



## Inside HQ

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# A Witness to Tragedy in Boston

At 2:50 PM I heard it and felt it. It was a loud *thud* like a cannon shot. Did someone fire a celebratory cannon or light a firecracker? Everyone in the medical tent looked at each other. No one spoke, but their expressions said it all: *What was that?*

My volunteer Amateur Radio assignment at the 2013 Boston Marathon was to shadow Chris Troyanos, Medical Director of the Boston Athletic Association. Our team was composed of Ralph Swick, KD1SM, and Jeremy Giguere, AB1SD. Ralph was the team leader and he communicated with the medical groups. I was liaison to the Course Network Control and Jeremy was liaison to the Massachusetts State Emergency Operations Center. We were all working with Chris in Medical Tent A next to the finish line.

For several seconds the tent remained deathly silent. Smoke drifted into the entrance and I smelled what I thought might be gunpowder. Then, maybe 10 seconds later, there was another *thud* and the tent shook.

The medical personnel and first responders bolted from the tent with Chris right behind them. Ralph and Jeremy tried to follow Chris into the crowd, but they lost him almost instantly. Within minutes they lost track of each other as well.

I tried calling Net Control on 2 meters, but the frequency was busy with other signals. "WJ1B to Net Control" produced no answer.

I left the tent and walked into a smoky chaos of shouts, screams and the sight of people on the ground. Although I could hear Net Control on 2 meters, my calls still went unanswered. I tried to raise Ralph on the 70 centimeter intercom channel. I heard him, but he could not hear me very well. At least he was still on the air.

I went back into the tent as the injured began streaming in. People were bleeding and a doctor, pushing an injured woman in a wheelchair, was yelling that the patient had shrapnel in her stomach. I felt helpless and I heard someone say, "All non-medical staff please leave the tent!"

I followed the staff out the back to where the ambulances were parked. They were loading people onto stretchers as quickly as possible. When one ambulance left, another took its place. Sirens were blaring. The police, security officials, EMTs, Boston EMS, doctors and nurses were suddenly everywhere. No one was panicked; they were just trying to understand what was going on.

I heard the 2 meter Net Control asking all hams at the finish line to proceed to the bus control area. I tried calling my wife on my cell phone, but I could not connect, so I sent her a text message: **I'M OK**. I sent the same message to my daughters. I tried calling ARRL Headquarters, but I still could not get a voice connection; only text messages could get through. ARRL Marketing Manager Bob Inderbitzen, NQ1R, sent me a text at 3:28 PM: **CHECKING IN TO SEE IF YOU ARE OK**. Assuming that short messages would stand the best chance of making it out of the area, I simply typed: **I'M OK**.

At the bus dispatch trailers, the guys inside were monitoring half a dozen frequencies. The dispatcher was trying to figure out where the buses with injured runners were located and where they should go. Confusion reigned since many roads were blocked. I offered to contact Net Control to determine the answer.

This time I called on the 2 meter Course Tactical frequency and was pleased to hear, "WJ1B, this is Net Control."

I relayed the question. A minute later I received instructions for the buses to go directly to the Boston College law campus in Newton. The bus dispatcher acknowledged the message and asked me what frequency I had used. I told him it was 146.67 MHz and he switched one of the mobile transceivers in the trailer to that frequency and communicated directly with Net Control from then on.

We were ordered to evacuate the area completely, so I needed to get back to my car. I began walking toward the parking garage and as I was passing the Fairmont Copley Plaza Hotel, there was another explosion. It was further away and I heard it, but I did not feel it or see any smoke. All around me people started yelling "Hit the deck!" and "What's going on? What's happening?" I later learned that this was an intentional detonation of what police suspected to be a third explosive device.

The walk back to the parking garage was difficult because barricades had been erected and emergency personnel were blocking pedestrian access. Fortunately, law enforcement officers allowed me to pass when they saw my ID tags, yellow jacket and radio.

The entire city seemed in disarray. The Massachusetts Bay Transportation Authority trains were shut down. People were milling around the streets trying to figure out how to get home. Runners still in their running gear were looking for their families. Families were looking for runners. Because I had a radio, people kept asking me for directions, or how to locate a loved one. I felt useless since I was not able to help many of them.

While I was walking back to the garage, my cell phone rang. A voice call was coming through! It was the Boston Marathon Amateur Radio Net Control station. The caller asked where I was and if I was okay. I said that I was fine, told them that I was on Clarendon Street and I asked how the other hams were doing. He said that all were accounted for so far and that there were no known injuries. He added that I was officially "cleared" and released from my duties. Soon afterward, I finally reached my car and headed home.

I was proud to be an Amateur Radio operator that day. All of the volunteers did an incredible job under terrible circumstances. For an overall view of Amateur Radio's role in the marathon, see the article in this issue by the Boston Marathon Amateur Radio Communications Team. Also be sure to read Rick Palm's, K1CE, "Public Service" column.