



Virginia Commonwealth University

**Virginia
Multi-disciplinary
Crash Investigation Team**

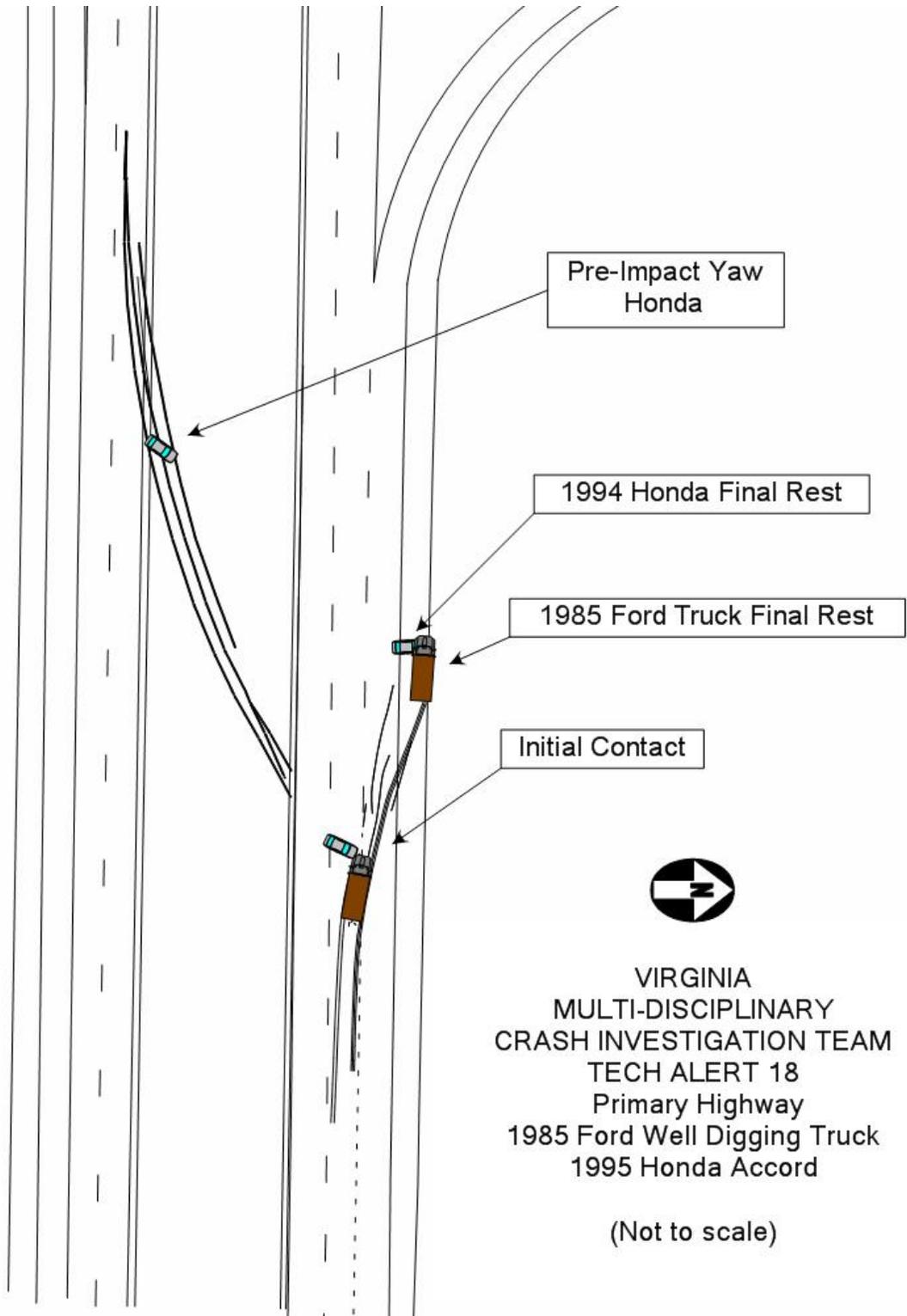
**Technical Alert Number 18:
Six Fatality Two Vehicle Crash**

Date: February, 2008

This Technical Alert describes an angle collision crash that occurred when a car crossed a median and struck a truck in the side, resulting in fatalities to all six occupants of the car. The occupants, who lived in another state, were difficult to identify because they did not carry identification that listed their current addresses. One passenger carried an invalid international driver's license.

