

at least eight JeffCo deputies—who already had been assisting escaping students, driving injured students to medical attention, and blocking access roads—stationed themselves around Columbine, forming an inner perimeter to watch the building's 25 exterior doors. Captain Robert Armstrong, the on-call commander for the Arapahoe County Sheriff's Office, and perhaps the most experienced commander on scene, stepped in and directed Denver police and the Colorado State Patrol to form a second perimeter away from the school to further secure the area, limit traffic access, and keep press and parents from approaching.¹¹ Anxiety that the shooters might have associates outside the school, or plans to launch attacks elsewhere, increased when firefighters reported that the brushfire a few miles south of the school that morning had been triggered by bombs, and could be related to the attack on Columbine. Bomb squads from the JeffCo and Arapahoe County Sheriff's Offices already had been told to report to the school.

At 11:45, JeffCo Lieutenant Dave Walcher drove up, followed soon after by five members of Denver's Metro SWAT team, including SWAT Commander Captain Vincent DiManna, who had a son and niece at Columbine.¹² Walcher, the top-ranked JeffCo representative on scene, assumed command upon arrival and told Terry Manwaring to get SWAT members into the school as soon as possible. A few minutes later, JeffCo Undersheriff John Dunaway arrived. Dunaway officially appointed Lieutenant Walcher as incident commander, and authorized an ad hoc SWAT team comprised of Denver, JeffCo, and Littleton Police members to enter the building as soon as it could.

Inside the school's science wing, meanwhile, the teacher who had helped Dave Sanders into a room had placed a hurriedly written sign in the window reading, "1 bleeding to death." A second teacher in the classroom contacted a dispatcher by cell phone, and tried to describe how to reach the room where Sanders lay, an area which was in the most isolated part of the building with no exterior door nearby. When a dispatcher contacted Sergeant Phil Hy just before noon to ask whether someone could get to the injured teacher, however, Hy replied that there was not yet a secure entry point for attempting such a rescue. Soon after, the dispatcher warned those in the room with Sanders not to break out a window because it might alert the shooters to their location.

The number of gunmen in the school was still unknown. Minutes before noon, though, dispatch radioed

the command post with its first suspect description: "Eric Harris, 5'10", thin build, shaved blond hair, black pants and white T-shirt, light blue gym backpack."¹³

The Emergency Medical Response

As law enforcement struggled to make sense of what was happening at Columbine, fire and emergency medical resources had also arrived, and faced a similarly disorienting scene.

Littleton Fire Department Battalion Chief Ray Rahne, the shift commander, had driven over to Columbine on a whim after hearing the first report of a female down, thinking that—unlikely as it seemed in that area—there might have been a drive-by shooting. Littleton Fire's eight stations in the Littleton area handled fire fighting and emergency medical services for about 190,000 people, and although the high school wasn't in Littleton, the fire department's service area included Columbine. When Rahne pulled up at the school's main entrance on Pierce Street at 11:34, though, he had heard nothing beyond the initial report. Although Littleton Fire and the JeffCo Sheriff's Office both had VHF radio systems, JeffCo was just one of 16 different law enforcement agencies in Littleton Fire's service area, and the two agencies rarely worked together and weren't using the same channels. As a result, Rahne was completely unaware that deputies had had firefights with gunmen on the other side of the school, and he had not heard about Neil Gardner's 11:29 call for medical help.

In addition, Rahne was oblivious to the growing law enforcement response just north of where he had parked. Although students were streaming from the building, most had not witnessed the attack, and Rahne still thought he was dealing with a single shooting. "We did not realize for about the first 20 minutes that an exchange of gunfire had taken place between the school resource officer and Harris and Klebold at the back of the school," says Littleton Fire Chief William Pessemier, who arrived about 20 minutes after Rahne. "We didn't have JeffCo's channels on our radios, and they didn't have ours."

According to Rahne, he soon spotted a girl sitting on the corner across the street from the school who had been shot in the ankle, and took her to a private ambulance.¹⁴ But neither she nor anyone else knew exactly what was happening inside, nor how serious it was. "I stayed in front of the school, set up command, and said, 'I need police officers for command in front of the school,'" Rahne recalls, "and nobody came."

