Crash

It's never good news when a truck, van or bus is involved in a road accident. Keith Read takes a look at what's involved in the path to recovery and establishes what operators should expect

One unwritten rule about crash repairs – especially for HGVs – applies even before the damaged vehicle gets to the repair shop. For those whose task is to recover the crashed vehicle, the message is: never turn a repairable wreck into a write-off. And that, says Darren Coot, operations director of Boleyn, one of the UK's leading heavy recovery companies, means a calm and considered approach up-front, rather than rushing in with all cranes blazing.

"We first send an assessor to carry out a risk assessment and to see what the damage is to the vehicle before we start lifting and pulling," explains Coot. "He can also judge what equipment will be needed for the recovery. This assessment is important, because some companies send every vehicle they have and it costs the earth, if some of them are not required. We send only what we need and charge only for those vehicles."

That said, if a vehicle falls over, Boleyn has all the equipment necessary to get it back on its wheels and, if required, onto a low-loader for transportation to the repair shop. According to Coot, the big one to watch is when there has been no major impact, but the truck has ended up on its side after what he calls a 'soft roll'. That's when the risk of the recovery doing more damage than the accident is at its greatest.

"Only recently, we recovered a truck that had rolled onto its side and, when we righted it, there was no major structural or panel damage – just some scratched paintwork. Had we not approached that job in the correct way, and just gone in with chains and pulled, it could have twisted the chassis and caused all sorts of problems for the operator."

However, there are times when his recovery crews just have to do some minor damage, in order to avoid even more costly repairs. If a laden truck has rolled over, it may be necessary to cut the trailer side so that when the truck is righted the load is left (undamaged) on the ground and the expensive parts of the vehicle – tractor unit, chassis and couplings – are saved from further harm.

"If you've got an £80,000 tractor unit with little more than cosmetic issues, and you try to pull it back on to its wheels while fully laden, you're going to twist everything and cause a lot of damage,"

"The message is: never turn a repairable wreck into a write-off" Darren Coot

converters

warns Coot. “And the cost will be much more than the repairs to the side of a £30,000 trailer. Doing it our way, the load can be safely moved and, quite probably, salvaged.”

In need of a lift

Coot finds it necessary to lift HGVs after an accident. “Their design – being so low – and the fact that there is now so much plastic in vehicles means it’s difficult to pull them away. We’re also restricted to where we can lift the vehicle, though. Sometimes we have to remove panels to expose chassis points where we can get a good lift.”

Once the vehicle has been recovered, however, it’s time for an estimate of repair costs and a decision about who should do the work. Scania’s approach is interesting here. The truck manufacturer has taken the whole process, following a crash, and grafted it on to its Scania Assistance roadside breakdown service. Kirk Freezer, services sales director for Scania (GB), explains why his company should be high on the list for crash repairs. “We built it, so who better to repair it?” he reasons. And the other big attraction for operators of Scania fleets is that there’s no cost to be part of this service: Freezer explains that Scania expects to gain its returns from straightforward parts and labour sales.

The service operates just like this company’s breakdown response – ring one number and everything is taken care of, with the objective of getting the vehicle back on the road as quickly as possible. “That’s important, because a truck off the road is costing the owner, in terms of lost earnings,” he agrees.

Most of Scania’s 90 UK dealers undertake some level of damage repair and the assistance service will ensure that the downed vehicle gets to the nearest appropriate dealer. And with links to all the insurance companies – but specifically RSA, formerly Royal & Sun Alliance – the assistance service can handle those negotiations, too.

“We aim to get our dealers to raise a repair cost estimate within 12 to 24 hours of the vehicle arriving at their premises,” states Freezer. “And, if they can’t handle some specialist aspect of the work required, we also arrange to move the vehicle to an independent repairer, approved and audited by us, who will carry out that work.”

The cold spells in 2010 saw calls for help trebling and in some weeks quadrupling. However, Freezer sees that as a blip. “I wouldn’t say the trend, in terms of accidents, is increasing or decreasing,” he says. “However, I do think the cost of repairs is increasing, because vehicles are so much more sophisticated that they used to be.”

