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A LIFE FLIPPED UPSIDE DOWN

A True Story Of Survival, Human Strength,
and the Importance of Ambulance Design



What began as a routine patient call has reshaped Jesse Sopko's perspective on life and duty. Despite enduring severe injuries—including multiple fractures, brain bleeds, and a traumatic brain injury—Sopko's spirit has remained unbroken.

Sopko's journey of recovery, marked by weeks in the ICU and extensive rehabilitation, is a testament to human resilience and the relentless will to survive. Reflecting on his experience, he advises, "Don't ever take a day for granted. Always kiss your loved ones goodbye."

This personal narrative, enhanced by photos, offers an inspiring look at recovery and a heartfelt reminder for EMS professionals to value their safety and cherish every moment with their loved ones.

Articles by James Careless.

Photos courtesy Jesse Sopko and Braun Ambulances.

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A True Story Of Survival, Human Strength, and the Importance of Ambulance Design

When they start their shift, the last thing that any EMT or paramedic thinks is that they themselves might be the victim of a horrific automobile accident — one in which their lives hang in the balance as tenuously as any of the patients they treat on the job.

This is what happened to Jesse Sopko, a paramedic with the South Central Ambulance District (SCAD) in Ashtabula County, Ohio.

Just after midnight on September 26, 2023, Sopko and a patient were in the back of SCAD's Unit 639 — a Braun Chief XL ambulance that the department had only acquired four months before —

when they were T-boned by a speeding driver who blew through a stop sign in rural Geauga County, Ohio. Sopko's ambulance rolled over multiple times before coming to rest in a ditch, at a horrific cost to himself and a fatal cost to his patient.

Fortunately, the rugged design of the Braun Chief XL prevented Sopko from being crushed to death by the impact. But he was still severely injured during the accident.

Jesse Sopko recently shared his harrowing survival story with host Michael McCabe on the [EMS World Podcast](#). This e-book is an abridged version of that interview, which is free to listen to online any time, anywhere.

Setting the Context

McCabe opened the podcast by describing Sopko: "He's 27 years old, married with a young child, and his life was flipped upside down quite literally in the early morning hours of September 26, 2023. It was on that day that Jesse quickly transitioned from provider to patient in the blink of an eye."

As for his employment at South Central Ambulance District? "I've been there since March of 2023 through to present," said Sopko. "I'm also a firefighter paramedic part-time with the Madison Fire District." SCAD's territory covers 225 square miles in Southern Ashtabula County, staffs seven full-time personnel including one chief (plus part time personnel), and operates four ambulances.

A routine call on a September night turned deadly in a second when paramedic Jesse Sopko's ambulance was T-boned at high speed. Sopko shares his personal story with EMS World.



A Typical Shift

On September 26, 2023, Sopko and his partner had been dispatched to a private residence within SCAD's primary response area at 11:29 p.m. to transport a male patient showing signs of altered mental status.

"We arrived on scene at [11:45 p.m.] and we initiated transport to our local hospital at [12:02 a.m.]," Sopko said. "We transported non-emergent, so no lights, no sirens. This patient was not a high acuity patient, so we're taking our time."

Sopko was in the back of Unit 639 with a patient in his 40s. They were headed to University Hospital (UH) Geauga Medical Center in Chardon, Ohio, going southbound on State Route 528. When they got to the intersection with Chardon Windsor Road, an eastbound Jeep failed to stop for a stop sign, and rammed headlong into Sopko's ambulance at high speed.

"He struck us right over the passenger side rear wheel," Sopko told McCabe. "For all the paramedics out there that spend the time in the back, they know that that's where the bench seat's at. We kind of fish-tailed and then we went into a spiral and then multiple flips, and we rolled [multiple] times."

The crash was reported to 9-1-1 by many members of the public. "The offender's Jeep was on fire. He self-extricated, the driver of the ambulance had self-extricated, and they called over the radio for two helicopters and the fire department for extrication."

A Horrendous Scene

Middlefield Fire & EMS (CCAN) responded to the scene, thinking that they were simply dealing with a collision between a truck and an SUV. What they found when they arrived was something else: a Jeep on fire and an upside-down ambulance with people trapped inside. Photos taken by law enforcement documented a horrific scene. And the reality was even worse than the photos for the crew and the patient. Sopko was unbelted and was severely injured.

When the ambulance came to rest, many projectiles fell onto Sopko and buried him. When rescuers got to them



"Don't ever take a day for granted," says Jesse Sopko (right, pictured alongside brother Aidan).

both, Sopko was the only survivor in the back of the ambulance.

"Initially I was thought to be deceased as well due to my slow respirations, and the amount of blood and stuff that was all over the back of the ambulance," he told McCabe. "And then I made some sort of noise or something and they said, 'no, he's still alive'."

A List of Severe Injuries

Once he had been extricated from Unit 639, Sopko was flown by UH AirMed's University 1 helicopter to UH Cleveland Medical Center where he underwent multiple surgeries. His injuries were numerous and severe: skull fracture, two brain bleeds, grade 2 diffuse axonal injury, traumatic brain injury, multiple spinal fractures, closed left clavicle fracture, displaced left scapula fracture, hemothorax left lung, pneumothorax left lung, multiple rib

fractures, sternum fracture, left midshaft open femur fracture, right femoral head fracture and more.

Sopko spent a total of two months in the hospital, including three weeks in the trauma ICU (10 days of which were on a ventilator). He also suffered from "brainstorming" (HTN, hyperthermia, tachycardia, BGL).

After moving out of the ICU, Sopko was moved to TBI rehab. He stayed a total of five weeks in inpatient rehab, followed by six months of outpatient occupational, speech, and physical therapy.

