

UNITED STATES OF AMERICA

NATIONAL TRANSPORTATION SAFETY BOARD

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Investigation of:

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AMTRAK TRAIN 188 DERAILMENT NEAR

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PHILADELPHIA, PENNSYLVANIA

* Docket No.: DCA-15-MR-010

MAY 12, 2015

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Interview of: THOMAS O'BRIEN

30th Street Station
Philadelphia, Pennsylvania

Friday,
May 15, 2015

The above-captioned matter convened, pursuant to notice.

BEFORE: DAVID BUCHER
Railroad Accident Investigator

APPEARANCES:

DAVID BUCHER, Railroad Accident Investigator
National Transportation Safety Board

STEPHEN JENNER, Ph.D., Human Performance Investigator
National Transportation Safety Board

MICHAEL BULL, Operating Practices Inspector
Federal Railroad Administration (FRA)

JOHN HINES, System General Road Foreman
Amtrak

DAVID NICHOLS, Chief Transportation Officer
Amtrak

EDWARD MRUK, Assistant General Trainmaster
Amtrak

MARK McKEON, Corporate Safety Advocate
Amtrak

WILLIAM BATES
National Safety Team
SMART Transportation Division

ANDREW CIUBA, Chairperson
SMART Local 1370

CARL FIELDS
Safety Task Force
Brotherhood of Locomotive Engineers and Trainmen (BLET)

DONALD HILL
BLET Safety Task Force

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I N T E R V I E W

(11:45 a.m.)

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3 MR. BUCHER: This is Dave Bucher, Rail Accident
4 Investigator for the National Transportation Safety Board. This
5 is the interview of Thomas O'Brien, assistant conductor on Amtrak
6 Train 188. The date is 05/15/2015. The time is approximately
7 11:45 a.m. and we are located at the Amtrak 30th Street Station in
8 Philadelphia, Pennsylvania. The interview is relative to the
9 accident of 05/12/15 and the NTSB accident number is DCA-15-MR-
10 010.

11 Seated to my right?

12 MR. HINES: John Hines, System General Road Foreman for
13 Amtrak.

14 MR. BATES: William Bates, B-a-t-e-s. SMART, National
15 Transportation Safety Team.

16 MR. HILL: Donald Hill, BLET, Safety Task Force.

17 MR. FIELDS: Carl Fields, F-i-e-l-d-s, Brotherhood of
18 Locomotive Engineers and Trainmen.

19 MR. NICHOLS: Dave Nichols. I'm Chief Transportation
20 Officer for Amtrak. Thanks for coming.

21 MR. BULL: Mike Bull, B-u-l-l. FRA, OP Inspector.

22 MR. MRUK: Edward Mruk, M-r-u-k, System General
23 Trainmaster with Amtrak.

24 MR. McKEON: Mark McKeon, M-c-K-e-o-n. I'm the Amtrak
25 Corporate Safety Advocate.

1 MR. CIUBA: Andrew Ciuba, C-i-u-b-a, Chairperson Local
2 1370, SMART, New York.

3 DR. JENNER: I'm Steve Jenner with the NTSB.

4 INTERVIEW OF THOMAS O'BRIEN

5 BY MR. BUCHER:

6 Q. Okay. Mr. O'Brien, as I talked to you before, if you
7 could just go back just beginning with going to work the day of
8 the accident and, as much as you can remember, just take us
9 through your day, any details you can remember, anything that
10 stands out.

11 A. Okay. I boarded the train at Metro Park to get to New
12 York, and got to New York relatively early and sat around in the
13 crew room until my conductor, Emilio, showed up and then Brandon
14 showed up as well. And we worked 2121 down to D.C. We --
15 somewhere around New Carrollton, we had to stop because Brandon
16 was having some kind of computer problems in the front, on the
17 head end of the train, something about the speed control or the
18 speedometer, essentially, of the train was not working well, so we
19 had to get permission to operate 556 from New Carrollton to D.C.

