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At the New Orleans Convention Center, Geraldo Rivera strolls in front of Fox News cameras with a woman he says he rescued.

A city in ruins

Fear and violence lurk in New Orleans, where Geraldo Rivera mugs for the camera, transvestites bicycle down Toulouse Street, and rescue workers and reporters still wonder why so many people were left behind to die.

By Stephen Elliott



Sept. 5, 2005 | NEW ORLEANS -- I drive into New Orleans with a note from the Louisiana State Police Public Information Officer. The highways are empty past the checkpoints, as is the city. Highway 10 ends at a barricade in uptown. I follow relief vehicles through cleared thoroughfares. Most of the streets are blocked by fallen trees. On the roads that are open, cars -- almost exclusively police and relief vehicles -- drive in whatever direction they want. Some locals ride by on bicycles. The sense of emptiness in the city is overwhelming. I pass a Whole Foods with its door propped open, alarm still ringing, panes of glass intact.

I stop when I see two men and a woman on a porch off Magazine Street. "You a reporter?" one of the men asks me. "I'll tell you whatever you want to know." He tells me about the conspiracy: people with a lot of money flooded the city on purpose. "You want some wine?" he asks. "I've got a hundred dollar bottle of wine." They say they've been getting supplies from the Whole Foods and using water from a neighbor's pool to operate the toilet. But now the food at the grocery store is gone. The woman's legs are bitten, covered in bright red welts. I leave them a gallon of water and continue toward the Convention Center.

It's only a day since tens of thousands of people were rapidly evacuated from the Convention Center after being jammed inside it for five days. Trash is strewn everywhere. There are black bags, pillows, boxes, twisted chairs, water bottles, soiled and torn clothing. Shopping carts are turned upside down and stacked on top of each other. Garbage cans lay in the bushes. Nothing in the Gulf Coast seems to symbolize the tragedy more than the excess of garbage and human waste.

The army presence is heavy in the Convention Center. Troop transports arrive with bus loads of people. They're processed quickly, searched, loaded onto giant helicopters, and flown to New Orleans Airport, where busses, planes and trains are now moving in high gear to evacuate the city.

Geraldo Rivera arrives in a Fox News truck. An elderly woman with blond hair grips his elbow. She's wearing thick dark glasses and a pink shirt. He carries her small white dog in his arms. He's wearing thigh-high waders unzipped to below his knees. We shake hands. "Her relative called one of our stations," Geraldo tells me, explaining how that call went to another station, and then another, and finally to him.

The woman had been stranded in her home for six days. Geraldo picked up the woman and her dog up and brought them here. The woman looks frail on his arm, though not as bad perhaps as a lady collapsed on a chair nearby, unable to move. Or a woman in a wheelchair being lifted from the truck, carrying her prosthetic leg on her lap.

"That's the second time he brought her here," one of the doctors tells me, nodding toward Geraldo.

"What?"

"They did two takes. Geraldo made that poor woman walk from the Fox News Van to the heliport twice. Both times carrying her dog."

"Are you serious?" I ask. He says he is.

The doctor has been here for six days, volunteering for the state. But the federal government has control now. "You can't do anything if you're not with the feds," he says. "All they needed was to send in the army. This is too big for the state. A couple of days ago, there were people being murdered left and right. I treated this one lady at the airport, a stranded tourist. She just stepped outside of her hotel. They beat her over the head, broke her jaw, and raped her."

I leave the Convention Center and head toward the French Quarter. I'm afraid to step out of my car, afraid of street corners where lights don't work. The empty city is no place for cowards. I park the car near the river. Then I see two transvestites in latex and fishnets bicycling down Toulouse Street. I follow them, thinking they might lead me to the New Orleans I visited so many times before. I was in my early twenties and that city was full of sex and alcohol and music. I remember driving down here in February one year, living in a van below the quarter for a week. I remember being 20 years old and paying too much money to take Polaroids of a woman in negligee. The tip, she said, determined the kind of outfit she wore.

Soon the transvestites are gone but Johnny White's, located on the corner of Bourbon and Orleans, is still open and serving drinks. "We never closed," the bartender tells me. It's the only bar open in the city. They serve warm beer and shots. As it gets darker, they light candles on the countertops.

"You looking for a story?" a guy at the bar asks me. I shrug my shoulders. Also inside the small bar are an Indian woman, a man with his arms wrapped around his wife, holding a cigarette in her mouth. I ask for a coke and the bartender says they only use coke in mixed drinks, so I order a bottle of water instead. It cost me two dollars.

The man with the story is Greg Rogers. He was forced from his house yesterday at Louisiana and Clairborne, an area completely submerged. "I was the last person in the neighborhood," he says. "I had a month and a half worth of food, some books. I had my two dogs. SWAT showed up and said it was time to go. I told them I was fine, I didn't need rescuing. They said you're coming with us or we're killing your dogs." Rogers says the officers took him in a boat to an overpass and told him to start walking in the other direction. He has a windup radio with him and that's how he heard that Johnny White's was still open. "I was so happy to hear Johnny's was open," he says. He tells me he knows a bartender here. He sleeps on the bar's floor.

"I didn't want to leave my house," he says. "I was fine. What were they going to do? Take me to the Superdome where I'd get shot and robbed?"

Rogers sits on the chair drinking light beer. I ask him about his dogs, and he says he left enough food and water for them for two weeks. He says he can't get home without a boat. He tells me he was a Marine for eight years, and served in the Gulf, Bosnia, and Mogadishu. He won't reveal the unit he was with. He says they did some bad things.

