

UNITED STATES OF AMERICA

NATIONAL TRANSPORTATION SAFETY BOARD

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Investigation of: *

*

UNION PACIFIC RAILROAD TRAIN *

DERAILMENT, HAZARDOUS MATERIAL * Accident No.: RRD20LR005

RELEASE, AND FIRE IN TEMPE, *

ARIZONA, ON JULY 29, 2020 *

*

* * * * *

Interview of: JOHN HARTLEP, Brakeman

Union Pacific Railroad Company

Union Pacific Yard Office
Tucson, Arizona

Friday,
July 31, 2020

Errata Change Requested by Interviewee Jon Hartleb:

Hello Richard. Thank you that would be acceptable to me.

Sent from my iPhone

On Sep 10, 2020, at 20:25, Hipskind Richard <hipskir@ntsb.gov> wrote:

Jon,

Understood. I guess I should have explained that one has to print the blank document, write in the changes (using the example form as a guide) and then sign and date it before returning it. However, I am ok with your e-mail as your response and I can make it clear for the docket about the spelling of your first name.

Is that acceptable to you? Please let me know, thanks.

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From: Jon Hartlep <[REDACTED]>

Sent: Thursday, September 10, 2020 10:31:31 PM

To: Hipskind Richard <hipskir@ntsb.gov>

Subject: Re: Transcription of Interview

[CAUTION] This email originated from outside of the organization. Do not click any links or open attachments unless you recognize the sender and know the content is safe.

Hello Richard. Trying to use the Errata form attachment and I am unable to add text. I am woefully ignorant when it comes to touch technology. **The only change I would make is the spelling of my first name. From John to Jon. T** Thank you.

Sent from my iPhone

On Sep 7, 2020, at 20:29, Jon Hartlep <[REDACTED]> wrote:

Hi Richard. Received the transcripts. Work in the morning but will review when I land. Thank you. Jon

Sent from my iPhone

On Sep 7, 2020, at 19:38, Hipskind Richard <hipskir@ntsb.gov> wrote:

John,

Jim Maynard called me and also texted me to re-send these files for your review—it is not too late. Please let me know that you got this e-mail and if you intend to submit an errata sheet, thanks.

APPEARANCES:

RICHARD HIPSKIND, Investigator in Charge
National Transportation Safety Board

WAYNE BURRIS, Operating Practices Inspector
Federal Railroad Administration (FRA)

JOE PINKERMAN, Railroad Safety Inspector
Arizona Corporation Commission

SCOTT JONES, Inspector
International Association of Sheet Metal, Air,
Rail and Transportation Workers (SMART)

JIM MAYNARD, Safety Task Force Investigator
Brotherhood of Locomotive Engineers and Trainmen (BLET)

JOHN ALLBERRY, Operating Practices General Director
Union Pacific Railroad Company

MIKE CURTIS, Representative
International Association of Sheet Metal, Air,
Rail and Transportation Workers (SMART)
(On behalf of Mr. Hartlep)

I N D E X

ITEM

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Interview of John Hartlep:

By Mr. Hipskind

6

I N T E R V I E W

1
2 MR. HIPSKIND: All right, good afternoon, gentlemen. My name
3 is Richard Hipkind, and I am the investigator in charge and the
4 track and engineering group chairman for NTSB for this accident.

5 We are here today, on July 31st, 2020, in a conference room
6 setting at Union Pacific's Tucson yard office to conduct an
7 interview with Mr. John Hartlep, who is a brakeman and who works
8 for the Union Pacific. This interview is in conjunction with
9 NTSB's investigation of a train derailment, hazardous material
10 release, and fire that occurred in Tempe, Arizona, on July 29,
11 2020. The NTSB accident reference number is RRD20LR005.

12 Before we begin our interview and questions, let's go around
13 the table and introduce ourselves. Please spell your last name,
14 and please identify who you are representing and your title. I
15 would remind everyone to speak clearly and loudly enough so that
16 we can get an accurate transcription. I'll lead off and then pass
17 off to the gentlemen who are in the conference room.

