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On My Mind

Richard Eckstrom: Let's remember the unity we share after attacks

By Richard Eckstrom

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South Carolina is nearly a thousand miles from Boston.

But we, too, were shaken by the events of April 15, 2013. Two homemade bombs exploded in the midst of the Boston Marathon, killing three spectators, shattering the lives of dozens of others, and casting a pall of sadness over one of America's proud traditions.

A few weeks ago, in the pleasant early morning hours of April 5, I couldn't help but think about the Boston bombings as I stood at the crest of the Cooper River Bridge in Charleston watching 40,000 runners pass. This was the 37th annual Cooper River Bridge Run, and as with other large races across the country, the Boston attack had prompted law enforcement to increase security for the runners and spectators. I was there with 130 members of the S.C. State Guard, of which I serve as commanding general, to help provide enhanced security.

All my troops were unpaid volunteers, compensated and motivated by the gratitude of the community.

We were stationed at the starting gates and at intervals along the 6.2-mile race route, and we were assembled in the vicinity of the finish line to create "safe zones" in case runners or spectators had to be diverted if a threat emerged. In addition to bolstering safety, one of our goals was to make sure the event went smoothly and that the heightened security wouldn't hamper anyone's enjoyment. In speaking with participants, it became clear to me that they didn't mind the increased security, and they understood why greater precautions were necessary.

It was obvious that the Boston bombings loomed heavily over many who attended.

The Boston Marathon is held each year on Patriot's Day, a commemoration of the first two battles of the Revolutionary War – the battles of Lexington and Concord.

In a way, it's fitting that the worst terrorist attack in the United States since 9/11 occurred on Patriot's Day. Times of national tragedy ultimately bring out the best in Americans. While last year's Boston Marathon was marked by feelings of anguish and fear, in the aftermath we took comfort in the heroic response of police officers and emergency workers, in the courage of ordinary people who rushed to the aid of complete strangers, and in the tremendous outpouring of compassion and generosity from across the country.

But more than that, the bombings rekindled our patriotic spirit in a way we haven't seen since 9/11.

America's got its problems. And we'll always be, in many ways, a divided nation. But since our earliest days, our hallmark as Americans has been our strong spirit and toughness in the face of adversity. That's our inner character. And during our toughest challenges, our inner character always comes to the forefront.

Such times of trial remind us that our various differences pale in comparison to the common bond we share as Americans. They make us closer and stronger.

A year after the Boston Marathon bombings, let's also remember the genuine unity and patriotism we displayed as a nation when evil outsiders drove us together. That terrible tragedy offers yet another lesson in the character of America.

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