The crash of bus 405

by Jay Levinson and Elie Shmeltzer

Following the accident which caused fourteen deaths on 6th July 1989, the authors stress the important role the police can play in identifying victims.

At 11.50 hours on the morning of Thursday 6th July 1989, a passenger grabbed the steering wheel of Bus 405 travelling from Tel Aviv to Jerusalem, forcing the vehicle off the road and into a deep ravine. Two hours later, after the wounded had been evacuated to hospital and the overturned vehicle had been fully searched, the death toll stood at fourteen.

For the first time since its establishment four years earlier, the Disaster Victim Identification (DVI) Unit of the Israel National Police was called into action. (The Unit functions as a technical assistance group in the Division of Criminal Identification & Forensic Science, with overall incident responsibility remaining in the hands of the territorial command, in this case the Jerusalem Sub-District.)

The incident scene was carefully recorded by three units from the

The authors:

Dr Levinson is a Superintendent of Police assigned to the Disaster Victim Identification Unit of the Israel National Police. Chief Superintendent Shmeltzer is the Head of the Field Assistance Section of the Israel National Police

Mobile Crime Laboratory. Preliminary, or "soft" identifications were also made to start the investigative process. However, one particular incident emphasized the problematic nature of this procedure and the caution required. An identification card was found on one specific body. Although photo comparison seemed to confirm identity, work rules precluded this as final identification, since there have been too many cases of one person carrying either false documentation or the papers of another person. Fingerprints of the person to whom the identity card had been issued were compared with the deceased, and the negative results confirmed the error-prone nature of identification based upon documentation. The next day it was learnt that the identity card had fallen from the pocket of a rescue worker who had worked at the scene.

As the bus rolled into the ravine, the fuel tank caught fire and set the chassis alight. Hence, the condition of several of the bodies was extremely difficult. Volunteers from a local religious burial society assisted in handling the deceased victims. After the incident those volunteers were organized into formal teams with a commander and a telephone response network, since it was realized that moving badly burnt or decayed bodies was a difficult

task requiring unique motivation. At least one volunteer present at the scene still has psychological scars from what he saw almost three years ago.

Identification at the Forensic Medicine Institute

By evening all of the fourteen bodies had been transferred to the Institute of Forensic Medicine in Tel Aviv-Yafo where a DVI operations centre was established according to contingency plans.

Reports about fellow passengers were received from hospitalized victims, and co-ordination was established between body numbers assigned in the field and numbers given upon receipt at the Institute.

Three DVI teams assembled, bringing their identification kits, and team members started the process of collecting post mortem information from the victims. Concurrently, the police started the process of trying to collect parallel ante mortem data.

In all cases, post mortem information was both written on Interpol forms designed for the purpose

STRUCTURE

The Israel National Police has several dozen DVI teams throughout the country. Each team is headed by an evidence technician who is assisted by an investigator and two forensic odontologists. Pathologists and X-ray technicians are on call.

The DVI Headquarters Unit provides administrative support and co-ordinates logistics, manpower requirements, etc. Temporary mortuaries have also been pre-selected throughout Israel.

and recorded by photography. This proved important later when the photographs helped clarify one notation made by a forensic odontologist.

Due to religious sensitivities no autopsies were conducted, but heavy emphasis was placed on X-ray and external examination.

In some cases the collection of ante-mortem information was relatively simple. One victim, determined to be a soldier by his uniform and identification tag, was quickly identified by fingerprints obtained from his military file. In another case a family came to the Institute because the evening news had shown pictures from the crash site. Although the faces of victims could not be discerned, this family had recognized their missing daughter by the colorful dress which she had been wearing. Viewing the body corroborated the family's contention, but too many mistakes have been made with identification based upon personal

recognition. Three hours later, in the middle of the night, the family returned with the relevant dental records, and a final identification was made.

Another victim was identified by classic police investigation. Examination of Deceased No. 13 showed a religious garment and two keys, along with several pieces of paper with notes in Russian in a trouser pocket. One telephone number appeared several times in the notes, and a call led to the Jewish Agency in Jerusalem. A visit to a local religious institution for Russians yielded another lead - someone recognized another phone number as that of a school principal. When interviewed, the educator recognized the content of one note as work from one of her classes. The roll book was examined, a missing student was found, and a visit was made to his apartment. The keys found on the body opened the apartment door and mailbox of the missing student.

The building manager then confirmed that the notes in Russian were telephone messages which he had written for the missing student. We give this example to illustrate the fact that standard investigative methods can prove invaluable in some cases.

Results

In all, one victim was identified by fingerprints, another eleven were identified by forensic odontology and one was identified by a classic police investigation.

Conclusion

After the above incident lessons were learnt, and changes were made in working procedures. Investigative units tasked with ante mortem information collection were given more extensive DVI briefings, and recording of telephone queries was given stronger emphasis. Furthermore, revisions were made to the DVI kits

Most important, however, many officers came to realise that disaster victim identification constitutes an important function for which the police must constantly be ready.

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