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[News /](#)  
[U.S.](#)

## 'Scene of total chaos' as train hit vets' parade float, killing four

By JUAN CARLOS LLORCA  
The Associated Press  
Published: November 16, 2012

MIDLAND, Texas — Cheered by a flag-waving crowd, the parade float carrying wounded military veterans was inching across the railroad tracks when the crossing gates started coming down. And then, seemingly out of nowhere, a freight train came bearing down, its horn blaring.

Four veterans died in the Thursday collision, and sixteen other people were hurt. For some of the war heroes who managed to jump off the flatbed truck just in time, training and instinct kicked in: They rushed to aid their injured comrades.

"They are trained for tragedy," said Pam Shoemaker of Monroe, La., who was with her husband, a special operations veteran, on the float ahead of the one that was struck.

Shoemaker said there was no warning; she hadn't seen or heard the train until it was upon them. The couple jumped from their truck and ran toward the other one, knowing it would be hit in a matter of seconds because it was unable to move due to other floats in the parade.

The crossing barriers had just started to come down, she said.

"We saw people jumping from the other trailer and then there was the impact," Shoemaker said.

Sudip Bose, who was a front-line physician in Iraq, said Friday that the immediate aftermath reminded him of a combat triage situation. Veterans already were tending to the wounded when he reached the crash site. Bystanders tried to help with the limited medical supplies available.

"They were applying tourniquets, holding pressure to the wounds," said Bose, who served in Fallujah and Baghdad and was volunteering at the parade.

"It was a scene of total chaos," he said.

Spectators described horror and helplessness as the train hurtled toward the flatbed tractor-trailer.

"The train honked its horn, but the 18-wheeler could not go anywhere because of the other one being right in front of it," said Daniel Quinonez, who was waiting in his vehicle as the parade went by. "It was a horrible accident to watch happen right in front of me. I just saw the people on the semi-truck's trailer panic, and many started to jump off the trailer. But it was too late for many of them."

Marine Corps Chief Warrant Officer 3 Gary Stouffer, 37, and Army Sgt. Maj. Lawrence Boivin, 47, were pronounced dead at the scene, Midland police spokesman Ryan Stout said. Army Sgt. Joshua Michael, 34, and Army Sgt. Maj. William Lubbers, 43, died later at Midland Memorial Hospital.

Of those hurt, four remained in stable condition and one is critical, Stout said. Ten others were treated and released from the hospital in Midland, about 320 miles west of Dallas.

At a prayer vigil Friday morning, Mayor Wes Parry's voice cracked as he described how he had met Boivin and his wife a day earlier.

"It's hard to believe today that he's not here anymore," Parry said.

National Transportation Safety Board officials arrived Friday in Midland to investigate. NTSB board member Mark Rosekind said the agency is conducting a thorough investigation, but didn't offer any details. Another news conference was scheduled for later in the day.

On NBC's "Today" show Friday, NTSB chairwoman Deborah Hersman said the train was equipped with a forward-facing camera.

"That will give us some video images if it survived the crash and we can download it, as well as recorders on the train," Hersman said. "We're going to be looking at the signals ... and making sure that the gates and lights were coming down."

Late Thursday, Union Pacific spokesman Tom Lange said a preliminary investigation indicated the crossing gate and lights were working. He did not know if the train crew saw the float. The black box from the train will determine its speed at the time of impact.

Federal Railroad Administration records reviewed by The Associated Press show there have been 10 previous collisions — five cars and five trucks — at the same railroad crossing since 1979. Six drivers were injured in those accidents, but there were no fatalities. The trains involved were moving slowly at the time of the previous accidents, between 15 and 25 miles per hour.

The parade had been scheduled to end at a "Hunt for Heroes" banquet honoring the veterans. The wounded service members were then going to be treated to a deer-hunting trip this weekend. The events were canceled.

The events were organized by Show Of Support, a local veterans group that says its mission is to "lift the spirits of our U.S. troops and disable veterans" through hunting and fishing. The group's president, Terry Johnson, has not responded to emails seeking comment and his phone number was unlisted; the phone rang unanswered at the group's offices.

Secretary of Defense Leon Panetta was saddened by the news of the accident, Pentagon spokesman George Little said in a statement, adding that Panetta's "thoughts and prayers" are with the victims and the community.



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