

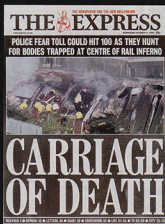
There was a sickening

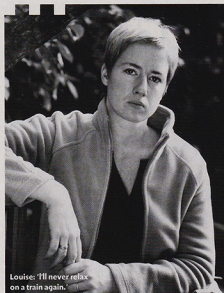
crunch inside my mouth and I spat, hard. It was broken glass. Bewildered, I looked at my hands covered in black diesel and as I tried to stand up, people around me began to move too. It'd all happened so fast. The violent jolt, flying through the air as the carriage lurched forwards, backwards and finally on to its side. Like being in a washing machine. Now the dark, the silence, the heaps of glass and people. The acrid, terrifying smell of burning. And in my head rattling just one thought: 'No. There is no way I am going to be in a train crash.' As if I could somehow defy what was happening. I mean, a few seconds earlier I'd been chatting and drinking coffee, on my way to work... ►

Paddington. By the women who were there.



The day the nation went into shock: 31 people died in the Paddington rail crash but, owing to a spate of hoax calls, the death toll spiralled out of control with unthinkable numbers hitting the headlines





Louise: 'I'll never relax on a train again.'

'I was on the train' Louise Morriss

I was in a great mood that morning. I'm a marketing consultant and a client had invited me and a couple of colleagues, Gareth and Nikki, to watch the England football squad train at Bisham Abbey. We met at Paddington station, bought some coffees and walked towards the train.

I was leading the way to the front carriages, but Gareth spotted some free seats in one of the rear ones. 'Quick, grab those,' he said. Strange how tiny decisions like that can end up saving your life. We settled down and Gareth started a funny story. We were having a laugh and sipping coffee as the train pulled away.

Without a hint of warning, an enormous jolt ripped through the carriage and suddenly I was hurtling forward from my seat, my hands wildly snatching at thin air.

I was lying on the ground – which was now one of the carriage sides. There was shattered glass everywhere. I spat some from my mouth, then realised my eye was hurting. More glass, but fortunately it was near the edge and I eased it out.

Managing to stand up, I saw other people were stirring, too. My mind was still in denial and I kept thinking: 'I'm dreaming. This isn't real.' Then my nose filled with a smell that snapped me right back into reality... burning. 'This is it,' I thought. 'We're trapped and there's a fire somewhere and I'm not ready to die.'

I looked around wildly for Gareth and Nikki. He had blood pouring down his face and hers was twisted with pain. 'My shoulder...' she said. They'd been sitting opposite each other, so they must have been thrown together. Amazingly, no-one was panicking. Some people found their mobiles and started dialling 999. Others tried to open the doors and windows that were now above us.

I don't know how much time passed, but eventually there was some movement. I shouted: 'We're getting out!' People started shuffling towards the back of the carriage. A bloke had managed to smash a window and heave himself through. He was pulling others after him. That's when people started to cry. I shuffled forwards in a daze until it was my turn. I stuck my hand up and it was caught by a man. Using all my

strength, I heaved myself through the jagged-edged opening. Another group of men stood at the bottom and caught me as I slid off the top of the carriage and on to the ground.

Gareth had stayed behind to comfort a man with a broken leg, so I waited for Nikki and helped her move off. By now there were people everywhere. Smoke and sirens filled the air as a fireman came towards us. 'If you can walk, get off the track,' he shouted. He pointed towards a path to Sainsbury's.

It's amazing how your mind can shut down in a situation like that. I just held onto Nikki and put one foot in front of the other, walking away from the twisted wreckage, the fire, the people still trapped. Or worse. 'Don't look back,' I said to myself, over and over. Because I knew that if I did, I'd see things that would stay with me for the rest of my life.

We climbed into an ambulance and sped towards St Mary's Hospital, Paddington, with sirens howling. When we got there, it was pandemonium. Nikki was whisked off. I seemed relatively OK, apart from cuts and bruises. I drifted around in shock and ended up in the area where frantic friends and relatives were gathering. Someone was passing around a news report off the internet: the word DEAD hit me like a sledge hammer. I'd been in a train crash where people had died. Eventually, I was checked over and given the all clear. Gareth had been taken to a different hospital and Nikki had been admitted to St Mary's with a fractured collarbone.

I fought through swarms of reporters into a taxi. At home I answered calls from worried friends and relatives. Then I spent all night watching telly as the full horror of the crash unfolded on the screen. I just felt a weird, detached feeling. It was all too much.

Next morning I knew what I had to do. The fact is, I live in London. I can't live without trains. I had to get back on one or I might never manage it again. I couldn't watch it pull into the station. Sweating, I climbed aboard and sat rigid with my teeth gritted so hard it hurt. I just went a few stops, to prove I could. But I'll never relax on a train again.

TIMETABLE OF A TRAGEDY

Tuesday 5th October

■ **8.03am** The First Great Western InterCity express leaves Cheltenham heading for London, packed with commuters.

■ **8.06am** Thames Trains' service to Great Bedwyn, Wiltshire, departs from Paddington Station, London. Louise Morriss, 29, (pictured above) is one of the passengers on board.

