



Reporting Test for Class of 2010-11

NAME _____

DATE _____

Instructions:

Assume the following four stories contain feeds from reporters in the field. Your job is to write as quickly as possible the best stories you can. There is no time limit, but bear in mind that in an actual situation each story would be posted immediately to the Web, so speed and accuracy are important.

Use a separate sheet for each story and analysis. For each story, please consider the following:

- What is the most important news of the day? Write the story, then tell us why you constructed it that way.
- Note any discrepancies, factual errors and legal or ethical issues.
- What further reporting, if any, do you think is needed?

These stories are fictitious, created only for this test. The sources quoted and the events presented here should not be taken as real situations.

Story 1, Friday

Arnie Swenson, 45, says he boarded MetroRail Train #115 at Union Station at about 4 p.m., bound for home in Lakeland. It was a routine trip, till the train pulled out of the Glenville Station. As the train reached a sharp curve and banked toward the left, Swenson says he looked out the window and could see a freight train approaching on the same tracks. "My first reaction was, "What the hell?" Swenson says. "Then, we hit the other train. There really was no time to react." Miraculously, Swenson, a warehouseman, suffered only minor cuts and bruises.

Another passenger, Burke Kendal, 33, says "everything and everyone" seemed to become airborne during the collision. Tables and seats were torn from their moorings and became missiles hurtling toward the front of the train. Then, there was dead silence. "Then, people started moaning. Some began screaming in pain," he says. "It was horrible."

According to authorities, the mishap occurs when a northbound MetroRail commuter train collides head-on with a southbound Central Southern freight train at approximately 4:23 p.m. just north of the Glenview station. There are three passenger cars on the MetroRail train, each capable of hauling 155 passengers, but a MetroRail spokeswoman says there are 225 passengers aboard Train #115.

Glenview Fire Marshall Gary Tucker describes a scene of "utter devastation and chaos." Tucker says that at least 15 people are confirmed dead and "scores more" are injured.

The accident occurs in a hilly area on a single track that is shared by both commuter and freight trains. Normally, northbound trains pull into a sidetrack at the Glenview station till the southbound trains pass. There is only one set of tracks between Glenview and Lakeland 15 miles away because of a series of narrow tunnels the trains must pass through.

A triage area is set up in a barren schoolyard nearby. The injured are being laid out according to the severity of their injuries: a red tarp for the most critical, a yellow tarp for serious injuries; a green tarp for moderate injuries.

Rescue crews are combing the wreckage in search of survivors and non-survivors. A small oil fire erupts, sending billows of thick black smoke into the late afternoon air, but the blaze is quickly extinguished. The locomotive of the MetroRail train is crushed, it's twisted metal hulk pushed into the front of the passenger car behind it. That is where most of the effort by rescuers is concentrated.

Investigators are investigating why safety systems developed over recent years to avoid disasters such as this seemingly failed, says an investigator with the NTSB.

Burt Cummings, 66, a retired MetroRail engineer, estimates that the MetroRail train was probably doing no more than 40 mph as it rounded what's known as the Glenview curve. He thinks the freight train was probably doing no more than 25 or 30 mph.

The injured are being transported to a number of area hospitals, including Glenview Memorial Hospital and Lakeland Community Presbyterian Hospital.

Glenview Mayor Arlene Myer, who is up for reelection next year, says at a news conference: "Our hearts go out to the victims and their families of this enormous tragedy. Rest assured, we will get to the bottom of this and ensure that it never happens again."

The worst train wreck in U.S. history occurred July 9, 1928, in Nashville, Tenn., when 101 people were killed and 171 were injured.

Story 2, Saturday

There are unconfirmed reports from a local train blogger that the engineer on the MetroRail train that collided with a Central Southern freight train Friday was trading text messages with several teenage train aficionados just before the horrendous mishap. A spokesman for the NTSB says they are treating the report with caution.

