

VIA Rail Derailment: Passengers describe chaos, terror in deadly Burlington train crash

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A VIA Rail train is seen illuminated by a spotlight while emergency crews continue working after it derailed in Burlington earlier on Sunday.

CARLOS OSORIO/TORONTO STAR

Inside Via train 92, it was chaos and terror — passengers had been thrown on top of each other, frantic screams for help were coming from all directions, and blood had splattered inside cars that had flipped on their sides as a Toronto-bound passenger train derailed Sunday afternoon.

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Three locomotive engineers on the Niagara to Union station route were killed and 46 people were injured when all six cars of the passenger train flew from their tracks just east of Aldershot GO Station in Burlington.

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“I just looked up and I could see people flying all over the place,” said Richard Parsley, 60, who saw the engine flip shortly before his own rail car flew onto its side, breaking two of his ribs and his shoulder blade. “It’s mind-boggling.”

“There was blood everywhere,” said Faisal Abid, 21, seated in the first car.

The cause of the derailment is under investigation by the Transportation Safety Board, but experts said it appeared the cars came off as the train was crossing tracks; one authority confirmed there was a crew working on the tracks, which prompted the train to switch over to another set.

Where the cross-over occurred is within 100 metres of where, nearly four years ago, a 19-car freight train derailed, also sending the cars toppling on their sides.

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Authorities have said they are working to clear the tracks as fast as they can, but GO Transit said passengers can expect reduced service during the rush hour commute Monday.

Ambulances from Burlington, Toronto and Hamilton rushed to the scene alongside three air ambulances just after the accident occurred at 3:28 p.m.

As many as 60 people were trapped inside, with some remaining inside the mess of snarled metal until 8 p.m. Hamilton General Hospital initially declared a Code Orange, signifying a disaster situation.

Three passengers were airlifted to hospital with severe injuries, including a broken leg and a back injury. One passenger suffered a heart attack. Some 43 others, including one crew member, were either treated on scene or taken to local hospitals for minor injuries.

Abid said all around him, people were being thrown and frantically screaming that they were hurt.

Laptops and bags were falling from above, hitting people in the head. Abid recalls a young girl behind him, fearfully asking her parents if she was going to be an orphan.

Those sitting in the emergency exit aisles were being tossed outside the window, he said. “My legs were basically on the windows.”

“Everybody was shaking and crying,” said Deanna Villella, 40, who boarded at St. Catharines. The whole ordeal lasted maybe 10 seconds, but “felt like forever.”

University of Toronto student Liana Baciu, 22, was coming back from a reading week trip with her boyfriend to Niagara Falls when the car they were sitting in slammed into the side of a nearby building.

“It just kept jerking and jerking,” said Baciú. “Eventually we came to a stop. Everyone was sort of piled to one side.”

Some of the windows shattered. Suddenly it got really dusty inside the train.

“At first I thought maybe we hit a freight train,” said Baciú. “If you looked up you could see the roof of the building we had crashed into half covering the window.

“While the train was derailing I thought, ‘If I survive I hope I’m in one piece and if I don’t I hope it’s a quick death,’” said Baciú.

Once the train had settled on its side, the passengers tried to extract themselves from their seats and assess who was seriously hurt.

“Just a couple of seats down from us was a man whose back went through the glass,” said Baciú. “He really wasn’t able to move and he was in a lot of pain. There was a 10-year-old girl who fractured her arm. Farther down there was a lady with a dislocated shoulder.”

Baciú and her boyfriend were loaded onto a Toronto EMS bus and taken to Trillium hospital. The pair was diagnosed with whiplash and sent home.

“All I left the train with was the clothes I was wearing and my phone,” said Baciú. Her books, laptop and ID are still lodged inside the wreckage. Via Rail officials have told Baciú she will eventually get her luggage back, but for now, the psychology major won’t be able to do any studying.”

Baciú says she feels “shaken” and “really lucky.”

“I think it will be a few days until I fully understand the impact of what has happened.”

Of the three dead, two were experienced locomotive engineers. The train normally operates with just two engineers, but on this trip, a trainee was on board.

Their bodies were removed around 8 p.m. The names are not being released pending notification of next of kin.

“We’re a small company. We’re close — we know everyone by name,” said a visibly shaken John Marginson, Chief Operating Officer with Via. “We certainly feel for the families.”

Burlington Mayor Rick Goldring echoed the sentiments.

“Our thoughts are very much with the families affected by this tragic accident,” he said.

The train left the tracks near Plains Rd. and King Rd. When it stopped, six cars lay zigzagged off the tracks, at least three flipped onto their sides and two lodged up against a building. Two cars appeared as though they had been snapped clean apart.

Inside, refuse and luggage littered the floor.

Neighbours and shoppers at the nearby Burlington Ikea described hearing a crash or feeling the ground shake. Glenn Harris, who lives about 200 metres from the scene, said he heard “a very loud bang” that “rattled off the windows.”

It may be some time before the cause of the derailment is known, said Chris Krepski, spokesperson with the Transportation Safety Board.

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Two Transportation Safety Board investigators were working at the scene Sunday night, and four more are expected to travel from Ottawa. They will use witness reports, event recorders from inside the train, and evidence from the scene — “everything” — to piece together what went wrong.

In the February 2008 derailment, a freight train skidded off the lines, derailing 19 cars and tankers in the exact same block as Sunday’s accident.

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Three cars smashed into a crane manufacturing company on Enfield Rd. in Burlington — not far from the building where two of the Via trains cars crashed up against Sunday. A preliminary investigation in 2008 derailment found one of the trains had a broken wheel.

Rex Beatty, president of the Teamsters Canada Rail Conference, the union that represents Canada’s locomotive engineers, said Sunday night it appeared as though derailment occurred while the train was crossing tracks.

Trains run on various tracks, but normally they will stay on their designated tracks from beginning to end of a trip. If there’s work to be done or a blockage, trains will temporarily cross over.

“That manoeuvre is very normal. It happens all the time,” he said.

Beatty says he is aware that a crew was working on the tracks, which prompted the train to cross over from one track to another.

David Jeanes, national president of Transport 2000 Canada, a public transit advocacy group, described the track in question as a multiple main line used every day by Via Rail, CN Rail and GO Transit.”

“This track should have been well-maintained . . . This is a location where the trains can cross over from one track to another. At the point where the accident happened, there are track switches that allow trains coming out of Aldershot station to switch to different tracks as they head to Toronto.”

He said there have been CN freight train derailments in both Kingston and Pickering in the past five years, where the incidents happened at track switches. Fortunately, there were no deaths.

Jeanes added that when there is more complex track work, something can go wrong. “It’s just in the same way that automobile accidents are more likely to happen at intersections than straight roads,” he said.

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