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BY KEITH JENKINS — THE WASHINGTON POST

Virginia State Police Trooper Jeff Jones, one of the first officers on the accident scene, holds the brake drum that killed Valerie Coburn.

Death Out of Nowhere

Part From Truck Kills Woman on Beltway

By Steve Bates
Washington Post Staff Writer

John Coburn had only a split-second view of the huge black object hurtling toward his windshield, but he says that was enough time to realize the horror of what was about to happen.

In an instant, a 27-pound fragment of a brake drum that had broken off a tractor-trailer smashed into the cabin of Coburn's pickup truck, killing his sister-in-law and narrowly missing her young son as it shot out the back window into the bed of the pickup.

"It was hanging in midair right in front of me," a distraught Coburn said yesterday as he recalled the moment before Valerie Ann Coburn, 34, of Chantilly, died Tuesday evening on the Capital Beltway in Alexandria.

"A second earlier or a second

later—what a difference a second could make," said Coburn, who was driving Valerie, her husband and two children home from an afternoon of boating on the Potomac River.

Yesterday, John and the rest of the Coburns were struggling to make sense of what authorities said was a freak accident that sent the jagged drum fragment into the pickup's cabin at an estimated speed of more than 100 miles an hour.

Valerie was sitting in the middle of the pickup's bench seat when she was struck in the neck. Her husband, James Coburn, was on the passenger side; her and James's children, 8-year-old James Barrett and 6-year-old Jessica, were in the covered bed of the pickup, which was westbound on the

See BRAKE, A14, Col. 1

This photograph, taken from the back of the pickup truck, shows the spot where the brake drum crashed through the vehicle. The speed of the fragment, which came off a passing tractor-trailer, was put at more than 100 mph.

Truck's Broken Brake Drum Becomes A Deadly Projectile on the Beltway

BRAKE, From A1

of the Woodrow Wilson Bridge about 7 p.m. Tuesday.

Authorities said they believe one of 10 brakes on an eastbound tractor-trailer broke apart, sending the fragment flying over a concrete barrier and into the pickup.

Authorities said the driver of the tractor-trailer, identified as Willie L. Spann, 47, of Plainfield, N.J., told them he did not realize what had happened and did not stop until he was in Prince George's County and another trucker sent him a citizens band radio message that his brakes were smoking.

By that time, the incident had been reported and police were searching for Spann's truck. Maryland State Police found Spann and his truck near the St. Barnabas Road exit. Virginia State Police then arrived and issued Spann a citation accusing him of driving a vehicle with defective equipment, which carries a maximum fine of \$20 plus court costs.

Spann, whose truck was carrying 26,000 pounds of cardboard, was released after promising to appear in court and could not be reached for comment yesterday. Virginia police, who described Spann as being distraught over Valerie Coburn's death, said yesterday they are still investigating the incident and plan to discuss the matter with prosecutors.

It is the second time in less than a month that the Coburns have had to deal with a family tragedy.



VALERIE ANN COBURN

... was returning from family outing

Less than three weeks ago, Valerie Coburn's grandfather died in an automobile accident in Mississippi, John Coburn said. Her two children were still coming to grips with his death when they saw their mother killed, he said.

Coburn recalled that as he raced Valerie toward an Alexandria fire station moments after she was struck, Jessica Coburn said, "I hope it's just a bad dream."

James Coburn and the children were in seclusion yesterday, family members said.

Some transportation analysts described the incident as unusual.

"That's about the most bizarre accident I've ever heard of," said American Automobile Association spokesman John Undeland.