Saved by a Tough Truck

As severe as Jesse Sopko's injuries were from this accident, the fact that he survived at all is somewhat of a miracle.

Sopko credits his survival to the toughness of the ambulance's design. "It's bent to all holy heck here, but it stayed togeth-

Lights and Sirens

On September 26, 2023, paramedic Jesse Sopko experienced an unimaginable crash when his ambulance was T-boned and rolled over multiple times. The ambulance's rugged design prevented a fatal outcome, despite being severely damaged. "It's bent to all holy heck here, but it stayed together," Sopko recalled. This incredible resilience highlights the critical role of vehicle durability in protecting EMS providers.

er,” he said. “That’s the most impressive thing is the amount of force [generated by an ambulance] going 62 miles an hour, met with a vehicle who is presumed to be going 55 to 65 miles an hour in a literal T-bone into a swivel with multiple flips. I mean, that’s a lot of energy. For this thing to hold up as well as it did — I’m impressed by it every time, if I’m being honest.”

As photographs of the damaged ambulance prove, Unit 639 was battered by the collision but it was not broken. Even after rolling multiple times, the rear box maintained its structural integrity and didn’t collapse.

Three Lessons Learned

Today, Sopko is back on the job as a paramedic. But he hasn’t forgotten what happened to him on that terrible September night. He’s learned three key lessons from the experience that he wants to pass on to others in EMS.

Buckle Up: On the night that the accident occurred, Sopko was not belted into his seat. This is a common practice for EMTs and paramedics, he said, because



Sopko is back on the job doing what he loves, with a newfound perspective and lessons learned.

they want to be able to move around freely to treat their patients as needed. “Nowadays, that’s not an option for me unless there is something very significant with patient care that I need to get up and do,” noted Sopko. “Other than that, that seatbelt doesn’t come off because it was

bad: It was bad. And I like to think that that restraint probably would’ve made a difference.”

Safety First: On a larger scale, Sopko takes on-the-job safety far more seriously. That’s something he wants other EMTs and paramedics to do as well.

As an EMS professional himself, EMS Podcast host Michael McCabe understood this point. “As providers, we’re always hyper-focused on the patient’s safety, on their well-being, on our skills and everything else,” said McCabe. “We allow ourselves to get into this tunnel vision approach where we have to do all this for this patient. And I think that we actually consciously just don’t buckle ourselves in a lot of times because we feel that it restrains us from doing what we need to do. And again, I would be



Even after rolling four-and-a-half times, the rear box maintained its structural integrity and didn’t collapse.

Corresponding Podcast

For a corresponding podcast interview between host Mike McCabe and Jesse Sopko, visit <https://www.hmpglobelearningnetwork.com/site/ems-world/podcasts/night-my-ambulance-rolled-over>

— and by the grace of God, I've never gone through something like you have, but I think that this is the time where it really rings true with you — that the seatbelt is so important in the back of that ambulance."

"You're a thousand percent right," Sopko replied. "It's funny because [during] my whole career, when I went to school and everything like that, the whole time I was worried about getting hit by a car on the highway directing traffic, or walking through an incident, or something like that. But nowhere along the way did you think, 'Oh, you're going to get in an accident. You're going to roll over [multiple] times and nearly die.' It's just something that you don't consciously think about. It's just the first responder mentality: It's kind of like 'I'm invincible, right? I'm invincible, and if it's going to happen, I can prevent it: It's not going to happen.'"

As Sopko learned, such things do happen. This being said, he does acknowledge that wearing a safety belt won't necessarily save an EMT/paramedic from harm during an accident. "But, at least hopefully, it will save you from becoming a projectile in an aluminum box."

Expect the Unexpected: Jesse Sopko's near brush with death on what was supposed to be an uneventful patient transport has changed his views on life. "The big thing is, don't ever take a day for granted," he said. "Always kiss your loved ones goodbye when you leave in the morning and when you come home."

Meanwhile, "the big thing for all my public safety folks out there — whether you're police, fire, EMS, wherever your

A Career of Service

Jesse Sopko works for South Central Ambulance District in Ashtabula County, in addition to certifications and prior positions, including:

- Firefighter 1 & 2 (Fall 2015) — Ohio Fire Academy in Reynoldsburg, OH
- EMT-B (Spring 2016) — Lakeland Community College (CC) in Kirtland, OH
- Paramedic (2017) — Lakeland CC in Kirtland, OH
- Hazmat Technician (2017) — Ohio Fire Academy
- Fire Inspector (2020) — Bowling Green State University, OH
- Fire & EMS Instructor (2022) — Bowling Green State University, OH



roots lie — is to always keep your head on a swivel and expect the unexpected," said Sopko. "I was dispatched to a run-of-the-mill EMS call with a patient that

I've transported multiple times before. I didn't expect to end up in the hospital for two months after that and be in pain every day and have significant difficulties with my mind, my cognition and my body. Something you don't do is to wake up in the morning and say, 'Oh, you know what? I'm going to die: That sounds like a great plan.' No, you plan on coming home from work and carrying on your day, going to the store, doing whatever you're doing. So you know what? Keeping your head on this swivel and wearing your seatbelt helps you do that. So I would highly recommend you do that: Trust me."

Buckle Up for Safety

Surviving a near-fatal crash taught paramedic Jesse Sopko invaluable lessons about on-the-job safety. He now insists that EMS providers always buckle up. "That restraint probably would've made a difference." Traditionally, many EMS providers avoid seatbelts to facilitate patient care; however, Sopko's experience underscores that personal safety is paramount. His story illustrates how a moment of neglect can lead to catastrophic consequences. Embrace these lessons to protect yourself and your colleagues in the field today.



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