20 So we got to D.C. about 30, 35 minutes late. And then
21 we had, I guess, an hour or 55 minutes until sign-up, so I went
22 and sat down in the basement and rested in there for that, nearly
23 an hour.

24 Signed up. We had our briefing and went out to meet the
25 train when the track went out, but the train wasn't there. We had

1 to wait for the equipment. The equipment showed up almost at
2 departure time coming from the yard. And it was seven cars, as to
3 eight, which was disheartening because the manifest showed a lot
4 of people. It showed, like, more people than -- and they hate
5 sitting next to each other, so it was going to be a pain.

6 But it did show up. They put all the cables together
7 because nothing was connected. And it was hot, so customers were
8 already mad about that. But it was eventually going to cool off
9 and we assured them that it would.

10 She gave her opening announcements, Akida, in the
11 middle, and we took off. We stayed about a half hour late for at
12 least through Baltimore, and I think between Baltimore and
13 Wilmington he made up some of that time.

14 We got to Philadelphia and we were almost back on time.
15 Boarded passengers in Philadelphia and she made another
16 announcement for them. And then somewhere -- and I'm not
17 completely qualified on the territory yet, so I just -- I don't
18 know exactly where, but now obviously I know where we were. But
19 somewhere between Philly and Trenton everything was fine until it
20 wasn't. You know what I mean? Like there wasn't like a, oh, man,
21 this feels strange or this looks strange or something is wrong.
22 It just -- we were moving along and then there was, like, 2
23 seconds of shake and then what felt like two really major impacts
24 to me.

25 I felt like we slammed the car ahead of us, and I

1 actually -- I don't know what was really happening. I know that I
2 was walking around taking seat checks down, because we only get
3 one person on in Trenton. So I was walking all the way back to
4 where I sat myself. I sit in the rear of the seventh car so that
5 I can flag.

6 And I was already in the seventh car by that point,
7 probably somewhere in the middle of it, pulling the seat checks
8 down off either side. And we hit and I went flying. And I hit
9 the back of some chair. And as soon as I got up, I'm looking
10 around and there's immediately more blood than made sense for me
11 to be able to see so fast. I just thought how are we all bleeding
12 so much already? And I'm looking at the walls and I'm looking at
13 the floor and there's just blood and there's stuff everywhere.
14 The seats are all either disconnected and off or rotated out of
15 place.

16 And now people are, like, yelling about being trapped
17 because they're pinned with these, they're pinned with these
18 seats. People are screaming that they think that the train's on
19 fire. And it's not. It's just, it's like dust and stuff, stuff
20 that -- all that negative pressure in the train just sucks, you
21 know, everything up and we're swimming in it now.

22 And I had this stupid thought that I needed to, like --
23 because my hat got knocked off my head and I was, like, you got to
24 find that hat because they're going to want to see a guy that
25 looks like he knows what he's doing and looks like he's not ready

1 to wet his pants and cry. So I found the hat. I put it on. All
2 these rocks poured all over my face. And I was like, this was a
3 bad idea. But -- and at the time I didn't feel hurt. I had the
4 wind knocked out of me from that -- from the seat in my chest, but
5 I was, like, oh, I'm like invincible.

6 So it was time to get people out of here. And I look to
7 the rear of the train, because that was sort of the direction I
8 was heading, and I went that way. And the side door, which was my
9 first choice of getting out, was jammed and broken, maybe 9, 10
10 inches wide. And then the bottom whole foot of it was buried in
11 the ballast. So I was, like, you have to be small to get out here
12 and it's not going to work. People were already trying to cram
13 out, and when they were, I was like, move to your left. When you
14 get out, move to your left. Stay away from the rail. Stay away
15 from the wires.

16 Oh, I'm jumping around. I'm sorry.

17 Q. It's all right.

18 A. I did try to make a radio call, but I just -- I wasn't
19 sure enough of where we were and I don't know which CTEC I'm
20 talking to, so I just said, "CTEC, this is 188, we're in trouble.
21 Emergency, emergency, emergency." And I also heard Akida doing
22 the same thing. I can hear her saying, "Emergency, emergency,
23 emergency," and then whatever else she said was lost on me because
24 I was just -- I was surrounded with everything else.

