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“Perfect Snowstorm” Hits Virginia

# 117-Vehicle Pile-Up in Stafford County Ties National Record for Largest Crash

by Tammy Poole

**F**eb. 22, 2001, will be forever known as the day of the perfect snowstorm in Virginia.

“The snow kept coming down harder, and it was extremely cold that day,” said First Sgt. Jeff Fox of the Area 5 office in Fredericksburg. “It was kind of like the Perfect Storm. Everything came together, unfortunately. And it could happen again.”

“It” was a bizarre series of multi-car crashes, including a 117-vehicle pile-up that tied for the largest crash in the country with a 1991 California crash.

At 10:24 a.m., the first accident report came in from Spotsylvania. By 11:15 a.m., Fox said there were 29 reportable accidents on Interstate 95 alone in Area 5.

And, between 10:24 a.m. and 6:57 p.m., there were 33 reportable accidents on the interstate involving 214 vehicles. The accidents were grouped into three separate groups, Fox said.

The statistics tell the story.

Sixty tow trucks were used. Sixty two people were injured. There was one fatality, a working mother who left work early to pick her child up from school when the private Christian school closed early.

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The first group of vehicles began colliding at 10:34 a.m. at the 125 mile marker near the Massaponax exit on I-95.

“That one involved 34 vehicles—several tractor trailers and passenger vehicles. There were 14 injuries. We had the first lane open for travel at 1:50 p.m. and all of them reopened by 5:06 p.m.”

Five troopers worked the scene as numerous others worked traffic flow and assisted with the crash. It was worked as several crashes in one, he said.

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At 10:35 a.m., one minute after the 34 vehicle crash, 33 vehicles collided near the 134 mile marker at the Potomac Creek area. ➤



“There were 16 injuries with this one, which included a commercial bus, multiple tractor trailers and cars. We had the first lane open at 12:20 p.m. and all lanes open by 5:06 p.m.”

Three troopers and a sergeant worked this scene. Again, they worked it as individual crashes as much as possible.

The first crash was a more compact scene between guard rails. Fox said it was very congested and a rather “tight squeeze.”

The second one was very spread out.

At 10:50 a.m., the big one occurred.

“One hundred seventeen vehicles—including 17 tractor trailers—wrecked at the 146.2 mile marker.”

Fox said he thought the accident at the 125 mile marker was big, until he learned of the one at the 146 mile marker.

“The two smaller ones were nothing compared to that one. When I got up there to the 146, I saw what looked like five football-field lengths of vehicles everywhere—some spread out, others pushed in tight. Two of the vehicles caught on fire, but the blaze was quickly extinguished.”

The scene looked like a war zone

—“like something on the highway going back to Kuwait”—or one of those movies where the end of time has arrived, he said.

“You could see the carnage. The snow kept coming down harder, and it was extremely cold that day. There was a boat sitting by itself at the front of the wreck. It was very eerie.”

The accident was worked like an assembly line, Fox said, with one trooper assigned to handle the investigation and at least 10 other troopers handling various tasks such as taking pictures or diagramming the scene.

“We had the first lane open at 8:54 p.m. and all lanes were open by 10:28 p.m.”

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**“In the middle of all the melee, one vehicle was untouched—wedged in between four tractor trailers.”**

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The unexpected disaster had the Division scrambling, as they called out “everybody we could get hold of,” Fox said. “The wrecks affected other areas as well. The big one was only two miles from the Prince William line, so all the backup occurred in the seventh division. Initially, 67 people were called out to work. We had BCI, the motor carrier and safety units helping out. Area 11 handled most of the traffic control. At one point, the sheriff’s office took care of the county accidents.”

Area hospitals as well as the rescue squads that were called on to transport the injured were inundated. Area communications were overwhelmed with all the 911 calls.

Even area wrecker services were swamped, Fox said. At least 60 wreckers were called in from the area and surrounding counties to haul away the vehicles.

