

# Missions Sometimes Require Learning on the Fly

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Sgt. Steven Armstrong has been a Black Hawk crew chief with the Oregon Army National Guard for nearly six years. The missions he has been a part of inspired him to go back to school to become a paramedic. He recently graduated and will soon start joining missions as a flight medic. Though Armstrong said he was excited about his future, working the hoist to bring patients to safety has also offered plenty of thrills.

“A mission I did with Staff Sgt. [Benjamin] Sjullie was probably my most exciting, even though it was a routine mission for him, really,” Armstrong said. “A girl was hiking in the Opal Creek Wilderness area, a big hiking area here. She was trying to use a rope to climb down an embankment, fell and broke her leg.

“We were trying to get her taken care of and up and out because she was 50 feet down an embankment,” he said. “They had her in a basket and all rigged up with rope systems to lift her out. But it was going to take them too long and it would have been dark by the time they could get her out of there, so they called us.

“It was my first hoist mission,” he said. “We overflew the area, saw where she was. She was kind of in the bottom of a valley, on a rock bank next to a creek. Then there was a bridge right next to it, so Sgt. Sjullie said, ‘Hey, drop me on the bridge.’ We came back around and lowered him onto the bridge. We used about 240 feet of cable to get him onto the bridge, so we still had about 50 feet to play with.

“He rappelled down the rock bank and picked up the patient,” he said. “We did orbits until he called us on the radio. We went and hovered over, I lowered down the cable. We got to 290 — which is our max cable — and we weren’t there, so we had to descend from where we were hovering. We started to get a little bit close to the trees, but it wasn’t too bad. Because she was down on the ground below the bridge, we had to use a lot more cable.

“We hooked her up,” he said. “We used what’s called a tagline on the basket to keep the patient from turning from the rotor wash. Well, the tagline broke about halfway up. Normally when there is a patient in the basket, when they get under the rotor wash, they’ll start spinning, which is really dangerous for the patient, so then we’ll usually have to lower them back down or bring them up and try to slow the spinning. But after it broke, she didn’t spin at all. We were very lucky there.”

One crisis averted, but there were still other lessons to be learned from the mission.

“When she got up, the rigging on the basket was too long,” he said. “Basically our hoist sits above the door. The hook can only go so far up before it gets to the hoist and stops. And the rigging was so long that the patient was still below the floor. We were able to finagle it in there, but we had some learning points from that.”