



## Facing Terror

**The previously untold complete story of how one Eagle Scout helped bring Boston Marathon bomber Dzhokhar Tsarnaev to justice.**

By Mark Ray

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On Friday, April 19, 2013, an unmarked car slipped quickly and quietly through the streets of Boston. There was no need for a siren, because the streets were empty — except for the hundreds of vehicles representing an alphabet soup of law-enforcement agencies. Each of those vehicles, like this one, was on the trail of 19-year-old Dzhokhar Tsarnaev, the surviving suspect from the Boston Marathon bombings the previous Monday.

“It was like a zombie apocalypse movie,” says FBI crisis negotiator and Eagle Scout Russ Houston, the driver in the unmarked car. “No one was out on the streets. No one was walking their dogs. It’s normally a bustling city full of people, but everyone was inside their homes.”

(Houston has received threats because of some previous casework, so *Eagles' Call* agreed to preserve his anonymity and identify him with a pseudonym.)

People were in their homes because of an extraordinary “shelter in place” alert issued by the governor. After a massive manhunt that included false alarms, countless tips, a carjacking, a high-speed chase, the murder of an MIT police officer and the death of suspect Tamerlan Tsarnaev, police believed their remaining suspect was somewhere near Watertown. It’s a neighborhood so peaceful that police officers rarely fire their guns outside the practice range.

The unmarked car pulled into the parking lot at the Arsenal Project mall, where local, state and federal agencies had set up a command post. “There must have been 1,000-plus law-enforcement officers in that parking lot,” Houston says.

At about 7 p.m., Houston heard a fusillade of gunfire nearby — something he hadn't heard since being deployed in Iraq and Afghanistan — and saw an FBI agent sprinting toward a Hostage Rescue Team vehicle. "You rarely see an HRT guy sprinting from the Command Post, so it had to be something big," Houston says. He grabbed his helmet and vest, and joined the team for another drive through deserted streets.

### **The Suspect in the Boat**

Soon, the vehicle arrived a few houses down from 67 Franklin St. There, homeowner David Henneberry had taken advantage of the recently relaxed shelter-in-place alert to check on his boat, the Slip Away II, in his backyard. Noticing the tarp covering the boat was out of place, Henneberry climbed a ladder, looked inside and discovered Tsarnaev lying in a pool of blood. He called 911 and hundreds of police officers surrounded the location.

A brief but intense shootout had ensued — the noise Houston had heard — before Boston Police Superintendent William Evans shouted, "Hold your fire!" After a canister of tear gas failed to get Tsarnaev out of the boat, law-enforcement officers tried commanding him from a loudspeaker to "come out." The Massachusetts State Police attempted to extract him by driving their armored BearCat vehicle up to the boat, but were unable to flip it over. Through it all, Tsarnaev didn't respond. At that point, the FBI took the lead of a chaotic scene and occupied the inner perimeter positions.

The FBI HRT tried using nonlethal flashbang devices, which give off intense noise and light flashes, but those didn't elicit a response.

So Houston, along with his two FBI colleagues, prepared to do what seemed impossible: Use words and not weapons. They would try to talk the desperate, wounded, murderous Tsarnaev out of the boat without additional violence.

"In the back of my mind, I thought, 'He killed innocent men, women, children and police. No way is he going to surrender,' but I was duty-bound to give it my best shot," Houston says.

### **Words, not Weapons**

Houston entered an adjacent house and climbed to a second-story bedroom where he could see inside the boat. He was close enough that he didn't need a bullhorn and was well within small-arms range if Tsarnaev decided to shoot. Houston took cover and opened the window.

With 400 officers and agents looking on and FBI headquarters monitoring from an aircraft above, Houston spoke to Tsarnaev — not even sure the young man was listening.

"This is [Russ], with the police," he said. "I'm here to talk to you."

And so the delicate dance began. Houston demonstrated empathy, saying he recognized Tsarnaev was hurt and scared and confused. This went on for 10 minutes, and there was no response. "You don't want to sound like a parrot, so you find different ways to send the same message," Houston says.

As time ticked by, there was overwhelming pressure to resolve the situation tactically — knowing Tsarnaev might have firearms or explosives with him in the boat. Many likely didn't want to see Tsarnaev emerge from the boat alive — not after what he had done. But the FBI recognized the intelligence-gathering value of a living suspect. HRT's motto, "To Save Lives," is ingrained in every HRT operator.

