

AFTERMATH OF WAR

# 10 lessons from a near-death experience

A decade after being severely wounded in an attack, a former Star reporter finds some war wounds never heal, but there is reason to celebrate

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SPECIAL TO THE STAR

There is light when you face death. I know, because I've faced it a few times since March 4, 2002. There is also light after darkness. I know, because I've been at the edge of the abyss many times in the decade since I was ambushed in an alleged Al Qaeda attack while covering the Afghanistan war for the *Star*. The homemade grenade (IED) thrown at my car has meant dozens of surgeries on three continents. I have extensive injuries to my right leg and shrapnel is still peppered throughout my body, but I celebrate being alive. Near-death taught me a few things:

**1 Horror doesn't end with war**  
It wasn't until 2009, when I Googled my husband's name for a story, that I realized the depth of our horror. Hadi, who had been with me in Afghanistan, had saved my life, rescuing me from our bombed vehicle. My online search produced a photograph of the attack that I had never seen. "What's that on your head?" I asked. "You," he replied, "the rest of you." What appeared to be a flesh-coloured head covering was flesh — mine. This is known as biological shrapnel. It didn't matter then, because Hadi was in shock and I was near-dead. Yet that image still alarms, and I'm still in awe of all that Hadi endured to save me.

**2 Love heals all**  
After the bomb, I felt myself dying. I knew it would be far easier to just let go. My eyes were open but I was in darkness. I felt the chill of death spreading. I whispered goodbye to Hadi and apologized for not being able to stay. We had been married 15 months and he desperately urged me to hang on. When a tunnel of light appeared, seeming to offer comfort in the darkness, I told God I wasn't ready. I didn't bargain; I simply said I wouldn't leave Hadi alone in the desert.

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**3 Hope is essential**  
I was near-suicidal for some time because of pain and disability, so offered a simple daily prayer to hang on: One. Small. Thing. In hospital for months, I repeated these words every day, forcing myself to concentrate on one small thing that made life worth living: blue sky appearing through a window high above the bed; Hadi's sweet face every morning in hospital; my mom and siblings taking turns at my side, from Germany to Canada; the nurse who wept, yanking 100 metal staples from skin grafts. This practice continued through recovery and only grew as I regained mobility. I celebrated each victory through two years of rehabilitation with such positive affirmations. I learned to walk again with three words: Healthy. Strong. Calm. I assign a word to each step, over and over. I switch the word order for new challenges. Ten years later, daily gratitude — sometimes in the form of a gratitude blog, to help others suffering from trauma — keeps despair at bay.

**4 Faith transcends the darkness**  
Strong faith in God has kept me optimistic. Although I was at the edge of the abyss for years after the attack, it was never so dark that I would fall deliberately. Faith and love gave me the resilience to adjust to disability, job loss and more in the past decade.

**5 The upside of down**  
"You don't look disabled." This is the most common reaction since my final surgery in 2003, as I moved from anger to adjusting to loss of mobility. I wear a custom-made leg brace, but few see it because I stopped wearing dresses. It took years to accept the disfigurement, scarring and visible shrapnel embedded from torso to ankles. Longer still to accept disability and the loss of independence. However, I've learned to deal with chronic pain, and some days can be grateful for its constant reminder that I can move. And I have found my second career — rehabilitation counselling, working with people with disabilities.

**6 The brain is resilient**  
Disability barred me from returning to my *Star* bureau in India (I needed regular medical care then) so I left journalism — my dream career since childhood. I returned to school to study language, psychology and disability. I needed this: traumatic brain injury (TBI) had affected my speech and cognition and I wanted to be sure of recovery. Also, I wanted to give back to those who had helped me. At San Francisco State University's graduate program in rehabilitation counselling, I devoted my research and training to helping Iraq and Afghanistan war vets. I later persuaded the department of veterans affairs (VA) to let me join its experts in postgraduate, clinical training in treating TBI and PTSD (post-traumatic stress disorder). I graduated with honours, proving that the brain can heal, after near-death.