That said, experience teaches us that it’s often difficult to guess the cost of a truck or bus repair just by looking at the obvious wreckage. “Frontal impact damage often looks far worse than it is. That’s because the driver of a modern truck is far better protected and safer than he’s ever been,” comments Freezer.

That can’t always be said of the engineers undertaking repair work, though. Chris Wood who, with business partner Kirk Bahra, runs Trash UK, a repairer of RCVs (refuse collection vehicles), skip-lorries and road sweepers, states that his engineers’ first task is to thoroughly clean a damaged vehicle.

“We have to be careful not to endanger the workforce with hypodermic needles or harmful waste that might still be in the mechanism. Then it’s a case of stripping out the machinery, using the correct slide hammers and lifting gear – cranes or forklifts – and inspecting it to assess just how much is damaged and what needs repairing or replacing,” explains Wood.

“Spares are usually available, but sometimes we have to get things made – especially when vehicle manufacturers would rather sell you a whole packer blade, rather than the small part of it that actually needs repairing,” he continues. “We use a local company to make the part and, that way, the vehicle is repaired quicker and cheaper.”

“We built it, so who better to repair it?” Kirk Freezer

Bus and coach repairs cause more problems than HGVs and LCVs

While many spare parts are freely available, some HGVs require bespoke parts

Trash UK customers come from all over the country and include local authorities, private contractors and anyone operating RCVs or other similar vehicles. They come because they can expect specialist service. "The majority of accident repairs to RCVs are to the cab and chassis," comments Wood. "So you have to use the correct procedures when cutting the metal, the correct welding and correct materials. For instance, you wouldn't use mild steel in a hard-wearing area. Getting this right is down to knowing the equipment – and that comes down to experience."

Repair and compare

It's an important point: HGVs are far more complex and far bigger than vans or LCVs, so they're not as easy to repair. Nor are the plant, tools and know-how required to do this kind of work cheap to buy or to run. Which is why you don't find full-service specialist truck and bus repairers growing on trees.

"The equipment and premises you require are huge, compared to those a car or van repairer would need, and the vast array of skills and technology you need to know about for trucks is also far greater than for car repairers," comments Len Reeve, business development manager for Spectrum Vehicle Repairers. "While some car repairers will undertake car-derived vans, that's where it stops. For example, when it comes to the high-top Transits and Sprinters, they simply won't go into an oven designed for a car. That's why we have four ovens – one for small vans, one for bigger vans, and two for large trucks and trailers."

Much the same applies to PSVs, which present yet more challenges. "The biggest [issue] is always obtaining some of the parts," comments Reeve. "When parts are specific to a particular vehicle, they are often made in small batches, because there might only be a few hundred buses built to that spec. Once those parts have been used on after-market and crash repairs, they can be difficult for anyone to source. Bus companies seem to accept that – very unlike haulage firms that don't want vehicles off the road at all."

For our Spectrum man, the solution is clear. "If we can't source a part, then we have to set-to and make it. The side skirts on buses, for example – which are usually the areas that get damaged – are generally made from aluminium or GRP composites. We have sheet fabricators, guillotines, presses and folders, so we can make those parts when we have to." Reeve concedes that there are times when the cost of doing this kind of work might be as much as double that of buying a piece off the shelf. But, if it's simply not available, it's got to be worth doing.

Spectrum is geared up for all sorts of specialist work – from buses to concrete mixers and skip carrying trucks. Among the most unusual vehicle repair jobs are cash-carrying security vehicles, which have been a significant part of this company's history. "Their glass is unique, and you have to understand the systems on the vehicle and work within that industry's codes of vehicle operation," comments Reeve.

"For example, we often have to wait for some of the systems to be de-activated before we can start working on the vehicles. That deactivation – and reactivation after the repairs are completed – would be done by others. We would never know about the on-board security systems themselves. Then when it comes to replacing glass, we simply have to use the original supplier to get direct replacements, so that it's the correct specification."

How does he think commercial vehicle repairs stack up against car repairs? "I think a commercial vehicle is four or five times more difficult to repair than a car, because there are so many systems on trucks – and most of those are on steroids," says Reeve. "Often, you can't even pick up truck components and assemblies with one hand. We routinely have to use lifting gear and fork trucks, and reckon on two- or three-man jobs." TE