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Kendall Bolton's family gathers during a promotion ceremony at Fort Riley. Those pictured are, from left, step-father Martin Harrison, sister Kennedy Conner, Bolton, and mother Sherrie Harrison. Courtesy photo

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Liberal native also provided Hurricane Irene relief support

By ROBERT PIERCE • Leader & Times In America, April 15 is traditionally the day taxpayers need to have their returns, both federal and state, turned into the government. This year's April 15 will not soon be forgotten in Boston for other reasons, though, at one of that city's most well-known sporting events.

Around 2:45 p.m., emergency workers were called to the scene of the finish line of the Boston Marathon as two explosions ripped through the nearby crowd leaving at least three dead, about 150 injured and others wondering what had happened, who had done it and why.

In the week that followed, members of the United States Public Health Service were among those who were called to the scene. Among those was 1999 Liberal High School graduate and

USPHS Lt. Cmdr. Kendall Conner Bolton, who has currently been assigned to the Army Medical Command in Fort Riley.

Bolton's branch often deploys to natural disasters, such as hurricanes and tornadoes, and incidents that affect mental health.

"Sometimes, we have to deploy to tribal nations when there's mass suicides," she said. "We were deployed to assist with mental health after the marathon bombing." At the time of the bombing, Bolton was part of a mental health team on a 10-day mission.

"My first mission was going to the Boston Athletic Association and doing a presentation for the executives that coordinated and ran the Boston Marathon," she said. "They're a very tight knit group, and they take a lot of ownership in the marathon. We did a presentation for them, and we also assisted with their mental health needs after their presentation."

Bolton said when she initially heard the news of the bombing, she was shocked by what she was hearing.

"I was driving, and I heard it on the radio," she said. "It was just really hard to wrap my mind around. I got the call the next day, and I had to be prepared to go within eight hours. It was very fast pace and a lot to take in at once."

When she arrived in Boston, Bolton said her feelings became mixed after the initial shock she had felt when finding out about the bombing.

"When I got to the airport, there was a police officer with an assault rifle working on the baggage claim," she said. That was a very new experience for me. There were police officers everywhere. There were National Guard members everywhere. I am used to seeing active duty everywhere, but not armed with pistols and assault rifles and on every corner. That was definitely different."

Bolton said in Boston, security personnel seemed to be everywhere.

"There were certain places you could go, couldn't go," she said.

The hotel Bolton was staying at was less than a mile from where the Boston Marathon incident had taken place.

“We were in a 12-story building, and we could see the police responding to both of the shootouts,” she said. “That was a pretty terrifying experience for all of us. That’s something none of us expected – to be in the middle of active crisis while deploying.”

Bolton has had seven years of military training, and Boston was not her first deployment.

“I was deployed to Hurricane Irene and Tropical Storm Lee up in the northeast,” she said. “I assisted with the disaster case management team.”

Bolton said she truly felt pain for those involved with the situation in Boston.

“My heart just went out to those who put so much time and energy into the marathon and those that were injured,” she said.

Bolton did say, however, she was moved by how the situation was handled by locals in the Massachusetts city.

“I was very impressed with the community that ran this marathon, just the whole community overall,” she said. “They just really came together. Nobody really seemed necessarily mad at anybody, just a very resilient group of people. That’s what impressed me the most.”

With Boston’s crisis being a man-made one and Hurricane Irene being an act of nature, Bolton said she did have two different sets of emotions when she was dealing with the two disasters.

“When I went up to Hurricane Irene, I came back with a completely different perspective,” she said. “People’s houses were destroyed. The whole community was destroyed, a very small tight knit community much like Liberal. I came home just very much blessed to have a home and blessed to have my belongings and blessed to have my photographs and things that were special and important to me.”

Bolton said her feelings were completely different with Boston because it wasn’t homes that had been destroyed.

“I felt very blessed that I had my physical health,” she said. “That was definitely eye opening.”

Bolton did say both incidents did invoke hurtful feelings, but she explained that Irene gave her much more to process emotionally than the bombing.

“Just being there and standing there in that rubble and hearing somebody’s story of what used to be in that rubble and what they lost and hearing somebody explain to me what happened when they opened their basement door and their whole basement was full of water and they ended up swimming out of their house with their children,” she said. “That’s something I’ve never honestly ever experienced, hope never to have to, and I just came back. It’s puts a whole new perspective. You’ve got some water in your basement, you can just wipe it up, not a big deal.”

With Irene, Bolton said she was more focused on the pain hurricane victims were experiencing. With Boston, she experienced more of a feeling of terror.

“There’s a heightened level of anxiety,” she said. “It was an active crime scene. Everybody was on alert. The first experience was more of a feeling of just really people grateful to be alive, people trying to rebuild. One was terror, and one was rejuvenation.”

While many across the country saw the Boston Marathon incident as an act of treason against America, Bolton said this was not the case with her.

“I didn’t see it that way, and I don’t think Boston really did either,” she said. “They saw it as an attack against Boston, and I don’t think it mattered so much the color of the person, just that somebody would do that to something that was so sacred to that community.”

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