

## **Record of Conversations – Karl Zunker, Incident Commander**

### **RRD19FR001**

On the morning of October 7, 2018 FRA Mechanical Engineer John Manutes spoke with Assistant Chief Karl Zunker of the Laramie County Fire District No. 10 at the Plains Hotel in Cheyenne, Wyoming. Assistant Chief Zunker is a volunteer who has served with the fire district since 2000 in various roles including Chief. He has commanded multiple large scale multi-jurisdictional incidents on Interstate 80, however this was his first large rail incident. He has served on a number of smaller railroad incidents and is familiar with much of the railroad community in his area.

Assistant Chief Zunker was on call when he received a page from Laramie County 911 Dispatch Center which stated, "Respond to train collision with derailment". He left The Albany restaurant in Cheyenne where he had his response truck and called en route at 7:47 pm. While en route he was notified via radio that there were two trains involved, each train had two employees, there was hazardous materials included in the trains, and that dispatch was on the phone with Union Pacific and would receive a manifest shortly. Assistant Chief Zunker arrived on scene at 8:01 pm according to the logs, however he likely was on scene sooner. He made the trip with lights and sirens at a high rate of speed.

The initial response consisted of Assistant Chief Zunker from district number 10, Engine No. 1-1 from District No. 1 in Cheyenne (automatic dispatch due to District 10 staffing shortages), one engine from nearby Warren Air Force Base, 2 ambulances from American Medical Response (AMR). The second call for equipment included fire district 1's heavy rescue and hazmat team and a communications truck to use as the Incident Command Location. Wyoming Highway Patrol and the county sheriff were also on scene.

Assistant Chief Zunker was initially given a location of "742 I-80 Service Road" and the nearest landmark was given as the "I-80 Truck Parking". This proved to be highly accurate. Assistant Chief Zunker noted a locomotive headlight, from the struck train, approximately 1-mile from the given accident location. He considered access options for that location, but ultimately trusted his dispatcher and continued to the truck parking. At the truck parking location he began driving along side the train in a westward direction and realized he was very near to the accident by the obviously derailed cars in the struck train. He stated that it was, "dark, dark" at this time. His headlights illuminated the derailed locomotives soon after. There were no lights emanating from the derailed equipment. He noted there were some Union Pacific employees in the area already.

The dispatcher reported that there were three cars of phosphoric acid, one car of sulfuric acid, one molten sulfur, one anhydrous ammonia, and one miscellaneous hazardous car in the two trains. Soon thereafter, a Union Pacific employee handed Assistant Chief Zunker a manifest for each train. While he was grateful and surprised about the efficiency with which he received the manifest, he felt confused because it was the first time he had seen a freight train manifest and it felt like he, "was reading Chinese". He stated that he eventually figured out that the first cars on the list were actually on the rear of the train and the last cars on the list were actually on the front of the train. This confusion made it difficult to locate the anhydrous ammonia car, which was of particular concern. He stated that

indicating “front of train” and “rear of train” would be helpful. He also closed the frontage road access by placing a highway patrolman at the site. This action effectively closed public access to the site.

When Engine No. 1 arrived from district 1 Assistant Chief Zunker instructed them to search for leaks with a detector and be on the lookout for crew members. They identified one empty, formerly residue, tank car in front of the general pile, 3 cars with damage and no remaining leak, and one possible slow leak on a separate car. During this time the Wyoming Highway Patrol evacuated the truck parking lot. Considerations were made for additional evacuations and closure of I-80 but there were deemed unnecessary due to wind conditions and tank car conditions.

The Fire District Number 1 Heavy Rescue and Hazmat team relieved Engine Number 1-1. They conducted an additional operation to search for leaks, and along with Union Pacific HazMat response determined that there was no leak through the use of testing strips. There was a small amount of condensation that may have been confused for a leak.

Shortly thereafter the Communications Van arrived and was established as the new Incident Command. Radio channels were switched to County Agency Tactical channel in order to free up the dispatch channels for potential additional incidents.

Once no leaks were confirmed and the anhydrous ammonia car was located at the rear of the striking train the primary operations effort focused on search and rescue. During the final hazardous materials sweeps the first deceased employee was located on Track No. 2 laying on the north rail. Assistant Chief Zunker did not observe the body, and later was told it was the striking train’s conductor. He was also informed that the body was intact with, “blunt force trauma everywhere”. It was immediately obvious the conductor was deceased.

Assistant Chief Zunker then stated he created two teams from the available firefighters, approximately 20 people total, and assigned each team a Union Pacific expert to start on each end of each train and meet in the middle. The teams continued to search for hazardous materials leaks and conduct search and rescue operations. Search and rescue teams also lined up at arm’s length and searched the north side of the right-of-way. AMR and Union Pacific officials used a hrrail vehicle to search the track west of the incident location. Additionally, a life flight helicopter had been called by Assistant Chief Zunker early in the incident. This helicopter was on standby overhead and he directed it to search along the trains and right-of-way using its high-powered search light. These efforts did not locate anyone.

Assistant Chief Zunker reluctantly determined that they had conducted as much of a search effort as was possible without heavy equipment and without securement of the imbalanced loads in the general pile. He provided his contact information to the UP and began to demobilize.

Assistant Chief Zunker did return to the scene multiple times to assist with event recorder recovery and to assist while cadaver dogs conducted searches in the following days. He was relieved to hear that some closure was accomplished when the engineer was located using heavy equipment.

He also made a point of stating that Union Pacific response teams were “phenomenal” to work with.

Assistant Chief Zunker received training from the UP in Cheyenne approximately 2 years ago. The training was a result of conversations had within the local rail community and the fire department responding to locomotive maintenance issues including fire. The training was locomotive centric and included fuel cut off, air cut off, and electrical sources. It did not include event recorder training, which they were asked to help with in this incident.

They have not received any railroad hazardous materials training. Assistant Chief Zunker is interested in reaching out to UP regarding any possible training that could be brought to Wyoming, however he doubts they have the resources available to do training in Pueblo.

The assistant chief has received large scale incident command training for multiple jurisdictional agencies, located in Aniston, Alabama. This training has been critical and valuable for a number of large scale highway incidents for which he has been the incident commander. Once again, the training was crucial for his handling of this event. He felt as though other departments, even those with employees of a higher rank, worked well through him as the IC and allowed him to make the decisions he needed to, with a notable exception of a fire chief from nearby jurisdiction. He did state that the Union Pacific managers initially on scene were hard to ‘keep at the command center’ and they didn’t seem to have as much incident training. Once the UP “Go Team” arrived from Omaha, he was impressed with the command structure and professionalism in working together with his department.

I thanked Assistant Chief Zunker for his time and our interview ended.