

Rescue on the rails

Current, former soldier triage, treat wounded in D.C. metro disaster

By Matthew Cox

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Chief Warrant Officer 4 Dennis Oglesby and former Army Master Sgt. Martin Griffith didn't realize right away that a Metrorail train had smashed into the rear of the train they had just boarded June 22.

"I heard a loud noise from the rear of the car ... what the [expletive] was that?" Griffith recalled saying.

No one was hurt in their car, the fifth on the six-car train, so Oglesby said "let's go." Griffith followed.

"We took off and ran for the rear of our car and opened up the emergency doors between that car and our car," Griffith said.

"The people in that car were all lying on the floor in various states of picking themselves up." Griffith and Oglesby, who both work at the Pentagon in the Army's Personnel Recovery Branch, had no way of knowing it at the time, but they were in the middle of the worst Metrorail train crash in the Washington, D.C., subway system's 33-year history. When it was over, nine people would be dead and more than 70 injured.

The two men began assessing injuries and helping passengers toward the front of the train.

Most injuries seemed minor until they examined a man at the rear of the car.

"There was a guy standing there saying, 'Can you please help me? I'm bleeding; I don't know from where,' " Griffith recalled.

After a quick check, Griffith and Oglesby realized it was not the passenger's blood.

"We all looked up and noticed that blood was dripping through the top of the car and down the outside of the glass doors," Oglesby described in a written account of the accident.

Griffith looked out the left side of the car and saw someone lying on the roof of the train car.

"I knew there was something terribly wrong," he recalled.

Griffith looked out a window on the right side of the car "and I saw probably seven or eight passengers who had been ejected from the train," he said.

The men managed to pry open the passenger doors and jumped down to the ground where the victims lay. Oglesby, 42, who has a Special Forces background that includes SF medical training, went to work assessing injuries.

He told Griffith he needed T-shirts or anything he could find to dress wounds.

"I called back into the car to another passenger and said to pass the word for all first aid kits and as many T-shirts or articles of clothing that passengers could spare," Griffith recalled.

Griffith, 37, who had spent most of his 15 years on active duty in the 101st Airborne Division (Air Assault), deployed to Afghanistan in 2002 and to Iraq in 2003 and in 2005. That day, he said, he drew on his Combat Lifesaver training.

He worked with Oglesby, treating victims and reassuring them that help was on the way.

Oglesby came upon a young woman in her mid 20s named Amanda with severe wounds to the chest, right thigh and left arm. "She was alert, responsive, but complained of difficulty breathing. ... I moved between victims several times to check on everyone but knew I had to focus my attention to Amanda. Upon returning [to her] she asked me not to leave again," he said.

Meanwhile, Griffith went back inside the train to try to help the



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Investigators and officials look over the collision scene of two Metro trains in Washington, D.C., on June 23.

person he saw earlier on the roof. "I called up to the roof — 'Is there anybody up there? Can you hear me?'" he recalled.

"There was a little bit of movement and she fell off to the side of the train" and landed between the two rails that carry electricity to the tracks. "About that time, another train passed," Griffith said. He realized power to the rails had not been shut off. "If I didn't get down there, she was going to touch the rail and die. There was no way I was going to let anything else happen to her," he said. "I jumped down between the hot rails with her. I put one foot on either side of her legs and a hand on each of her shoulders. I told her, 'Don't touch anything but you or me; if you do, we are in a lot of trouble.'" The woman was conscious enough to nod her head yes, Griffith said. She had a severe head wound and was having trouble breathing, he said.

Fire and rescue personnel began to arrive about 10 minutes later, Griffith said. He saw a man coming in his direction and called out, "You need to stop. The power is still on." The man stopped and began talking on his radio. Once they were sure the power was off, several rescue personnel came forward and put the woman on a back board. Griffith helped carry her to an ambulance about 150 feet away. Then he ran back to the train. About an hour had passed since they boarded the train at 4:30 p.m. More rescuers began to arrive. At one point, a fireman came up to Oglesby. "I told him I was Army, Special Forces [and] I needed [oxygen], bandages, a neck brace and a back board." Some of the rescue workers started cutting away portions of the train and debris began to fall on the passengers they had been treating, Griffith said. Both men tried to shield victims from debris until a firefighter saw what was happening and put a stop to the cutting, Griffith said. Amanda was getting worse. Oglesby told rescue workers that "we needed to move her to an ambulance ASAP." They put a neck brace on Amanda and placed her on a back board. From there, Oglesby, Griffith, another passenger and two rescue workers lifted Amanda onto the train car and handed her off to firemen. She is now recovering, Oglesby said. Both Griffith and Oglesby stayed until all of the passengers they had helped had left the scene. Oglesby, who has served 25 years in the Army and is a veteran of the first Gulf War and Somalia, has been recommended for the Soldier's Medal, he said. Griffith has been recommended for the Decoration for Exceptional Civilian Service, the highest award granted by Army secretary to Army civilian personnel, he said. Griffith said he credits the training he received in the Army for helping him cope that day. "I couldn't leave someone calling for help," he said.