18 And, John, Mike, if you'll wait. Let's get everybody else in
19 the panel, and then I'll come back to you.

20 Again, my name is Richard Hipkind. The spelling of my last
21 name is H-i-p-s-k-i-n-d. I am the investigator in charge and
22 track and engineering group chairman for NTSB on this accident.

23 Wayne, first you, and then Joe.

24 MR. BURRIS: Okay. Wayne Burris, B-u-r-r-i-s. I'm an FRA
25 Operating Practices Inspector for the state of Arizona.

1 MR. PINKERMAN: Joe Pinkerman. Last name is spelled
2 P-i-n-k-e-r-m-a-n. Here representing the State of Arizona as an
3 operating practices inspector.

4 MR. HIPSKIND: Thank you, gentlemen.
5 Scott?

6 MR. JONES: Scott Jones, SMART Union's National Safety Team,
7 spelled J-o-n-e-s.

8 MR. HIPSKIND: Jim?

9 MR. MAYNARD: Jim Maynard, BLET Safety Task Force. Last name
10 Maynard, M-a-y-n-a-r-d.

11 MR. HIPSKIND: And John?

12 MR. ALLBERRY: John Allberry, Union Pacific Railroad General
13 Director, Operating Practices in Spring, Texas, A-l-l-b-e-r-r-y,
14 and group chairman on the operating practices side.

15 MR. HIPSKIND: Okay. John, would you introduce yourself,
16 title, and spell your name?

17 MR. HARTLEP: Yes, sir. John Hartlep, H-a-r-t-l-e-p,
18 trainman, Union Pacific Railroad.

19 MR. HIPSKIND: Okay. And, John, do you mind if we proceed on
20 a first-name basis?

21 MR. HARTLEP: I do not mind at all.

22 MR. HIPSKIND: Okay. And do you wish to have a
23 representative with you?

24 MR. HARTLEP: I do.

25 MR. HIPSKIND: And, Mike, will you please introduce yourself

1 on the record?

2 MR. CURTIS: Mike Curtis, C-u-r-t-i-s, SMART Transportation
3 Division, local chairperson, Tucson.

4 MR. HIPSKIND: All right. And, John, do you mind if we
5 record the interview?

6 MR. HARTLEP: I do not mind if we record the interview.

7 INTERVIEW OF JOHN HARTLEP

8 BY MR. HIPSKIND:

9 Q. Okay, great. So let me start off, John, by asking you, kind
10 of take us through the start of your day, where you reported to,
11 the train you picked up, and kind of take us through the
12 highlights up to the point where the train had the emergency, if
13 you would, please.

14 A. Okay. On the 28th of July, we were called 2105 to work the
15 MTUPX on the 29. I was called as the brakeman. I was also called
16 with an engineer, Mark Walls, and a conductor, Mario Cortez. We
17 got to work, Mario pulled the paperwork, gave me my work order.

18 We were told that the power was located on the south end of
19 the Tucson Union Pacific yard. They brought the power after
20 checking it out, out of the south, took it to Track Number 29,
21 pulled the other cars out on Track Number 29, and joined with some
22 cars that were on Track Number 28. Those cars were on air, had
23 already been air-inspected, tested by the car department. We had
24 our air slip handy. Utility here at the yard went back and got
25 our EOT working and tested, and then we got in the vehicle and

1 headed up to the head-end where we got on. We then received our
2 permission to depart.

3 We departed at -- I can't recall the exact time, but a little
4 bit after 2300 in the evening, and proceeded to head up to
5 Phoenix. We had two locations that we had work along the way.
6 First was what we call Old Randolph, where we had to pick up a
7 car. We were not able to pick up that car as it wouldn't pass the
8 air test, wouldn't shut up. So we eyeballed that. Am I allowed
9 to use railroad jargon?

