

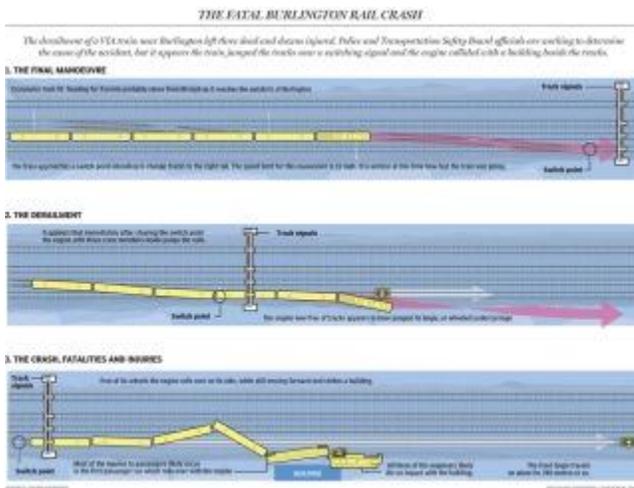


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Trainee driver could have been at controls when Via Rail train crashed: investigator

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Adrian Humphreys, National Post
Monday, Feb. 27, 2012



Click here to see an enlarged version of this graphic explaining how the derailment happened
[National Post Graphics](#)

The VIA rail train on its way to Toronto derailed at the very moment it was switching tracks — akin to changing lanes on a road — when trains on this stretch in Burlington must slow from 80 miles per hour to 15 miles per hour.

The derailment on Sunday killed two locomotive engineers and a trainee, and seriously injured three passengers; 42 other passengers were taken to hospital, where eight remained on Monday afternoon.

Whether commuter train 92, on its way to Toronto, reduced speed as it should is not yet known.

The answer lies in the so-called “black box” — which in fact is a bright orange metal case — now sitting in the back of a Transportation Safety Board van, where it is scheduled for detailed examination.

“We are going through the coaches to see why the injuries occurred; if there is something in there that, other than the speed of the train, caused the injuries, if seats came loose or whatever. We have the download from the event recorder, from the lead locomotive,” Tom Griffith, a regional senior investigator with the Transportation Safety Board of Canada, said in a Monday morning press conference.

VIA Rail identified the three employees who died as Ken Simmonds, 56, Peter Snarr, 52, and Patrick Robinson, 40.

Mr. Simmonds, from Toronto, leaves behind a wife and one daughter. He joined VIA as a locomotive engineer in 2007 and started his career with CN in 1979.

Mr. Snarr, also from Toronto, leaves behind a wife and two daughters. He also joined VIA as a locomotive engineer in 2007. He started his career with CN in 1978.



VIA rail Engineer-in-training Patrick Robinson is seen in undated Facebook photo. Robinson was one of three VIA rail engineers killed in the train derailment in Burlington on Sunday, February 26, 2012 Facebook

Trainee driver could have been at controls

It's possible that the trainee could have been behind the controls, but he would have been working under strict supervision, Mr. Griffith said.

“There were three crew members in the head end of the train. As to who was on the controls — right now we're still investigating that,” he added.

Mr. Robinson, of Cornwall Ont., was a new VIA employee who was on board as an observer as part of his familiarization program. He joined VIA in October 2011.

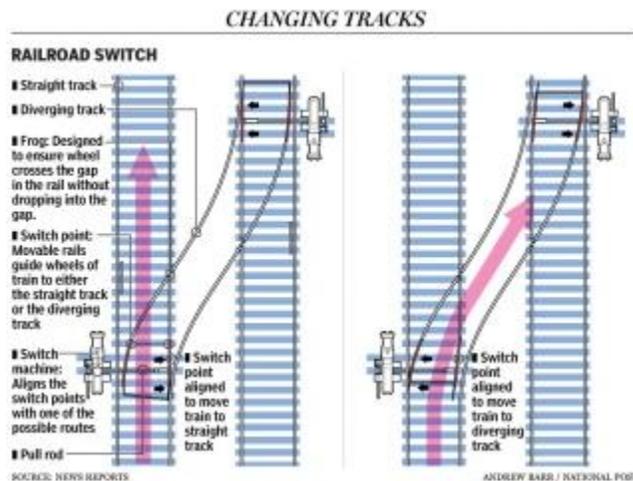
He leaves behind a young daughter and son.

