



After Incident Review Committee Report

Incident Date: November 19, 2005

Incident Location: I-85 Southbound between Hamilton Mill Road and SR 20

Responders: Gwinnett County PD, Gwinnett County Fire, Willard Wrecker Service, Braselton PD, Hall County PD, GA State Patrol

Incident Summary

At approximately 1445 hours a Honda, headed north on I-85, crossed the median and went into the southbound lanes near the SR 324 overpass. It struck a Toyota van in the left lane. The van spun and struck a Kenworth tractor-trailer in the right lane, then veered off into the median. The Kenworth continued south and stopped a short distance away. The Honda, which was pushed back slightly from its impact with the Toyota van, then was struck by a Peterbilt tractor-trailer in the left lane. A Westernstar tractor-trailer, which had been traveling behind the Peterbilt, swerved into the right lane to avoid a collision. It then crushed the Honda, which had been knocked into the right lane by the Peterbilt. A Ford Focus traveling behind in the right lane swerved onto the right shoulder to avoid colliding with the Westernstar. The four vehicles came to rest 800 feet later – the Ford Focus pinned against the guardrail by the Westernstar, the Westernstar on top of the Honda, and the Peterbilt against the Honda. The Toyota van remained in the median and the Kenworth was stopped on the right shoulder a short distance ahead. There were several injuries, one entrapment and one fatality – the driver of the Honda, who was crushed under the left front tires of the Westernstar.

Incident Response

The initial dispatch went out at 1451 hours. Gwinnett County PD was on-scene at 1456 hours. Gwinnett County Fire was nearby when the accident occurred due to a house fire, and was onscene at 1457 hours. Several issues had to be addressed quickly:

1. It was the Saturday before Thanksgiving, and several afternoon football games were in progress in Atlanta, Athens and farther up I-85 in South Carolina. One out of four vehicles on I-85 that day were from other states and traffic was heavier than usual.
2. Due to the heavier traffic and the location of the accident, access was difficult.
3. Traffic control was needed immediately as all southbound lanes and one northbound lane had to be closed.
4. As a fatality was involved, the accident had to be investigated as a crime scene involving both an accident investigator and the county medical examiner.
5. As it was a Saturday, many responders were off-duty and had to be called in from home.

Other critical factors:

- a. Tractor-trailers were involved – a potential haz-mat operation
- b. Multiple vehicles and an entrapment were involved
- c. Extrication would be difficult as one tractor-trailer rested on the victim

Upon notification and before arrival on-scene, Gwinnett PD Sgt. Wayne Thaxton called special ops to handle traffic control, requested the M.E. and commercial vehicle inspectors, and called in additional investigators. Traffic control was initiated within six minutes of Gwinnett PD's arrival on-scene. The wrecker service was called three minutes later for towing and recovery. Gwinnett Fire and EMS quickly assessed the critical factors and took the injured off-scene within 15 minutes of arrival. The M.E. arrived within 45 minutes of the incident.

The investigators split the accident scene into several zones, requested a ladder truck from the FD for aerial photographs, and began photographing and marking the evidence. The roadway was painted to indicate the vehicle positions. Several officers were on hand to interview the witnesses, who were asked to write down what they had seen, and take the drivers for blood and urine tests.

Although traffic control was initiated at 1502, due to the heavier traffic, by 1549 hours the traffic on I-85 southbound was backed up to SR 211 in Braselton. Children were playing soccer in the grassy median to pass the time. Braselton PD and Hall County PD were called to reroute the traffic off of I-85 onto SR 124 and Thompson Mill Road and assist with detours in Jackson and Hall counties. Gwinnett County special operations officers also notified media, particularly the radio stations broadcasting the football games, who alerted the public to the traffic congestion on I-85.

The commercial vehicle inspectors began with the Kenworth and released it after inspection, then had the Peterbilt and the Westernstar towed to another location for inspection.

The victim was extricated from the Honda at 1649 hours. All lanes were reopened by 1729 hours. The total duration of the incident, from dispatch to clearance, was 2 hours and 38 minutes.

Incident Lessons Learned

Considering its severity, the incident was cleared in a very short time. This required the following people to work together quickly and efficiently:

- 23 Gwinnett Police officers and investigators
- 23 Gwinnett Fire and EMS officers and personnel
- 5 Willard Wrecker Service towing and recovery personnel
- 1 Gwinnett County Medical Examiner
- 1 GDOT Assistant Engineer
- 17 Gwinnett County 911 operators

Many of these people work well together because they have trained together. [Should I say anything about the TIM Team here?]

The weather was a positive factor in clearing the incident. It was 57 degrees and partly cloudy. The pavement was dry. One tractor-trailer was empty; the others carried non-hazardous materials – frozen foods and flour.

Willard Wrecker Service had just taken delivery of a 62-ton truck four days earlier. They responded quickly with the proper equipment, and their personnel were properly trained to

operate it. The extrication of the victim (not to mention moving three tractor-trailers) would have been severely delayed, if not impossible, without their assistance.

The accident investigators marked the evidence with paint, which took less time than surveying. The final investigation was done later so that impact on traffic would be minimal.

If a picture is worth a thousand words, then an aerial photograph is worth even more. Having the ladder truck available to supply a "bird's eye view" of the accident scene was an invaluable tool in conducting a quick and efficient investigation.

Incident Response Areas of Improvement

GA D.O.T. HERO assistance with traffic control would have freed up many officers to manage the incident itself. Although the incident occurred out of HERO range, an exception could be made for one of this magnitude.

Had Gwinnett PD had more officers available to assist, they could have been stationed on secondary roads to assist motorists with the detours. If detours were pre-determined and the public was more aware of them, not only in advance but with signage in appropriate places, the traffic could have been dissipated more efficiently.

###