25 People were squeezing out that little side door and I

1 thought, all right, this is going to -- someone's going to get
2 hurt and this is going to take forever, people trying to get out
3 this door. So I opened the bulkhead door in the back. I key that
4 thing open and I pull the levers that lock it in place and push
5 that out. And then finally that's a way that people can really
6 start getting out.

7 So the first two or so people get out and they act as,
8 like, stairs for the other people that I'm pulling out. And then
9 now that they see that I'm a guy with a hat and I'm supposed to
10 know what I'm doing, they're pointing me in the direction of the
11 people who can't walk out. Because a lot of people at those two
12 rear cars were banged up, but were walking. Some of them were
13 not, and so they would say go here or go there, and so I'm going
14 to these different people.

15 And I remember the first woman that I grabbed was, like
16 -- I don't know what happened to her, but I just, I couldn't see
17 her eyes anymore. There was just all blood and she's screaming
18 about she can't see. So I pick her up and and I get her and
19 I'm -- I sort of shoulder her out and we get her to the rear of
20 the car and they grab her.

21 And I went back in and I'm continuing to try to clear
22 this car. I'm getting people's feet unstuck from chairs and I'm
23 making my way into the sixth car. In the sixth car there's a
24 handful of people who need specific help getting themselves out of
25 this train. So I'm getting them up and I'm either taking them out

1 or there are other people. There was a guy who was an off-duty
2 police officer back there, and he started lending a hand too. He
3 was grabbing people and he was like -- he had a flashlight. It
4 could've been mine. Mine went flying somewhere. I have no idea.
5 But he had a light and he was, like, lighting the way for people
6 and he was ready to help grab other people off.

7 After I cleared that car, I couldn't get to the next
8 one. It was either way separated from us or just the entrance was
9 blocked off, but I just couldn't budge those doors. I was trying
10 to crowbar the side doors open and they weren't going anywhere.
11 Somebody at some point was popping emergency windows open. I
12 didn't do that, but there were people coming out the windows.

13 Eventually, when I felt like I did everything that I
14 could do in those two cars, I grabbed the box of the glow sticks
15 and then I went out there and I snapped them and, like, sat them
16 with the people who were, like, not moving and not walking.
17 Because there were like -- it was a handful of people sitting off
18 the right-of-way and just kind of in the dirt. But they were in
19 total darkness and I just thought if they pass out, we're not
20 going to know where they are. We're never going to be able to
21 find them. I mean, that's stupid now because of course everybody
22 had flashlights, but I just -- in my head I was like, you need to
23 mark these people so they can be seen.

24 And so I did that and then I walked up to the wreck of
25 the café car and I went in there because it seemed like there were

1 a lot of people in there. But at that point first responders were
2 already showing up. So they showed up after I had finished those
3 last two cars and were in that café, I think sawing at the table
4 or something, trying to get somebody out, because I think somebody
5 was pinned in there. And that seemed like something that I
6 couldn't do anything about. You know, it just seemed like there
7 are tools for that job and I don't have them.

8 So I turn around and head back and just start trying to,
9 like, find injured passengers and see if there's -- if there are
10 things that I can do. One of the first responders stops me and
11 asks if I have any kind of idea of how many people are on, and I'm
12 like, well, yeah, I have, like, an exact idea. And I took out my
13 device and it said 236, or whatever it said, and so I was, like,
14 "Well, there's 236 and there's 5 crew members on." And he said
15 okay. And he asked if I was okay to walk and if I felt okay and I
16 said yeah. And so he said, "All right, then I need you to come
17 with me. We're going to go and ask you a bunch of questions."

