



Remembering the tragedy

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“I could hear the screaming and the hollering. Of course the sirens,” Midland County Sheriff Gary Painter said of when he walked up to the train wreck. “The first thing I saw was a hero down and blood, and one of his family members comforting him.”

“I’ve seen it in war,” Painter said, noting that Nov. 15, 2012, was full of fear and terror, a chaos he remembers from his time serving as a Marine in Vietnam.

Four men died as a result of the train accident that struck about 4:35 p.m. Nov. 15, 2012, at South Garfield Street and West Industrial Avenue, with more than a dozen injured. The Hunt for Heroes parade float was crossing over the train intersection when a Union Pacific train collided with the float.

Hunt for Heroes is a charity event hosted by Show of Support in honor of wounded warriors. The people on the float were the wounded warriors with their wives, who were finishing a parade route before going on the annual hunting trip.

That day wasn’t just like any other day before the accident, as Painter was at the Midland Horseshoe arena with his family, eagerly awaiting the arrival of the heroes from the parade.

Painter and his department was part of honoring the heroes, with officers in the department and officers on horses awaiting the arrival of the heroes. The Midland Fire Department was also there, with fire engines and ambulances.

Something seemed wrong when some of the fire engines and ambulances started pulling away, Painter said. They wouldn’t do that except for something big.

That’s when he was told by one of his officers about the radio call that came in just seconds before: A train crashed into the float carrying heroes.

Mayor Wes Perry was in a meeting at Midland ISD with State Sen. Kel Seliger and some business leaders when he received a message from someone about the accident.

“I jumped up and left,” Perry said. “When I saw it, I thought this can’t be happening. It must be a mistake.”

Perry said when he arrived on the scene, he knew there was nothing he could do but provide the emotional response to the media as a resident of the city of Midland.

Instead of speculating, or focusing on the facts of what happened, Perry said he knew immediately his role was to be a person, and even removed himself from much of the process to avoid getting in the way.

CBS 7 anchor Jay Hendricks said he was in the newsroom when their team first heard of the crash.

“The scanner went off. Something about a call with a crash,” Hendricks said, remembering that they thought they heard someone say parade. “Our immediate thought was it was the float with the wounded soldiers.”

Hendricks and one of the videographers at CBS 7 immediately drove out to the scene, where they were mostly blocked from seeing anything but the train itself.

On the other side of the train, Painter was working feverishly to help those who were injured. But he wasn’t the only one.

“The heroes, even the ones who were injured, were providing first aid to people at the scene,” Painter said. “They were doing what they were trained to do.”

Despite the men on that float being home from war, Painter said from experience that it takes a while to switch from the mentality of being at war to the mentality of being safe at home.

He said those men were most likely still in the mindset of being at war.

“You tune your senses to the act of war,” Painter said. “You can’t just flip a switch and turn it off.”

The heroes at the scene became a team when the train struck, he said, and formed a bond with each other as well as with the first responders who arrived on scene.

After the initial shock of seeing the scene, Painter said he had to disassociate himself in order to do what needed to be done – help the injured, remove the dead, and ultimately investigate the scene.

But, of course, Painter said the injured were the top priority.

Dr. Sudip Bose, who provided medical support for the event, said he was only a few blocks away when he was told about the accident.

“The first thing I noticed when I got to the scene, obviously it’s a horrific, chaotic scene,” Bose said. “But even in this experience, even in moments like this, you just see incredible, incredible acts of human courage and the human spirit.”

Bose said bystanders, parade members and the veterans all helped out with the wounded, even as some were wounded themselves.

“I remember people holding bleeding points, I remember people trying to tie tourniquets,” Bose said. “I remember things like that because in the end, one provider can only do so much.”

Perry said he went home to be with his family for about an hour after a short time at the scene, praying with them after not knowing what to do in the middle of the chaos.

“I didn’t feel like (the scene) was my place,” Perry said. “I didn’t want it to feel like a political thing.”

Perry said the accident wasn’t about him, and wasn’t even about Midland. It was about the veterans who died and the people who were injured during the accident.

Hendricks said during his interviews he could tell who saw the accident and who was relaying secondhand information.

Those who were animated with hand gestures and somewhat in shock clearly saw what happened, he said.

But even as someone reporting, Hendricks said he had a personal interest in the accident, as well. Earlier that day, Hendricks was at the luncheon with Perry and the veterans, where Perry gave them keys to the city and told them, “you’re going to hear the word hero all weekend.”

Hendricks said he shook hands with Sgt. Maj. Lawrence Boivin that day.

“I remember his face vividly,” Hendricks said.

And through his interviews, Hendricks said nobody could believe it happened in Midland, and that downtown was a quiet place that day and night.

“It was almost like the collective breath of Midland had gone away,” Hendricks said. “It was just very quiet. Very somber.”

Even in his role as a law enforcement officer, Painter said he felt the same way. He was in shock and saddened.

When something like that wreck happens in your backyard, Painter said, it’s devastating.

“I prayed many times that night. For strength not just for me, but for the people out there,” Painter said, as he had to wipe tears from his eyes. “I drive past that location at Garfield and Industrial every single day. And there’s not a time I don’t look, reflect and say a prayer.”

It wasn’t until the next morning that the gravity of the situation hit Perry, he said.

Despite having all the emotions and feelings of sadness that residents of Midland felt that day, he wasn’t able to fully grasp the subject until he saw Hunt for Heroes organizer Terry Johnson at a vigil the next morning. The two hugged for a long time.

“I think I was on autopilot and just trying to be strong,” Perry said. “It kinda hit me that this ... this was real. That was a really emotional moment.”

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