**7 Giving**  
I've always done volunteer work, guided by elders who taught me that it's vital to help others. During rehab, volunteer work helped soothe my losses: I believed I would never write again, so taught writing instead to high school students. My mobility was reduced, so I trained to be a kayak guide for paddlers with disabilities. (Kayaking is such a passion, I was on the water before I could walk again, unaided, in my first post-attack year.) Because the U.S. military risked their lives to save mine, I made a personal commitment to repay their selflessness. I volunteered Saturday mornings with elder veterans at the VA hospital in San Francisco for three years during school. I read books aloud and shared funny stories with men and women who had served in World War II, Korea and other conflicts. I almost "bled out" after the attack and soldiers lined up in the dark for hours in the desert cold to donate during life-saving surgery at Bagram Air Base. I joke that I became a regular donor because I had so much American blood to give back. They gave so much, my blood type changed. It's O-negative and it was O-positive, but it's the Anti-D, Anti-C antibodies that make the difference. The American Red Cross informed me this new blood is so precious, it's known as "baby blood" because of its value to newborns. I was so eager to work with war wounded, I persuaded Swords to Plowshares, one of the best veterans' non-profits in the U.S., to accept me as an intern during my final school year. Counselling homeless vets, from the Vietnam era to current wars, convinced me I had chosen the best career.

**8 Some war wounds may never heal**  
Eight years after the attack, I was diagnosed with PTSD. The first clue? I woke to the stench of burning flesh. I had been having nightmares about Afghanistan, which was unusual, so many years later. I was having flashbacks during the day, too. I told my therapist I was never aware of smelling my own flesh, shredded in the explosion, although I was aware of the warmth of the blood. My pain was manageable after I ended all medications in 2008, but now it was often unbearable. The pain can be severe enough to spark suicidal thoughts again. Nine years later, I started have leg spasms day and night, which sometimes rendered my leg immobile. After graduation, I was hired by California's department of rehabilitation. Within months, I was promoted to veterans' liaison, working with disabled veterans and all agencies connected with returning vets. I lost my job in state slashbacks, and after two years of contract work in another state, I couldn't get counselling work — despite 200 applications. I lost my health insurance and was rejected for coverage, while unemployed, because of "a pre-existing condition" — disability. I sought therapy when I couldn't handle all this, especially after we were threatened during an escalation of neighbourhood violence.

**9 It takes experts to learn how to breathe**  
It took a pain management course at St. Paul's Hospital in Vancouver, and a Master's degree in rehabilitation counselling to teach me how to breathe. Truly. Always a workaholic with great passion for journalism, I had to learn to slow down, to breathe deeply and to relax. Staying healthy helps as much with psychological recovery as it does in repairing the body. Yoga, meditation and daily hikes are essential. I eat well, sleep well and live well, a life of mindfulness more joyful than pre-disability.

**10 Celebrating life**  
After emerging from a medically induced coma, I vowed to walk again unaided within one year. I progressed from wheelchair to walker to cane, marking the first anniversary by walking without help. Hadi and I labelled this anniversary "Celebrate Life Day." Each year, we travel or go to the ocean for a day to celebrate in privacy. We don't work, check Facebook, answer the phone or meet people. We celebrate life, in joy and love and hope.



U.S. military flight surgeons treat Kathleen Kenna after a grenade attack left her severely wounded. She was airlifted to Ramstein Air Base, Germany.

Kathleen Kenna and her husband Hadi at their wedding in December 2000, below, a mere 15 months before Kenna was wounded.



JEFF VINNICK PHOTO



HADI DADASHIAN PHOTO

"Strong faith in God has kept me optimistic."

## Why do trains derail?

TRAIN from IN1

However, after studying as many as 400 images from the scene and aiding in a reconstruction of the mishap, he deduced that the root cause was among the most common — a broken rail. Technology has seemingly made rail travel safer, but when something goes wrong, the results can be horrifying. A deadly reminder came last Sunday when VIA train 92, travelling east to Toronto, entered a crossover at a speed of 67 mph (108 km/h) at Burlington. The locomotive and five coaches jumped the track, killing three engineers and injuring 46 passengers. The event recorder gives no indication the train ever reduced speed. The brakes were never applied. The maximum authorized speed at that crossover is 15 mph (24 km/h). It is unclear which of the three engineers was driving and why the train was travelling at more than four times the speed limit. The train also passed signals that

should have warned the engineers to slow down. Transportation Safety Board (TSB) lead investigator Tom Griffith was not prepared to blame human error for the derailment. **THERE WERE 588** derailments in Canada last year, most of the mundane variety. The TSB mandates that every time a train wheel leaves a track, it must be reported. The majority of the derailments from 2011 — 485 of them — took place away from main tracks, typically in rail yards. While shunting trains, mistakes are often caused by human error, such as switching incorrectly or bumping cars together. On main tracks, where accidents are likely to be more dangerous, there were 103 derailments. That's up from 80 in 2010 but down from the five-year average, from 2006 to 2010, of 115. None were deadly. Wolf has found that track condition causes more main track derailments than human error or speeding.