On a clear, dry Wednesday afternoon in summer, a 1994 two door Honda Accord was traveling east on a urban primary road. The 24 year old female driver was accompanied by a 24 year old male friend in the front passenger seat. Four of the driver's siblings accompanied them: brothers who were 21, 16 and 13 years old, and an 11 year old sister. The group was traveling from a bordering state to vacation at a nearby tourist area, a trip that would normally have required only about an additional hour of driving. They had traveled at least three hours before the crash. None of the occupants wore safety restraints.

A 1985 Ford truck was traveling west, in the opposite direction, in the right lane. This vehicle is designed with a large flat bed to which well-drilling equipment is permanently mounted. A 41 year old male was driving the truck, accompanied in the right seat by the truck's registered owner, a 42 year old male. The driver was unrestrained but his passenger wore a lap belt. A post crash examination did not reveal any apparent vehicle defects that may have played a role in the crash severity.



The road is a divided four lane east-west urban primary route with asphalt pavement which is in good condition. The eastbound lanes are on a slight downgrade, and the westbound lanes are on a slight upgrade. The eastbound lanes are separated from the westbound lanes by a grass median approximately 55 feet wide. The lanes are 12 feet wide with asphalt shoulders and have rumble strips adjacent to the edge of pavement. The rumble strips are worn but still functional (The Virginia Multi-disciplinary Crash Investigation Team [VMCIT] recommends that city personnel inspect the pavement markings to evaluate their condition and apply new markings if necessary). Prior to the crash location, the right westbound lane widens to form a third lane, the deceleration lane for an exit ramp leading to a city road. The ramp separates from the main highway beyond the crash site. The road is controlled by pavement markings and signs. The signs are in good condition and the pavement markings are in fair condition. In addition, the road has raised snow plowable reflective pavement markers to help delineate the roadway at night and during inclement weather. The speed limit is 60 MPH.

The Accord ran off the left edge of the pavement, across the rumble strips and a few feet into the grass median. The driver swerved to the right to regain the roadway, lost control and continued several hundred feet down the road, swerving from lane to lane. The driver finally swerved left sharply enough that the vehicle rotated counter-clockwise and slid into and through the median, furrowing the grass and dirt along its path. The vehicle then entered the westbound lanes and encroached upon the path of the oncoming truck. The truck driver applied brakes and his vehicle slid approximately 75 feet to impact with the car. The Accord slammed into the truck's left saddle (fuel) tank at an angle as the vehicles engaged. They remained entangled as the heavier, equipment-laden truck pushed the smaller car to the west, gouging and scratching the road surface as they slid across the right travel lane and the deceleration lane. The 13 year old boy was ejected through one of the left side windows of the Honda. Fire erupted and completely consumed the Accord and partially burned the truck. At final rest, the vehicles were still attached, with part of the truck atop the car. The truck straddled the edge of the right shoulder, its right wheels off the roadway, and the back end of the car extended into the right travel lane.

As soon as the vehicles stopped, the truck passenger released his seat belt and began to exit the vehicle. The driver was dazed, having struck his head, and was unable to get out on his side. His passenger pulled him out through the right side of the vehicle as the fire began to blaze. Witnesses to the crash stopped on the road, called 911, and began attempting to assist the victims. An officer responding to the scene moved the injured boy further from the heat of the blaze. The fire was too intense to extricate any of the other victims; however, autopsies later revealed that they had all suffered fatal blunt force injuries to the head and/or chest. They were either dead or unconscious and close to death when the fire consumed the vehicle.

Fire, emergency and law enforcement personnel arrived on the scene within minutes. The truck driver was transported by ambulance to one hospital, while the boy was airlifted to another in the area. City police closed all lanes of the highway and rerouted traffic while they dealt with problems at the scene. A Medical Examiner was notified and came to the scene. He authorized removal of the bodies for transport to the District Office of the Chief Medical Examiner for autopsies and identification. The investigating officer measured and documented the physical evidence and had the vehicles towed. One of the eastbound lanes was reopened and, when the scene investigation was completed just over six hours after the crash, all lanes were opened and the scene was cleared. The sixth Honda passenger died at the hospital the following morning from injuries to his chest and abdomen.

