

UNITED STATES OF AMERICA

NATIONAL TRANSPORTATION SAFETY BOARD

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Investigation of: *

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FATAL AMTRAK DERAILMENT *

NEAR JOPLIN, MONTANA * Accident No.: RRD21MR017

ON SEPTEMBER 25, 2021 *

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Interview of: DENNIS RICHTER, Conductor
Amtrak

Shelby, Montana

Monday,
September 27, 2021

APPEARANCES:

ZACH ZAGATA, Investigator, Operations Group Chairman
National Transportation Safety Board

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

STACEY THOMPSON, Operating Practices Specialist
Federal Railroad Administration

STACY CHAVEZ, Operating Practices Inspector
Federal Railroad Administration

AARON RATLEDGE, Assistant Vice President, Operating
Practices and Rules
BNSF Railway

PAUL O'MARA, Assistant Vice President Transportation
Amtrak

PATRICK SULLIVAN, Superintendent of Transportation
Amtrak

BRIAN FRANSEN, Member, Safety Task Force
Brotherhood of Locomotive Engineers & Trainmen (BLET)

JIM CHASE, Member, National Safety Team
SMART Transportation Division

PATRICK HARRISON, Local Chairman
SMART Transportation Division

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I N T E R V I E W

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2 MR. ZAGATA: Good afternoon. My name is Zach Zagata, and I
3 am the NTSB operations group chairman for this accident. We are
4 conducting an interview on September 27, 2021, with Dennis
5 Richter, who works for Amtrak. This interview is in conjunction
6 with NTSB's investigation of the accident near Joplin, Montana.
7 The NTSB accident reference number is RRD21MR017. The purpose of
8 the investigation is to increase safety and not to assign, fault,
9 blame or liability.

10 Before we begin our interview and questions, let's go around
11 and introduce ourselves. Please spell your last name, and title.
12 I'll start off and then pass it to my right. Again, my name is
13 Zach Zagata, Z-a-g-a-t-a, and I am the NTSB operations group
14 chairman.

15 MR. HARRISON: Oh, Pat Harrison. I'm the representative --
16 the local chairman for SMART Transportation Division. Harrison,
17 H-a-r-r-i-s-o-n.

18 MR. RICHTER: Dennis Richter, R-i-c-h-t-e-r. I've been a
19 conductor out here for like 17 years.

20 MR. FRANSEN: Brian Fransen, F-r-a-n-s-e-n, BLET Safety Task
21 Force.

22 MR. CHASE: Jim Chase, C-h-a-s-e, SMART National Safety Team.

23 MS. THOMPSON: Stacey Thompson, T-h-o-m-p-s-o-n, FRA
24 operating specialist.

25 MR. RATLEDGE: Aaron Ratledge, R-a-t-l-e-d-g-e, operating

1 practices and rules, BNSF Railway

2 MR. O'MARA: Paul O'Mara, O-M-a-r-a, assistant vice president
3 transportation, Amtrak.

4 MR. CHAVEZ: Stacy Chavez, C-h-a-v-e-z, FRA operating
5 practices inspector, Helena.

6 DR. JENNER: Stephen Jenner, S-t-e-p-h-e-n, J-e-n-n-e-r. I'm
7 a human performance investigator with the NTSB.

8 MR. SULLIVAN: Patrick Sullivan, S-u-l-l-i-v-a-n. I'm Amtrak
9 superintendent of transportation.

10 MR. ZAGATA: Okay. Thank you.

11 Do we have your permission to record our discussion with you
12 today?

13 MR. RICHTER: Yes.

14 MR. ZAGATA: Thank you.

15 Do you understand this will be part of the public docket and,
16 as such, we cannot guarantee any confidentiality?

17 MR. RICHTER: Yes.

18 INTERVIEW OF DENNIS RICHTER

19 BY MR. ZAGATA:

20 Q. If we could just start out, if you'd kind of just give an
21 overview of your railroad career for us?

22 A. Okay. Started out here 17 years ago as a AC, and took about
23 5 years to get a regular job. Got a regular job as a conductor,
24 AC. Now I'm a full-time conductor. I grew up in this area, just
25 down the road. Half the people at that accident site I knew, the

1 EMTs, which kind of helped. But I love this area, don't want to
2 move.

3 Q. Appreciate it. So next, if you could, and don't go into too
4 much detail, but just kind of give us an overview of your trip,
5 and kind of talking about what went on as far as emergency
6 responders and some detail there if you can kind of provide it,
7 but not getting into detail about what you saw and all that. Is
8 that --

9 A. You want it from when we --

10 Q. Yeah. When you started your trip.

11 A. Oh, start of my trip?

12 Q. Yep.

13 A. Went on duty at 8:21 in Minot. Normal trip. Every station
14 stop we were on time. Left Havre on time, I think. Yeah. And
15 everything was going smooth. We got a Box 2 we copied. I was
16 getting ready to put my little vest on because we had the
17 protection. That's when it all -- everything went to hell. There
18 was no warning, nothing. Lots of commotion. I thought it was
19 never going to end. It just keep going.