Finally, after another few minutes of one-way communication attempting to elicit a response, Tsarnaev groaned. "That was a huge relief," Houston says. "I can't describe it, but after a few minutes I had a weird feeling he was listening."

Now that he'd established two-way communication, Houston moved to step two: building rapport. The negotiation team's goal was to persuade Tsarnaev to surrender and exit the boat peacefully. Houston contrasted aloud the conditions in the boat with those outside.

In the boat, Tsarnaev was alone and scared and hurt. Outside, there was medical help and people who cared for him. In particular, Houston invoked Tsarnaev's high school wrestling coach. Houston had contacted the coach earlier to learn about Tsarnaev — so as to Be Prepared.

Tsarnaev finally responded — "water" — which made Houston elated. "If the subject wants or needs something from law enforcement, that's perfect. Now we're negotiating," he says.

The only catch, of course, was that Tsarnaev couldn't have water or anything else if he didn't get out of the boat.

"I can't move," Tsarnaev said repeatedly.

"We're not going to come on the boat," Houston replied.

The refusal was more than just negotiating; no one knew whether Tsarnaev had guns, a suicide vest or another bomb.

## **Peaceful Resolution**

After another 20 minutes, Houston convinced Tsarnaev to drag himself toward the edge of the boat. He could only crawl a foot or so at a time. Houston told him to pull himself up, and he talked Tsarnaev into putting one leg over the side of the boat. Using words alone, Houston was getting Tsarnaev to do what he previously said he couldn't.

The next goal was getting Tsarnaev onto the ground, so the negotiation team coordinated with the tactical officers to point their weapons' red lasers on the boat trailer's mud guards. Tsarnaev could focus on these dots and see a path to follow out of the boat.

Then things stopped. Tsarnaev had used all his energy and could not swing his injured leg over the side of the boat. Houston motivated Tsarnaev to display his hands and raise his shirt to show he wasn't holding a weapon or wearing explosives. However, he was sitting precariously on the edge, appearing as if he might lose consciousness at any moment and fall back into the boat.

The HRT team leader then directed a combined law-enforcement tactical team to approach the now-compliant Tsarnaev, and then handcuff and arrest him.

A few minutes later, Houston joined Tsarnaev for an ambulance trip to Beth Israel Hospital. Houston then caught a ride to his hotel.

“We went through a roadblock, and the people rushed around the Boston police car,” Houston recalls. “They shook the car in jubilation, shouting ‘USA! USA!’ It was quite moving.”

### **This Eagle Never Quits (sidebar)**

Russ Houston enjoyed an idyllic childhood in San Diego, where the large military presence makes patriotism second nature. Among his earliest memories: jets from the “Top Gun” school at Marine Corps Air Station Miramar screaming across the sky.

Houston’s father, uncle and older brother were all Eagle Scouts, so his odds of earning Scouting’s highest honor were high. Just to be sure, his mother laid down the law with this incentive: no driver’s license until he earned Eagle. The incentive worked, and he reached Scouting’s highest rank before his 15th birthday.

After high school, Houston followed his older brother to West Point, where he struggled academically throughout his plebe year. A class clown, he found the regimentation of military life stifling. Despite the challenges he faced, this Eagle didn’t quit. He graduated in the top 20 percent of his class.

He then entered the Army for five years, serving with his brother in the 1st Brigade Combat Team, 1st Cavalry Division. Along the way, he completed Airborne and Ranger School. Despite his Army success, Houston longed to work for the FBI, where he could serve his country but shed some of the trappings of military life. But getting there wasn’t easy.

“When I first applied, I was told I was noncompetitive,” he says. He focused on improving himself, earned his master’s degree and got accepted.

In 2013, Houston visited the National Jamboree to share the story about the Boston Marathon bombing. His message was simple: “This Eagle never quits. I learned in Scouting that hard work plus opportunity usually equals success,” he said. “Of my mild accomplishments — Eagle Scout, West Point, Airborne Ranger in the Army, FBI Special Agent, Operator on the Hostage Rescue Team — what I tell Scouts and my sons I’m the most proud of is being an Eagle Scout.”