

S.A. veteran died saving wife from train

By Eva Ruth Moravec

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MIDLAND — The [National Transportation Safety Board](#) on Friday was backing off early reports that the lights and crossing arms were working properly at the intersection where a Union Pacific train struck a float carrying military veterans, killing four men, including one from the San Antonio area.

“We have not determined yet if they were working properly,” said [Mark Rosekind](#), with the NTSB. “We don't have a lot of information yet.”

Union Pacific spokesman Tom Lange said the train was sounding its horn before the crash, but at least one witness, who recorded the crash, said the horn and the crossing arms came too late.

The man, who said his camera had been confiscated by police, stated that the arms actually struck the trailer.

While the first float passed over the railroad crossing safely at Garfield Street and West Industrial Avenue, the second float, carrying 12 veterans, 12 spouses and two escorts, didn't. The two floats were the finale to the parade.

“For some reason, they got struck by that eastbound train,” Midland police Chief [Price Robinson](#) said. He wouldn't say if the driver of the tractor hauling the trailer was at fault.

Union Pacific spokesman Tom Lange said the train was sounding its horn before the crash.

The veterans, all injured in the service, had just begun a weekend of being honored by Show of Support, a nonprofit organization that was started in 2004. The short parade route was lined with spectators who watched as the second of two floats carrying the veterans being honored was struck by a fast-moving freight train.

“The second float was almost through when the train hit,” NTSB member Mark Rosekind said. “Our mission is to find the probable cause.”

[U.S. Army Sgts. Gary Stouffer](#), 37, and [Lawrence Boivin](#), 47, were pronounced dead at the scene of the crash, which took place in a commercial area of Midland about 4:35 p.m.

Two other sergeants — [Joshua Michael](#), 34, an Army retiree from the San Antonio area, and [William Lubbers](#), 43 — were taken to [Midland Memorial Hospital](#), where they later died.

Another 16 people, including Staff Sgt. [Mark D. Juarez](#) and Staff Sgt. [Johnathan S. Rose](#), both of whom were assigned to the Wounded Warrior Regiment, Wounded Warrior Battalion East at [San Antonio Military Medical Center](#), were injured.

Capt. [Jill Wolf](#), spokeswoman for the Wounded Warrior Regiment, said neither man suffered life-threatening injuries.

A fourth San Antonio-based soldier, Sgt. [Joseph Gonzalez](#), was on the first float and was uninjured, officials said.

By Friday afternoon, most of the injured victims had been released.

Two spouses and one veteran were in stable condition, and another spouse was in critical condition at Midland Memorial Hospital.

A fifth injured person, also a spouse, was listed in serious condition at [University Medical Center](#) in Lubbock, city spokesman [Ryan Stout](#) said.

Matt Rogers, 20, Juarez's younger sibling, said he spoke to his brother Friday morning.

"He's standing, living, alive, and we couldn't ask for more," he said. "He was released from the hospital (Thursday) night and has a few fractures on his spine but can walk fine."

Rogers said the doctor told his brother he would be very sore for a few months, but should make a complete recovery. His wife, Amy, who also was on the float, was bruised, he said, but had no other serious injuries.

Attempts to contact Rose and members of his family were unsuccessful, but according to a Facebook posting on a profile that appears to be Rose's, he wrote that he and his wife, Colleen, were in the train wreck.

"We are OK the wife broke some bones and won't be able to walk for a few weeks. I'm just glad we are OK and hope everyone else heals that was hurt," he wrote.

The two floats, which were flatbed trailers, were carrying veterans in folding chairs from the downtown DoubleTree Hotel to the county's Horseshoe Arena, where they were to be guests at a banquet. The event was a part of the annual [Hunt for Heroes](#), sponsored by Show of Support, which selects injured veterans to participate in a traditional West Texas whitetail deer hunt.

The NTSB's Rose said the train, which was traveling at 62 mph, applied its emergency brakes, although it's not yet known how soon before the collision the train crew attempted to slow down.

The speed limit along the track where the crash occurred was raised from 40 mph to 70 mph in 2006 to meet freight demand, officials said.

The next year, the intersection was designated a "quiet zone," in which the crossing is equipped with safety upgrades and the train engineers do not sound the locomotive's horn except in the cases of an emergency. The decision to sound the horn is at the engineer's discretion.

[Joe Cobarubio](#), who was recording the parade and continued to record after the fatal crash, said the horn sounded too late and the crossing arms at the railroad crossing came down after the truck passed through the intersection, falling in the middle of the tractor-trailer.

