This Hospital Life

Boston Marathons Cut Short by Bomb Blasts

She was there thanks to him. “There” was 26 miles into the 2013 Boston Marathon, tantalizingly close to the finish line. She had just turned the corner onto Boylston Street. He was 100 yards or so behind on Hereford Street, the quarter-mile cutover from Commonwealth Avenue to the Boylston homestretch. The cowbells were clanging, the crowd’s supportive racket – a constant since they set off from Hopkinton four hours and nine minutes earlier – rising to its Copley Square crescendo.

Then came the explosions, 12 seconds apart, and a strange kind of quiet confusion. Maybe it was Patriots’ Day cannons, she thought. He checked his cell phone. There had been bombings, a text message read. It had happened near the finish line, just up the road, where his son and infant grandson were waiting for him.

He was E. David Crawford, MD, head of Urologic Oncology at the University of Colorado School of Medicine. She was Suzanne Sortman, RN, nurse manager of the inpatient operating rooms at University of Colorado Hospital. As they approached a satisfying conclusion to the famous run, they suddenly found themselves at the beginning of the latest terrifying and surreal mass attack in a public place.

Several thoughts flashed through Crawford’s mind as police blocked the runners’ paths and barricades went up. One was, I just ran 25.98 miles and I feel like hell. Another: I’m not going to get to see the big “Doc Crawford from Denver” sign the family of a former patient was holding somewhere up ahead. Foremost, though, was whether his family was okay, precisely the thought that was on Sortman’s mind. Neither would know for the better part of an hour.

Let’s run. Crawford spends his workdays helping men with prostate cancer, both as a surgeon and a researcher in

The reunited family of E. David Crawford, MD, about 45 minutes after the bombings at the Boston Marathon April 15. Michael Crawford, holding seven-month-old son Rory, hugs wife Katie, who had run most of the race but was unable to finish after the attacks. Courtesy David Crawford.
emerging screening technologies. He spends a lot of his free time working his body. Crawford has squeezed 54 marathons into his 65 years. The Boston Marathon is a serious deal. The 2013 edition would be his 18th consecutive run at Boston. Two weeks prior, he had run his own private marathon in Denver to prepare. In the months before that, stair workouts stretched two hours.

In his work as a surgeon, Crawford got to know Sortman. She had run 10 or 11 marathons herself – she can never quite remember – and had just missed qualifying for Boston. He could get her on the course, Crawford said. Her husband Vince could watch the finish in the VIP grandstand with Crawford’s son Michael and seven-month-old grandson Rory. Sortman trained, as well, and booked a room in the same Marriott Copley Hotel where Crawford and his wife Jodi, who was also running the marathon, were staying.

The Boston Marathon, the oldest modern marathon, is something special for runners. A half-million fans flank the 26.2-mile course, cheering the entire time. The Boston Athletic Association issued 27,051 numbered bibs this year. As Sortman described it, “You’re on an adrenaline high that whole entire marathon.”

“It’s the premiere race and you get psyched up for it each year,” Crawford added. “When I run it, I wonder: am I going to do another Boston Marathon? How many do you have left in you?”

Something very wrong. Over the years, Crawford had run in beautiful weather, as was the case on this Monday; through 85-degree heat, as was the case in 2012; through the remnants of nor’easters; and everything in between. He was shooting to finish in four hours and ten minutes, which would qualify him for next year’s race. Adjusting for age, marathon organizers figure that’s the equivalent of a 24-year-old running slightly over seven-minute miles the entire way.

Crawford dropped very slightly behind that pace, which would have put him a few steps away from the finish at four hours, nine minutes and 43 seconds after his start. That was the moment the first bomb ripped through the crowd, soon followed by the second bomb. A scene of elation became one of carnage.

Sortman saw smoke as she rounded the corner from Hereford Street to Boylston Street.

“I could see the finish line. I was coming up on where the second explosion had occurred when the police officers formed a line,” she said.

She and surrounding runners stopped. People approached and told them about the bombs. Exhaustion washed over her. The infamous Heartbreak Hill, a couple of miles back, had drained whatever glycogen was left in her legs. She texted worried family members and others who had been tracking her bib number, 22964, online and knew right where she had been when the bombs went off.
Behind her, police erected barriers to stop traffic from turning onto Boylston Street. They opened them to let two fire trucks and two ambulances pass. The runners behind the barrier couldn’t get through. Crawford was among them.

**Unplanned trek.** He felt the chill quickly — after races, marathoners wrap themselves in shiny Mylar blankets for a reason — and his system was starved for energy. But he was worried about his family. Word filtered in that the first explosion was right near the finish line. That’s where the VIP grandstand was. He was pretty sure his wife was somewhere behind him on the course, but his daughter-in-law, Katie Crawford, was probably up ahead.

The path forward was blocked. Cell phones weren’t working, though he managed to get a couple of text messages through. He backtracked and wove around, finally stopping in at the Collonade Hotel, where staff suggested he come in to warm up. Sortman, on her own unplanned trek to find her family, found Bostonians going out of their way for her, asking if she needed to make a phone call, if she needed to warm up, if she needed something to drink.

It took Crawford 45 minutes to find his family. His daughter-in-law had been running a couple of hundred yards ahead of him. She had been right at the point of the second explosion. Its BBs, nails and other shrapnel would have ripped into her had they not first found the flesh of those cheering her on. Her husband, Michael Crawford, and the infant son in his arms had been opposite the initial explosion. They found each other as Crawford found them. They hugged and cried and Crawford took a photo worthy of an iPhone Pulitzer.

Despite an impressive emergency response, the explosions killed three and injured some 260, many gravely.

**Bittersweet reunion.** Sortman reunited with her family — husband Vince, son Nathan, daughter Kristen Bray, sisters who flew in from Maryland and Texas — at about the same time. As with Crawford’s family, they were safe. As with Crawford, she felt terrible about what had happened.

“You get this pit in your stomach,” Sortman explained.

“It’s just kind of gut-wrenching, and it leaves you feeling empty that somebody would do that at such a sporting event — at a happy day in Boston with all these people that trained hard and all the spectators that came out,” Crawford added.

On the way to dinner that evening, Sortman and her family walked past a group of people. One had a Boston Marathon medal around his neck.

“How can I see your medal?” Sortman asked.

The man handed it to her and asked her if she had run today. She explained what had happened.

“Keep it,” he said.

She protested.

“I run it every year,” he said. “I have three of these. You can have my medal.”

Crawford, for his part, has 17 of those medals. He plans on getting his 18th next year. He’s already booked a hotel room for the 2014 race.
“A terrorist or group of them is not going to dissuade me or most of the runners from being there again,” he said.

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