Hundreds of firefighters, law enforcement officers and volunteers have worked through the night on the rescue effort. There have been astonishing moments of heroism. For example, an off-duty cop who was on his way home and survived the crash helped numerous victims out of the wreckage, despite a broken collar bone, a collapsed lung, a broken hand and a puncture wound to the leg. Officer Johnny Dunn was in serious but stable condition at Glenview Memorial Hospital.

Glenview Fire Capt. Rex Tolberman says he and his crew were about to sit down to a spaghetti dinner Friday when they got the call of a “possible physical rescue” from dispatch. Thinking it was a routine call about a car wreck, the crew rushed to the scene only to be confronted by a scene of such shocking carnage. “We’re on scene,” Tolbermann barked into his radio. “We have a train collision!”

Tolberman and his crew cut through a fence to get to the scene. “Send five ambulances!” Tolbermann radioed. He got closer and saw flames. Send all available fire trucks, he ordered. As he got up to the collision itself, he noticed that the engine of the commuter train had been shoved into the inside of the first passenger car, which was grotesquely on its side. Dozens of passengers were emerging from the wreckage, some dazed, some walking in circles amidst thick black smoke. “Send every heavy rescue unit available!” Tolberman finally ordered.

As the night wore on, the scene became more unreal. A nearby school parking lot was turned into an instant airport, as helicopters ferried dozens of the injured to area hospitals and others brought in heavy equipment. The air was thick with the stench of fuel, the noise deafening, the night sky lit up by klieg lights. Search dogs scoured the passenger cars for victims. Rescuers peeled distended metal apart with pry bars and jackhammers in a race to reach the injured.

“It didn’t seem real,” says Firefighter Rick Palacio, 25. “It looked and sounded like a disaster movie.”

According to officials at the scene, the death toll from Friday’s crash has risen to 25 dead, with at least 135 wounded, 40 of them critically.

Sandra Collins, a spokeswoman for MetroRail, says at a news conference at the scene that the engineer of the commuter train, who most certainly died instantly, failed to heed a red light signal that caused the catastrophic collision with a Southern Central freight train, the worst in MetroRail history. “We want to be upfront and honest about what happened,” Collins is saying somberly.

The engineer has not officially been identified pending notification of relatives.

According to train blogger Joseph Dupree, the engineer was Daniel Whitcomb who had more than 10 years as a MetroRail employee.

The NTSB would have no comment on Collins’ statement, saying the investigation into the crash has only just begun.

Jonathan Needham, a spokesman for United Train Workers of America, which represents MetroRail engineers and conductors, blasted Collins, adding that any number of factors could be involved in the collision and that “assignment of blame at this point in time is wildly premature.”

Story 3, Sunday

MetroRail officials, at a news conference early today, say they expect to resume regular train service in time for Monday's evening rush hour, after hauling away the wreckage from Friday's disastrous crash and repairing about 1,000 feet of damaged rail. "I have every confidence in the system," says Dan Griffin, a member of the MetroRail board of directors and a Lakeland city councilman. "Rest assured I'll be on the train tomorrow."

A MetroRail locomotive towed away two passenger cars that were still movable as investigators from the NTSB combed the wreckage scene for clues to what may have caused the major mishap. Workers with blow torches and heavy equipment began the arduous task of dismantling the ill-fated train's engine and the passenger car it wound up in. Earlier, the Central Southern freight train was driven away.

A woman who identified herself as the mother of a teen-age boy who, along with friends, allegedly was trading text messages with the engineer of the tragic MetroRail train, says her son and his friends often rode the MetroRail train on Friday afternoons and were friends with the engineer. He is officially identified as Daniel Whitcomb, 54, of Lakeland. "They knew the engineer very well," the woman, who asked not to be named to protect the privacy of her 14-year-old son, says. "They are mourning his loss. They all aspire to be engineers some day."

The NTSB says it is treating the report of text messaging with caution and would not comment on a blogger's report that Whitcomb had been text messaging just prior to the crash.

Catharine Yoshiyama, a NTSB member, says her agency's investigation is focusing on whether a signal that should have alerted the engineer to stop the train was working properly and whether it went unheeded. Yoshiyama said a computer reading indicated that the last signal before the collision site was displaying a red light, but investigators want to insure it wasn't a false reading.