The truck driver claimed that his license had been burned in the crash. A history check revealed that he had been licensed in the Commonwealth several years prior to the crash and had incurred one conviction out of state for speeding 1 – 9 miles above the speed limit, four years prior to this crash. His license had been cancelled in 2005 because he no longer had a Virginia address and was not considered a resident. He held a valid driver's license for the state in which he resided at the time of the crash. A check of his driving history from that state revealed that he had been convicted of traveling 15 mph above the speed limit in Virginia just over a year earlier.

The only forms of identification available for the Honda occupants were a driver's license issued to the driver and an "International Driver's License" issued to the front seat passenger. The first item was issued in a southern state, the same state in which the car

was registered. However, the driver had been living with her family in a northern state for some time prior to the crash. These circumstances slowed the investigator's ability to locate and notify next of kin, as well as making identification of the remaining victims more difficult. Ultimately, family members in the northern state were contacted. They provided dental records and DNA samples, which were used to make positive identifications for the badly burned victims.

The "international" driver's license was an item of interest to VMCIT members. Travelers who wish to drive in foreign countries may acquire a special permit (not a license) which indicates that they hold a valid driver's license in their home nation and are at least 18 years of age. The International Driver's Permit (IDP) must be accompanied by the individual's driver's license and can only be issued in the same country that issued the traveler's driver's license. The permit acts as a translation document, since it is translated into 10 languages and is recognized in over 168 countries.

The front seat passenger in this crash carried such a document, however, it was fraudulent. The passenger was from a South American country and this document was his only form of identification. It had been issued in the United States by a company based out of his state of residence, instead of his home country. The company that provided it was not authorized to sell the permits in the United States. Only the American Automobile Association (AAA) and the American Automobile Touring Alliance are authorized by the State Department to sell IDPs. Last year, AAA Mid-Atlantic released a statement highlighting the sale of these illegal documents, often to unsuspecting immigrants. The statement pointed out that online companies sell these fake documents for \$35 to \$100, while valid ones only cost \$10. The bigger concern, however, is that immigrants are falsely led to believe that the permit takes the place of a valid driver's license and allows them to drive legally in the United States. The company that issued the document carried by the front seat passenger claimed, "Our company can provide you with International Driver's License." It does not call the document a permit, although the ad does specify that an individual must also carry a valid "National Driver's License." This company charges \$40 for the "IDL" and offers the service by mail for slightly more.

The Honda driver's license had been issued over two years prior to the crash and she had no history of violations in the state of issuance or in the Commonwealth. The United States was not her immediate family's country of origin, but she was reported to have lived here for many years. Her total driving experience is unknown, but she apparently had driven between the northern state where she and her family resided and the southern state of official residence on more than one occasion. One of the purposes for her last trip to this southern state was to register the Honda and a second vehicle she owned, so that the registrations for both vehicles would be due for renewal at the same time. Additionally, she insured the Honda with a new company in that state, although the new policy was not effective until after the end of the month in which the crash occurred.

The Honda had three owners prior to the driver at the time of the crash. The driver had purchased it in a northern state just over two months earlier and registered it in the southern state that issued her driver's license. She purchased permanent plates for the vehicle in that state, just hours before the crash. Family members indicated that she had traveled to the southern state to obtain car insurance in addition to the registration. A CARFAX report did not list an odometer reading for this last ownership transfer, but a year prior to the crash, it listed the mileage as 148,899. This vehicle had been involved in three previous collisions, and at least two of these reported frontal impacts. The last collision was reported just over a year prior to the fatal crash and involved the Honda striking a parked motor vehicle. The vehicle had passed a safety inspection at the time of the last registration and was not known to have any defects.

This crash was one of six multiple fatality crashes that occurred in Virginia over a two month period in late spring and summer. The victims were from South America or a Caribbean nation and this crash investigation revealed similarities to other investigations (see *VMCIT Report Number 203—Two Multiple Fatality, Single Vehicle Crashes*). Although not all the victims in this crash were Hispanic, they were immigrants with extended families. The crashes all occurred during long distance trips and were the result of overcorrection after the vehicle left the original lane of travel. The vehicle carried more passengers than is typical and none of them in this crash wore safety restraints, including the two children. Although the front seat occupants of the crash would not have survived even if they had been secured in their seats, it is possible that several of the

rear seat occupants could have survived if they had been belted. Their blunt force injuries may have been significantly reduced and they could have been rescued from the vehicle before it was consumed by fire, potentially surviving this tragic crash.