

by Sgt. Barry Williams, arrived at the command post. Over the next 20 minutes, Williams led the team around to the school's west end—using a front end loader they had commandeered as a cover—while two SWAT snipers broke off from the group and stationed themselves on roofs south of the school and opposite the library windows and science wing.

A. J. DeAndrea, an officer with the Arvada Police Department and member of the JeffCo SWAT team, had been having a family picnic with his wife, who was nine months pregnant, when he was paged and told there had been a shooting at Columbine. DeAndrea, who approached the school's west end behind the front end loader, recalls the scene at Columbine as "surreal." First, he saw one of JeffCo's SWAT members driving a fire truck. Then he noticed one of the early students to be shot and killed, Rachel Scott, on the ground nearby—his first realization that there had been fatalities. Farther down the hill was the body of Daniel Rohrbough.

Manwaring gave the newly arrived team a terse summary. It still wasn't known how many suspects were inside, although there were estimates of as many as eight gunmen in the building—conceivably some kind of terrorist group. Because of the bomb outside the west doors, the SWAT team didn't enter there. Nor did it go through the open emergency exit door leading straight to the library, out of which a number of distraught students had escaped about an hour-and-a-half earlier, because there was a bomb visible there. Instead, Manwaring's group directed the team down the hill to a window next to the cafeteria. Although the entry point was a floor below where deputies had last spotted the gunmen, shooting from the library windows, Manwaring had no reason to believe the two had stayed in that area, says Lieutenant Bruce Williamson, SWAT commander for the Arapahoe Sheriff's Office. "The team going into the school had no idea where the last known location of these guys was," explains Williamson. "They were shooting all over."

Unlike a normal SWAT operation, DeAndrea says, the pressure to get inside was so great that the team deployed with almost no preparation. "As we entered, we were told all kinds of things," DeAndrea recalls. "We were told, 'Last seen in the business area. Last seen in the science area. They are possibly in the air ducts moving around. We've got somebody on the roof.' I remember the Channel Four news helicopter coming in real low trying to see what they had up there." The team did not know there had been a massacre in the library, though, nor was it told that there was a report of a badly injured person in the science wing. Neither Manwaring

nor DiManna, apparently, had been given that information. In addition, Manwaring still didn't have a map of the school, and most SWAT members had never been in the building.

On the other side of the school, meanwhile, SWAT Deputy Allen Simmons had called for assistance with the grueling and time-consuming process of breaking down doors and searching rooms for suspects and victims. Although Harris and Klebold had been dead for more than a half hour, the command post was still receiving regular cell phone reports of gunshots and explosions from students and staff hidden throughout the school, which further complicated the search.²⁷ Shortly before 1:00, a SWAT team from the Arapahoe Sheriff's Office joined Simmons in the east side search, while other members of the Arapahoe team, along with JeffCo, Lakewood, Denver, and Littleton, established a tactical command post on Pierce Street right outside the main school entrance.

In Manwaring's absence, JeffCo had named Commander Bob Brandt and Sergeant Bill Black of the Littleton Police to coordinate the SWAT deployment. Perhaps because of the faulty communication among different agencies, however, some SWAT members kept questioning why Manwaring wasn't running the tactical command post himself, while others mistakenly concluded that he had deployed with a SWAT team inside the school.²⁸ "We kept asking where he was, because all the commanders need to get together and formulate a tactical plan together," says Arapahoe SWAT team leader Louis Perea. "That wasn't happening."

At about 1:00, a school staff member gave an Arapahoe deputy a Columbine yearbook from the previous year with the photos of Eric Harris and Dylan Klebold circled. Captain Campbell sent plainclothes officers to make copies of the pictures and distributed them to the command and tactical posts. By 1:15, investigators had gone to both students' houses.

West Side SWAT Enters

The eight members of the JeffCo SWAT team led by Barry Williams, along with a few Denver SWAT members, broke a window and climbed into the school at about 1:09. Had shots been fired shortly before or as the west side SWAT team arrived, DeAndrea says, the team's goal would have been simple: respond to the shots and stop the threat. Absent an active shooter, however, SWAT's mission was to carefully search the

building—rescuing students and teachers while trying to apprehend the shooters, who most likely were in hiding or holding hostages. “With shots fired, we’re going to do a rapid and immediate deployment with an assault team, and we’re going to take care of the shots being fired,” DeAndrea explains. “Without that, we’re not going to run haphazardly anywhere.”

