



After Incident Review (AIR) Committee Report

Incident Date: March 6, 2006

Incident Location: I-285 Westbound between Glenridge Drive & Roswell Road

Responders: Fulton County PD, Fulton County Fire, Marietta Wrecker Service, HERO Units, DOT District Maintenance, Fulton County Medical Examiner

Incident Summary

On March 6 at approximately 1255 hours, a motorist traveling westbound on I-285 just west of the Glenridge Road access ramp discovered a ladder lying just ahead of his car. He stopped in the travel lane. A tractor-trailer (#1) stopped behind the car. A second car, a Mazda sedan, stopped behind tractor-trailer #1. A second tractor-trailer (#2) saw the stopped vehicles and slammed on his brakes. Despite leaving at least 100 feet of tire rubber on the interstate, tractor-trailer #2 slammed into the Mazda, effectively folding it up from the rear like a bedroll. The front wheels came to rest on top of the driver, crushing him along with the rest of the Mazda. The four center lanes (of 6 total lanes) were blocked by the accident.

Incident Response

The initial dispatch went out at 1303 hours. A Fulton County police officer was already on-scene due to the fact that he was in the area, setting up his laser gun to run radar. Fulton County Fire was on-scene at 1307 hours. Several issues had to be addressed quickly:

1. Traffic on the “top end” of the Perimeter is usually more dense than other areas and extreme backups develop very quickly.
2. Traffic control was needed immediately as all westbound lanes had to be closed, but diverting westbound traffic was impractical (and shortly afterward, nearly impossible) due to the location of the accident.
3. As a fatality was involved, the accident had to be investigated as a crime scene involving both an accident investigator and the county Medical Examiner.

Other critical factors:

- a. Tractor-trailers were involved – a potential haz-mat operation
- b. Multiple vehicles and an entrapment were involved
- c. Extrication would be difficult as one tractor-trailer rested on the victim

Fulton County Dispatch notified GDOT at the Transportation Management Center at 1309 hours and the accident was visible on one of the NaviGator CCTV cameras. HERO Units were immediately dispatched to the scene. The system generated a response plan (RP), which was accepted. Traffic alerts about the accident were posted on 9 changeable message signs (CMS) at 1312 hours. DOT Maintenance was also sent to assist with cleanup.

Although there was no fire, two Fulton County fire trucks were on-scene to block the view of the accident. Despite this, onlooker delay shortly created an extreme backup on I-285 eastbound, all the way from the scene of the accident back to the Tom Moreland Interchange.

Marietta Wrecker Service just happened to have a wrecker headed southbound on GA 400 at the time of the accident, so it was able to get to the accident scene very quickly. The heavy wrecker was needed to lift tractor-trailer #2 off of the victim before extrication. The tractor was so damaged that it had to be separated from the trailer and taken apart for removal from the travel lanes.

Initially the four center lanes of I-285 were closed. At various points during the investigation and clearance, all lanes were closed or only one right lane was open. Motorists used the right shoulder to get around the accident. Some were able to exit the interstate at GA 400, Ashford-Dunwoody and Peachtree-Dunwoody roads. The arterials rapidly filled and traffic on these side streets came to a standstill. GA 400 was able to accommodate some of the volume, but as most of the motorists were headed west, other arterials such as Abernathy Road also became extremely congested very quickly. For this reason the HEROs kept the interstate lanes closed but did not attempt to divert traffic off of I-285.

Once the tractor was pulled off of the Mazda, the Medical Examiner completed his process (he had arrived in less than one hour). Then it was determined that extrication could be done much more discreetly and efficiently offsite. A flatbed tow truck was called for and the Fulton County Police and accident investigator completed their process while waiting for the tow truck.

By 1455 hours two right lanes were reopened. By 1508 the damaged tractor trailer was relocated to the right shoulder. Traffic control was removed at 1532 hours.

The victim was extricated from the Mazda offsite at a nearby abandoned car dealership and the entire process was completed within 15 minutes. The Fulton County fire personnel were released at 1523.

All lanes, including the shoulder, were reopened by 1623 hours. The total duration of the incident, from dispatch to clearance, was 3 hours and 28 minutes.

Incident Lessons Learned

The weather was a positive factor in clearing the incident. It was a clear day and the pavement was dry.

Tractor-trailer #2 was empty; this could account for its inability to stop in time to avoid crushing the Mazda.

Marietta Wrecker Service responded quickly with the proper equipment, and their personnel were properly trained to operate it. The extrication of the victim would have been severely delayed, if not impossible, without their assistance. A-Tow was originally called, but because they have no heavy wreckers, they asked Marietta Wrecker to assist. It was lucky that Marietta Wrecker had a truck in the area; they were able to get to the scene quickly. This serendipity is not something to count on in future incidents, however.

If a picture is worth a thousand words, then an aerial photograph is worth even more. A ladder truck was available to supply a "bird's eye view" of the accident scene, but it was not used for this investigation.

Incident Response Areas of Improvement

Chief Butler pointed out that A-Tow and Marietta Wrecker Service maintain their equipment properly and are well-trained in handling incidents, i.e. they know what equipment to bring to an incident scene when provided only basic information. As incident commander, he was fortunate to work with such experienced towing and recovery personnel. A key factor in efficient incident clearance is for EMS personnel and incident commanders to be able to identify the proper equipment needed for clearance, but many first responders don't have this information or training. Providing easy-access laminated flash cards with this information to jurisdictions was discussed.

Off-site extrication can reduce lane closure time significantly as well as prevent severe onlooker delay. The decision should be made as early in the investigation as possible so that a flatbed tow truck can be dispatched quickly. However, finding an appropriate site that is both large enough and private can be a problem, especially on the north side of the metro area where land values and in-fill development have skyrocketed. A list of available areas should be compiled for local jurisdictions and incident commanders – and updated on a regular basis as property status changes quickly.

The first responders on-scene should be able to call for towing and recovery. While a Fulton County police officer was first on the scene to manage this incident, this is not always the case. Standard operating procedure currently restricts who has the authority to call for a wrecker. This should be analyzed to ensure efficient dispatch of all responders to be involved.

While this incident occurred at midday and afforded the investigators time to complete their process before rush hour, many incidents occur just before or during peak traffic hours. In this case, the authorities completed their investigation before the flatbed tow truck arrived to remove the Mazda. However, if all the equipment and personnel (i.e. the Medical Examiner) needed for clearance arrive in a timely fashion, accident investigators should have everything on-hand to mark the scene and exercise the option of completing the investigation at a later time.

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