While Mr. Robinson was new to VIA, he was an experienced engineer, said VIA spokesman Malcolm Andrews.

“He worked for two or three different railways, including CN, since 1990, in various positions, including locomotive engineer,” Mr. Andrews said.

Part of the training includes a familiarization process where new engineers ride on routes that they might eventually be working on with experienced engineers, Mr. Andrews said.

Mr. Robinson’s prior experience was on freight trains, Mr. Andrews said.



[Click to enlarge this graphic showing how train switches work National Post Graphics](#)

Event recorder will reveal pre-crash details; engineers ‘didn’t stand a chance’

The event recorders will tell investigators the speed, time, what controls were being activated or were not active — such as the train’s whistle or brakes — at the time of impact. It does not record audio or video from the locomotive, as is often the case for airplanes.

After the train derailed it slid into a building, destroying the locomotive cab where the three dead employees were.

“They didn’t stand a chance,” Mr. Griffith said.

‘Something went horribly wrong’

“I can tell you that the guys involved were senior employees, well-experienced employees,” said Teamsters Canada Rail Conference President Rex Beatty. “This would be a normal leg of the run between Niagara Falls and Toronto and I would suspect that they were performing their duties as they normally would and

that this all caught them by surprise.”

“My understanding is that they were dedicated employees doing their job and something went horribly wrong,” he said.



Via Rail engineer Peter Snarr in an undated Facebook photo. Snarr was one of three VIA rail engineers killed in the train derailment in Burlington on Sunday, February 26, 2012 Facebook

‘Too soon’ to say cause, investigators say

“We’re early into our investigation. It’s too soon for me to say right now what the cause was, but hopefully we will know,” Mr. Griffith said.

“We are going through these coaches now inside and outside to make sure nothing is wrong with them.” The train cars will be taken to an isolated area for further investigation. “We’re looking into every area that might have been causal in this derailment,” Mr. Griffith said.

No criminal charges have been laid, Mr. Griffith said, which is why the Transportation Safety Board has taken the lead in the investigation.

The Transportation Safety Board has started downloading information from the event recorder, Mr. Griffith said, but they “will have to go a little farther” to get the rest of the information because of the damage done to it during the crash.

Class-action lawsuit likely

A law office that successfully led a class-action lawsuit against Via Rail and CN after a 1999 crash has been contacted by a number of injured passengers.

[external] [Sutts, Strosberg LLP](#) will likely move forward on a multimillion-dollar class-action, said Sharon Strosberg, adding that it’s a very good case.

“We’re inclined to start an action, given our experience in that area,” Ms. Strosberg said.

How the calls first came in

Emergency crews were first alerted to a problem at 3:28 p.m. when an area resident called, indicating a train had derailed.

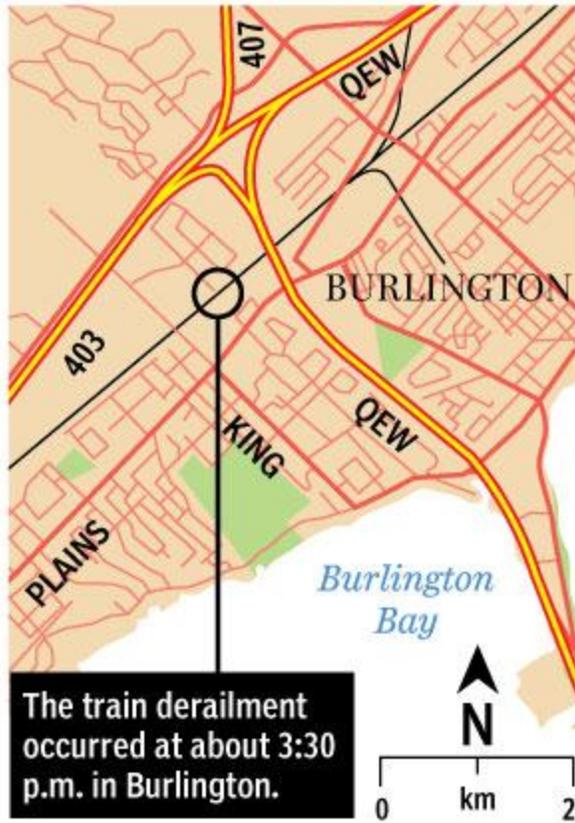
It took two minutes before the first call from inside the train; in total nine 911 calls were received in the first three-to-four minutes after the impact.

