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Fact-checking the 'Patriots Day' movie

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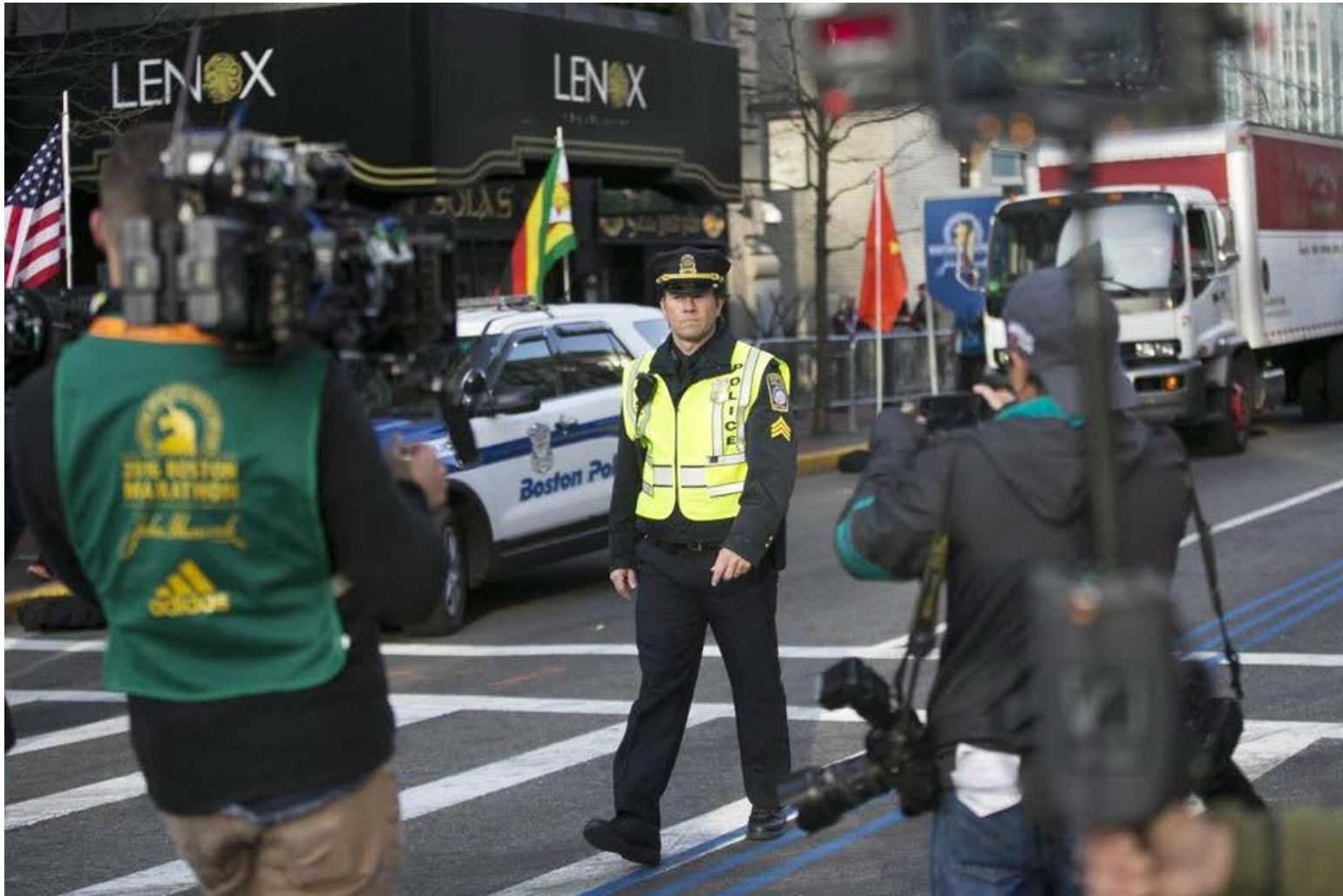
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Mark Wahlberg filmed a scene for "Patriots Day" in April 2016.

By Matt Rocheleau

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The film "Patriots Day" recounts the [bombings at the Boston Marathon in 2013](#) and the tense moments and days afterward in which first responders, doctors, and nurses rushed to save lives,

while law enforcement officials hunted down the suspects.

But like many Hollywood movies based on reality, it doesn't always accurately depict what actually happened.

Here's a rundown of some of the key scenes, and whether they were real or fake.

(The list is largely in chronological order, and, beware, there are spoilers.)

The film's title

If you're not from around here, you may not realize that the film's namesake is a [state holiday](#) in Massachusetts.

