

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

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

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