"Down the list would be operator's actions in terms of how he or she handles brake controls or throttle controls ... that is not a very common cause," he said. Jim Feeny, a spokesperson for CN, says "our records show that about 80 per cent of main track accidents are related to either mechanical or engineering issues. "A mechanical issue would be a broken wheel or another broken piece of equipment. An engineering issue would be something like a broken rail." Although the train that most recently derailed near Toronto was going dangerously fast, Wolf said, "it's very rare that you have excessive speeding" because of those black boxes, which keep a record of how quickly a train is moving. American train drivers shown to be exceeding the speed limit by as little as 5 mph (8 km/h) can be fired, he said. "Train drivers today are highly trained. They're monitored with detection devices

so they toe the line very closely," he said. "I read these black boxes every day ... and I can't tell you the last time I saw a guy over the speed limit. I'm not talking one or two miles an hour over but, say, five or 10. It's amazing you can control a 15,000-ton, mile-and-a-half-long train and hold it right on 30 or 40 miles an hour as you go across the countryside, but these engineers do a great job typically of maintaining a steady speed limit." Feeny said CN also has "no tolerance" for speeding. "We have zero tolerance for safety violations," he said. "The consequences can be very, very severe, up to and including dismissal." **SINCE RAILWAY TRANSPORT** blossomed in North America in the 1830s as an efficient means to transport people and goods — the "last spike" linked Canada together as a complete geographic nation in 1885 — engineers have wrestled with how to ensure those trains stay on their tracks.

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GARY WOLF  
RAIL SCIENCES INC.

While statistics show that derailment remains a constant concern for railway operators, the percentage of trains that go off track is small. Members in the Railway Association of Canada run an average of 1,100 trains a day, or more than 400,000 per year. Greg Gormick, a transport policy consultant, says the very trait that makes trains an efficient means of transportation — low friction — also makes them vulnerable to go off the rails. The point of contact between the steel wheel of a train and the track — neither of which is perfectly flat — is about the size of a dime. And they move so effortlessly, he says, that an empty train car parked in a rail yard could be shifted by a heavy wind if the handbrake wasn't applied. "It does wind up being a kind of danger. You have that small point of contact, the low friction and the high roll-ability. I guess you'd have to call it a double-edged sword," Gormick said. "I still believe this is basically the safest form of transportation, but it is not without its failings."

The most common cause of derailments, said Wolf, is track that has been damaged or moved out of line. That alters the track's geometry, which is the relationship between the two rails and the support system — the ties, plates, spikes and roadbed — that anchors those rails. "You're constantly fighting the weather and the weather constantly moves the track around," he explains. "You drive by track as a layman and it looks like it's pretty solid but it's anchored to old mother earth and old mother earth constantly shifts around. So the track geometry changes with weather changes. You're constantly fighting that as a track maintainer." **TECHNOLOGY HAS TRIED** to stay one step ahead of nature. Beyond inspectors who monitor the tracks, railways use automated train cars that test track strength and assess the geometry. Train operators also use ultrasonic rail flaw detectors. A car moving over the track sends ultrasonic radio waves into

the rail, which allows inspectors to detect internal flaws that might not be visible. As well, trains are monitored by various detector systems alongside the tracks in an attempt to find such problems as overheated wheels or bearings, so that cars can be pulled out quickly if a danger is developing. Hot bearing detectors are placed about 19 to 24 kilometres apart on core routes, according to CN's Feeny. While there was a jump from 80 to 103 in the number of main track derailments from 2010 to 2011 — largely attributable to some severe weather at the start of 2011 — the numbers do appear to be trending downward. Over the last decade, the number of main track derailments peaked at 198 in 2005. During one four-year stretch in the mid-'90s, the number of main-line derailments never dipped below 151. "We've made tremendous progress with all the electronic detectors and things," said Wolf. However, Emile Therien, the retired president of the Canada Safety Council,

doesn't believe the railroad industry is doing enough to keep the public safe. Therien, who is still a railway watchdog, believes this latest accident in Burlington should be a wake-up call. "They don't want to spend money on (technology)," he said. "It's just a matter of time, and I hate saying it, (before we get) another Mississauga." **THERIEN IS REFERRING** to the 1979 derailment of 24 cars, 19 containing dangerous materials, which prompted the evacuation of 220,000 people. However, Feeny says his company will invest just more than \$1 billion in 2012 on track infrastructure to ensure safe operating conditions. He says CN's investment was just below \$1 billion last year. "A billion dollars a year is a significant investment in anybody's books," said Feeny. "The flaw in Mr. Therien's arguments is the facts. The number of incidents doesn't correspond to the story he is trying to tell. The trend is going in the right direction."