“I’d asked for all the wreckers in Stafford, Spotsylvania and Prince William counties. There also were wreckers from Fauquier and Culpeper. At the time, we couldn’t determine what was drivable and what wasn’t.”

In a crash of that magnitude, there were unusual incidents, Fox said.



"In the middle of all the melee, one vehicle was untouched—wedged in between four tractor trailers."

The investigation was finally finished nearly two months after the crash. One of the possible causes? Driving too fast for road conditions, Fox said.

He cites a perfect example.

"One fellow interviewed by one of the TV stations said he crested the hill doing about 70 miles per hour and there were vehicles everywhere. So he threw his cell phone and had slowed down to about 20 miles per hour when he crashed. That's the sort of thing that causes crashes like this."

While the troopers were working the big three, there were seven more reportable crashes during the same time period combined with 31 non-reportable crashes in the county and on the interstate. Five more crashes were never found and they didn't even include numerous vehicles skidding off the road into ditches. And these numbers are low estimates, he said.

"Quite a few of our troopers didn't go home until 6 a.m. the next day."

Total resources for the Department alone through March 18 were 1392.9 hours for that day. Sixty-four sworn

employees were involved in the matter from beginning to end.

The main three troopers in charge of the accidents were Trooper Dan Redifer, who worked the 146-mile marker crash; Trooper Jason Dickerson, who worked the 134-mile marker crash; and Trooper Travis Purdue, who worked the 125-mile marker crash.

To date, Trooper Redifer has a 57 page report and 17 pages of truck reports because each tractor trailer requires a separate report.

"For about three weeks, we had a team of four to five troopers assisting him with follow-ups. Many people left

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the scene, were taken to shelters or hospitals. There was a massive follow up to the accidents."

By the end of April, things had "pretty much slowed down," Fox said. Some troopers were still doing reconstruction and interviews of the biggest crash.

"There is a minimum of 116 interviews with just the drivers alone excluding the fatality. That's not even counting any passengers in those vehicles."

Despite all the turmoil, Fox said he was proud to see how his troopers pulled together.

"The troopers—all of them, including safety, Division 7 and Division 11—worked hard. Nobody slowed down. Nobody complained. It was a mind boggling experience."

Several of the troopers were brand new to the job, having just been released that week from school.

Fox said he could just imagine them wondering if this was what it was going to be like all the time.

"We all came back to the office around midnight. We got pizza and brought it to the office," he said, laughing as he recalled how quickly the food vanished. ➤

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At their desks, the troopers were divided into three groups and were told to only work with their group and not discuss the other accidents, which might confuse the issue.

“We also entered all the vehicles into computers so we could tell where the vehicles were.”

As a result, the office has had less than 10 phone calls from people wondering where their vehicles had been taken.

Fox praised the support staff as well.

“The dispatchers—I can’t say enough about how hard they worked. We could see everyone getting tired, as they all sat at their tables, working. So many came together and rose to the occasion.”

Everyone involved should be proud of himself or herself, Fox said.

“The whole community came together. People were very civil and helpful. I did not hear of one incident of anyone taking advantage of anybody else. There were a lot of heroes that day. A lot of the troopers, as far as I’m concerned, rose to the occasion.”

Now that spring has arrived, things have quietened down to some degree, Fox said.

“I used to like snow. After this, I didn’t want it to snow anymore. I’m so glad spring’s here.”

Warm weather brings its own headaches, however. One month after the snowstorm, a full-size tractor-trailer loaded with sludge overturned at the 123-mile marker.

“People were very sensitive that the interstate was closed because a sludge truck had overturned,” Fox said. “The only thing worse would have been if it were hot outside that day. As it was, we ended up putting a trooper at every traffic light.”

Does it ever slow down?

Not often, Fox said.

“This is a young area with an extremely high turnover rate,” Fox said. “I came here in 1985 and left in ’94. I came back in ’95 then went to Luray. I’ve been back here a year. I must be crazy!” □