



The Boston bombings - what if it happened here?

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By RICHARD ECKSTROM

Like their fellow Americans across the country, South Carolinians were horrified at the recent Boston Marathon bombings, which killed three people and injured dozens of others.

Here at home, our heartfelt prayers went out to the victims and their families as a difficult question hangs over our state. It's a question none of us wants to imagine, but we must:

What if it happened here?

I have no doubt that our own law enforcement agencies have repeatedly asked this question and taken every step possible, long before this act of terrorism in Boston, to reduce the chance of something like this happening in South Carolina.

Yet, all the preventive measures in the world can't stop every evil plot. As a result, we have to prepare as best we can to deal with such a terrible event should one occur.

Purely by coincidence, a group of your fellow South Carolina citizens were doing just that within 24 hours following the Boston bombings.

Over the course of two days, more than 150 medical, military and civilian personnel from various federal, state and local agencies took part in a training exercise sponsored by the National Disaster Medical System (NDMS) and directed by the U.S. Army. The exercise was designed to simulate responding to a mass casualty event.

The chilling scenario: A bombing at a sports event in Charlotte had overwhelmed that city's hospitals.

As the simulation went, patients already in Charlotte-area hospitals were evacuated and airlifted to Columbia to make room for scores of bombing victims who needed immediate hospitalization and medical treatment in Charlotte. Dozens of actual Civil Air Patrol cadets from throughout South Carolina played the role of these evacuees.

They were actually airlifted by the U.S. Air Force, in gigantic C-17 transports, from Charleston where they had assembled to participate in this exercise and flown to Columbia Metropolitan Airport.

At the airport, members of the S.C. State Guard served on the flight line directing the movement of the C-17s as they taxied. Other State Guard members offloaded the cadets onto stretchers, moving them into a hangar belonging to the S.C. Aeronautics Commission. There the casualties were immediately examined, classified by the severity of their medical conditions, and then actually transported via ambulance to one of 14 hospitals participating in the exercise, one hospital as far away as Dillon.

Before each patient leaving the hangar, a separate record was created for each of them in a special patient accounting system. These records were then constantly updated to track each patient's whereabouts and condition.

As commander of the State Guard, I was grateful for this very authentic training environment where the casualties were role players rather than real-life casualties. I was proud to witness the superb coordination among the federal, state and local entities involved.

In addition to the Air Force providing airlift for the exercise, the Army provided administrative expertise as well as medical professionals and ambulances.

At the state level, besides the Aeronautics Commission and the State Guard, the S.C. Forestry Commission filled coordination and reporting roles for the exercise. Spartanburg Regional Hospital provided Hospital Emergency Response Teams.

The Salvation Army provided a very essential service — a mobile kitchen and food for those people participating.

I'm grateful for everyone who took part in this important emergency preparedness drill. I don't mind saying I sleep better knowing we have these folks out there, always at the ready, doing their utmost to prepare to answer the call of duty should it ever come.

And, if you'll indulge me for just a moment, I'd like to express a special thanks to the dedicated men and women under my command in the State Guard.

These folks are 100 percent volunteers. They receive no pay whatsoever for the countless hours, often on weekends, that they devote to maintaining a ready emergency response force for their neighbors and fellow citizens across South Carolina. They often incur costs, such as mileage, that they pay from their own pockets.

I've never been associated with a finer, more selfless, more community service-oriented group of people in my life than the members of our State Guard. I'm truly honored to serve with them as their commander.

Richard Eckstrom, a CPA, is the comptroller general of South Carolina and commander of the S.C. State Guard.