

Log H-424

NATIONAL TRANSPORTATION SAFETY BOARD  
WASHINGTON, D.C.

ISSUED: OCT 5 1984

Forwarded to:

Mr. Norman Darwick  
Executive Director  
International Association of  
Chiefs of Police, Inc.  
13 Firstfield Road  
P. O. Box 6010  
Gaithersburg, Maryland 20878

SAFETY RECOMMENDATION(S)  
H-84-73

At 11:45 a.m., on January 10, 1984, a G & D Auto Sales, Inc., tow truck was turning right from the company's driveway onto westbound State Route 44 in Rehoboth, Massachusetts, when the rear-facing passenger car in tow, a 1981 Oldsmobile, was struck by an eastbound tractor-semitrailer operated by Branch Motor Express Company. The 76,950-pound tractor-semitrailer continued eastbound; crossed the centerline of the damp, two-lane, two-way roadway; and struck the left front of a westbound Town of Rehoboth schoolbus carrying 15 students, ages 5 and 6. The 1979 schoolbus overturned and came to rest on its roof off the roadway. The driver of the tractor-semitrailer, the driver of the schoolbus, and one student were killed; 12 students were injured. The driver of the tow truck was not injured. 1/

On January 16, 1984, the steering column of the Oldsmobile was disassembled by a consultant for the Massachusetts Authorities to determine and assess the effect of the damage done to the steering wheel interlock system by the person(s) who had stolen the Oldsmobile on January 4. The consultant reported that after the thieves had removed the housing from the left side of the steering column, they pulled out the lock bolt spring so that it no longer activated the lock bolt when the ignition key was removed. With the spring pulled out, the lock bolt could no longer engage the lock plate below the steering wheel, and the steering wheel was free to move with no key in the ignition.

The angle of collision between the right front wheel of the Oldsmobile and the left steering axle wheel of the truck tractor was not more than 15°. The angle of collision between the Oldsmobile hood and the left front of the truck tractor was not less than 26°. The difference in collision angles indicates that the front wheels of the Oldsmobile were not aligned with the longitudinal axis of the Oldsmobile and that the front wheels were turned left. The Safety Board concludes that the front steering axle wheels of the Oldsmobile were not secured to prevent tracking outside the turning radius of the tow truck and that as the towtruck executed the right turn onto westbound State Route 44, the front end of the Oldsmobile crossed over the highway centerline and was struck by the tractor semitrailer.

1/ Highway Accident Report—"Collision of G & D Auto Sales, Inc., Tow Truck Towing Automobile, Branch Motor Express Company Tractor-Semitrailer, and Town of Rehoboth Schoolbus, State Route 44, Rehoboth, Massachusetts, January 10, 1984" (NTSB/HAR-84/05).

The driver of the towtruck had 29 years' experience and had been self-employed in the tow truck/body repair business for 22 years. The driver's qualifications and experience do not appear to be factors in this accident. However, after the accident, the tow truck operator reported that he thought that the steering axle wheels of the Oldsmobile were "locked." The fact that the key was not in the ignition and the position of the ignition switch, which indicated that the wheel was locked, may have misled the driver into believing the steering axle wheels were secured. Towing companies, especially those which tow recovered stolen vehicles for law enforcement agencies should be advised of the circumstances of this accident.

Therefore, as a result of its investigation, the National Transportation Safety Board recommends that the International Association of Chiefs of Police, Inc.:

Issue a notice to all association members advising them of the circumstances of the accident on January 10, 1984, in Rehoboth, Massachusetts, and the fact that the steering wheel lock which secured the steering axle wheels was disabled even though the ignition key was removed and the ignition switch indicated it was in a "locked" position. Suggest to your membership that towing companies performing towing services for each police department be contacted and advised of the circumstances of this accident. (Class II, Priority Action) (H-84-73)

The National Transportation Safety Board is an independent Federal agency with the statutory responsibility "... to promote transportation safety by conducting independent accident investigations and by formulating safety improvement recommendations" (P.L. 93-633). The Safety Board is vitally interested in any actions taken as a result of its safety recommendations and would appreciate a response from you regarding action taken or contemplated with respect to the recommendation in this letter.

BURNETT, Chairman, GOLDMAN, Vice Chairman, and GROSE, Member, concurred in this recommendation. BURSLEY, Member, did not participate.

By:   
Jim Burnett  
Chairman