18 And then he took me to the middle of the street and
19 disappeared and didn't ask me any questions. And ultimately, a
20 guy showed up and gave me, like, a triage tag number. And they
21 waited until they had, I think, three or four of us tagged and
22 then they put us in the back of one of these police wagons. And
23 it was me, a guy on a stretcher who was really bloody and beat up,
24 and then two other ladies, and brought us to Hahnemann or -- I'm
25 not sure if I'm pronouncing that correctly, but it was a hospital,

1 a university hospital here in Philly.

2 And, you know, I got checked in. I got x-rayed and CAT
3 scanned and got some pain medicine and discharged at 5 in the
4 morning, the next morning. That might be it.

5 Q. You want to take a break?

6 A. No.

7 Q. Okay. Okay. A couple follow-up questions and then
8 we're just going to go around the room and --

9 A. Just a couple?

10 Q. Dave Bucher. So you were in -- I want to be a little
11 bit clear what car you were in leaving Philadelphia. Which car
12 were you located?

13 A. Seven.

14 Q. Seventh car?

15 A. Um-hum.

16 Q. Okay. And about how many people were in that last car?
17 Do you remember?

18 A. At least 40 or so.

19 Q. Okay.

20 A. We were pretty tight.

21 Q. Okay. I know it happened very fast. You know, you left
22 Philadelphia and then it was just literally minutes?

23 A. Right.

24 Q. You mentioned that you had a working radio?

25 A. Yeah.

1 Q. Okay. Did you hear any radio transmissions leaving
2 Philadelphia?

3 A. Not anything that wasn't -- not anything that was
4 unusual. I mean, I heard us, the 2 to go dialogue and I heard him
5 acknowledging it up in the front. And then later, like, after the
6 fact, I was hearing that people were making transmissions about
7 shots and different things. I didn't actually hear any of that,
8 but that doesn't mean anything because sometimes I just, you know,
9 I just don't hear and I don't have a great radio. But I didn't
10 hear anything strange.

11 Q. Okay. Could you elaborate just briefly and then, you
12 know, I'll pass it off here. You say your radio doesn't work very
13 well sometimes?

14 A. Yeah. When I'm in the rear of the train and especially
15 if I, like, if I sit down, if I get a moment to sit, I get just
16 tons of static and I don't hear a lot of what's going on. I think
17 the closer I get to the engineer, the more I can hear. But from
18 all the way in the back, the radio wasn't really doing it.

19 Q. Okay. All right. That's all I have right now. I'm
20 going to pass it off.

21 MR. HINES: Thomas, John Hines. Again, thank you for
22 coming in. I have no questions for you.

23 BY MR. BATES:

24 Q. William Bates with SMART. Thomas, let me ask you one
25 question. What brand of radio were you using?

1 A. The Icom.

2 Q. Icom?

3 A. Yeah.

4 Q. Okay. You've had problems with the Icom?

5 A. That actually was the first day I had that one. Because
6 my last Icom was just shutting off, like, battery charged or not,
7 they were turning off for no reason. So at the crew desk that
8 morning, I asked if they had, like, a replacement. So they gave
9 me that one.

10 Q. Thanks.

11 A. Okay.

12 BY MR. FIELDS:

13 Q. Carl Fields, BLET. Hi, Tom.

14 A. Hi.

15 Q. First off, nice job so far --

16 A. Thanks.

17 Q. -- relating how it unfolded. On May 12th, prior to May
18 12th, had you ever worked with Brandon, the engineer?

19 A. Yeah. I'm typically -- I don't have enough time in the
20 company to really hold anything. I've been on the extra board.
21 But that -- when I got bumped, that particular job had been
22 vacant, so I just asked if I could ride that vacancy. So I had
23 been on that job for 2 or 3 days, so all the -- every one of those
24 I worked with Emilio and Brandon.

25 Q. And prior to that, did you work with them at all?

1 A. I had worked with Emilio. I posted with him when I was
2 training. But I'd never seen Brandon before. Before coming on
3 this job, I never -- I assumed he was from a different zone
4 because I had -- it was weird that I had never seen him, but I
5 didn't.

