



CHAMPION
BUS INC.
— a THOR company —

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April 15, 2004

Mr. Richard Boyd, Chief Medium & Heavy Duty Vehicle Division
U.S. Department of Transportation
National Highway Traffic Safety Administration
Office of Defects Investigation
400 Seventh Street, S.W.
Washington, DC 20590

PE04-008

Dear Mr. Boyd;

Champion Bus, Inc submits the following information in reference to Preliminary Evaluation #PE 04-008.

RECEIVED
NHTSA
2004 APR 26
OFFICE OF DEFECTS INVESTIGATION
WASHINGTON, DC

1. **Furnish the total number of Champion buses built on General Motors and Ford cutaway chassis manufactured for sale or lease in the United States.**

Answer: 2,227 (for the period of 1/1/00 thru 12/31/02)

2. **Furnish the number of/and copies of all owner complaints and field reports, studies, surveys, or investigations from all sources, which have been received or authorized by Champion, or of which Champion is aware, pertaining to the alleged defect in the subject vehicles. This should include information pertaining to the report included with this letter. Separate the number and copies of owner complaints from other sources. Also, if Champion has issued any service or technical bulletins, advisories, or other communications to dealers pertaining to the alleged defect in the subject vehicles, provide a copy of each document. If no such documents have been issued, so state.**

Answer:

- a. The first notice Champion received concerning the fire was on December 26, 2000 when [REDACTED] forwarded a letter from [REDACTED] Adjusters and Administrators, notifying him that "On August 24, 2000 an electrical short occurred somewhere in the dashboard of the vehicle while it was moving, which created an electrical fire resulting in the total loss of the vehicle." They also stated "The cause and origin of the fire was determined to be due to faulty wiring." See attached copy of the fire report from [REDACTED] Adjusters.
- b. On December 27, 2000 Champion received a copy of the fire report from the Hesperia Fire District. They theorized that the fire was caused by a fuel leak.
- c. On January 9, 2001 a letter from Dick Cuteher, Champion Service Manager, was sent to [REDACTED] Adjusters stating that

since it was determined that the fire was caused by a faulty ignition system, Champion was not responsible because we do not tamper with the ignition system during the conversion. He recommended that the customer contact the GM Customer Service facility, and offered the phone numbers to do that.

- d. On May 9, 2002 Champion received a fax from [REDACTED] notifying us that he had been served with papers stating that the insurance company for the [REDACTED] was suing General Motors, Crusader Bus Company (meaning Champion but used the incorrect name) and [REDACTED] for the bus that caught fire and was destroyed.
- e. On May 14, 2002 Champion received a letter from their counsel, Walter Bennett from Champion's corporate office of Thor Industries stating that they will set up an investigation of the bus by Crawford Investigation Services (see attached).
- f. A report from Crawford Investigation Services (Crawford) was completed on November 17, 2002 and submitted to [REDACTED] and forwarded to Champion Bus, Inc. (Champion) (see attached). Their findings were that the fire originated at or near the battery. They stated "The ignition source for this fire is undetermined at this time but is in all probability electrical in nature." They also stated, "The event that caused the union of this ignition source and the first material ignited is undetermined at this time but in a all probability is an electrical failure." They also stated that their opinion was that this fire was accidental in nature.
- g. A letter was sent to [REDACTED] Service Manager for Champion (see attached), on January 27, 2003. Dick stated that the bus had three batteries but Champion added only two. Someone else added the third battery.
- h. On March 26, 2003 received a memo (see attached) from John S. Ward, Attorney representing Champion's interest that Ron Orlando, a GM engineer from Detroit, was focusing on the battery connections and/or alternator as a possible source of the fire. "This was in contrast to the Fire Department's conclusion of a fuel line leak, although consistent with Mr. Allred's (our inspector) preliminary findings. Mr. Allred theorized that the cause of the fire was electrically related, and possibly related to the fact that the three batteries were wired together. Since the [REDACTED] representative, Mr. [REDACTED], did not allow the inspectors to remove the alternator or battery cables, they could not determine the cause of the fire. Also, since there was still some uncertainty as to the actual cause of the fire, and another inspection might be necessary, they determined that a settlement would be the best solution.
- i. On April 7, 2003 Champion's Attorney, John Garmhausen, forwarded a letter from J. Randolph Huston of Walker, Wright, Tyler & Ward (see attached), that stated that they had Crawford come back out and inspect the

vehicle along with representatives from GM and it looked like GM was going to agree to settle the claim along with Champion.

- j. On April 11, 2003 a letter was sent to [REDACTED] in response to some questions that were asked (see attached). Dick stated that the bus was equipped with a heavy-duty PennTex alternator model #PX420 and that alternator was not the alternator supplied by GM but was added by Champion.

3. **Identify and describe all accidents, subrogation claims, or lawsuits known to Champion pertaining to the alleged defect (where Champion is or was a defendant or codefendant). Provide Champion's analysis of each item, clearly identifying the vehicle (model year and VIN), the vehicle owner, and any injuries or property damage, which may have occurred.**

Answer: There was a lawsuit that was filed in March of 2002 in response to a vehicle that belonged to the [REDACTED] that was destroyed by fire. The lawsuit was originally filed as Nonprofits United v. General Motors, et al. and was later revised to read City of Barstow v. Champion Bus, Inc. and was filed in the Superior Court of the State of California for the County of San Bernardino/Barstow District, Case number BCV06206.

- a. **Champion's analysis of the event:** On December 20, 2000 Champion received notice from a Champion Dealer, Sunset Bus and Commercial, Inc. that received a notice from [REDACTED] claims adjuster, [REDACTED] Adjusters and Administrators, Inc. that on August 24, 2000 a 2000 Champion Crusader CalTran-C2, Paratransit Bus, had as they stated, "an electrical short occurred somewhere in the dashboard of the vehicle while it was moving, which created an electrical fire resulting in the total loss of the vehicle." They determined that the fire was due to faulty wiring however, after investigation by GM's fire investigator and Champion's fire investigator, it was determined that the fire originated near the battery or alternator but, since the Customer's representative would not allow the inspectors to remove the alternator, no cause was ever determined.
- b. **Champion vehicle model year 2000, model CR210GH, VIN #1GBJG31J9[REDACTED].**
- c. **Vehicle Owner: [REDACTED]**
- d. **Vehicle was completely destroyed.**

4. **Identify and describe all significant modifications or changes that could relate to the alleged defect in the manufacture of the subject vehicles. The following information must be included for each modification or change:**

Answer: No modifications were ever made as a result of the investigations because the cause of the fire was never determined.

- a. the reason for the modification or change;
Answer – No changes were made for the above stated reason.
- b. a description of the modification or change;
Answer – No modifications were made.
- c. the approximate calendar date on which the modification or change was incorporated into production; and
Answer – N/A
- d. state whether the modified or changed components could be interchanged with earlier production components.
Answer – N/A

5. Furnish the number of warranty claims related to the alleged defect on the subject vehicles by model series code, calendar month, and problem code. Each problem code must be identified.

Answer: No warranty claims were ever submitted relating to this area.

If you should have any questions or require any additional information, please do not hesitate to contact me at 810-724-6474 ext. 399.

Sincerely,



Dick Cutcher
Service Manager

CC: Don Roberts, President, CBI
David Carter, Engineering Manager, CBI
Warren Marsh, VP Operations, CBI
Deborah Morse, Warranty Admin Assistant, CBI
Andy Imanse, Eldorado International