

INSIDE STORY

2 MTA Employees Recall Metrolink Collision in Burbank

By BILL HEARD, Editor

Dana Woodbury is still sore from bruises and scrapes suffered during the crash of Metrolink 210. These days, he still is uneasy commuting by rail, although he takes the train to work.

John Dover was back at work, Jan 21, despite aches and pains. Still reluctant to board a train, he drove to work. He starts therapy soon for his shoulder and arm injuries.



PHOTOS BY GAYLE ANDERSON

(Jan. 21, 2003) It was Monday morning, Jan. 6, the start of a new week and Dana Woodbury was annoyed. He had just missed his 7:45 a.m. commuter train from Canyon Country into Union Station.

An MTA transportation planning manager who joined MTA in 1982, Woodbury, 52, grabbed a cup of coffee as he waited to board the next train, Metrolink's 210. The train was late coming up from LA. It would stop at Via Princessa, where Woodbury waited, and make a turnaround trip to the city.

When at last the four-car train pulled into the station, the conductor apologized to his patrons for the late arrival. Woodbury boarded the second car and took a seat on the right. He relaxed with his coffee as the train eased out of the station a few minutes behind its scheduled departure time of 8:47 a.m.

TOS John Dover caught the 210 at Santa Clarita.



John Dover, a 27-year MTA employee and transportation operations supervisor attached to the Bus Operations Control Center, caught the 210 one stop down the line at Santa Clarita. "When I got aboard, the conductor said, 'I hope we won't have any more delays to downtown.'"

Dover, 51, found a seat in his favorite location – on the left-hand side, mid-level in the first car near the engineer's compartment. On this journey, the engine was positioned at the rear of the train.

Underway again, both men settled in for the hour-long commute.

60 passengers, crew on board

At Newhall, more passengers boarded. Others climbed aboard at the Sylmar/San Fernando and Sun Valley stations. As the train gathered speed en route to Burbank, about 60 passengers and crew were on board.

"We had just left the Sun Valley station about 20 minutes out from LA," Woodbury remembers of the tragedy that was about to strike. "We had just gotten up to speed and may have been going 70."

Suddenly, Woodbury felt "a marked jolt as if we'd hit something on the tracks." Debris, pieces of a crossing gate, flew past. Out his window, he saw the lights of a broken crossing signal still flashing. "I knew instantly we must have hit something at a crossing."

Dana Woodbury, a transportation planning manager, returned to work Jan. 13.



One car ahead, Dover felt an impact and saw the engineer stand up and take a sideways step out of his compartment. "He said something like, "We hit a truck!"

And, indeed, before the engineer could apply the brakes the train had ploughed into a stake-bed truck that had driven through or around the crossing gate at San Fernando Road and Buena Vista in Burbank. It was 9:30 a.m.

"He just pulled out in front of me. I couldn't react. I couldn't react," Dover heard the engineer say. The train continued for at least 1,000 feet while derailling.

Lurching toward a wall

The front of the first car began to rise and roll over. Glancing out a window, Dover saw it was lurching toward a retaining wall that separated the track bed from the Golden State Freeway.

"I'm holding on and we're getting closer to the retaining wall," he says, recalling the grinding sound the car made skidding across the ground. "Then we hit it and the next thing I know, I'm thrown to the other side." The noise became even louder as the car scraped along the concrete wall.

The car had been thrown on its right side and now was facing the direction from which it had come. The engineer was lying across the door of his compartment. A woman passenger was pinned beneath a table and couldn't move.

Dover discovered he was bleeding from a deep gash that ran from the middle of his forehead to behind his right ear. His shoulders and neck were stiff and his left arm was hurting badly. As he moved to assist the engineer and the trapped passenger, he could see people running toward the train.

Meanwhile, in the next car back, Woodbury grabbed for a handhold as the train began to sway violently from side to side and then rise into the air. He was momentarily irritated that he spilled coffee on his trousers.

He got down between the seats to protect himself but was propelled across the car when it fell onto its left side. He hit the wall hard, bruising his backside and spraining both wrists.

Held on to their children

Near him were two women with babies. Fortunately, they had been sitting on the left side and were not thrown around. Both managed to hold on to their children throughout the crash.

Another passenger, pinned between his seat and the wall, called for assistance. Woodbury helped free the man. "We tried to figure out how to get out. The windows were too high to climb out of and one end of our car was blocked because the third car was propped up on it."

The shaken passengers moved cautiously, stepping on the window and walls of the overturned car, climbing over seats and the passengers' scattered possessions to reach the forward door.

Just as the group reached the door, rescue workers began climbing in. The passengers stumbled out into the daylight and were astonished by the devastation.

"It was a shock," says Woodbury. "It brought tears to my eyes."

The train was off the tracks, cars on their sides, rails torn from the roadbed. Splinters from the mangled ties lay all about. The injured sat on the ground awaiting help or moved slowly along the train, dazed, some bleeding. Emergency workers moved among them, rendering first aid and providing comfort.

Used 'jaws of life'

It took John Dover a lot longer to get out of the first car – maybe 45 minutes – and it wasn't easy. Rescuers had to use the "jaws of life" to free the door. The engineer was taken out on a backboard, then the injured woman was lifted out before the rest scrambled to safety.

Although he walked away, Dover received first aid for his injured head and, along with several others, was transported to Providence St. Joseph Medical Center in Burbank. He was treated for his wound and for the abrasions on his shins and right thigh. He was given medication for the pain in his left arm and shoulders.

His wife, Gail, and daughter, Christy, his mother-in-law, Cathy, and a fellow BOCC employee, TOS Russ Modell, met him at the hospital.

"My wife had tears in her eyes. She said, 'I'm sure glad to see you,'" says Dover, who returned to work on Tuesday, Jan. 21. "I said, 'I'm glad to see you, too.'"

Thirty-three passengers and crew on the 210 were injured in the crash. Engineer Jim Cook suffered a broken wrist and other injuries. A 48-year-old woman and two others incurred serious injuries. The driver of the stake-bed truck was killed on impact.

Although in some pain from his bruises and sprains, Woodbury remained at the scene, giving a statement to a police investigator. He called his wife, Sherrie, who immediately drove in from Acton to pick him up.

As he looks back on the event, it all seemed to move in slow motion.

"I didn't feel a lot of fear," says Woodbury, who returned to work, Jan. 13. "You're in the moment and don't have time to think about it. You just hope when it ends that you'll still be here."

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