20 I flew against the wall. For some reason, I went and wrote
21 on a seat check 3:47. That must have been the time the damn thing
22 happened. Because when I went back up there, it said 3:47. I
23 don't remember doing it, but --

24 Then I ran back, trying to call my assistant conductor. He
25 wouldn't answer. I thought he was dead because after I looked

1 back there, I go holy -- and he wouldn't answer. Finally answered
2 and we started doing like a triage thing, trying to work on the --
3 trying to get people out and then helping the people that were
4 screaming and -- it was unbelievable.

5 Q. Okay.

6 A. There's a lot, too, you can recall, you know.

7 MR. ZAGATA: Okay. At this time I'm going to turn it over to
8 Steve Jenner. He's a got a few questions.

9 DR. JENNER: Great.

10 BY DR. JENNER:

11 Q. What I'd like to do is back up before this day. If you can
12 talk about the training that you've had with Amtrak to address
13 emergency situations such as this? Have you taken any?

14 A. In Portland, we've -- I know they filled a car full of fake
15 smoke and we went through a little demonstration how to find our
16 way out of there and how to get people out, but nothing would put
17 you in for this stuff, when cars on their side. We needed
18 ladders. That was our biggest thing, we need ladders because
19 people were on top of the cars and I thought they were going to
20 fall, and some people wouldn't get off the cars. And just for an
21 example, one person had a broken arm and he wouldn't get off. I
22 said, sir, you got to get off the car. He goes, my friend's ashes
23 are down there, I'm taking his ashes to bury him. I let him stay
24 up there. I couldn't pull him down.

25 Q. Okay.

1 A. That's what pops into my mind on all this stuff, but --

2 Q. Right.

3 A. The EMTs, I mean I knew half of them. They did a good job, I
4 think. I was trying to delegate authority for some of my onboard
5 people, but one of them didn't speak very good English and I was
6 trying to get names of all the people. I finally gave one of the
7 EMT people, before they got on the bus, she had to take their
8 names down so we can see -- I didn't know who was going in those
9 ambulances, so I didn't -- couldn't get names from those people.
10 But I think we got a pretty good count of those people that
11 were -- nobody left that place without giving their name.

12 Q. Okay. What car were you in?

13 A. I was in the dorm car. It's the 732, right behind the
14 baggage car. My car stayed up.

15 Q. Okay. So what was the mood of the passengers right after the
16 incident? Was there panic or chaos or calm? How would you
17 describe it overall?

18 A. It was total panic, people screaming and -- yeah, it was
19 unbelievable. We were trying to get people out of there so we
20 could even go see what was wrong with the people that were
21 trapped. And the train was separated so far. For a old, fat 61-
22 year-old guy to run back and forth, it wasn't very fun.

23 Q. Right. Did you try to make any public announcements, either
24 just within your train or to, you know -- just within your car?

25 A. No.

1 Q. Okay. So --

2 Q. I could see the other part of the train was back there. I
3 didn't think anything even worked.

4 A. Sure.

5 Q. So what --

6 A. I just went running back there. After I put my gloves on, I
7 must have wrote that time down, and I headed back to try to find
8 my AC. I knew he was in the lounge car, and that's -- that was a
9 horrible car.

10 Q. Right. Did you observe injuries in -- you said a broken arm.
11 Was that in your car or was that in someone else's car?

12 A. No, that was some guy that climbed up out of the car somehow.

13 Q. I see. So just in your car, in the dorm car, did you observe
14 injured people?

15 A. No.

16 Q. Okay.

17 A. No.

18 Q. So you helped those people escape or get out of the --

19 A. No, the attendants did. There's attendants for each car,
20 sleeping car. They got all their people out and counted them.
21 Those people were all accounted for that were up front, the cars
22 that didn't go on the ground. I was back there working on people
23 that were needing help and --

24 Q. Okay. So about how long did you spend in the dorm car before
25 you departed for others?

1 A. Probably 1 minute.

2 Q. Oh, just 1 minute?

3 A. Just enough to get my gloves on and my bearings, and looked
4 out the window and I was running to the back.

5 Q. Okay. So what was the first car that you went to?

6 A. The lounge car.

7 Q. Okay. And there you saw that there were injured people in
8 the lounge car?

9 A. They were laying out underneath the lounge car and behind it.
10 Yeah, I -- it was horrible. I got on the radio and told the head
11 end to get as many ambulances there as we could because there's
12 deceased.