Once through the window, team members found themselves in a teachers lounge, standing in about three inches of water that had accumulated from the cafeteria sprinkler system, activated by bombs thrown earlier by Harris and Klebold. The group was immediately bombarded with sounds and smells. “You’ve got the school bell going off, you’ve got the fire alarm going off, you can smell gun powder in the air, and there’s an overwhelming noise from the sprinklers made by the water coming down,” DeAndrea recalls. While some members were particularly disconcerted by the alarms, DeAndrea says, what bothered him most were the alarm system’s flashing strobe lights, which chillingly mimicked the flash of a gun, and which also created sudden shadows that forced him to recheck areas repeatedly to ensure there was no one hiding or preparing to attack.

Looking into the cafeteria, DeAndrea recounts, was an otherworldly experience. “We don’t hear shots fired,” he says. “We don’t see kids running around. There’s nothing. It’s like this place is locked down. It’s eerie. First thing in my mind, I’m thinking ambush. Where are they? They’ve got hostages. We’re going to find them here somewhere, and they’re hunkered down.” Carefully picking their way past exploded and unexploded bombs, the team scanned the cafeteria and headed into the kitchen area.

Almost immediately, DeAndrea says, the team heard movement behind a door. “We’d shout, ‘Police department, open the door! Police department, open the door!’ Expecting for that door to open, and we’re going to engage in gunfire,” he recalls. No one, however, opened the doors. There were no gunmen hidden in the school’s rooms, and students, traumatized by what they had already witnessed or heard, would not undo the locks.

DeAndrea, the designated breacher for his team, had made a conscious decision not to bring his usual 55-pound ram into the building, because carrying it would hinder his ability to wield a gun. Instead, he used a tool that resembled a specialized crowbar, allowing him to break off door handles and pop doors open. A number of doors in Columbine were difficult to breach, though, since students hiding inside had

piled furniture or other objects against them for further protection. “We’re busting down doors wholeheartedly thinking we’re going to go through that door and we’re going to engage somebody,” DeAndrea says. “Do we think that we might get shot? Absolutely. Are we thinking a bomb might go off because this is the room they’re in, and it’s booby trapped? Absolutely. But we still have to get through the door.”

Instead of gunmen, the team found 20 to 30 students hidden in the kitchen area, as well as two male staff members hiding in the walk-in freezers. The team began to evacuate students and staff, even as Williams passed on a report that the shooters might be in the library or the science area. JeffCo had been joined by more SWAT members from Denver, and the team passed small groups of students from one member to another and then out the same window through which they had entered. Once outside, students were directed up the outside stairs to be driven to safety. Since the path took them past the bodies of both Daniel Rohrbough and Rachel Scott, officers told students to focus only on the person immediately in front of them.

Away from the building at last, SWAT members took students to the east side, where law enforcement personnel quickly searched them, not only looking for injuries, but trying to ascertain that the attackers were not among the escaping students. To help, deputies had recruited Columbine’s two deans of students, Chris Mikesell and Peter Horvath, stationing them near the tactical command post on the east side of the school. Mikesell and Horvath scanned passing students, searching not only for Harris and Klebold, but also for students who were thought to be associates of the two, and who might be accomplices in the attack. Once checked, students were supposed to duck through a hole cut in the fence and board buses waiting on an adjacent residential street. Because of a lack of communication, though, Arapahoe’s Captain Campbell says, a Denver officer down the street was stopping buses at first and wouldn’t let them pass. “By the time the buses came down to pick these kids up and transport them over to Leawood, the kids had already said, ‘Screw this, I’m out of here,’” says Campbell.

With the two SWAT teams in the building, meanwhile, SWAT commanders Manwaring and DiManna had returned to the tactical command post on the east side of the building. Manwaring, who finally had gotten a current floor plan for the school from school administrators, sent in some additional SWAT members after the original two teams to help secure the evacuation routes. He did not, however, send new teams into