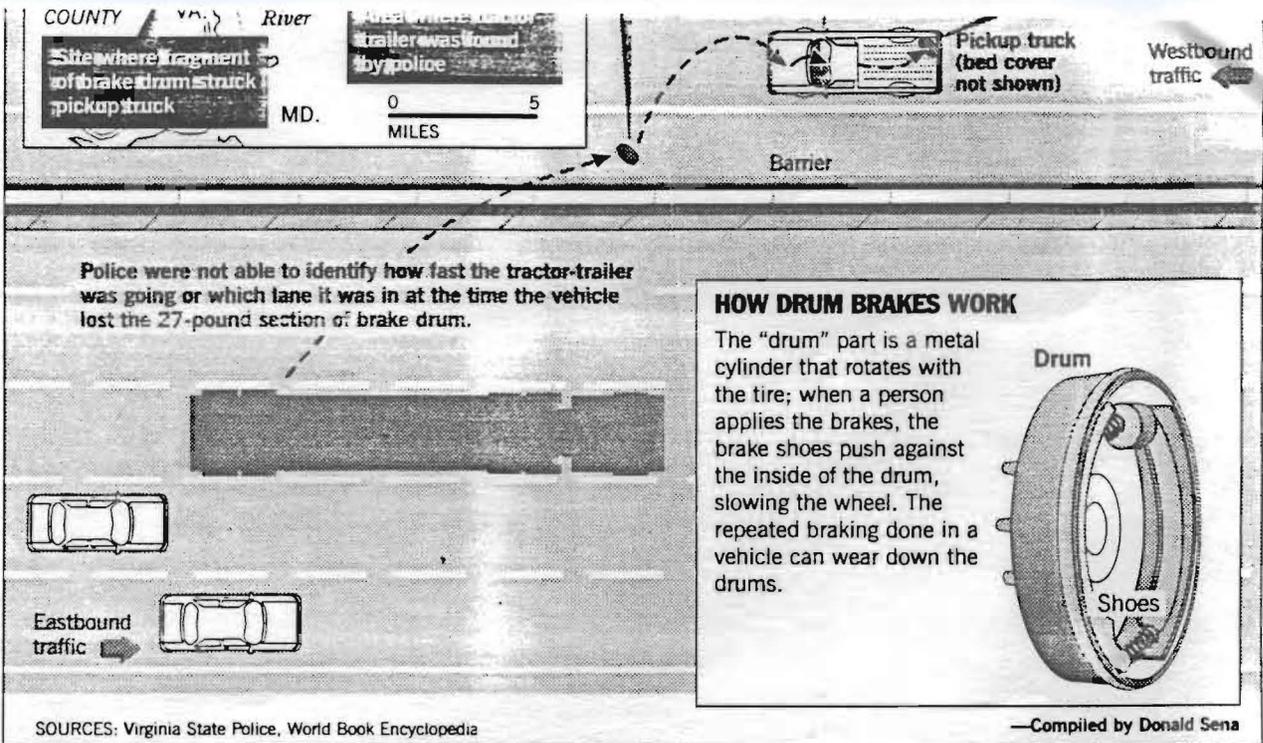
But Sgt. Dave Feather, who supervises the truck division of the Virginia State Police, said such accidents can result when trucks have brakes that need replacing.

Maryland State Police said a similar accident occurred June 21 on Route 75 near Frederick. A piece of a truck brake drum flew through a windshield and struck a young girl, who was flown to Children's Hospital in the District and survived, officials say. Police said they never located the truck.

An AAA official said that careful maintenance can prevent such breakdowns. Bob Livingstone, the AAA's director of automotive services, said that "normally, the driver will get some indication" before a truck brake disintegrates.

When a brake drum disintegrates, Livingstone said, it's usually because it has worn too thin. Before that occurs, he said, a driver should feel "a pulsation or a vibration" when applying brakes, even on a big truck with 10 brakes.

Virginia State Police said they believe Spann is an independent truck driver. The truck's tractor is owned by the Miami-based Ryder rental company. The trailer, which officials said included the brake system that failed, is owned by Contract Leasing Corp. of Jersey City and leased or rented to Layton Transportation, of Edison, N.J. Officials with Contract



SOURCES: Virginia State Police, World Book Encyclopedia

—Compiled by Donald Sena

BY MICHAEL DREW—THE WASHINGTON POST

Leasing and Layton Transportation declined to comment yesterday.

It was not clear yesterday how recently the trailer's brakes had been inspected. Officials said that federal law requires annual inspections.

Tuesday's accident occurred two weeks after Lissa Campos, 18, of Dale City, was killed in another freak accident on a Washington area highway. Campos swerved her car to avoid a sofa in the roadway of Interstate 95 near Lorton, crossing a guardrail and colliding with an oncoming car.

In Tuesday's accident on the Beltway, a concrete barrier and green posts that help screen motorists' views of oncoming traffic apparently gave John Coburn little clue where the brake drum had come from or what it was.

"I saw a piece fly up," he said. "It was a little bit round and black. [At first] I thought it was a piece of tire."

Coburn said his new 1993 Ford

pickup was pulling a new boat and traveling about 55 miles an hour in the far left lane of the Beltway's inner loop. "I didn't want to react too much and jackknife," said Coburn, who said that another tractor-trailer was immediately to his right. "I thought we could take the hit."

To his horror, Coburn said, the object bounced off his pickup's hood and struck the windshield just above the rearview mirror. It hit Valerie Coburn in the neck, whizzed within inches of her son's head and rammed into the rear tailgate, leaving a huge dent. The brake drum fragment remained in the pickup's bed.

William Park, a George Washington University physics professor, said the fragment likely was traveling with a momentum comparable to that of a small cannonball.

Coburn said Valerie and James Coburn first met about 15 years ago, when the Coburn family moved from Alexandria to Chantilly, where

Valerie grew up. It was love at first sight, John Coburn recalled.

"It was always Jimmy and Val," said Coburn, who said his brother works as a mechanic for Metro. The family lives in the 4100 block of Dawn Valley Court in Chantilly.

Valerie Coburn worked part time and "was the best mother in the world. She always had dinner ready at 4 p.m. when her husband got home. She really liked baking," John Coburn said, adding that she particularly enjoyed making wedding cakes for new couples.

A day after her death, John Coburn said of his sister-in-law: "I keep looking over my shoulder and seeing her face" after the moment of impact. "I keep overriding that with the image of her face riding on an inner tube" on the Potomac a few hours earlier in the day.

Said Coburn, "She loved it."

Staff writer Bill Miller contributed to this report.