

Surprise Witness

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Reporter

It's an un-lucky Friday the 13th. At exactly 11:11 a.m., a police car passes through this busy intersection on Palatine Road when suddenly the squad car is broadsided by empty hearse.

It's a grinding collision, with crashing glass and groaning steel. Arlington Heights police officer Chuck Tiedje is trapped and must be cut from the wreckage. He's airlifted to Lutheran General Hospital.

Hundreds of fellow police officers line up to donate blood and keep a constant vigil at the hospital, where Officer Tiedje clings to life in a coma.

"I spoke to his nurse, she still says it's literally hour by hour," Officer Ted LaPorte says. "He is still really deep in the woods."

For 26 days, Chuck Tiedje's family waits, praying for him to come out of his coma. Tim Tiedje clutches his kid brother's police star.

"This has given me a little comfort, this week, just holding on to it," Tim Tiedje says. "And I pray that someday I can pin it back on him."

Chuck Tiedje says it was a difficult time for his kids. "They didn't understand why they couldn't talk to daddy for 26 days. They couldn't understand how I could sleep for that long," he says.

Doctors said the former Marine and decorated police veteran would likely never walk again.

"I broke my left hip in two spots, my right hip in three spots, left femur, sacrum which is the lower part of my back...," Tiedje says.

It was four months before Officer Tiedje could stand on his own. To this day, he has no memory of the accident and cannot help investigators determine what happened that Friday the 13th.

Eith eyewitnesses told police the hearse ran a red light, but details of what they eyewitnesses remembered varied.

The main driving the hearse, 54-year-old Aleksandr Babayev insists he blacked out from a diabetic seizure and he told police he remembered nothing about the crash.

However, Babayev didn't count on a ninth witness. A surprise witness that rode along with him in the hearse. A witness that would give investigators an astonishingly clear record of exactly what happened.

The witness is an event data recorder -- similar to the black boxes found in airplanes. It preserved important information about what Babayev was doing behind the wheel five seconds before the collision.

"It was surprised by the extent to which they can download this information," Attorney Bob Clifford says. "It's truly remarkable."

Unless you're a car enthusiast or have read every page of your owner's manual, you might not realize so-called black boxes are in millions of cars. Although they've been around for nearly 30 years, many mechanics we talked to didn't know about them either.

Any car with an airbag has to have some sort of triggering device. That's what these black boxes were designed for.

"The data recorders that are in vehicles today record data like vehicle speed, change of velocity in a crash, how the airbag deploys, braking and those kind of things," says Phil Haseltine, president of the American Coalition for Traffic Safety.

Haseltine speaks on behalf of automobile manufacturers. He says although the boxes are designed to regulate the deployment of airbags, manufacturers have come to depend on them for information about real life crashes.

"These systems provide that real world information that you can't precisely replicate in a laboratory," he says.

Back in 1998, engineers used event data recorders to determine that airbags deployed "too easily." In some Chevy Cavaliers and Pontiac Sunfires. Their findings led safety officials to recall nearly 1 million GM cars.

"This is a double-edged sword because in some cases it's going to help you and in some cases it's going to hurt you," Clifford says. "We can tell whether or not a vehicle was operating within the bounds of the law before a crash."

The investigators downloaded the data from the black box in the hearse and discovered it contradicted Babayev's version of events. It showed that while eyewitnesses could only guess at Babayev's speed, the black box recorded the hearse traveling at 61 miles an hour. That's well above the posted speed limit of 45. Four seconds before impact, the readout shows Babayev speeding up to 62 and then 63 miles an hour. And the data suggests Babayev was pressing harder and harder on the gas pedal as he approached the intersection.

One second before the crash, Babayev hit the brakes.

"Which is in conflict, of course, with someone saying that they're unconscious during the period of time that they're going through an intersection," Clifford says.

Babayev pled guilty to running the red light. According to the secretary of state, his driving record contains three previous speeding tickets, as well as a 1996 suspension for repeated moving violations.

The mangled remains of Officer Tiedje's car, tell what the cold computer data cannot, that a police officer almost died in this wreckage.

"The same guardian angel who was with me that day is still with me pushing me along," Tiedje says.

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