job because it's the work they love. Without donations from the public, our foundation's work in helping SAR teams won't be able to go on."

Shields expects to return to the Louisiana flood area after a short respite. The rescue work, he said, is far from finished.

"When you get out of the city and into the outlying areas, there's nothing left. It's been completely

flattened. Next to the parishes, New Orleans looks like a great place to live."

If you would like to support the Bear Search & Rescue Foundation you may send support to :

Bear Search and Rescue Foundation
36 Ketley Lane,
Princeton N.J. 08540

or donate through Pay Pal on the Foundation website www.bearsearchandrescue.org

or call Capt Shields at 732-713-6298

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