Some of the calls from inside the train were reporting chaos, blood, people injured. One man inside the train specifically asked for an ambulance.

Halton Police examining if vandalism or interference possible

THREE DEAD IN DERAILMENT

A Toronto-bound train from the Niagara area went off the tracks on Sunday.



RICHARD JOHNSON / NATIONAL POST

CLICK TO ENLARGE .

One track of the line has been reopened while the investigation continues. Two of the cars derailed have been placed back on the track, and released to train officials to move.

King Road, the nearest street to the scene, remains closed in all directions and will be for the duration of the investigation, said Sgt. Dave Cross of Halton Regional Police.

A police collision reconstruction unit is conducting their own investigation, Sgt. Cross said. "Our primary role is to determine if anything criminal has taken place here," said Sgt. Cross of Halton Regional Police, such as vandalism or purposeful interference.

Train crossing from one track to another as accident occurred

The train was crossing over from one track to another as one was being worked on by a crew, said Rex Beatty, the president of the Teamsters Canada Rail Conference, told CBC News on Monday.

"Think about it as a detour around that work area," Mr. Beatty said.

He told CBC the crew work would have had no impact on the crash and that crossovers are normal operations that happen routinely.

However, he admitted that it is his understanding that crossovers do not happen at that location that often.

"It would be unusual at that location given the proximity to Toronto, but it's certainly not abnormal in any way."

Onlookers mourn the dead

A middle-aged woman whose daughter works for VIA rail arrived near the scene on Monday afternoon. She taped three red roses to a street sign; attached was a note.

"God bless your souls my heart goes out to the families of the fallen ones ... May God hold you in his arms and console you in your hour of need," the note read.

Accident site close to scene of 2008 freight train derailment

The six-car VIA Rail passenger train came off the rails on a straight track in good weather Sunday afternoon, very near to the site of a 2008 freight train derailment.

On February 18, 2008, a broken wheel on one of CN's rail cars caused 19 freight cars to jump the tracks, causing delays and cancellations, but no injuries.



Train traffic begins Monday February 27, as inspectors continue their investigation in Burlington, Ontario where a VIA train de-railed Sunday Peter J. Thompson / National Post

Three passengers seriously injured

VIA officials said three passengers had serious injuries and 42 other passengers and one other crew member were also taken to local hospitals. Among the injured was a child. They were taken to four hospitals in Hamilton, Ont., and Mississauga, Ont.

The three most seriously injured suffered a broken leg, a back injury and a heart attack. One passenger was reportedly ejected from the train through a broken window.

Burlington Fire had 28 firefighters at the scene on Sunday. “We were doing extractions of the victims, as well as the fatalities,” said Burlington Fire Chief Shayne Mintz. His officers have had experience with a couple of train derailments in the past, he said.



A part of the VIA train Peter J. Thompson / National Post

Train passengers say they “still feel safe.”

As officials in orange safety vests scour the tracks around the fallen train cars and reporters gather 50 metres away awaiting more news, rail passengers waited somewhat anxiously to board at the nearest open train station.

“I’m not too freaked out, although I did think twice this morning,” Holly Lesperance, 19, a Ryerson University business student said.

Ms. Lesperance was returning from reading week, from Windsor to the stop in Burlington.

“I’ve been traveling by train to Toronto most of my life. I have family in Burlington, so I feel pretty safe,” she said. “It seems just like a freak accident. I still think it’s more dangerous to get in a car than a train.”

That thought was echoed by another passenger, Debbie, who declined to give her last name.

“I still feel safe,” she said. “I feel terrible for the people who went through that, but it still safer than driving on the 401.”

Debbie was traveling to Ottawa on the VIA rail. Her husband offered to drive her instead, but she declined, placing her faith in VIA.

Adjacent street nearly completely shut down

On Enfield Road near the accident, business owners said the street was almost completely shut down, slowing down business.

One business owner watched as crews lifted a train car with a crane-like piece of machinery from the tracks directly behind his building.

“A lot of my customers haven’t made it through, but I have enough work here to keep me busy,” said Dave Kew of Kews Automotive Needs.

VIA is asking those seeking information about passengers to call 1-888-842-6141.

With files from Postmedia News and Jesse Mirsky



A bouquet and note commemorating the dead placed near the derailment site; February 27, 2012
Peter J. Thompson / National Post



One locomotive and five passenger cars derailed in Burlington, Ontario, Sunday. Tyler
Anderson/National Post

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