

Haunted By Laotian Ghosts, ‘Rescue Dawn’ Resurrects Real-Life Vietnam POWs

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- [Adam Fendelman](#) [2]
- [Christian Bale](#) [3]
- [Interview](#) [4]
- [Jeremy Davies](#) [5]
- [Rescue Dawn](#) [6]
- [Steve Zahn](#) [7]
- [Werner Herzog](#) [8]



CHICAGO – Haunted by the non-fictional ghost he was portraying, Steve Zahn – who previously had been typecast by Hollywood as a comic reliever – lost 40 dead-serious pounds for “Rescue Dawn” to walk the same footsteps of a POW four decades earlier.

“Once you get past the wheat detox, losing the weight was more mental than physical,” Zahn said in a Chicago interview with Adam Fendelman. “I weighed myself for the first 20 pounds and then stopped. The closer I got to the movie, the more it became about Duane.



Christian Bale in “Rescue Dawn”

Photo courtesy of by Lena Herzog

“I had his picture all over the place – on my fridge and everywhere – so I was always reminded. If I wanted to cheat and eat, I had to look at his face. I didn’t cheat because I wouldn’t be telling the truth. It’s a weird state when you get to that spot where your body has changed that much. It’s like you just woke up.”

Though safely nestled in our Chicago hotel room, you could tell Zahn wasn’t acting when he delivered the words “his ghost is still out there, man” with eyes lost in the distance and his mind evoking the impenetrable Laotian jungle that was his set. It was as close as an actor could get to war-inflicted, post-traumatic stress.

With the jungle the cast’s true prison, director Werner Herzog made the environment just as much the film’s main character as Zahn, Christian Bale and Jeremy Davies. Zahn added: “There were thorns and bugs and snakes [galore]. I’d be on set looking at a banana spider and think: ‘If that thing bit me, I’d really die.’ In many of Werner’s films, the environment is the main character.”



Steve Zahn in Chicago

Photo by Adam Fendelman of HollywoodChicago.com

Bale portrays Dieter Dengler: the only American to escape a POW camp in the Laotian jungle. After months of calculating his death-defying getaway through some of the planet's most ferocious wilderness, the renegade blazed his own route to freedom. He exploited the most primal qualities of evasion, endurance, tenacity and courage to find his way home.

Zahn, whose character mirrored Bale's side by side, says he was inspired to haul himself out of bed at 5:30 a.m. every day in large part because of the opportunity to work with Bale.

"Christian is the real deal. He's all those things you're supposed to be when you're a great actor. He's simple, direct, intense and one of the funniest mother (sic) I've ever worked with. Damn it he's funny," Zahn said. "What we were doing could have been difficult. We didn't need to be reminded that we were hungry and barefoot and POWs when the camera was rolling.



Steve Zahn (left) and Christian Bale

Photo courtesy of by Lena Herzog

"That's our job. It was easy to stay in it. Werner was adamant about no distractions on set. There weren't M&M bowls, chairs and bored crew members playing high school grabass. It was the most difficult and grueling movie I've ever done. I was exhausted daily. As hard as it was to get up every morning, though, I couldn't wait to hang out with Christian."

Zahn says the role for this biopic film required very little research.

"I've seen all the war movies a million times. I had planes in my room when I was a kid and my dad thought I'd have a military career. I'd watch 'World at War' in third grade. I was fascinated with memoirs of soldiers who had crystal-clear experiences that one year in a bush. For 'Rescue Dawn,' I thought: 'OK. It's 1966. Vietnam. POWs. He's in Laos. That's bad.' I kind of just knew it all."



Jeremy Davies

Photo courtesy of by Lena Herzog

Though he pitches the role as a natural, it bucks a clear trend his career has taken thus far.

“Perception is interesting to me. I’m just an actor. When I was doing theatre, I was an ingénue. In film, you do something funny and become the funny guy. I just go from job to job and don’t have a big plan. I like doing comedy. I don’t feel a need to change it up so people respect me. A 20-year-old drunk-ass, stoned dude is funny. At 40, it’s not.

“People expect me to be a standup guy. I don’t do standup. I’m not really that funny when I’m hanging out with my friends in Kentucky who aren’t in the business. What’s funny to me is people who take themselves seriously and aren’t what they think they are. Also, POWs are funny. Just kidding.”



Christian Bale (left) and Steve Zahn

Photo courtesy of by Lena Herzog

Though the part didn’t seem to fit in his career mold, Zahn says he zealously sought out the role. He describes the film as one that depicts a human’s true will to survive and defends Herzog by saying he’d be the last director in the world to politicize this topic.

“Surviving is fascinating to me,” Zahn said. “I don’t know where I’d break, if I would or if I’d succeed. All I know from all my reading and watching movies is that people with faith – some kind of faith – have historically been the ones to make it. There’s something outside them – some belief – but with ‘Rescue Dawn,’ we never talked about that.”

With the implication that he didn't make much cash on this project, Zahn did talk about the personal side of shooting such a taxing film both on himself and his family. Living on a farm with kids, sometimes he's gone and sometimes they come to work with him.



Werner Herzog (left), Steve Zahn (middle) and Christian Bale

Photo courtesy of by Lena Herzog

"I'm sure not going to take them to some banana spider [set]," Zahn said. "You know what I've done for the past eight months? Honestly? I've been to every field trip with my kids. I drive them to school every day and make them breakfast. I pick her up from school and take her to ballet, drive her home and take her to gymnastics.

"I pick him up at 2:30 p.m., bring him home, give him a snack, watch a little SpongeBob and then we play outside. Right now, we swim every day for at least two hours. I have lots of time off. My kids really miss me when I'm gone. Though I'm going to Bulgaria for four weeks soon, then I come home and I get to play with them. Not a lot of dads get to do that."

When he goes to work, though, he goes to work. He says something in him switches on when it's time to mean business – funny or otherwise – and he's always on his toes. He says "Rescue Dawn," which for the most part didn't utilize much "magic or fake stuff" (CGI was only used in plane scenes), is like no other Vietnam film.



Christian Bale (left) and Steve Zahn.

Photo courtesy of by Lena Herzog

“You can have all the ingredients for the cake but you still have to bake the thing right,” Zahn said. “The hardest thing in film is to have a consistent tone for two hours.

“Whatever realm of realism you put it in, it’s got to make sense. This film has a clear message. Yes, there are monster holes in it – some things don’t make sense – but the tone is right. When you have the right tone, you don’t notice the mistakes. You don’t care because you feel something.”



[9]

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- [3] http://www.hollywoodchicago.com/labels/christian_bale.html
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- [6] <http://www.hollywoodchicago.com/news/rescue-dawn>
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