13 Q. Do you know if, by the time you made that call, did -- the
14 other person on the radio, did they say that we've already called
15 ambulances? What was your conversation?

16 A. Well, he did the "emergency, emergency, emergency" right when
17 this happened. And I can't remember if he was talking to the
18 dispatcher or not because I was -- but when I got back there, I
19 told him we needed ambulances and fire trucks and -- then it was
20 ladders and -- we needed a lot of ladders.

21 Q. Um-hum. Okay.

22 A. Jaws-of-life. We couldn't get some of those people out.
23 They had to use big grinding wheels and --

24 Q. Okay. So if you could tell me the story once the emergency
25 responders showed up, what sort of coordination did you have with

1 them?

2 A. There was a guy in Joplin, he's the fire chief. I think his
3 name was Martin Elly (ph.). He kind of took control of all of the
4 fire departments that showed up and told them where to go and that
5 was fine with me. I didn't know what -- I mean I told them where
6 people were hurt and I kind of just told them, you know, who
7 needed what and we need ladders over there, and this lady's
8 trapped in a 15 car, and --

9 Q. Okay. So once the emergency responders showed up, did you --
10 did they get right to work?

11 A. Yeah, they all did. I mean, you didn't have to tell them
12 anything. They were -- and there was passengers, you know, that
13 were trained EMT people that were working on people. And we were
14 putting blankets out, trying to find a place where we could lay
15 people.

16 Q. Okay. And you had -- you did finally have a conversation
17 with the assistant conductor?

18 A. Yes.

19 Q. And if you could just disclose --

20 A. Him and I, we kind of -- we worked on the lounge car first
21 trying to get people out of there. He went inside and I'm pulling
22 them over, trying to drag these people up. They had -- I don't
23 know, there was a -- they had to step over this, so I put a bunch
24 of seat cushions down there so they could step on that. And then
25 I put my leg out there so those old people could put one foot

1 there and then go over.

2 After we got everybody out of there, they had one lady that
3 was still screaming in there. He was dealing with that with an
4 EMT person. I went back to the -- where the train was separated,
5 40 yards back or whatever, and started seeing what the situation
6 was back there. That's where I was laying blankets out, too, for
7 people that were cut up.

8 Q. What had the assistant -- what sort of shape was he in, the
9 assistant conductor?

10 A. Well, when he finally answered, he was a rock star. Man, I
11 wouldn't have been able to do it without him. I was glad he was
12 able to help. But he was just covered in dirt. Yeah. Still had
13 his hat on though.

14 Q. Okay. Did you -- beyond the initial coordination you had
15 with emergency responders, did you have any other contact with any
16 of the responders?

17 A. Yeah, but there were so many of them, that -- from several
18 different -- I mean, all them little towns. I mean I didn't know
19 who was in charge of what. But I talked to my sister today.
20 She's a registered nurse. And she said Chester should have
21 been -- they should have been delegating, you know, who does what,
22 and doing the triage type thing.

23 Q. Right.

24 A. She was there also at the -- in the ambulance, my sister was.

25 Q. Right. From your perspective, did emergency response, the

1 responders, did it seem organized? Did they seem unorganized?

2 How would you summarize that?

3 A. No, I thought it was well organized. They were getting those
4 ambulances in there. But it was so damn dusty from that powdery
5 dust, you couldn't see nothing and --

6 Q. Okay. So when you went to the separated cars, what did you
7 do then, you know, farther back in the train?

8 A. Just trying to help people that were hurt and get people out.
9 I had one of my onboard gals out of Seattle, Danielle Travers,
10 she -- they hadn't started dinner yet, so she's still in a skirt
11 with a t-shirt on, and she's in there just -- yeah, she was very
12 helpful, too. Some of those places I couldn't fit in and she was
13 in there helping drag people out. Some of the people didn't know
14 where to go or how to get out of there. It was dark. You know,
15 like in that lounge car, the lounge car attendant was stuck down
16 there. It was so dark, he had a flashlight trying to -- he got
17 hurt, I don't know, arm or --

18 Q. Right. Were these trains equipped with glow sticks?

19 A. Yes.

20 Q. Did you see any passengers using them?

21 A. You couldn't get to them in those cars that -- because they
22 were laying on the side. I mean, it would take you a half an hour
23 to go find a glow stick.

