

hearing and to make appropriate decisions. At 2:17, JeffCo SWAT leader Barry Williams, in charge of the west side team, divided his group in half in order to move more quickly through the lower level of the school. The sense of urgency driving the team had only increased. Shortly before 2:00, Williams had received the first reports from dispatch alluding to the critically injured Dave Sanders, one alerting him to an injured teacher in the science area, while another—later found to have identified the wrong room—said a male was doing CPR on a victim in the library, and that a blue and white shirt was hanging from the door knob to signal the victim's presence. In addition, one of the two snipers on the roof radioed Williams at 2:15 to report the sign in the second-story window reading, "1 bleeding to death." Although Williams had asked dispatch for directions to reach the victim, though, his connection with dispatch was erratic, and he apparently was never given a clear description of where the science wing or the library were located. From the reports he had received, it wasn't even clear whether there was just one victim, or a few in different parts of the school.

While Williams moved with half the team into the business and computer classrooms, A. J. DeAndrea took a team of three JeffCo deputies and a Denver officer and headed into the auditorium, where they had been warned shooters might be concealed on the catwalk. Alarms and strobe lights were still assaulting their senses, DeAndrea says, making it extremely difficult for members of even the same team to talk. "You can't hear anything," he remembers. "Basically, everything is hand signals, because unless I'm in your face yelling, you're not going to be able to communicate." DeAndrea also had trouble hearing dispatch reports, he says, and couldn't communicate well with the other half of the JeffCo SWAT team, let alone Simmons's SWAT team on the other side of the school, because the line-of-sight radios didn't receive well within the core of the building. "Barry [Williams] and I communicated very rarely," he says. "I was getting some transmissions, but I'm sure that I missed a lot."

After checking the auditorium, which was empty, DeAndrea's group emerged on the upper level of the school, where a dispatch report had indicated there might be students hidden nearby. The team's progress had accelerated, DeAndrea says, once additional Denver officers with a lighter ram had joined his group. In fact, one of the few encouraging aspects of the response was the ease with which members of the two teams interacted, despite the fact that SWAT teams rarely worked with other jurisdictions.³² "There was not

a glitch," DeAndrea says. "There were no egos that day. There was no posturing. It was a total team effort."

In addition, although there were now a couple dozen SWAT members working their way through the school—including some who had become separated from their teams, and who had only irregular radio contact with other officers—no SWAT members mistakenly shot at each other. "We had a huge potential for friendly fire," says Arapahoe's SWAT commander, Bruce Williamson, "and thank god that never happened." Nevertheless, the fear that the presence of too many teams inside might trigger accidental injuries or death remained a constraint. According to one report, the Lakewood SWAT team, which had positioned itself south of the school, volunteered to try to rescue the bleeding victim upstairs, having seen the sign in the window. But incident commander Walcher vetoed the attempt, claiming there would be too much risk of surprising teams already inside and precipitating dangerous crossfire.³³

Upstairs at last, DeAndrea says, SWAT members could see motion in a room close by, off of the choir room in the music section. When the team breached the door of the room at 2:24, DeAndrea says, they found 60 students crammed into one small space. "They're terrified," he says. "I've never seen fear like this before. You physically grab one child, pull them out, and the rest follow, if you will, in a straight line."

DeAndrea had been told there could be a shooting victim nearby, he says. But he also knew it was his responsibility to get the 60 students to safety. "Now we have a problem," he says. "We've got 60 kids. It's negligent for us to leave them in there knowing that there are bombs inside this school. Do we know if any bombs are on a timer? Is the whole school going to blow up? We stop everything, and we need to get these 60 out, and we're in the dead center of the school."

DeAndrea's team set to work, hurrying students in groups of ten out the west side of the school along the exact route SWAT had used to enter, with a SWAT member at the head, middle, and end of each cluster. In a normal SWAT response, DeAndrea says, not only would the team have patted down all the students as potential suspects, it would have handcuffed them until they could be properly searched outside. But given the pressure to get the students out of the building safely, DeAndrea simply ordered them to keep their hands on their heads until an officer told them to take them down. The news helicopter footage of students existing the school with their hands on top of their heads became an enduring image of the *Columbine* tragedy.

