Highway 401 tragedy hits Hamilton family

Deputy coroner identifies two more of the dead in Friday's horrific accident

BY DONOVAN VINCENT
STAFF REPORTER

Paula LaForme got the devastating news she had been dreading since Friday's horrific accident on Highway 401 near Windsor.

LaForme had been waiting anxiously for word on whether her brother Robert, the driver of a transport truck, was among the seven who died in the 80-vehicle pileup.

Yesterday afternoon, she learned the Hamilton man was one of the six who died in a fire sparked by the collision.

"It's really hard knowing he was burned. That makes things twice as hard," she said last night in an interview.

"We're all just devastated. He was just a man going to work, supporting his family."

Robert's wife had called her sister-in-law late Friday to say she was very concerned because she hadn't heard from her husband. On Saturday, Paula and her mother Wilma went to a hospital in Hamilton to give blood.

They were asked to do so by police who were having difficulty identifying remains they believed were Robert LaForme's.

DNA comparison of the blood confirmed the worst.

LaForme and Vivian Shognosh, 70, who was in another vehicle, are the latest two victims identified by Ontario's deputy chief coroner, Dr. Jim Cairns. Shognosh was from an Indian reserve on Walpole Island, near Chatham.

A grief-stricken Paula LaForme said last night Robert's remains will be cremated, with a private ceremony afterwards.

He had three sons, aged 8, 9 and 15, and three stepchildren.

LaForme said her heart goes out to the families of the other six crash victims.

"There are people in the same situation as us feeling our pain."

After releasing the two names yesterday — a third victim, Anne-Marie Strnisa, 24, of LaSalle, Ont., was identified earlier — Cairns said the names of an Ontario man, as well as a father, his son and daughter from New York, are still to be released.

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PAULA LAFORME
Sister of victim

Dental records of the four were to be sent to the coroner's office today.

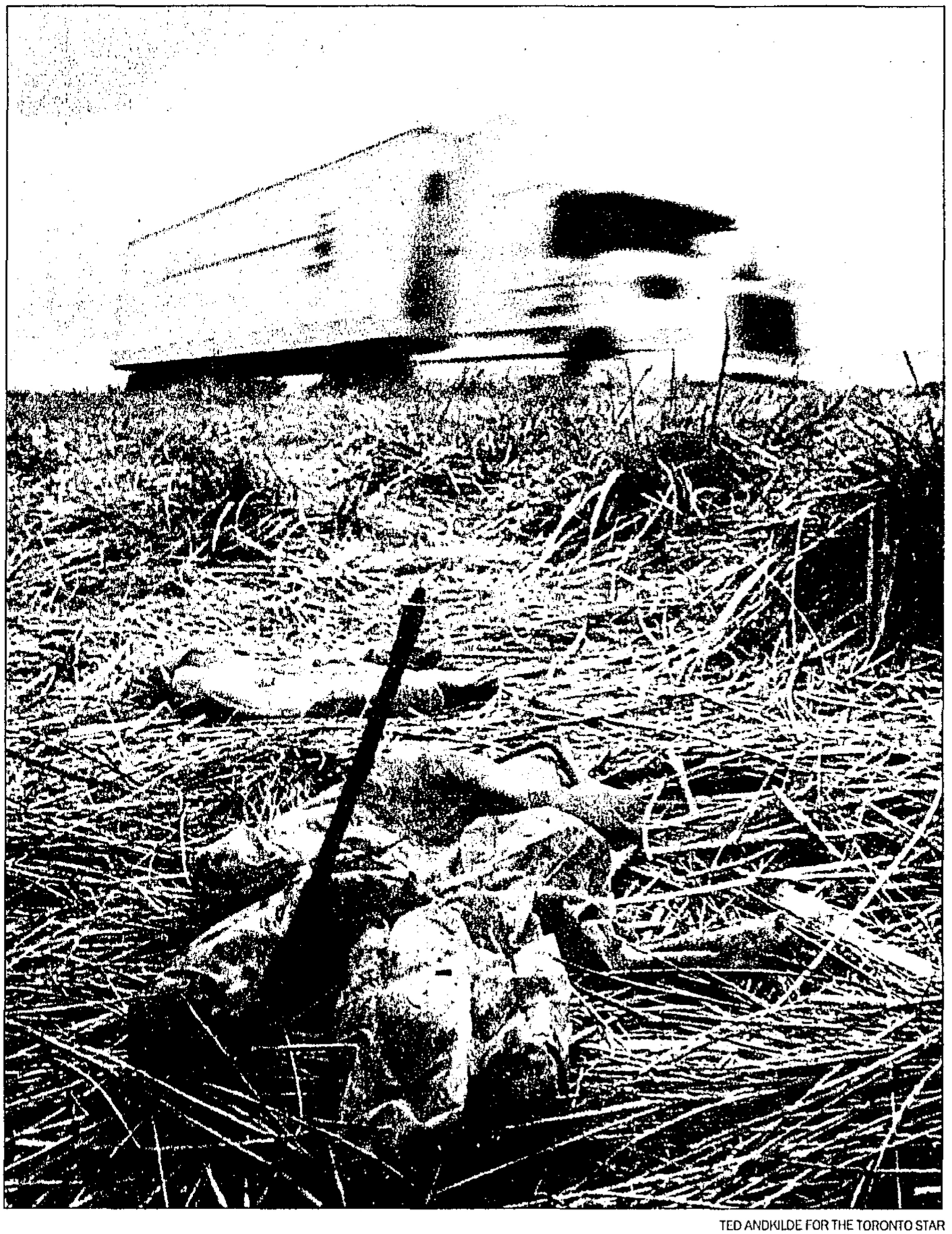
Police say the accident, east of Windsor, was caused by dense fog and exacerbated by driver error.

A team of Ontario Provincial Police officers probing the accident are using their notes, interviews with drivers, survey equipment and a computer program in an attempt to reconstruct the crash — one of the worst ever on an Ontario highway.

At the same time, a "phenomenal number" of calls came in to the OPP from frantic members of the public who had heard news of the crash and feared they had lost their loved ones.

Investigators had to figure out who truly was missing and who just hadn't called home, Cairns said.

"It's not like an airplane, where you have a list of passengers and you can match up the bodies with the names," Cairns said.



TED ANDKILDE FOR THE TORONTO STAR

CRASH SITE: Discarded rubber gloves mark the scene of one of Ontario's worst highway accidents. Highway 401, closed east of Windsor Friday morning by an 80-vehicle pileup, has now reopened.

He described the grim task of locating and identifying bodies in the so-called "hot zone," where fire killed six of the victims.

Cairns said a team that included himself, forensic identification officers with the OPP, and investigators with the Ontario Fire Marshal's office, went through the wreckage looking for remains.

Some cars were crunched or badly burned, Cairns said.

"There were many vehicles we couldn't even see."

He said it was "unbelievable" there were only six bodies in the hot zone.

Sergeant Bill Hibbert of the OPP said four of the six were located inside or partially inside their vehicles, and two were outside their cars.

Police have theorized the two got out of their cars and then were hit by other vehicles.

Meanwhile, the weekend following the deadly crash, Chatham OPP ticketed five people for speeding along Highway 401, less than 50 kilometres from the accident scene.

Chatham OPP dispatcher Andrew Archibald said yesterday that one officer alone clocked four people at speeds higher than 150 km/h and another driver going faster than 160 km/h.

With files from Lily Nguyen