After a while, the transvestites I saw earlier come staggering by. They're drunk and one of them is bleeding heavily. Apparently she fell off her bike. When someone offers help, she refuses.

It's almost dark now. Curfew is at seven. The only lights are the lights from a CNN crew down the street. "I wonder if I should go get my car," I say aloud.

"Go now before it's dark," the Indian woman says. She has half an unlit cigar in her mouth. "I'll be so worried about you. Especially if you don't have any weapons."

Suddenly the streets are filled with red berets. The 82nd Airborne, the army elite, have fanned out across the neighborhood. They stop at the bar and ask if we have all we need. The bar manager says we need food and water. She tells them that people have been stopping by the bar for supplies and they've been feeding them. The berets ask her about security. Security's been fine, the manager says. "We know all the bad people. They don't bother us."

I walk to my car and get a gallon of water and two Slim Fast bars, which I give to Rogers. He puts the bars on top of his guitar case, hands the water across the bar. "I was fine at my house," he says bitterly. "Now I'm going to lose my dogs."

A man in leather pants, a blue shirt, with long black hair and tattoos down his forearms, arrives at the bar with a cooler full of medical supplies. The bartender is now on the other end of the counter, doing speed. "I'm not really a bartender," he tells me. "I'm a drunk. I was just helping out." This is still the city I visited, I decide, concentrated into one bar.

The medic dresses Rogers' wounds. He has cuts on his legs and arms, apparently from diving into the water a few days ago to save his neighbor, who had been blown off the roof of her house by a helicopter. He had to walk all day and swim to get to Johnny White's last night. He says he was stopped and searched eight times. I spy the sign behind the bar, "Never Closed."

It seems to get hotter in New Orleans now that it's totally dark. Down the street, some lanterns burn. The humidity has increased. The medic's name is Ride Hamilton. "I'm not really a medic," he says, just like the bartender is not really a bartender. "But I'm the only medic here. I wear this uniform because it helps me get through stuff." I wonder to myself what kind of medic wears leather pants, especially in this heat.

I ask him where he learned how to do these things. He says he watches a lot of military documentaries. (The New York Times reported that Hamilton is a firefighter.) He says he stitched up a guy a few days ago, using a sewing needle and fishing line. FEMA left the stitches in. Said they were as good as any stitches they had ever seen.

"I got a warehouse full of supplies in my house," Hamilton says. "I went to all the places, all the pharmacies, before the wrong people got there. I took ointment and medicine while they were taking food. I'm doing this on a quarter tank of gas and a donut tire."

I talk to the Indian woman for a while. She used to live in San Francisco, close to where I live. "I got so bored in San Francisco," she says. "New Orleans never closes." It's a strange thing to say but it's true on this particular corner. Near ten p.m., I decide I should probably go. "Don't," she says. "You're a target. People are being killed for bicycles. You have gasoline."

Six blocks away from Johnny White's is Canal Street, which is now Media City. Stretching for nearly a mile down the street are tents, busses, campers, generators, satellite trucks and cars. There's a makeup area with arc lights. Heavy police presence. The Sheraton is still open, the only hotel in town, commandeered by federal agents. Workers clean trash in front of the hotel. The rest of the street is covered in broken glass.

Journalists sleep in their vehicle seats and in the meridian. I hang out for a while with the crew from the Cleveland Plain Dealer and they offer me Gatorade. They have made chairs from boxtops placed on top of a fallen palm tree.

We swap stories about the things we've seen. I mention the shelter in Alexandria that was ready and open for two days before the displaced arrived. One of the reporters says he ordered a shot of whiskey at Johnny White's yesterday and it tasted like piss. We talk about the 4,000 people left for days on the causeway. A reporter says he's never seen anything like it. "They left those people to die," he says.

"Look at that," someone says. It's a row of white trucks with green stripes -- immigration. Then the red berets come marching past. Then Fish & Wildlife. The federal government has arrived in force.

"Think it's safe to drive out of town tonight?" I ask, and everybody says no, it is definitely not safe. I have a plane to catch in the afternoon in Jackson, Mississippi. I've been on the Gulf Coast five days and there's certainly no shortage of reporters here.

Eventually I take off anyway. I drive past the hospital and the military trucks there. Heavy weapons are set on the lawn. No one is supposed to be on the streets.

The disaster, it seems to me, is the failure of a philosophy. A philosophy of small government, tax cuts, deficits, and privatization. The federal government should have arrived sooner but the federal government was doing other things.

I drive east on 90, an empty highway, but I'm forced off by flooding. I drive down to the entryway, where a state trooper is parked. He is also lost. The streets in front of us are submerged. I drive back beneath concrete columns, half a dozen warnings in my head. I turn right below the highway and dead end at a giant pool. Men sit on orange theater chairs beneath the overpass. I pass them

slowly. Nobody smiles or waves. A man in a blue police shirt holding a shotgun stops my car. Two men in camouflage and bulletproof vests are with him.

"Where the hell are you going?" he asks me. I tell him I'm trying to get out of town, to Mississippi, but everywhere I try to drive is underwater. The man is fat, a thick layer of sweat across his face, a lock of hair stuck to his forehead. He wants to know why my driver license says San Francisco and I give him the card of the Lieutenant, who told me to call him if anything went wrong.

The fat man gives me directions. The troops keep their hands on the triggers. Earlier today, two blocks away, troops shot five assailants who opened fire on contractors. I wonder if these are the troops that did the shooting. "Man," he says, handing me back my license. "You are in a bad neighborhood. You need to get out of here."

About the writer

Stephen Elliott is the author of four novels, including "Happy Baby."

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