10 Q. You absolutely are.

11 A. So that was eyeballed. We left that car there as per the
12 rule. Went on to New Randolph, where -- I'm getting a little bit
13 more in-depth here -- we dropped the conductor off at the car that
14 we were supposed to pick up, and I went up to the D rail and the
15 switch, flagged the D rail green. He made the cut on the main
16 track. We proceeded to set out six cars, six tagged cars at New
17 Randolph, and then we swapped it over to the other track and
18 picked our car up, did our air test. It passed the air test. We
19 went ahead and brought those -- that car out, went back to the
20 main track, walked up to the head engine.

21 I want to put in here, too, at that point we didn't need a
22 track warrant for ABS territory. We were still operating on CTC.
23 Once we did that, we received our warrant to operate on ABS
24 territory from the dispatcher. That warrant told us that we were
25 going to proceed to a siding called Jermand (ph.) safest siding

1 and wait for the arrival of another train, a southbound train. We
2 were northbound.

3 So we got up to Jermand, pulled into the siding. We were
4 allowed to leave the siding switch (indiscernible) our entrance.
5 We came to a stop in the siding, and our conductor released our
6 warrant. We then received another warrant for after the arrival
7 of our southbound train. We waited in the siding for our
8 southbound train to come by. We verified that, that southbound
9 train was indeed the train that we were waiting on, and then we --
10 after they cleared, we lined our switch, the conductor lined our
11 switch, and we headed north.

12 And I do want to also interject at that point that, due to
13 the pandemic and coronavirus, that the third person on the train
14 was -- myself, was located on the second unit, not the first unit.
15 That second unit is also facing in the opposite direction of the
16 lead unit. And it will become a little bit clearer why I said
17 that later.

18 So we left. Again, exact times I don't know. I wasn't
19 keeping a log. I was on the second unit. And we headed north.
20 And after passing the Tempe Bridge, we came to a stop. And for
21 me, it was a very smooth stop, so not really understanding what
22 was happening for a second, then over the radio I hear that
23 they've gone into emergency, and our conductor was getting off the
24 head-end to walk the train. So I turned on my radio, put my
25 gloves on, and stepped out south -- or at this point I'm going to

1 say east.

2 And I was standing on the engine itself. I asked Mario,
3 what's going on? He said, we're in emergency; we better walk it.
4 I said, great. And at that point, I looked over just off the
5 right-hand side, and I saw a plume of smoke around the corner. I
6 told him to come up on the engine and look at it, as well; he did.

7 So we both stepped down on the south side of the tracks and
8 started walking. As we were walking, we were job braking. At
9 that time, I made a point to tell him that I would prefer if he
10 went back to the head-end and called it in and got all the hazmat
11 paperwork handy in case I had any questions as I continued to walk
12 through, and he did. No questions; turned around and went back to
13 the head-end.

14 As I was walking back, the dispatcher came over the radio and
15 said that he had a report that our train was on fire. He didn't
16 at that point specify where on our train it was on fire. It was
17 pretty obvious with the smoke. Okay, at this point, I do realize
18 that it is us and not another fire somewhere else.

19 I walked about, let's say, 40 cars, 45 cars. As I came
20 around the corner, underneath the overpass, I then actually was
21 able to see the bridge, and I did verify at that point that we had
22 a problem. Our train was on fire. I could see a number of lumber
23 cars already burning. But from my angle on the west side of the
24 bridge, I didn't see any derailment because you can't see it from
25 there. So I had no idea that we had actually derailed. I

1 actually, at that point, didn't even realize that the bridge had
2 collapsed, if it indeed collapsed.

3 So the dispatcher, right around that point, came back and
4 said that he didn't want any of us near the incident. So I gave
5 Mario a car number, the car number I was standing by, the sugar
6 car. I have the car number here if you'd like me to read it.