24 Q. Okay. You had mentioned a need for ladders and Jaws of Life,
25 but is there any type of equipment that you -- besides that, that

1 you wish you had?

2 A. I don't -- I wish they'd put sterilized gloves in all these
3 cars. Because all -- every -- all the time we're looking for -- I
4 ain't touching blood without any protection, I can tell you that.
5 There is -- you know, they have a little first aid kit, but
6 there's only like one or two pairs in there. It doesn't prepare
7 you for anything like this.

8 Q. Right. You mentioned first kit. Did you see that being used
9 by any of the crew?

10 A. No.

11 Q. Okay.

12 A. Like I said, half the stuff you couldn't get to the way they
13 were laying.

14 Q. I see.

15 A. The gravel and the -- I mean you could've got on a ladder and
16 tried to find a way to get to it, but --

17 Q. Right.

18 A. We could've ran back up front, I guess, but by that time the
19 EMTs are already there. They had all that stuff.

20 Q. You had discussed briefly some of the training you had for
21 these type of situations. Is there any type of training you --
22 from your experience now, that you think you could have benefitted
23 from?

24 A. Oh, I'm sure there's some kind of training that would -- it's
25 just how you, you know, go about delegating authority is what --

1 for the conductor, for my thinking is I should have been -- could
2 have been trained a little better on that, how to, you know,
3 delegate. I mean it was just random, but tried to do the best I
4 could.

5 DR. JENNER: I think that's all the questions I have right
6 now. Thanks very much for your details.

7 MR. RICHTER: You're welcome.

8 MR. ZAGATA: Does anybody else have any additional questions?

9 MR. CHASE: I just have one. Jim Chase.

10 BY MR. CHASE:

11 Q. You said Box 2, and I know what that is, but if you wanted to
12 clarify that, what the Box 2 is?

13 A. Well, it's a crossing warning malfunction. And if it seemed
14 to not be working, we have to stop and protect it. So I -- and
15 we're supposed to wear a vest, new rule. But when this happened,
16 I was up -- getting up to get my vest, and hit the wall, went
17 running back.

18 Q. And you guys physically copy that on paper? You don't get
19 that on the PTC?

20 A. It was on the PTC, but my engineer radioed back.

21 Q. Okay. So then you copied --

22 A. We copied it.

23 Q. I gotcha. So then you copied it.

24 A. Yeah.

25 Q. Thank you.

1 A. And I knew it was coming up about 8 miles or somewhere in
2 there.

3 MR. CHASE: Okay. That's all I have.

4 MR. ZAGATA: Anybody else?

5 UNIDENTIFIED SPEAKER: Can I interject a little bit on what
6 he was asking? Is that allowed or -- no. Okay.

7 DR. JENNER: I'm sorry. I did have a follow-up.

8 BY DR. JENNER:

9 Q. How long have you been a full-time conductor?

10 A. Probably at least 10 years.

11 DR. JENNER: Okay. Thank you.

12 MR. ZAGATA: All right. Zach Zagata.

13 BY MR. ZAGATA:

14 Q. I just got a couple for you. You've been working on this
15 territory for quite a while, you said, right?

16 A. This is the only territory I know.

17 Q. Yeah. In that time, have you've gone over areas where the
18 track's kind of rough and you noticed it, like the car will move
19 in there?

20 A. Yes. Well, in that spot?

21 Q. Yeah.

22 A. No. I haven't noticed that spot.

23 Q. But other locations you can feel it?

24 A. Yeah. And I always call the dispatcher or call it in.

25 Q. Call it in?

1 A. I put it on my EMP.

2 MR. ZAGATA: All right. That's all I've got. Once again,
3 thank you for coming in and talking to us. We appreciate it. If
4 there's anything you need, let us know. I'll give you my number.

5 Do you have anything else you want to add?

6 MR. RICHTER: I don't think so.

7 MR. ZAGATA: Okay. All right. Well, I appreciate it, and
8 we'll conclude the interview.

9 (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: FATAL AMTRAK DERAILMENT
 NEAR JOPLIN, MONTANA
 ON SEPTEMBER 25, 2021
 Interview of Dennis Richter

ACCIDENT NO.: RRD21MR017

PLACE: Shelby, Montana

DATE: September 27, 2021

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.



Kay Maurer
Transcriber