Yoshiyama criticized MetroRail for saying yesterday that the engineer of the MetroRail train had been at fault in the collision, specifically for failing to heed the red signal and causing the passenger train to crash head-on into a Southern Central freight train. "I don't know what basis they made that assertion on," Yoshiyama says. "We really try hard not to jump to any conclusions."

Yesterday, Sandra Collins, an official MetroRail spokesman, said that the MetroRail engineer failed to heed a red signal that caused his train to collide with the freight train, causing the worst MetroRail crash in MetroRail's history.

According to Yoshiyama, the MetroRail train was traveling at 42 mph when it "blew through" a junction with a railroad siding closest to the crash site, according to the train's data recorder.

A MetroRail dispatcher told NTSB investigators that he had set up the signals and switch so that the Southern Central freight train and the MetroRail passenger train could pass each other safely. Usually, the northbound MetroRail pulls off into a siding near the Glenview station till the southbound freight train passes.

"By the time the dispatcher noticed something was wrong, the two trains had already collided," Yoshiyama says. The train's conductor, who was seriously injured, called the dispatcher to notify him of the accident, she said.

The death toll remains at 25 dead, with 135 seriously or critically injured.

Story 4, Monday

Dressed in a somber, charcoal grey pantsuit to match the occasion, Sandra Collins at a morning news conference this morning announces her resignation as official spokesman for MetroRail, citing the withering criticism she's come under for her statements last week in the aftermath of MetroRail's worse rail disaster in its history. Collins, who was also wearing dark sunglasses, had said the engineer of the ill-fated passenger train, identified yesterday as Daniel R. Whitcomb, 54, of Lakeland, had apparently ran a red light that caused the mishap.

Talking to reporters and TV news crews, Collins, 50, says that she cleared that statement with her boss, MetroRail's chief executive Ben Bardlow, before issuing the statement. She says her intent was to rebuild the public's trust in the agency, and Bardlow thought that was a good idea. "Under such a tragedy as that occurred Friday, spinning was not acceptable," Collins says. "I still feel I did the right thing. After all, we work for the public."

Bardlow was not available for immediate comment.

Collins' assignation of blame for the crash last week set off a round of criticism from some members of the 12-member MetroRail board of trustees and the NTSB, among others. Some critics suggested that Collins' admission was "wildly premature."

Sources close to the investigation said today that federal investigators have obtained cell phone records for 54-year-old Daniel Whitcomb that indicate the engineer received a text message 24 seconds before his passenger train crashed head-on with a freight train. The sources, who wished to remain unnamed because they are not authorized to speak about the investigation, also claim that Whitcomb received and sent more than 50 text messages while on duty that day.

Cell phone records also confirm that Whitcomb apparently allowed some teenage rail enthusiasts to ride with him in the cab of his locomotive while on duty, the sources say. Unauthorized ride-alongs are "a serious breach of safety regulations that could cause dangerous distractions," a source said. There is no evidence to suggest that any of the teens were onboard the train Friday, the source said.

Ellie Rangsdorff, the new spokesman for MetroRail, declined to comment on the investigation.

The preliminary results of an autopsy for MetroRail engineer Daniel R. Whitcomb, 53, indicate that neither drugs or alcohol played a role in the crash, County Coroner Bruce Z. Willert says. Final autopsy results won't be available for some weeks, he says.

The apparent cause of Whitcomb's death was listed as massive trauma injuries. Willert says the engineer suffered "an egregious amount" of blood loss and "multiple fractures" in his torso and lower body. Whitcomb had a history of diabetes, the autopsy confirmed, but it was undetermined whether that was a factor in the crash.

The coroner's autopsy report also includes notes from investigators for the National Transportation Safety Board, which note that the MetroRail locomotive was pushed 54 feet into the passenger car behind it and that the bodies of eight of the victims were found in that car.

25 people were killed and 135 were wounded Friday in MetroRail's worst accident.

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