7 Q. If you want to, that's fine.

8 A. Okay. It's T5LX518747, a sugar hopper. I gave him that car
9 number, and I told him that we were on fire probably another eight
10 cars east of that location. At that time, I turned around and
11 walked back up to the head-end to await further instructions.

12 When I got back to the head-end, and after a few minutes, we
13 received a call from a Union Pacific official, Kevin Moore, asked
14 that one of us would meet him back there so we could salvage
15 whatever cars we could salvage. At that point, we were at less
16 than an hour to work, so we took it as an urgent request. I got
17 off the train and proceeded to walk back again to the bridge.

18 I met Kevin, we walked back to it, and then I asked Kevin
19 where he wanted to make a cut. He informed me that indeed the
20 sugar car is what we were leaving with. So we secured what we
21 were leaving with a brake and got a pin, made the cut. And he
22 also instructed us to take it as far as 48th Street since we were
23 running out of time, and at that point we would be relieved by
24 another crew. I stayed back with Kevin, and he drove me to the
25 yard office, where I was going to wait for the rest of the crew.

1 The TXTUD crew, I'm afraid I don't know who was on it,
2 relieved our crew and they brought my grip bag and the crew bag,
3 and we met at the yard office. So that's basically what happened
4 from the time I went on duty through our portion of the incident.
5 As far as afterwards, we were asked to wait. We were going to
6 proceed to make our statements. And we had to -- based on the
7 estimated loss, we had to go to a facility to have a tox screen
8 done, both with blood and urine testing.

9 We waited till Rodriguez showed up -- he's a UP officer --
10 and he took us to a Concentra nearby. We were there a couple
11 hours. A representative showed up and along with the team,
12 Concentra and a representative, they took our blood sample and
13 urine sample, and then we were released from there after we made
14 all the necessary chain of command -- or what do they call it?
15 Custody, chain of custody.

16 We went back to the Phoenix yard office at that point. We
17 finished our statements, which I'd like to read my statement if
18 that's okay? You guys already have a copy of that?

19 Q. I'm sure we have a copy of it, but --

20 A. It's basically redundant.

21 Q. John, as I said earlier, this is your interview. If you want
22 to read that, that's fine.

23 A. Okay. It's just a paragraph, so if you don't mind, I'll read
24 it. This is what I wrote.

25 Q. Please do. Go ahead.

1 A. Okay. "At 0708, the train MTUPX of the 29, came to a stop on
2 the main line. As I was exiting the second unit to join the
3 conductor to walk the train, I noticed a plume of smoke east of
4 our location. I send the conductor back to the head-end to call
5 and retrieve hazmat info while I walked the train. As I came
6 around the corner, I saw multiple cars on fire on the Tempe
7 Bridge. The dispatcher advised us to stay clear, so I went back
8 to the head-end. John D. Hartlep on July 29th, 2020."

9 That was my statement.

10 Q. Okay.

11 A. We wrote our statements, and then we were briefed that we
12 would meet with the command and control team at the incident site.
13 The Union Pacific police officer took us to that site. We met
14 with -- I wish I could tell you the names. I didn't write them
15 down. But we met with a representative of the FBI and a detective
16 from the Tempe Police Department. We met separately. I went
17 first and I was interviewed, probably six or seven questions, for
18 about 15 minutes; then I was relieved. Our engineer second, and
19 then our conductor went in last. We didn't discuss what they
20 talked about. I wouldn't want to inject on that.

21 After the interview, we were taken back to the yard office,
22 received accommodations at the Holiday Inn. We went, got our
23 rest, and we deadheaded back to Tucson the next afternoon. Once
24 we tied up, we were placed on critical incident, 3 days off
25 (indiscernible). And that's basically what happened.

1 Q. Great job, John. Let me just stitch up a couple of things I
2 need to find out. So if you take a train -- one takes a train
3 from Tucson, and you're heading up to Phoenix, about how many
4 miles is that? Just ballpark it.