■ **8.11am** The Thames train shoots a red signal and ploughs into the Great Western service. At least 30 people are killed or fatally injured, many more are seriously hurt. As injured passengers stagger from the track, off-duty nurses Sarah Caine, 27, and Denise Huggett, 37, (pictured centre) are the first medical staff to reach them.

Wednesday 6th October

■ **9am** While survivors are being treated in hospital, the bodies of some victims remain trapped in the wreckage. Firefighter Sally Cox, 31, (pictured far right) works to cut them free.

Here are their stories...



Paddington

'We were first on the scene' Nurses Sarah Caine and Denise Huggett

'It was surreal. All those people standing around in their business suits. Some covered in blood, some clutching their stomachs or wherever the pain was. And us, the only people there with medical training...'

Sarah: I heard mention of a train crash on the radio, just as the phone rang. It was my boss at the accident and emergency unit at St Mary's Hospital. 'There's been a major incident,' she said. 'Come to work.' So I woke Denise and we called a cab. We'd only gone a few minutes when we hit traffic and decided to walk. We went towards Ladbrooke Grove and saw loads of police.

Denise: Some people were gawping over a wall, so I glanced over. I looked away quickly, but not before I'd registered mangled trains. We were at the crash scene.

Sarah: A policeman collared us. 'Can you come and look after people?' he said. 'They're gathering in Sainsbury's car park.' We didn't think twice, obviously. We dashed in and were met with the sight of 70 or so people. Some sitting, some standing, all looking totally shocked. They'd managed to walk from the crash, but some were in a pretty bad way.

Denise: Sarah was already in uniform, so I dived into a toilet and put on my scrubs. The Sainsbury's people were brilliant. We said we needed rubber gloves, first aid kits and Post-it notes so they dashed off and collected them from the shelves. We had to prioritise patients quickly, so when the ambulances arrived we could say who needed help most urgently. A quick assessment can make the difference between life and death if someone has internal injuries. The Post-its were to stick on people, numbered in order of urgency. It's called triage.

Sarah: We asked the Sainsbury's ladies to get everyone who wanted to go to hospital in one

place. They brought the worst cases to us. We did basic checks to decide who might be in trouble. One bloke was in a pretty bad way, pale, with a poor pulse and very cold. So we stuck the number 'one' on him and a policeman sat with him. Everyone stayed calm and tried to comfort each other. It was so worryingly quiet it was really eerie.

Denise: We were the only people there with medical training, so we had to work fast. Many people were bleeding because of broken glass, so we organised first aid.

Sarah: A vicar appeared, looking shaken. He said he'd been administering the last rites at the track, so we knew people had died. He helped comfort other victims. Then dozens of ambulances seemed to arrive almost out of the mist. The paramedics asked us who we were most concerned about and the serious casualties were whisked away. We'd saved them vital time by doing the assessments. Then two buses turned up and the walking wounded went in those.

Denise: We decided to get to the hospital and hitched lifts. **Sarah:** It was such a relief to be there with colleagues and equipment. At the scene it had just been us, relying on adrenaline and skill.



Sarah (left) and Denise.



Sally and that photo: 'I'd only been singled out because I was a woman.'

'I helped release the dead' Firefighter Sally Cox

'When you're working to free a body from wreckage, you can't think about it too much. You wouldn't get the job done. It's only afterwards you can wonder who they were. You think: they were just people like me, on their way to work...'

I was off duty when the crash happened, so I didn't work to free the living. When I lined up the day after with the rest of White Watch, our brief was stark: there were bodies trapped in the wreckage and we had to get them out.

I'm the only woman at East Ham Fire Station where we have a cutting and lifting unit. Drawing near to the crash site, we saw the huge tarpaulin screen erected to shield the wreckage from the press. And there were lines of police and people who had gathered to watch. You see that a lot, people drawn to a disaster scene, hypnotised by it.

We were waved through. I looked up at a twisted carriage, left hanging in the air by the impact. And inside, I could see five bodies.

The atmosphere was solemn. People with heads down, doing what had to be done. Because the carriage was dangling, we worked in a precarious position, hanging onto cables and each other as we worked to free the victims within.

For more than six hours, we fought to reach and release each corpse in turn. Then they were taken away in body bags. When we train, we use models the same size and weight as people. So, to cope, I thought of the dead people like that.

It was exhausting work and we'd take it in turns having a

breather. I sat on the ground and pulled a hand across my filthy, sweat-drenched face. I didn't know it, but someone was watching me... through a long photographer's lens.

Afterwards we went for a drink. That's when we let ourselves think about the people we'd freed. They were just people like us, going to work like every other day. Only they'd never go home again.

Later, I sat watching *Newsnight* with my husband when the presenter started going through the next day's papers. I couldn't believe it – there was a picture of me on the cover of half of them! The headlines and captions implied I was crying when I was wiping my face during a rest.

I was furious. I'd worked hard to become a firefighter and the last thing I wanted was this, making out that I'd had to stop for a cry. I'd only been singled out like this because I was a woman. I was just doing my job like every firefighter there, a grim job amid a terrible tragedy.

But we were working after the survivors were long gone. The worst task had faced the lads on the day of the crash. It's one thing to free dead bodies – they don't make a noise. It's a lot harder when people are in pain, begging for help, who need to get to hospital. You can't switch off then. **nw**