CTIA's John Walls: My Experience at the Boston Marathon

John Wall, Vice President of public affairs, CTIA

This following is John Walls' firsthand account of his experience at the Boston Marathon and the tragic events that unfolded at the finish line on April 15. John is vice president of public affairs for CTIA.

Like most of us, I use my wireless device every day—email, text, talk, “surf”. All of the usual stuff. But on the afternoon of April 15, my smartphone was transformed into the most precious and helpful tool I’ve ever needed, giving me invaluable connectivity to the world outside of the chaos surrounding me, and ultimately providing indescribable relief.

Even though I work at CTIA, on April 15, I was just an immensely proud husband and father of my wife and daughter who were running in the Boston Marathon, eagerly awaiting their arrival at the finish line. I’d already snapped several pictures of my wife, Cindy, and youngest daughter, Katie, running together at the ten mile mark in Natick.

My sister-in-law had secured passes to the VIP viewing grandstand just yards from the finish line, and she and I had made our way to second row seats along with several of her co-workers and friends. We knew Cindy and Katie were just a mile or so away from the finish line and were ready to cheer them on.

And then all hell broke loose.

The first bomb exploded literally across the street from us, probably no more than 100 feet from where we were sitting. We were actually watching the elderly gentleman who was featured in that unforgettable photograph, and he was directly in front of us and in line with the explosion. I had my phone in my hand, ready to take pictures of Cindy and Katie, and somehow had the presence of mind to snap a shot of the scene just seconds after the blast. I then switched on the video function, perhaps on instincts still lingering from my previous career as a journalist, and began recording the incredible scene unfolding in front of us.

John took this video from his spot in the second row at the finish line.

The second explosion is clearly audible on the recording, as were the screams of panic and shouts of direction of how best to evacuate. It was a surreal scene filled with inexplicable emotion. My first thoughts were of survival. I knew we had to get out of the area quickly, while trying to keep calm and not create a stampede. All the while I’m thinking, “God, please don’t let us blow up.” It took maybe a minute (or

was it an hour?) to get to a safer spot, and it was only then that I could start collecting my thoughts and sort through the madness. That's when I thought of Cindy and Katie, and felt a horrible fear of what could be happening to them.

"There were just two bombs, right?," we asked each other. No one knew for sure. Sirens screamed from all directions, and first responders scrambled into action. Realizing that many of our family were tracking Cindy's and Katie's progress online, and that they were well aware of where Sharon and I would have been at the time of the explosion, I started making phone calls.

I left a voicemail for our middle daughter, telling her that we were safe and that I believed her mom and sister were, too. I then called our oldest daughter and talked with her for a few minutes. She wasn't aware of what had happened, so fortunately she'd heard from me personally before seeing the news on television. I asked her to call my mother to tell her I was all right, and to pass the word to as many of our other family members as she could. I was also able to call my mother-in-law and received a call back from our middle daughter. In all, four calls were completed just 15 minutes after the explosions, followed by a stream of text messages from friends and family all over the country wanting to know whether we were safe.

I answered as many texts as I could, while also trying to figure out how to find Cindy and Katie. I assured everyone that I was okay, but I couldn't say the same with certainty about my wife and daughter. I asked for any news updates to be passed along, hoping to find out information that they were out of harm's way. Text messages provided tidbits here and there and were the only way to get reliable information in and out of the scene. We were still just a block and a half away from the finish line, and the confusion and the unknown were overwhelming.

"Call me! Text me! Tell me you're okay!" That's all I could think. We had access to a car and were now making our way toward the part of the course on which we believed Cindy and Katie would have been running, somewhere around the 25 mile mark. I was also sorting through the constant deluge of text messages I was receiving and somehow missed one text as it came through. I found it scrolling through the long list of messages about ten minutes later, and its contents were a few short words that lifted the huge weight of dread and worry about my wife and daughter. "Heading to the Park Plaza. We're okay. Love you, Katie".

What a relief and how sweet that was to read! It had been an hour since the explosions, but we knew they were safe and sound. However, what had not occurred to me was how worried they were about us. Cindy knew exactly where we'd be since Sharon occupied the same spot in the grandstands every year. All they'd been told was that a bomb had gone off at the finish line, and that several spectators were hurt. They were swept up in a panic of their own, afraid that we'd been injured or worse. I texted them back immediately, but found out later they'd returned a borrowed cellphone to its owner. Unfortunately our daughters in the D.C. area were not able to respond to a text from the runners in time, either. So, Cindy and Katie began their zigzag journey to the hotel, our pre-arranged meeting place, not knowing whether Sharon and I were even alive.

Cindy told me later that she had feared the worst and had convinced herself that we'd been hurt in the blasts. It took them about an hour to get to the hotel and once there they borrowed another cellphone and tried calling me. The call didn't get through, but another call to one of our daughters in D.C. did. She gave them the great news that we were all right, and soon after that another call to me connected. I was overwhelmed to hear their voices and after a dozen "I love you's", I gave them instructions on how to walk toward where we were parked, which was around a mile from the hotel. We met on a sidewalk about halfway between, squeezing each other tightly and crying from incredible joy and relief. Eventually we made our way back to Sharon's house in Hopkinton exhausted and still stunned by the day's events.

What an extraordinary day it was. And what an invaluable role wireless had played for us, and assuredly, thousands like us in downtown Boston. In a scene of epic confusion, mobile communication was our lifeline. Yes, networks were congested and calls sometimes were impossible to make. But text messaging was constant and proved to be an incomparable comfort and security to us, and our friends and family all over the country.

Just as striking is the ability wireless devices have to serve as recording agents of such historic events. I was among those at the finish line witnessing a tragic chapter of American history, and like so many others, recorded it in telling pictures and video with a wireless device. The FBI requested all of that content to be sent for its review, so I passed those along to the Bureau. The fact that citizen journalists, like me, are empowered to become valuable contributors to a criminal investigation is another remarkable example of the technology's utility.

Cellular technology is being put to good use every day in our personal and professional lives. Email, talk, text, "surf"—we do them every day without a second thought. But on April 15, my incredible device and its fantastic technology was a godsend for my family and me, providing us with a priceless certainty on a day that had been senselessly turned upside down.

While most emergencies are not nearly of the magnitude of the Boston event, they still occur all over our country on a minute-by-minute basis. Nearly 400,000 calls are made every day from a wireless device to 911, providing immeasurable help at critical times. In light of that, and what I experienced first-hand, I can't imagine ever being without a device again. Not because I'm afraid, but rather, because I know first-hand what it's like to desperately need to be in touch with those you love the most, and how wonderful you feel when you finally connect with them.

Source URL (retrieved on *05/06/2015 - 9:32am*):
http://www.wirelessdesignmag.com/news/2013/04/ctias-john-walls-my-experience-boston-marathon