5 A. About 115, 120 miles as the railroad crow flies.

6 Q. Okay. And so, over that amount of territory, would it be
7 typical for a train to roll over a couple, two or three hotbox
8 detectors placed along the railroad where the rolling stop is
9 examined?

10 A. Your assumption is correct, and we didn't get a peep back,
11 either verbally or mechanically from any of the detectors that we
12 passed. We have a talking detector right out the gate; nothing on
13 that one. The other detector is on the CTC. When anything went
14 wrong, we would receive notice from the dispatcher.

15 Once we get into ABS, then it would be a mechanical feedback
16 that we got, voice, mechanical voice, and we received none the
17 entire trip. No feedback for hotbox, no feedback for bearings,
18 anything. Everything was perfectly normal, from our point of
19 view, as we made our trip.

20 Q. Okay. And if you think about -- so the train is in Tempe,
21 and you're making a reduction, maybe, from 40 miles an hour down
22 to 25 or thereabouts. And think about you're coming around that
23 curve, and you guys were on the south approach, those couple of
24 spans coming up to the superstructure of the longer bridge. Do
25 you recall seeing anything, feeling anything, hearing anything,

1 and did you see the locomotive ahead of you bobble or shift one
2 way or another?

3 A. The short answer to your question is no. I didn't feel
4 anything. I didn't see anything. Again, I was facing south, so
5 my field of vision wasn't out the front window as we were
6 traveling. So the answer to your question is no. I neither felt
7 anything or saw anything that was abnormal for our trip.

8 Q. Okay. Any recollection or memory of any issues or problems,
9 any track issues in and around that location, say, a month ago or
10 anything like that?

11 A. No. I've also been on vacation the whole month. I just came
12 back. That was my second trip out. I'm on the extra boards from
13 (indiscernible) to Phoenix are varied. My last trip that I made
14 to Phoenix, I didn't notice anything at that location, probably
15 over a month ago.

16 Q. Okay. And the other crewmembers, you've worked with them
17 before; you know them well?

18 A. Mark Walls I know well. Mario is the youngest seniority guy
19 who just came off of furlough and out of the yard. We're
20 separated by over a decade in seniority. That was the first time
21 I worked with him. I have seen him before, but that's the first
22 time I worked with him.

23 Q. Okay. And we'll talk to Mark, too, but I wanted to get your
24 thoughts on -- so the train's gone into emergency, you've gone
25 back and seen the smoke. And where I'm going with all this, John,

1 is were you guys ever approached by emergency responders or a
2 railroad official, and was there a discussion about any kind of
3 paperwork or billing or anything like that?

4 A. I can only answer for me, and the answer would be no. As far
5 as paperwork goes, no.

6 MR. HIPSKIND: All right. Well, listen, you did a great job,
7 and let's bring in the other members of the panel and we'll see
8 what's on their mind.

9 Wayne, if you'll lead off, and then Joe.

10 MR. BURRIS: That was a good job. I can't think of anything
11 that I didn't get answered.

12 MR. HIPSKIND: Sometimes that happens. More often than you'd
13 think.

14 MR. BURRIS: Very good.

15 MR. HIPSKIND: Jim?

16 MR. MAYNARD: I've got nothing to add. Great job, John. I
17 really appreciate all the detail. Thank you.

18 MR. HIPSKIND: Okay, you're up, John.

19 MR. ALLBERRY: Nothing to add, John. You're very detailed
20 (indiscernible). I appreciate it. Thank you.

21 MR. HARTLEP: Thank you, John.

22 MR. HIPSKIND: All right. And we're close to wrapping this
23 up. So, Mike, as his representative, I always offer -- are there
24 any points of clarification or anything that you want to bring to
25 our attention regarding John's discussion with us?

1 MR. CURTIS: No, sir.

2 BY MR. HIPSKIND:

3 Q. Okay. So, John, is there anything else that you want to
4 comment on or something, or do you want me to go to the concluding
5 questions?

