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Driver Confusion Eyed In Deadly Bush Crash



Investigators Say Driver In Georgia Bus Crash May Have Mistaken Exit Ramp For Lane

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Investigators said the driver involved in Friday's deadly bus crash in Georgia apparently mistook an exit ramp for a lane. The bus, carrying a university baseball team from Ohio, tumbled off of a highway overpass and onto pavement 30 feet below. The husband-and-wife drivers

were killed, along with four students.

Investigators said the drivers had just boarded the bus less than an hour before in order to relieve another team. Authorities said there were no skid marks at the crash site and hoped to get more clues from the bus' computer system.

Bluffton University, a small college in Ohio, was thrown into mourning after the bus crash.

The team from the close-knit, Mennonite-affiliated Bluffton University was making its annual spring training trip to Florida before daybreak when the charter bus crashed, scattering bags of baseball equipment across the road and splattering blood on the overpass. Some of the athletes climbed out the roof escape hatch, dazed and bloody.

"I just looked out and saw the road coming up at me. I remember the catcher tapping me on the head, telling me to get out because there was gas all over," said A.J. Ramthun, an 18-year-old second baseman from Springfield, Ohio, who

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was asleep in a window seat and suffered a broken collarbone and cuts on his face from broken glass. "I heard some guys crying, 'I'm stuck! I'm stuck!'"

Investigators said the driver apparently mistook the exit ramp for a lane and went into the curve at full speed. It was dark at the time, but the weather was clear. Photos from the crash scene on the 1,150-student campus in Bluffton, about 50 miles south of Toledo, students and community residents ? some wiping away tears ? filled the gymnasium to grieve and learn more about what happened. When news of the crash appeared on television, students on campus desperately tried to reach some of the athletes on their cell phones.

Sophomore Courtney Minnich said that at a college as small as Bluffton, "even if you didn't know everybody, it will hurt, because you've seen them on campus."

(CBS)Classes were canceled, along with other sports trips that had been scheduled during next week's spring break. Two airlines arranged for the players' parents to fly to Atlanta free on Friday evening.

Megan Barker, a sophomore from Bucyrus, Ohio, said she knew just about everyone on the team and described them as "a fun-loving group of guys." She added: "They live as a family."

Beyond the six killed, 28 players and their coach, James Grandey, 29, were taken to the hospital. He and six players were reported in serious or critical condition; many of the rest were soon released. The players' injuries included broken bones, cuts and bruises.

The players not in critical condition do not have head injuries, CBS affiliate WGCL-TV reports.

The bus had set out from Ohio the evening before and had traveled all night long before it went off the road and landed on its side about at about 5:30 a.m. on Interstate 75. Just last night at Bluffton, there was a service to pray for a safe journey for the team, CBS News correspondent Randall Pinkston reports.

Two vehicles traveling under the overpass were struck by the bus, but their drivers were not hurt.

"It looked to me like a big slab of concrete falling down," said pickup-truck driver Danny Lloyd, 57, of Frostburg, Md. "I didn't recognize it was a bus. I think when I saw the thing coming, I think I closed my eyes and stepped on the gas."

The National Transportation Safety Board was called in to investigate.

Authorities said the husband-and-wife drivers had just boarded the bus, relieving another team less than an hour before. Investigators said there were no skid marks, and they hoped to tap into the bus' computer system for clues.

It was not immediately known if the bus had seat belts. Motorcoaches like the one involved typically do not have seat belts in the passenger section. Calls to the charter company, Executive Coach Luxury Travel Inc. of Ottawa, Ohio, were not immediately returned.

The bus company has a clean safety record, according to inspection reports by



the Federal Motor Carrier Administration (FMCA), the agency in charge of commercial bus safety, reports CBS News.

The company, which employs 20 drivers and owns at least seven buses, has had no crashes and no safety violations in the past two years: the company has passed 12 roadside inspections of its vehicles and drivers, CBS News reports.

The university identified the victims as sophomores David Betts and Tyler Williams; freshmen Scott Harmon and Cody Holp; and bus drivers Jerome and Jean Niemeyer, all of them from Ohio.

"This is deeply impacting all of our students, faculty and staff. We know these people on a first-name basis," said James Harder, the school's president. "For now we're pulling together and supporting each other as best we can."

The baseball team had been scheduled to play its first game of the season in Sarasota, Fla., on Saturday and had eight more games scheduled in Fort Myers, Fla.

The university is affiliated with the Mennonite Church USA. About one-fifth of the students are Mennonite, and the school stresses spirituality, but it is open to all religious backgrounds.

The church emphasizes pacifism and nonviolence. But unlike adherents of more conservative Mennonite denominations and the Amish, members wear modern clothing and use electricity. Smoking and drinking are banned on campus.

At a campus chapel service the night before the bus trip, students had prayed for safe travel for their sports teams and other students during spring break.

"Sometimes you take that stuff for granted," said Katie Barrington, a junior from Brooklyn Heights, Ohio.

Bluffton football players were working out in the weight room when they saw news of the crash on TV and recognized the logo on the bus as the company that all the school's sports teams have used, assistant football coach Steve Rogers said.

"That's when reality hit everybody," he said. "Everybody was in shock. Nobody knew what to say or what to feel." He added: "It hits home harder than it would if it had happened at a bigger school. Everybody knows each other."

Matt Ferguson, a freshman baseball player from Pleasant Hill, Ohio, said most of the freshmen had stayed behind.

"We were bummed out we didn't get to go," he said. "Now we don't know what to think."

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