Patriots Day is celebrated each year on the third Monday in April. It [commemorates](#) the start of the Revolutionary War. Only two other states, Maine and Wisconsin, recognize it. The Boston Marathon is held each year on Patriots Day. And as the movie shows, the Red Sox traditionally host a game at Fenway Park the same morning.

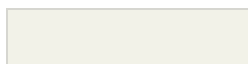


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The movie's main character





Cullen: It's not just a movie. It's personal

There are some who think "Patriots Day" was produced too soon and others who think it should not have been made at all.

Burr: Here's how 'Patriots Day' could have been better

Sergeant Tommy Saunders, played by Mark Wahlberg, does not represent a real person.

Instead Saunders is what's known in Hollywood as a "composite" character, based on a blend of the experiences of several police officers.

In the movie, Saunders is present at seemingly every key point before, during, and after the explosions, and is portrayed as the hero of the story.

In reality, there were many people who helped save lives and restore order after the bombings.

At the same time, there were certainly some first responders who were in the thick of things at multiple, critical times in the moments and days after the blasts.



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“One of the officers that Wahlberg’s character is based on is Dan Keeler, a recently retired Boston police sergeant detective,” the [Globe columnist Kevin Cullen wrote](#) recently. “Keeler took a strong leadership role on Boylston Street in the immediate aftermath of the bombs. He kept the Ring Road open, critical for medical evacuations, and ordered the race shut down at Hereford Street, to prevent Boylston from being clogged with runners. Keeler was also there, in tactical gear, when Dzhokhar Tsarnaev was taken into custody.”

The Boston accents

These weren’t always spot on.

As Globe reporter [Mark Shanahan wrote recently](#): “Like every Hollywood film set in Boston, this one features a few characters with questionable accents. Actor John Goodman, for example, who plays former police commissioner Ed Davis, speaks with a drawl you might hear in New Orleans, but probably not on Newbury Street.”

William Evans of the Boston Police running the Marathon

Evans, who was superintendent of the department at the time, indeed ran the 26.2-mile race. (It took him 3 hours and 34 minutes.) The bombs went off not long after he had completed the race, and Evans was one of the first commanders to reach the scene.

Several months later, he [became](#) acting commissioner of police, taking over after [Edward Davis’s](#) seven-year tenure as commissioner. Evans was named to the post permanently in early 2014.

The 2013 Marathon began with a moment of silence for a different tragedy

As the movie shows, runners, organizers, and spectators [paused](#) at the race’s starting line in Hopkinton that day to remember the lives lost in the school shooting in Newtown, Conn., in Dec. 2012.

The marker at Mile 26 of the race was also dedicated to honor the 20 children and six adults who were murdered at Sandy Hook Elementary School, and a team of people from Newtown ran the race to raise scholarship money and help their community heal.

Was there a third explosion in Boston that day?

The movie makes a couple of brief passing mentions of reports of a possible explosion in Boston at

about the same time as, though several miles away from, the two blasts at the Marathon finish line. That really happened: shortly before 3 p.m., people [reported hearing explosion-like sounds](#) when a fire broke out at the John F. Kennedy Presidential Library and Museum in the city's Dorchester neighborhood, prompting officials to investigate whether that was linked to the Marathon bombings. Officials [later ruled](#) there was no connection and it was just a fire. (That building was evacuated and no injuries were reported.)

Other details of the day of the bombings

The movie accurately depicts some other details about the race that day — including who won the men's division ([Lelisa Desisa](#)), when the bombs exploded ([about 2:50 p.m.](#)), and the number of people the bombing killed (three: Martin Richard, 8; Krystle Campbell, 29; and Lingzi Lu, 23).

The film also shows how Steve Woolfenden and his 3-year-old son Leo, who was in a stroller, were [both injured](#) in the bombings.

It shows how [newlyweds](#) Patrick Downes and Jessica Kensky were both injured, taken to separate hospitals, and lost limbs from the blasts.

And it correctly shows how [some runners kept running](#) toward the finish line for a short time after the bombs went off, many unaware of and confused about what had happened.

The movie got one key detail wrong about the day of the bombings. It showed a lone State Police trooper standing watch over the body of a victim who was killed in the Boylston Street blasts. [In reality](#), a team of several officers from the Boston Police Department covered the bodies of Martin Richard and Lingzi Lu with tablecloths from restaurants there and for about 12 hours stood vigil over them until law enforcement forensics specialists were able to gather evidence from the crime scene.