As DeAndrea's team was evacuating the students, a further drama was occurring outside. A deputy who had spent the previous two hours conducting air surveillance from a news helicopter radioed dispatch that someone was trying to climb out a broken window on the school's southwest side.³⁴ The Lakewood SWAT team, which had been checking the parking lot for vehicles belonging to Harris and Klebold, convinced an armored car company to loan them a bulletproof car. Just after they drove the armored car to the side of the school, SWAT members managed to catch the seriously injured student, Patrick Ireland, as he fell from the library window.³⁵

The Final Discoveries

Between 2:30 and 2:45 that afternoon, the three main SWAT teams searching and clearing Columbine High School began to converge. After removing the 60 students from the choir room, DeAndrea's team found two more groups of about 30 students each in two nearby rooms and handed them to Simmons's team, which had just worked its way down the southern east-west hallway, to escort out the east side of the building. The group led by Barry Williams, meanwhile, had finished its search of the business wing downstairs, and had mounted the stairs by the cafeteria—coming up just down the hall from the other two teams and heading into the science wing. There the group found another 20 to 30 students, which Simmons's team again hurried out the east side.

At 2:42, Williams's team finally reached the critically injured teacher, Dave Sanders, as well as about 60 students in that and an adjoining classroom. Williams radioed for medical help and a member of the team stayed behind as the others escorted the traumatized students from the building. Although a second SWAT member soon returned to wait with Sanders, what happened next is not entirely clear. Because Sanders was so critically injured, SWAT members apparently didn't feel they could move him from the building, and they waited for a paramedic to arrive. At the same time, however, paramedics continued to hover outside the east entrance, expecting that the injured party would be carried out to them. Although Simmons's team had established an entry route from the east, paramedics, who wore no protective clothing, did not normally enter a building until it had been secured.³⁶ After the two SWAT members waited for about 20 to 30 minutes, a

Denver paramedic finally arrived from the west side of the building. Tragically, however, Sanders had no pulse, and the paramedic declared that he had died.³⁷

The horror of the day had not yet ended, though. Williams's SWAT team finally entered the library at 3:22, the last area of the school to be searched. Immediately, Williams radioed to dispatch. "Barry Williams is a very calm, cool, collected man," DeAndrea says. "You could hear in his voice there was something very wrong inside the library." The scene inside, DeAndrea says, was shocking and terribly sad. Although one girl with several gunshot wounds was still alive, twelve other students in the room were dead, most huddled under tables where they had tried to hide. Two, however, surrounded by weapons and bombs, matched the description of the gunmen, and appeared to have committed suicide with gunshot wounds to the head. Despite the apparent suicides, law enforcement still had to operate under the assumption that there might be accomplices in the building or already outside.

Given the many bombs visible in the room, SWAT moved as quickly as possible, radioing for paramedics, and evacuating four staff members found hiding in rooms off the library, including teacher Patti Nielson, who had climbed into a cupboard following the shooting spree almost four hours earlier. As two paramedics removed the wounded student via the library's emergency exit—walking around bombs in the hallway—the SWAT team called for the bomb squad to take over.³⁸

Back in the hall outside the library, DeAndrea says, the three SWAT teams studied a map that Williams's group had torn from the wall, and concluded they had searched the whole school. Even now, though, they didn't quit. The teams returned to the main lobby on the east side of the building, regrouped with reinforcements along normal jurisdictional lines, and went back through the building for a rapid second sweep—this time, finding no one alive.³⁹ As the teams searched, the Littleton Fire Department was finally able to shut off the alarms and sprinkler systems. Outside, meanwhile, Sheriff Stone and Steve Davis held a news briefing at which Stone announced the possibility of "up to 25 dead" as the result of the attack.⁴⁰ The actual toll that would emerge over the next several hours was grim enough: fourteen students and one teacher killed—including the two gunmen—and 24 victims injured.

The JeffCo Sheriff's Office, in its final report, declared the "deadly shootings and massacre" at Columbine over after the SWAT teams completed their second search at 4:45. More than 160 victims had been treated at four