6 Q. And did you take any exception to the way he operated?

7 A. I was actually really happy with him because I found him
8 to be involved in the briefing process. Like they really -- they
9 would stand together with the TSRB and go over everything. They
10 would go over the lines, and I wasn't used to seeing that. I'm
11 used to just, here are the TSRBs, no Form D's, whatever. But
12 they, like, talked about line by line what they were.

13 And plus, I thought he was really communicative on the
14 radio. Like I could always understand what he was saying and I
15 could -- he always responded to everything that was said to him.
16 Or if CTEC said something to him, he would confirm that the crew
17 heard it in the back, which I appreciate, because sometimes I
18 don't know what is happening.

19 Q. Now, I apologize if this is redundant. But when you
20 call out the emergency broadcast to CTEC, and I believe you said
21 the conductor or the other assistant --

22 A. The other -- yeah.

23 Q. -- conductor was as well, did you get a response from
24 CTEC?

25 A. No.

1 Q. Okay. Thank you. That's all I have.

2 A. Yeah. No problem.

3 MR. NICHOLS: Thanks. Dave Nichols. And thanks for
4 coming in. Great job.

5 MR. O'BRIEN: Yeah. Thanks.

6 MR. NICHOLS: I got no questions.

7 BY MR. BULL:

8 Q. Mike Bull, FRA. Just to elaborate a little bit more on
9 the radio conversations about the gunshots. You said you did not
10 hear --

11 A. No.

12 Q. -- any language like that?

13 A. I didn't.

14 Q. So you just heard somebody else talking about it?

15 A. Yeah. I heard Akida talking about it after the fact.

16 Q. After the accident?

17 A. Yeah.

18 Q. Okay. And the radio, you said you just -- this is the
19 first day you used this radio? The --

20 A. Yeah.

21 Q. -- handheld radio? Are they typically assigned to you
22 and then you keep the same one all the time?

23 A. Yeah.

24 Q. So this'll --

25 A. Yeah, we got --

1 Q. -- be your radio?

2 A. Yeah. The one I got -- the one that I just traded in
3 was the one they gave me at Wilmington, like, when I was done --

4 Q. Okay.

5 A. -- that was the first thing they gave me.

6 Q. Did you report any problems with it?

7 A. Not until the day that I swapped it out. I just --

8 Q. Okay. That's all I have. Thank you.

9 A. Okay.

10 Q. Good job.

11 A. Thanks.

12 MR. MRUK: Tom, Eddie Mruk. I appreciate all the
13 detailed information you gave today and I really appreciate you
14 coming in, and I have no further questions.

15 MR. O'BRIEN: Okay.

16 BY DR. JENNER:

17 Q. This is Steve Jenner with the NTSB. Also, thank you for
18 your story and --

19 A. Thanks.

20 Q. -- the detail. Let me -- I'm sure you've had time to
21 reflect on your experience some. Have you thought about are there
22 any type of improvements to procedures or rules or training or any
23 type of equipment that you can think of that would've helped, you
24 know, post-accident and the responsibilities you were doing?

25 A. I think that there's probably no amount of training that

1 gets you really prepped when it actually happens, but I think that
2 the training that we got where this is what you say on the radio,
3 to make sure that every, all transmissions -- other transmissions
4 stop and that somebody's aware that there's a real problem, that
5 traffic isn't going to continue on, I think that training was
6 ingrained in us enough that I knew that that was the thing that I
7 had to do.

8 I think the stupid hat thing was ingrained in me enough
9 that, like, I knew get your hat on because that's how they
10 identify you as someone who can help. And you know, they -- we're
11 made very familiar with all the ways to get out of the train. I
12 think I was as trained as you could be to get people out and to
13 get yourself out safe.

14 Q. And going back a little, you departed, like, from Union
15 Station, I think --

16 A. Yes.

17 Q. -- you described? Then you used the term "we made up
18 time" a little, I think, around Baltimore or after Baltimore?

