

SWAT's First Entrance

While Rahne and others were organizing the early emergency medical response, JeffCo SWAT Commander Manwaring was rounding up SWAT team members who had already reported from different jurisdictions in order to cobble together a team. Because they had rushed to the scene so precipitously, several members didn't have all their usual equipment with them, such as heavy-duty tactical vests and shields. Just after noon, as the rescue units raced from the back of the school with the three student shooting victims, Manwaring asked to borrow a Littleton fire engine to use as a shield, and 12 SWAT members from the JeffCo Sheriff's Office and the Denver and Littleton police departments approached the east side of Columbine, sheltered by the slow-moving truck with a SWAT member at the wheel.

When they reached the school, Manwaring broke the group in two. One half, led by Manwaring and Denver Commander Vincent DiManna, continued around the north of the building—still crouching behind the fire truck—towards the west side, where the shootouts had occurred. The other half, led by JeffCo SWAT Deputy Allen Simmons, prepared to enter the east side just south of the main doors.

What the SWAT teams would confront was a sprawling 250,000-square-foot building on two levels, containing 75 classrooms, many smaller rooms and closets, and such large gathering areas as the gymnasium, cafeteria, and auditorium. The school had been significantly updated and expanded in 1995, including the addition of a new cafeteria and library. Unfortunately, the SWAT teams didn't have an updated map of the school among the emergency resources they kept on hand. Although Littleton Fire had begun running off copies of its Columbine "pre-plan," a simplified room plan that showed where to go for alarm and sprinkler shutoffs, for example, Manwaring hadn't received a copy. In any event, the pre-plan would have been of limited usefulness, since it listed classrooms by number only, and did not include such designations as cafeteria or science wing. Instead, Manwaring had only a sketch drawn hastily by a student. In fact, when he sent the first team in, the SWAT commander thought the school's cafeteria was still on the east side, its location before the remodeling four years earlier.

At 12:06, slightly more than a half hour after Manwaring first paged the JeffCo SWAT team, Simmons's group entered the east side of Columbine. According to many observers, forming an ad hoc, multi-jurisdictional

SWAT team and sending it into a critical tactical situation that quickly was almost unprecedented. Normal operating procedure, by contrast, was for a team to wait until all its members had arrived, to deploy as a team, and to receive a detailed explanation of what was happening before entering. "It was very, very fast for everything up to that point," says Lieutenant Bruce Williamson, SWAT commander for the Arapahoe Sheriff's Office, who would arrive about 40 minutes later. "Columbine High School broke all the molds."

Inside the building, beneath wailing fire alarms, the six SWAT team members began to move slowly from room to room. The team, which split in two to cover more territory, soon found one teacher and two staff members as it advanced carefully through the warren of classrooms. Arvada Police Department Chief Ron Sloan, whose department had two officers on JeffCo's SWAT team, says members were undoubtedly trying to figure out what kind of situation they were facing: hostage-taking, barricaded suspects, a mental health situation, or some type of terrorist act. "I'm sure it was in the minds of people, 'Are they going to flee the scene now that the police are here, or are they going to secrete themselves somewhere and level some kind of demand?'" Sloan says. "For it to continue on after the initial police presence, and for homicides to be taking place indiscriminately after that, particularly by young people in a school, was almost unheard of."

SWAT members were also straining their senses to try to detect a sound or motion that would reveal the presence of one or more shooters. In fact, however, almost from the moment the first SWAT team entered, the actual targets were gone. Reports from inside the school and from escaping students of shooting and of bombs exploding dropped off sharply after noon—though such accounts did not stop entirely. Investigators later determined that Harris and Klebold had killed themselves in the library at 12:08, shortly after firing at the paramedics rescuing victims below. Responders, however, had no such information at the time to guide their actions. "You cannot assume anything, yet you have to assume something, so what you assume is the worst," explains Chief Sloan of Arvada. "And the worst case scenario is that the bad guys are secreting themselves, they're taking hostages, and they'll shoot you as soon as the door opens." He adds: "You can't assume that they've committed suicide. You can't assume that this room does not have suspects in it. You have to assume the worst."

