

THE DAILY

A FATAL DECISION

Veterans' parade float entered railroad tracks as warning alarm flashed

By Juan Carlos Llorca Sunday, November 18, 2012



PHOTO: AP (2)

Among the dead were Army Sgt. Maj. Lawrence Boivin, left, and Army Sgt. Joshua Michael, 34, who was able to move his wife to safety before the train hit their float.



PHOTO: Tim Fischer/AP

Debris from the deadly accident surrounds the "Heroes on Board" truck that pulled the doomed parade float.



PHOTO: Matt Marton/SouthtownStar/AP

Dr. Sudip Bose, who served in Fallujah and Baghdad, sprang into action to care for the wounded after the collision.

MIDLAND, Texas — A parade float filled with wounded veterans that collided with a freight train had crossed onto the railroad tracks after warning signals were going off, investigators said yesterday.

Four veterans of Iraq and Afghanistan were killed and 16 more people were injured when the train crashed into the flatbed truck in West Texas.

It was the second of two floats carrying veterans in Thursday's parade in Midland. The first was exiting the tracks when the warning bells and signals were activated, 20 seconds before the accident, according to the National Transportation Safety Board. The second float didn't enter the tracks until several seconds after the warning system went off, the NTSB said. By that time, the guardrail was lowering.

"Once the crossing becomes active, people should stop," lead investigator Robert Accetta with the NTSB said at a news conference yesterday afternoon.

The timeline was pieced together by combining information from a video camera mounted on the front of the train, another one on a sheriff's car and a data recorder that acts like an airplane's black box, activating when the train blared the horn, NTSB member Mark Rosekind said.

Nine seconds before the crash, the train sounded its horn, a blaring that lasted four seconds, according to Rosekind. The guardrail hit the truck, then the engineer pulled the emergency brake, trying to bring the train that was traveling at 62 mph to screeching halt.

People on the first float and dozens of others who had come out to greet the veterans shrieked and watched in shock, as some aboard the truck tried to jump off, witnesses said.

A candlelight vigil was being held yesterday evening.

The NTSB has also interviewed the engineer and conductor, and established the train's air brakes were working, Rosekind said. No mechanical problems were found with the cars. A review of the train's maintenance history found no defects, he added. The tracks also had no problems.

Investigators will try to establish on Monday what the engine could have seen as it approached the truck, Rosekind said.

Part of the investigation includes whether the parade had the proper permit. The parade has been an annual event in Midland for nine years, but City Manager Courtney Sharp declined to say whether the group, Show of Support/Hunt for Heroes, had the necessary paperwork to hold the event.

Railroads, though, are a vital part of Midland, a town that sits in the heart of Texas' oil rich Permian Basin. Three or four tracks lie within city limits, and the site of the accident is just about 10 minutes from downtown, said Midland spokesman Ryan Stout.

That's considered when the city grants permits for parades and other events, Sharp said.

"We take all steps into consideration when we permit," he said. "I hate to go down that track until all of the investigation is over, but yes we do take that stuff into account."

The veterans were on their way to a banquet in their honor and were being cheered by a flag-waving crowd. It was supposed to be the start of a three-day weekend of banquets, deer hunting and shopping in appreciation of the veterans' sacrifice.

The carnage could have been worse, but uninjured veterans instantly tended to the injured. They applied tourniquets and put pressure on wounds as their training and battlefield experience took over.

"Instincts kicked in," said Dr. Sudip Bose, a front-line physician in Iraq.

Tommy Shoemaker, a special operations soldier, resuscitated one person and applied a tourniquet to a bleeding woman.

“They are trained for tragedy,” said his wife, Pam Shoemaker of Monroe, La.

Killed were Marine Chief Warrant Officer 3 Gary Stouffer, 37; Army Sgt. Maj. Lawrence Boivin, 47; Army Sgt. Joshua Michael, 34; and Army Sgt. Maj. William Lubbers, 43.

Five people remained hospitalized yesterday. In Midland, three people were in stable condition and one in critical. None of the injuries are life-threatening, said hospital spokeswoman Marcy Madrid. A fifth person who was transferred to a Lubbock hospital shortly after the accident was in serious condition.

Union Pacific spokeswoman Raquel Espinoza said the speed limit in that area was raised from 40 mph to 70 mph in 2006.

– *Associated Press*

Reference: <http://www.thedaily.com/article/2012/11/17/111812-news-vet-train-crash-heroes>