"The train didn't blow the horn until about three seconds before it hit the trailer," he said. "You could see all of the people turn around, because they heard the train, and they were stumbling around, falling over the crossing arm."

His camera was confiscated, he said, and he was arrested by Midland County sheriff's officers, who charged him with interfering with duties of a public servant.

After spending the night in jail, charges against Cobarubio were dropped, a detention officer said.

He said the incident shook him to his core.

"I couldn't believe what I was seeing," he said, recalling how he felt while recording the wreck.

Dr. [Sudip Bose](#), the medical director for the city of Odessa who retired from the Army after 12 years, was among the first on the scene. Officials said some people on the wrecked float had jumped off of it, seeking safety.

"There were people with all sorts of injuries," he said, "and it was a very chaotic scene. People had been tossed around, and a lot of them were very anxious."

He said veterans on both floats rushed to the side of their injured comrades, applied pressure to wounds and otherwise triaged the victims before other EMS personnel arrived.

“There was great teamwork at the scene, and it was amazing how they jumped off of the trailer and their training kicked in,” he said. “I haven’t experienced this level of trauma since being in the combat zone, but you could really see the human spirit coming out.”

Thought of bombing

For veterans, the crash brought back jarring memories of war, said Dennis Wright, a readjustment counselor for the Midland Vet Center. At a vigil held in downtown Midland early Friday, Wright said he spoke to one veteran who was on the first float and tried to help him cope.

“The veteran told me he was not expecting a train to kill his buddies,” Wright said. “He thought that they had just been bombed. He was right back there in Iraq.”

Bose said helping the victims and witnesses work through what they experienced at the scene would take time.

“Some people saw some horrible things yesterday,” he said. “For it to end this way is just so tragic. They’re really grieving.”

Mayor Wes Perry called for flags in the city to be flown at half-staff and called for a candlelight vigil in honor of the victims at 6 p.m. today at Centennial Plaza downtown.

Perry, who’d honored the soldiers with a key to the city at a ceremonial lunch Thursday and waved as they passed on Wall Street, said he thought a haunting text message he received shortly after the crash was phony.

“It said, ‘Pray for the wounded warriors. Three are dead,’” Perry said. “I couldn’t believe it, but then I confirmed it in a phone call and was overcome by this incredible emotion, much like what I felt on 9/11.”

Midland’s 100,000 residents are like one big family, he said, and showed their support for the injured veterans by donating blood to the city’s blood bank or by donating money to the Show of Support.

Sonny Cleere, committee member of Hunt for Heroes, said that since the rest of the week’s activities have been canceled, the group is shifting resources now to help the families the best they can.

“So far we’ve had an outpouring of people wanting to help and that’s a positive that has come out of this — the fact that we live in a part of the country where the community has really come together,” he said.

Already more than \$100,000 has been collected in a fund for the families at First Financial Bank in San Angelo and Cleere said it’s not yet known how the money will be distributed, but it all will go to the affected families.

A plagued crossing

According to the Federal Railroad Administration, the intersection of Industrial Avenue and Garfield Street saw 10 crashes between 1979 and 1997, but no one was killed.

The trains involved in the previous crashes generally traveled between 20 and 25 mph, much slower than the freight train involved in Thursday’s wreck.

In the previous crashes at the intersection, the trains either slammed into vehicles that were stopped on the tracks or crossing over them. In February 1985, a truck struck a freight train while crossing the tracks in the middle of the night.

Federal records indicate the intersection was not equipped with crossing arms until sometime in 1991. All but one of the crashes occurred before that time.

In the 1997 crash, a train maintenance car going 5 mph struck a car as it passed through the intersection and apparently through or around the crossing arms, injuring the passenger vehicle's driver.

In six of the previous crashes, the vehicle drivers were injured.

Rosekind said although the train was moved around 3 p.m. and the truck was towed away several hours later, a team of 16 investigators had begun to collect pertinent data that will be analyzed in Washington.

The data included: footage from several cameras, including a forward-facing one on the front of the train and three others on locomotives; signal systems that would determine if the signals were synchronized and properly timed; motor carrier logs and parade permits and interviews with witnesses and victims.

"These people were sitting in an unenclosed space," he said. "Part of our investigation is also going to be to approach them, sensitively, to find out as much as we can about what happened."

emoravec@express-news.net

Staff Writers Michelle Casady, Vianna Davila and Scott Huddleston contributed to this report.

Reference: <http://www.mysanantonio.com/news/military/article/S-A-veteran-died-saving-wife-from-train-4043536.php>