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## We Didn't Think it Could Happen to Us

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notes  
FROM  
the  
FIELD

# we didn't think it would happen to us

■ by Chris North, Handicap International

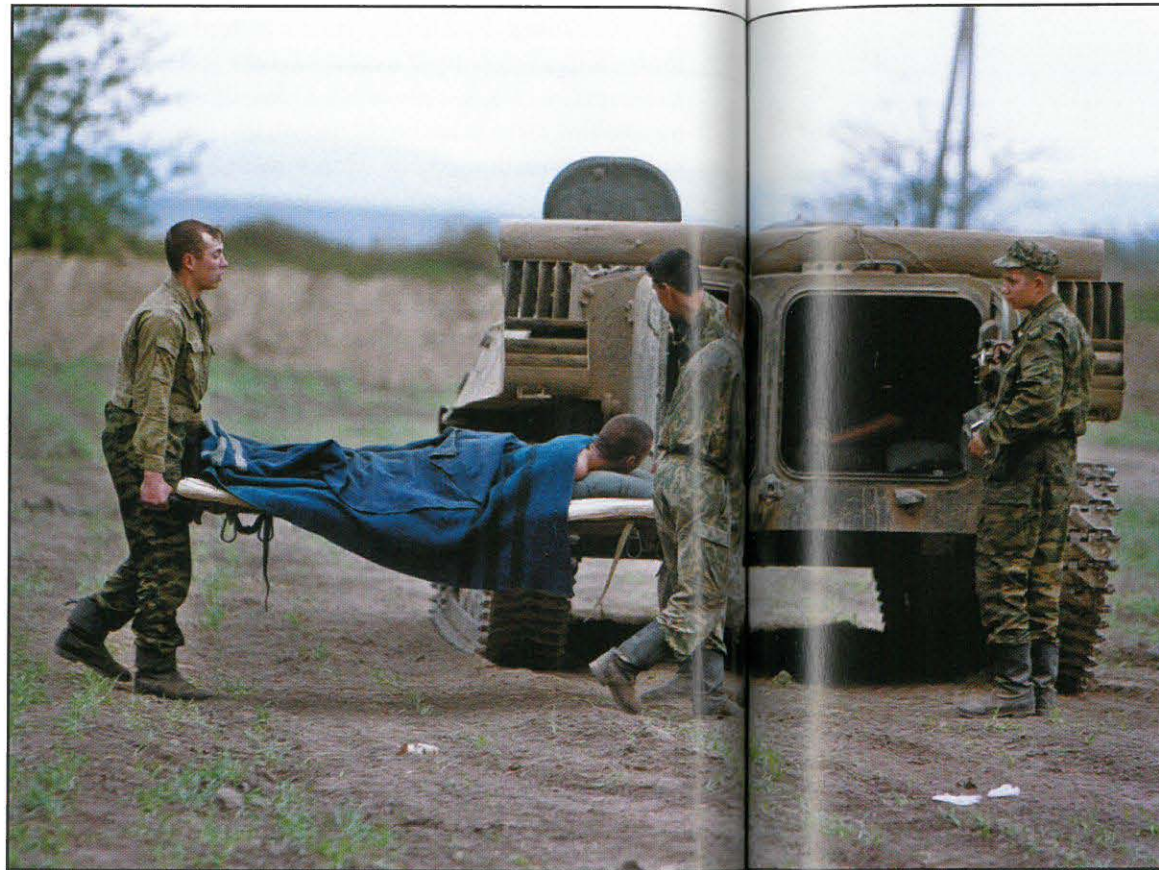


Photo c/o AP/ World Wide Photos

"Medic, Medic, Medic!" the radio bursts into life, the voice louder than usual, almost excited but in control. A definite sense of urgency delivered with those few words. Everyone is quiet, nobody breathes, only the radio is alive. Just listening and moving into action:  
*"Mine strike, a man is down,  
Team four, lane two,  
Injuries to hands and arms,  
Still conscious, bleeding too much. Over."*

Not really thinking, now just reacting: *"Hotel Zero Charlie, roger—we're mobile for your location. Wait. Out."* By the time the message ends, the emergency team is on the way; there are four deminers to rescue the man from the mine field, two trauma medics and an ambulance with driver, all moving swiftly and smoothly. This well-oiled, well-rehearsed rescue machine glides into action, no need to talk or discuss. Everyone on auto-pilot, slipping easily into practiced drills, all praying that it's just another training scenario. But everyone knows by the butterflies in their chest that this is the real thing.

We knew it was real because we heard the explosion. It wasn't the loud crack we're used to hearing when we blow up a stockpile of mines. No, this was an almost gentle "pop." The violence of a small explosion softened by distance. On site, the leader heard the bang. He had sent the radio message almost before the noise had finished, before it registered in his conscious mind that an accident had happened. No time for emotion or panic. He has a job to do, stay on top, in control. Don't let anyone just rush into the mine field to help—we don't want another accident.

Team leader stops all the other deminers from working. Get a head count; is everyone accounted for? Make a quick rescue plan, does this without thinking. Almost seems easier than the practices he's used to.

About this time, I've made a call to headquarters, told them the facts, which hospital we intend to go to, The casualty's identification number and blood group. Then the rescue team and medical team arrive; it seems like ages since *that first radio call*. It's been exactly two minutes, forty-seven seconds.

The medics start to call to the casualty—he doesn't respond. Is he unconscious or dead? Three minutes since the explosion happened. The rescue team of four deminers start working in pairs, carefully and calmly they begin to clear a route. Once they reach their friend, I go in. It's now been eleven minutes, twenty-two seconds. As they put him on the stretcher, I begin telling the medics what to expect:  
*"Right hand missing, damage to left and right upper arm, both thighs are bleeding, unconscious, breathing O.K., wrist stump pumping blood."* I apply pressure to the stump, can't stop the blood from spurting, hands slip, can't get a good enough grip.

Now we're back in the Safe Lane. Before I realize, the medics have put a drip in him starting to replace some of the vital fluid he's lost. Then a tourniquet, then a bandage, bleeding almost stopped. All the time, the medics are talking to him. Three calm, professional, caring voices.

I realize that I am out of breath. I can't remember when I started breathing again. It's been thirteen minutes and thirty-seven seconds. Loaded in the ambulance, he starts to come around. Trying to talk, so we listen. He says, "I'm sorry I let you down." Pain is starting to take hold. One small morphine injection. We're on the way to the hospital now, speeding down rough, narrow tracks, sirens screaming, seem strangely far away. Pull through the gates, tires screech as we stop. They are ready for us. Headquarters has done its job.

And then he's gone, taken from us. As he disappears, his last words to us are "I'm sorry."  
Forty-five minutes exactly. I look around at the medics and the driver. They all look really exhausted. I'm tired. ■

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