

Local Railway Items from Ottawa Papers - 1979

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Kingston (CN)

Morrisburg

Turbo trains pulled off rails in wake of mysterious blaze. (with pictures)

MORRISBURG Via Rail pulled its Turbo super trains out of service today and the federal government announced a full-scale investigation into the cause of a fire that badly damaged a Turbo near here Tuesday.

The fire in the lead engine of the Via Rail Turbo passenger train forced evacuation of 210 passengers on a desolate stretch of track.

No one was seriously hurt in the fire which occurred on a run from Montreal to Toronto.

The two-hour blaze, which sent clouds of smoke billowing into the early evening sky, reduced a power dome car and a coach to molten plastic. Two other coaches on the nine-unit Turbo, which has a capacity for 392 passengers, sustained serious heat, smoke and water damage in the 5:15 p.m. blaze.

Via Rail, the Crown corporation which operates the country's passenger rail services, said it has taken its other two Turbo super trains out of service pending its own investigation.

The federal government decided to conduct its investigation following a meeting today of the Canadian Transport Commission's railway transport committee.

The committee invoked a section of the Railway Act which empowers the commission to appoint investigators to look into all matters concerning the cause, circumstances and prevention of accidents.

The Turbos were replaced on the Montreal-Toronto run with slower, conventional equipment. Via Rail operates two Turbos daily in each direction. The replacement trains will take about 30 minutes longer to make the run.

The only known injuries following Tuesday's fire were sprained ankles suffered by passengers on the soft railway roadbed during a 1.5-kilometre trek from the scene to the nearest crossing, about six kilometres west of Morrisburg.

Volunteer firefighters from Iroquois, Morrisburg and Williamsburg were forced to drive their trucks down the track, taking 30 minutes to reach the scene.

Firemen sprayed foam and water on the burning Turbo units for 90 minutes before the fire was brought under control about 7:20 p.m.

A Canadian National regional superintendent who had been a passenger on the Turbo said the equipment should not have burned because built-in fire extinguishing systems are designed to activate automatically when engine heat exceeds a certain level.

However, Daniel Rosseel, Via's Quebec region spokesman, said from Montreal that the Turbo does not have an automatic fire extinguishing system, but is equipped with emergency indicator lights on a control panel in the engineer's compartment.

Passengers from the Turbo train which burned near here Tuesday finally arrived in Toronto at 11:30 p.m., about 3 1/2 hours late.

After a 2 1/2-hour wait beside the tracks, the stranded passengers were picked up by the regularly-scheduled Rapido from Montreal. At Brockville a number of passengers were transferred to the Exec from Ottawa, also on a regular run.

About 25 metres of track and several ties will be replaced today as a result of the fire, said Raymond Menard, a CN foreman based in Iroquois. Although the job will take up to four hours, service won't be disrupted because traffic will be switched to the parallel track, he said.

Menard said that about eight ties were damaged by fire. While the rail appeared undamaged, it may have been weakened by the fire and will be replaced as a precaution.

Daniel Rosseel, Via Rail's Quebec region spokesman, said work crews took five hours to make the damaged train mobile so it could be hauled to Montreal.

Another Turbo train left Montreal as scheduled today, while in Toronto a Rapido was being used as a replacement for the regularly-scheduled Turbo run to Montreal.

A Via Rail spokesman said he was not sure if it would be feasible to repair the Turbo a sleek single body structure and return it to service. There are still two other Turbo units in service. All the Turbo units are 12 years old.

In Toronto, Maurice Simms, Via's Ontario region spokesman, said that while the Turbo has had a checkered history of malfunctions, the one aspect officials were, and still are, not worried about is safety.

"No, we are not concerned with the safety aspect of the Turbo," said Simms. "We are not unduly alarmed."

In 1973, a CN Turbo caught fire just west of Montreal while on a demonstration run for officials of Amtrak, the U.S. passenger rail company. Amtrak was still sufficiently impressed with the train to buy it.

Upset passengers trek out safely.

Passengers from Via Rail's Toronto-bound Turbo that burst into flames Tuesday near Morrisburg claim the train's crew was under-equipped and slow in reacting to the blaze.

Terry Taylor of London, who was travelling home from Moncton and was in the lead car when the fire started, said there was smoke coming from the engine area but no one believed there was a fire.

"They could have probably put it out, but the train people had to go five cars back to get a fire extinguisher," said Taylor. Via officials said Tuesday each unit is equipped with a fire extinguisher.

Taylor was one of 210 passengers who rolled into Toronto's Union Station late Tuesday aboard the Rapido, a Via train that picked them up about three kilometres from the fire site.

Helen Daroch of Toronto, who was returning home with her sister Doris Birch, said passengers "were told there should have been some device to put out the flames in the engine panel but all they had was little fire extinguishers."

Birch said: "We got away quickly when we heard the train was mostly plastic."

Mary McIntyre of Toronto said she was dumped out in the middle of nowhere, forced to walk three kilometres on track rails and then stood for three hours waiting for another train.

"Not once did anyone say they were sorry," she said. "They were rude, and you can bet I'm going to write them a pretty nasty letter."

Clara West of Burlington said passengers were plagued by mosquitoes after being ordered from the train.

She fell while walking to the nearby village of Iroquois and received treatment for a badly sprained leg.

Judi Jewinski, of Waterloo, said she took the Turbo by accident and joked to a friend that she hoped she'd make it, referring to the problems that had plagued the train in the past.

She said a conductor came through their coach telling passengers they would have to leave the train for a few minutes because of technical difficulties.

"When I got out, the front was in flames," she said.

When the passengers finally arrived in Toronto, a shaky and tearful Mary Harrietha, of Halifax, hugged and kissed her two children Danny, 22, and Laura, 20, whom she hadn't seen in a year.

"I was scared stiff," she said. "There was a huge explosion and I didn't know what to do. I was afraid my kids would think I was dead."

Twisted wreckage of train strewn for 360 metres (with picture)

WEMYSS (Staff) Perth resident Murray Blair, who arrived at the scene of a train-truck crash here minutes it happened Wednesday evening, said the cab of the trailer was sitting undamaged just across the tracks when he got there.

"The train had hit the tractor-trailer just where the cab joins the rear section that's probably what saved the driver's life," Blair said today. "The driver told me he had driven that road every day for a month on trips to Cornwall.

"He said he slowed down and put it into low gear and just as he got the cab up on the tracks he saw the train's light," said Blair. "He put his foot to the mat but he knew he wasn't going to make it, but the action of his wheels when the train hit probably saved him from being dragged back into it."

Blair and his friend George Perkins, who heard the train whistle at his home two kilometres away before the crash, found Butterworth still in the engine, his ankle broken by a log from the tractor trailer that had smashed through the window.

Coburn was sitting in a nearby ditch with blood from his torn ear dripping down his face, said Blair.

The train's 24 cars were strung along a 360-metre stretch of track. Some were piled 15 metres high. One of the engines turned completely around on impact.

Most of the cars were carrying new GM cars destined for St. Therese, Que.

Four cars normally used to transport gasoline, wax, and asbestos were empty. The train was also carrying a few carloads of auto parts.

The tractor trailer was left lying in a deep ravine at the side of the track.

Two auxiliary trains from Toronto and Montreal arrived here at about 1.5 a.m. to begin hauling the twisted wreckage off the track.

More than 150 metres of ruined track must be replaced.

Freight trains leaving Montreal and Toronto were delayed Wednesday and are now being rerouted on Canadian National Railway lines. Passenger service was not affected.

CPR officials expect the cleanup operation and repair work for the tracks to take about another day. The track is expected to be cleared by 4 a.m. Friday