19 A. Right.

20 Q. How -- can you describe that, making up time?

21 A. I think we just -- we managed to move at normal speed,
22 at like a track speed in that space, and where sometimes we get
23 held up. And I think there's, like, fat built into the schedule
24 so that we have the opportunity to make up that time. So by the
25 time we got to Philly -- my memory; this is not super clear. But

1 by the time we got to Philly, I think we had the opportunity to
2 sit there a minute. I think when we got there, we were able to
3 sit. But I don't remember exactly.

4 Q. So by the time you're at Philly, you're pretty close to
5 schedule? Is that what I'm hearing?

6 A. Yeah.

7 Q. Okay. Was there any attempt during the post-accident
8 events to communicate with other assistant conductors or other
9 conductors? What sort of communication did you have with the
10 other crew?

11 A. I was trying to -- I couldn't get anybody. And I was
12 trying, because I wanted to just -- I wanted to feel like there
13 was some other crew out here besides me. I didn't know where
14 Akida was. I heard her make the emergency transmission and then I
15 never heard from her again. I don't know if there was just
16 massive interference or we were just -- we were too scattered to
17 connect with each other.

18 But I was calling for Brandon or Emilio or Akida to
19 respond just so that I knew someone was somewhere and I could kind
20 of -- I wanted us to be separated at specific spots in the train
21 so that we could all handle what -- the people coming out of it,
22 but I couldn't get anybody. I eventually stopped trying because I
23 just felt like I'm wasting time yelling into this thing when
24 there's other stuff to do.

25 Q. Did you ever see them while on scene?

1 A. No. I didn't see Akida and Tai (ph.), the LSA, I didn't
2 see them till I came out the -- either the fire officer or the
3 police officer took me out to the street where they left me, where
4 they said I was going to answer questions. When I got out there,
5 I saw both of them. Tai was right there and I walked with her a
6 little bit and she seemed really shaken up. And the Akida was
7 sitting on the floor somewhere. And when she saw me, she started
8 yelling because she was -- I think she was really in shock. So
9 she couldn't really say anything, but she was yelling and she had
10 her arms out, so I went over there.

11 Q. All right.

12 A. And neither of us had seen nor heard from Emilio or
13 Brandon. We didn't know if they'd made it out. We didn't know
14 anything about it.

15 Q. Thanks very much. That's all the questions I have.

16 MR. BUCHER: Okay. Dave Bucher. No questions.

17 MR. HINES: John Hines. No questions.

18 MR. BATES: William Bates. No questions.

19 BY MR. FIELDS:

20 Q. Carl Fields, BLET. Just I wanted to follow up, Tom --

21 A. Sure.

22 Q. -- if I may? You mentioned earlier and you just
23 mentioned again about the police officer taking you to the street
24 to stage you there to ask you some questions?

25 A. Right.

1 Q. Was it a Amtrak officer or --

2 A. No.

3 Q. -- local --

4 A. No, that was a -- I think it was a Philly officer.

5 Q. Okay. That's all I have. Thank you.

6 A. Okay.

7 MR. NICHOLS: No questions.

8 MR. BULL: Mike Bull. No questions.

9 MR. MRUK: Eddie Mruk. No additional questions.

10 MR. BUCHER: Okay. That concludes the interview of
11 Mr. O'Brien.

12 (Whereupon, the interview was concluded.)

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CERTIFICATE

This is to certify that the attached proceeding before the

NATIONAL TRANSPORTATION SAFETY BOARD

IN THE MATTER OF: AMTRAK TRAIN 188 DERAILMENT NEAR
 PHILADELPHIA, PENNSYLVANIA
 MAY 12, 2015
 Interview of Thomas O'Brien

DOCKET NUMBER: DCA-15-MR-010

PLACE: Philadelphia, Pennsylvania

DATE: May 15, 2015

was held according to the record, and that this is the original,
complete, true and accurate transcript which has been transcribed
to the best of my skill and ability.

Karen A. Stockhausen
Transcriber