

Experienced cyclist credits helmet for saving his life

By Sgt. Fabian Ortega, U.S. Army Europe Public Affairs

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HEIDELBERG, Germany -- Col. Michael G. Koba said the driver of the vehicle that caused him to slam into the ground helmet first, compressing his spine and damaging four vertebra, didn't see him riding his bicycle that Saturday afternoon in October.

"I was crossing an intersection when I saw a car coming toward me. In order for me to avoid the car I slammed on my brakes," Koba said. The car didn't hit him, but that action flipped Koba and his bike in the air.

Koba, the deputy chief of operations for U.S. Army in Europe and a native of Cohoes, New York, said he's been cycling on and off again since his high school days.

He arrived in Germany during the summer of 2009 and bought a bike mostly to get to and from work, he said.

Koba is like many who are overseas and learn that Europe is full of flat lands, river valleys, canals, and bike trails. "I discovered that Germany had some great biking opportunities...I began biking seriously again," he said.

Following the accident Koba was in the hospital 14 days. He had a broken wrist and had to have a vertebrae replaced, requiring two rods and eight screws to hold it in place.

"I had significant injuries as a result of the accident, but they would have been much more extensive, if not life-threatening, had I not worn a helmet, which was the first point of impact." The helmet was completely crushed but it did its



Col. Michael G. Koba, the deputy chief of operations for U.S. Army in Europe and a native of Cohoes, N.Y., is undergoing physical therapy for his injured spine as a result of his bicycle accident in October. Koba was in the hospital 14 days with a broken wrist and had to have a vertebrae replaced, requiring two rods and eight screws to hold it in place. (U.S. Army photo by Sgt. Fabian Ortega)

job, Koba said.

"Head injuries are a big concern," said Dave Scott, the safety division chief for USAREUR. "Bicycling is popular, so the probability of serious accidents is there for youth and adults."

Broken bones, lacerations, road rash and head injuries are the painful reminders of being thrown from a bike, he said.

Like motorcycle helmets, bicycle helmets are a Department of Defense requirement for anyone cycling on military installations, said Scott.

"It's also a requirement for Soldiers to always wear a helmet whether on or off the installation, on or off duty," he added.

Scott and Koba agreed that helmets should be replaced after any impact.

"A helmet should always be replaced after an accident, even if it does not appear to be damaged," said Scott. Helmets absorb the impact by compressing internally. The hidden damage will significantly reduce its effectiveness, he explained.

Koba's advice to fellow cyclists -"Pay attention to the vehicles on the roads around you because they aren't always paying attention to you. I thought my biggest vulnerability was the darkness to and from work," he said.

Getting injured in broad daylight on a Saturday afternoon was almost ironic, said Koba.

Still undergoing physical therapy for his injured spine and not yet able to ride, he said his goal is to participate in the 2011 "Road to Liberty" in Bastogne, Belgium, and offered one last bit of advice.

"Be safe and don't be afraid to ride. It's a great way to see Europe," he said.