With the first SWAT team inside, those in charge outside continued to try to organize the flood of incoming

information into a coherent account. At 12:14, although in reality Harris and Klebold were already dead, students on a cell phone in the school reported to 911 that the shooters were nearby. A few minutes later, police detained a young man approaching the school carrying an unloaded rifle and a knife who was dressed in clothes similar to those reportedly worn by the gunmen.¹⁸ In a television interview, a student who had escaped said that although he couldn't identify the shooters, they were part of a group known as the Trench Coat Mafia.¹⁹

Troubling news had also come in from the site of the earlier brushfire. Sixteen bomb experts who had assembled from Jefferson and Arapahoe counties, Denver, and the Federal Bureau of Investigation had spread out to advise SWAT teams before they entered the school; search the house of Eric Harris, who had been formally identified as a likely suspect; and evaluate the bombs that had sparked the fire earlier that morning. The two bomb technicians examining the refuse from the fire had quickly discovered the remains of an alarm clock—evidence not only that the gunmen had probably planted the bombs as diversionary devices to draw responders away from the school before the attack, but, even more disturbingly, that the shooters were capable of making timed devices.²⁰ The discovery not only heightened concerns about further attacks or explosions away from Columbine, but also forced law enforcement to conclude that it was likely there were time-activated bombs and booby-trapped rooms inside the school.

Establishing Incident Command

By 12:40, JeffCo's mobile command bus had arrived, and instead of grouping around Sgt. Phil Hy's patrol car, the command post operation moved inside the bus.²¹ In addition to JeffCo's incident commander, Lieutenant Dave Walcher—who was often joined by Undersheriff Dunaway, and sometimes by Sheriff Stone—command level representatives included Captain Robert Armstrong from Arapahoe; Division Chief Gerry Whitman from the Denver Police; Major John Wise from the Colorado State Patrol; Commander Bob Brandt from the Littleton Police; and either Chief Pessemier or Division Chief Chuck Burdick representing Littleton Fire.

According to Sheriff Stone, JeffCo established incident command using the same basic management model that the JeffCo representatives had studied and trained on during the four-day FEMA workshop a year-and-a-half earlier. "My position in this thing was almost

like a symphony director," Stone says. "You're watching every one of these things going on, but you have to make sure every instrument's playing properly." With Walcher handling incident command, Stone says, Dunaway took charge of operations, while he, himself, was "trying to do all the support stuff, get the investigation going, get the county involved, the media, and all these other support things that you have to do."

But for some others on the scene, the division of responsibilities wasn't always obvious. Virtually all law enforcement officials involved with the Columbine response say it was the kind of emergency that would have been difficult for any single agency to coordinate. Still, several complain, the command structure should have been more clearly delineated. "Everybody asked questions like, 'Who's actually in charge?'" recalls one command level officer. "Well, quite frankly, I couldn't tell you. If I had to guess from being around the command post, I would say it was a combination of Gerry Whitman, Robert Armstrong, John Dunaway, and Walcher. Those would be the key four." Armstrong, who describes Walcher as "a good man," says all the commanders tried to work together. "What we did is we'd say, 'What about this? What about that?' So we could play off each other. So you had more than one mind making those decisions."

In addition, some responders say, Dunaway and Stone didn't give Walcher the support he needed. Walcher, who had previously spent seven years with the JeffCo SWAT team, had only recently been promoted to lieutenant, and had no experience managing a major incident. While it wasn't necessarily preferable for a sheriff or undersheriff to be the incident commander during such an event, the top law enforcement officials—presumably the agency's most experienced people at managing an emergency response—would generally remain available to serve as sounding boards, ask questions, and make suggestions. Dunaway, however, spent a lot of time outside of the command post talking with school administrators, law enforcement and county officials, and others who had come to the vehicle. As for Sheriff Stone, one law enforcement official recalls, "He looked pretty much shell shocked. If I was a brand new sheriff and was going through some administrative changes, trying to reorganize my department, and this thing hit me a few months into my term, I probably would have looked just like him."

Walcher, however, says he had all the support he needed, particularly given the collaborative effort that quickly coalesced among the experienced command staff at the post. "No one agency by itself could handle