City firefighters have also [said](#) the movie glossed over their role in responding after the blasts and helping to save lives.

While the movie mentions the number of people killed in the bombings and their ages and shows their names and photos as the movie closes, the film does not detail those victims' stories.

Wahlberg [told the Globe recently](#) that Martin Richard had been a focus of the script initially, but his parents met with Wahlberg before filming began and asked that they not be included.

“Bill [Richard, Martin’s father] didn’t want anyone portraying himself or his wife or his children [in the movie], and we said, ‘Of course. We completely understand,’” Wahlberg said.

The New York Post’s front-page ‘Bag Men’ spread

That really happened.

Before law enforcement officials ever publicly identified potential suspects, the [Post ran a front-page photo](#) captured by surveillance cameras of two men watching the Marathon, including one carrying a backpack, with the headline, “Bag Men: Feds seek this duo pictured at Boston Marathon.”

Neither of the men played any role in the attacks. They later sued the tabloid, accusing it of falsely portraying them as suspects. The suit was [settled](#) in the fall of 2014. Terms of the deal were not disclosed.

The movie also accurately depicts how, behind the scenes, law enforcement officials were combing through surveillance camera footage to try to find the bombers. The images they found were [not clear enough](#) to run through facial recognition software to try to identify. And officials [struggled](#) over whether to publicize photos of potential suspects before ultimately releasing photos of two men, later identified as the actual bombers, on the afternoon after the Post’s controversial front-page.

Richard DesLauriers, who, as the movie shows, was the FBI special agent who helped lead the investigation, [told the Globe recently](#) that filmmakers took a bit of artistic license in how they portrayed a difference of opinion he had with then-Boston Police Commissioner Ed Davis over releasing photos of the brothers.

DesLauriers has since retired and [has said](#), as the movie portrays, that he had been planning to leave in the weeks before the bombings, but he stayed to help investigate the bombings.

One of the bombers bought milk after the attacks

That was real.

Surveillance video from a Whole Foods grocery store in Cambridge showed Dzhokhar Tsarnaev [pondering what type of milk to buy](#) about 20 minutes after the bombings.

Bombers’ friends at UMass Dartmouth

As the movie portrays, one of Dzhokhar Tsarnaev's friends at UMass Dartmouth did indeed exchange [text messages](#) with him a few hours after authorities released photos of Tsarnaev and his older brother, Tamerlan, identifying them as suspects.

In one exchange, the friend texted, "u saw the news?"

Tsarnaev later responded, "I saw the news ..."

"Better not text me my friend." Then, he texted, "Lol."

As the movie shows, Tsarnaev's friends at the college found items in Tsarnaev's dorm room when they searched it after the bombings, including a backpack containing fireworks. They later discarded some of the items.

[Three of Tsarnaev's college friends were convicted](#) of lying to investigators and sentenced to serve time in prison.

The movie also describes the younger Tsarnaev brother as a [marijuana dealer](#), which is accurate, according to people who said they bought drugs from him.

MIT Police Officer Sean Collier

As the movie shows, Sean Collier was indeed shot to death at point-blank range while in his cruiser outside the Koch Institute for Integrative Cancer Research at MIT. The Tsarnaev brothers tried to remove Collier's gun from the holster but were unable to, [prosecutors have said](#).

Collier was indeed described by those who knew him as a [fan of the Zac Brown Band](#), as the movie portrays him.

The movie also depicts Collier as having a romantic interest in an MIT student. But Collier's younger brother, Andrew, told the [Boston Herald](#) recently that was inaccurate — his brother did not have a girlfriend.

Intense carjacking scene

A man named Dun Meng was indeed carjacked while in a black Mercedes-Benz SUV, as the movie shows. The movie accurately portrays some of the dialogue that [Meng has said](#) went on during the roughly [90-minute ordeal](#), including the brothers discussing how they wanted to go to New York City.

The brothers really did use Meng's ATM card and his PIN number to buy gas. And Meng made his escape at a gas station in Cambridge, while the younger Tsarnaev brother was inside the station's convenience store and the older brother was fiddling with a GPS device.

Meng ran across the street to a different gas station and asked the clerk to call for help. He told police they could track his SUV using its onboard satellite system. Barely 20 minutes later, authorities tracked down the Mercedes.

Wild shootout in Watertown

Police and the Tsarnaev brothers really did engage in a [chaotic, intense shootout](#) on residential Laurel Street in Watertown as the movie shows. Gunfire was [exchanged](#) and the brothers hurled homemade bombs that exploded, rocking the neighborhood as the bullets flew.