Shortly before noon, Rahne finally heard that there were victims down behind the southwest side of the school, and sent two Littleton rescue units that had been waiting nearby to respond. As paramedics approached the back of the school, however, they hit an impasse. While some police officers and deputies who were crouched behind cars were waving them on, others motioned for them to stop. Despite the mixed signals, the paramedics parked as close as they could to four students lying on the ground outside the cafeteria, and rushed out to examine them. The first student they checked was already dead.¹⁵ As they prepared to assess the other three victims, though, shots rang out. Gunmen in the school were firing down from the second floor—from what officers would later learn was the library—and police officers and deputies on the ground, including Neil Gardner, returned fire. “They just literally took two bodies and threw them in one rescue, basically right on top of each other, and then took another one and put it in another rescue and just got out of there,” reports Rahne. The student who was already dead was left behind.

Rahne, meanwhile, had been summoned to the JeffCo command post about two blocks north on Pierce from where he had been waiting. Arriving at about the same time as Fire Chief Pessemier, the two men discovered a scene of turmoil as fire engines, ambulances, and police cars converged at the intersection.¹⁶ “I remember when I got there, Ray looked at me and said, ‘I don’t know where all these people are coming from,’” recalls Pessemier. “‘I didn’t call them.’” Adds Rahne: “I finally just started screaming, ‘Who’s in charge? Who’s in charge?’ But nobody would say. We had no staging, we had no base, because I hadn’t called for anything, and we were getting all these self-dispatched people coming to the scene.”¹⁷

As Rahne began to transfer command of the incident to Pessemier, the ambulances that had sped out from behind the school pulled up, and the paramedics jumped out screaming for help. “They opened up the back of the ambulance and the blood was just running out of it,” Rahne says. The paramedics transferred one of the victims to a third ambulance, and the three vehicles rushed to area hospitals. Anne Marie Hochhalter, one of the first people shot, was estimated to have been just minutes away from death when she reached the emergency department. “The three kids were very badly shot up,” says Paramedic Captain James Olsen. “One was barely alive, and another had half of his face shot off.” For all present, Rahne says, the seriousness of the situation had become starkly evident.

Once Fire Chief Pessemier had assumed incident command for the agency, he appointed Rahne operations chief for fire and emergency medical operations. At 12:10, Pessemier and Rahne set up two medical triage sites; one on the east side near the school’s main entrance, and a second a few blocks west of the school at the intersection of two small residential streets, Yukon and Caley. Yukon/Caley had already become a *de facto* triage site, since deputies who had evacuated students from the grounds west of Columbine early on had brought injured students to the intersection and laid them down for treatment in one homeowner’s front yard. When Rahne sent a lieutenant to Yukon/Caley to investigate, the lieutenant promptly called for ten more ambulances and a helicopter to transport eleven shooting victims, four of them critical.

The fire command staff also established two medical staging areas near the command post, and a fire staging area a few blocks south of Columbine on Pierce. . . . With staging and triage in place, the fire and emergency medical operation began to flow more smoothly. Littleton Fire still couldn’t communicate directly with the JeffCo Sheriff’s Office, however, nor could it communicate with most of the engines and ambulances reporting from other jurisdictions because of radio system incompatibilities. In order to ensure the ability to talk, Rahne says, he sent at least one Littleton Fire representative with a radio on all emergency medical or fire teams that he dispatched.

Chief Pessemier and JeffCo Lieutenant Dave Walcher, meanwhile, set up a unified command—incorporating both the medical and the law enforcement response. “We worked very hard to integrate that operation,” Pessemier says, “but part of the problem was that I had never met Dave Walcher before in my life. We didn’t have a real strong relationship with many of the law enforcement agencies in the local area.” Despite limited experience in coordinating or participating in such a complex multi-agency response, however, personnel from all agencies strove to cooperate, according to those at the scene. “Maybe it was Lance [Kirklin],” one of the critically wounded students whose ambulance had briefly stopped at the command post on the way to the hospital, explains Littleton Fire Department Division Chief Chuck Burdick, who served as the department’s law enforcement liaison. “A lot of people saw Lance come through, and the magnitude of it was such that people realized this is too big to have petty issues between us. We’ve got to get through this, and the only way we’re going to get through this is with the support of each other. I think we all knew that.”