6 A. Is this the part where I get to say add or change, or I'm
7 going to wait on that?

8 Q. This is the part. So let me go on the record here and ask
9 the question. John, is there anything that you would like to add
10 or change about our discussion, your description of the day's
11 events?

12 A. No.

13 Q. Okay. Are there any questions or comments that we should
14 have asked but we did not?

15 A. Nothing comes to mind.

16 Q. Okay. Well, I will send you my business card, and I'll try
17 to include the other contact information for the other gentlemen
18 on the panel. And if you think of something later on, don't
19 hesitate to call or talk to whoever you feel comfortable with.

20 A. Sure.

21 Q. Do you have any suggestions for preventing a reoccurrence?

22 A. At this point, I haven't been brought into the loop on what
23 we think has happened yet, so the answer to that would be no. I
24 don't know.

25 Q. Well, that's fair, John. I understand. And is there anyone

1 else who we should interview? You know we've already interviewed
2 Mark, the engineer, and we're going to talk to Mario, the
3 conductor. Is there anybody else?

4 A. The only other person who was on the ground as far as the
5 crew is concerned would be UP official Kevin Moore, who came and
6 helped me to separate the cars that we left with. I don't know if
7 he would have anything new for you or not, but he was technically
8 a part of our crew for a short period of time.

9 Q. Helping perform the cut-away to pull the --

10 A. Of course. He was the onsite manager who made a
11 determination of where we were going to make the cut and where I
12 made the cut.

13 Q. Okay.

14 A. He was also part of our decision-making process at the very,
15 very end.

16 Q. That's helpful. I appreciate you making the comment.

17 MR. HIPSKIND: Gentlemen on the panel, I don't have any more
18 questions, but I'll go around one more time. Wayne, Joe in the
19 room, anything else you want to add?

20 MR. BURRIS: No, sir.

21 MR. PINKERMAN: No, sir, I'm good.

22 MR. HIPSKIND: And you, Scott, Jim, what say you?

23 MR. JONES: Yeah, this is Scott. John, I just had
24 (indiscernible) I'm trying to make my notes here and watch the
25 screen. Did you happen to mention your seniority? What have you

1 got, about 13, 14 years almost?

2 MR. HARTLEP: Yeah, I hired on January of '07, so I'm in my
3 13th year.

4 MR. JONES: Okay, great. Thank you very much. Great job.

5 MR. HIPSKIND: And, John, anything?

6 MR. ALLBERRY: Nothing bad, just a comment that I'm just
7 grateful that you guys are all okay, John. That's the biggest
8 thing out of this. We'll figure out and repair things and make it
9 safer, but I'm just glad you guys are all okay.

10 MR. HARTLEP: I appreciate that, John. I had to turn off my
11 phone at the hotel. I got over a hundred phone calls and texts
12 that day from all over the country. So hearing it from you means
13 a lot, too.

14 MR. HIPSKIND: Well, and thanks for telling us that. It
15 almost sounds like you're in the same league as the IIC. My phone
16 has been burning up the last two days, so I kind of relate to
17 that.

18 Gentlemen, if there's nothing else, I'd like to say to John
19 and Mike, thanks for coming in, thanks for your interest in
20 railroad safety. And with that, we will conclude the interview.
21 Thanks again.

22 MR. CURTIS: Okay, Wayne --

23 MR. HIPSKIND: Hold on a second. Mike, do you have something
24 to say?

25 MR. CURTIS: I believe that the manager's name out of

1 (indiscernible) is Kevin Murphy.

2 MR. HARTLEP: Murphy.

3 MR. CURTIS: Not Kevin Moore, Kevin Murphy.

4 MR. HIPSKIND: Okay. All right. Thanks again, Mike and
5 John.

6 And last shot.

7 MR. MAYNARD: That'll do it. Thank you very much, John.

8 MR. HARTLEP: Thank you, Jim.

9 Thank you, guys.

10 (Whereupon, the interview was concluded.)

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