Watertown Police Sergeant Jeff Pugliese was on his way home when he heard the calls for backup and raced toward the scene, where he cut through residents' yards to [flank the bombers](#).

The younger brother did actually drive the stolen SUV over his sibling, dragging him briefly under the vehicle, as he drove away from police.

And a police officer, [Richard Donohue](#) of the Transit Police Department, was shot and gravely injured during the shootout in Watertown.

There was at least one key omission from the movie's portrayal of these scenes. It doesn't show how Boston Police Officer Dennis "DJ" Simmonds, who suffered a head injury from the blast of a homemade bomb thrown by one of the brothers. That injury was determined to have caused his death almost a year later.

The shootout in the movie also may have been dramatized somewhat by Hollywood. The movie shows police cruisers going up in a heap of flames after the homemade bombs went off. Those fireballs may have been an exaggeration.

Still, cruisers were [indeed damaged](#) by bullets and at least one vehicle had its windows blown out from the explosions, officials have said.

And the real-life Pugliese, after seeing the movie, described the scenes of the chaos in Watertown as

“pretty accurate.”

“From the first officers on scene pulling up and getting shot at and then my arrival, [director] Pete [Berg] made sure he got this right,” Pugliese [said](#).

The manhunt that shut down the Boston area

When the younger brother escaped from the Watertown fire, a massive manhunt ensued. Officials ordered area residents to [shelter in place](#), bringing the city and its suburbs to an eerie standstill. Boston’s transit system closed and officials banned anyone considered non-essential from driving around, while police in full SWAT gear searched in and around people’s homes in Watertown.

How the manhunt ended

The younger brother’s hideout — the shrink-wrapped boat in a resident’s backyard on Franklin Street — was indeed first discovered by the homeowner there, [David Henneberry](#), who had noticed something wasn’t quite right about the boat and went to investigate.

Henneberry’s discovery led to a swift and heavy police response, including the deployment of a State Police helicopter with a thermal imaging camera that picked up infrared images of the heat signature of the brother hiding beneath the tarp covering the boat.

When police finally captured the younger brother, area residents lined the streets of Watertown, clapping and cheering as the ambulance carrying the bomber and police vehicles whisked by.

As the movie says at the end, Tsarnaev has since been [convicted](#) on the 30 charges he faced and [sentenced to death](#), which he is [appealing](#).

The older brother had been on watch list

The movie references how Tamerlan Tsarnaev had been on a terrorism watch list before he and his brother carried out the attacks, and [that’s true](#).

Interrogation of Tsarnaev wife

The accuracy of this is disputed.

The movie portrays the older brother’s wife, Katherine Russell, as being uncooperative with investigators who grilled her after the bombings and denied her requests for a lawyer.

The film also suggests she knew, or should have known, something was up before her husband and his brother carried out the attacks, and that law enforcement continues to seek information about Russell's possible involvement in the bombings.

Her lawyer, Amato DeLuca, has spoken out against how she is portrayed in the movie, calling it untrue. He said she willingly sat down with authorities multiple times in talks that he described as “cordial” and “cooperative.”

As to the idea that she is still being eyed by investigators, “That’s news to me,” DeLuca said, according to The [Associated Press](#). “No one has made any suggestion that’s what’s going on. Obviously, it’s been some time since this occurred. Nothing has changed.”

However, Richard DesLauriers, the FBI special agent who led the investigation, told the AP he believed the portrayal of the interrogation scene was on point.

“I have no reason whatsoever to believe that anything about this aspect of the movie is inaccurate,” said DesLauriers, who is no longer with the FBI.

Additionally, the movie’s producer Michael Radutzky has said the interrogation scene was “triple-sourced from multiple authorities” based on “significant reporting about her behavior, her affect, her manner and the words she had to say,” according to the AP.

Director Peter Berg said there were “unresolved issues” with Russell, and it was hard to understand how someone living in a small apartment with the bombers could not have known what was going on.

David Ortiz’s Fenway Park speech

The movie portrays the now-retired Sox slugger standing on the field at Fenway, holding a microphone, and declaring “This is our [expletive] city.”

He [really said that](#).

As for the clips at the end of the movie of the bombing survivors and first responders speaking — it’s hard to imagine anyone would question their authenticity. But, yes, those are also real.

What actual survivors and first responders have said about the film’s accuracy

Some of the people who lived through the horror of the bombings and their aftermath have spoken out about the film since its release.

[Here's a roundup of some of those reactions](#), including whether they thought the movie was accurate. You can find some additional reactions [here](#), [here](#), and [here](#).

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