

triage sites for maladies ranging from shock to gunshot wounds, and 24 students had been transported to area hospitals. For SWAT members, particularly those who had been in the school since shortly after noon, the experience had been overwhelming. "Typically when we do a tactical operation and we make an entry into a high-risk situation, two minutes is a very long time," notes Williamson, the Arapahoe SWAT commander. "This went on for hours. So the adrenaline dump and the noise and the screaming kids and the dead children and the blood and the carnage and the signs of the explosions from the devices that went off in the school—they were dealing with that for a long time." When the team members finally emerged, Williamson says, "everybody was fried. That's emotionally the worst day I've ever dealt with. I've got four kids of my own. I went home and hugged them all."

By the end of the first day, almost 1,000 representatives of area law enforcement and emergency response agencies had reported to Columbine. While the Denver Police had provided the most aid to JeffCo during the shootings, followed by the Arapahoe Sheriff's Office and the Littleton Police, responders came from half a dozen sheriff's offices; 12 fire and EMS agencies, employing 46 ambulances and two helicopters; 20 area police departments; the Bureau of Alcohol, Tobacco and Firearms; the Colorado Bureau of Investigation; the FBI, and the Colorado National Guard.

The Bomb Squad and Investigators Take Over

If Eric Harris and Dylan Klebold hadn't scattered explosive devices around Columbine High School, investigators would have been able to conduct an immediate crime scene analysis, which in all probability would have allowed the coroner to identify the victims and remove their bodies from the school the night of the attack. As it was, the location and removal of bombs forced a delay in the identification of victims that was a final cruel twist for both families and responders.

Although the 16 bomb technicians originally assembled, joined by evidence collection experts from the FBI and the Bureau of Alcohol, Tobacco and Firearms, worked quickly after the SWAT teams finished, they faced a monumental task. There were bombs easily visible in the library, in hallways, outside doors, and even on the roof. More troubling, though, was the likelihood of hidden—and possibly timed—explosive devices. In

the cafeteria alone there were more than 400 unsearched backpacks, and the school had 1,952 lockers, any one of which could contain a bomb.

Technicians first disposed of all the bombs from the library that they could retrieve without moving any of the bodies, including those of Klebold and Harris, since the victims had to remain undisturbed until investigators had completed their initial crime scene analysis. Late that afternoon, as bomb experts discussed which part of the school to clear next, though, Deputy Inspector Joe Dempsey, team leader of the Arapahoe County Sheriff's bomb squad, along with a Denver bomb squad detective, spotted the top of an alarm clock poking out from a large, blanket-covered mound in the back seat of a car identified as Klebold's. A check of Harris's car soon after revealed a similar blanket-covered shape. Given the danger posed by the large bombs, experts had to clear the cars before returning to the building. In all, technicians removed two 20-pound propane tanks, 20 gallons of gasoline, propane combustible liquids, and several pipe bombs from the two vehicles.

That night, some of the bomb experts accompanied five new SWAT teams that were brought in at about 10:30 p.m. to conduct a third sweep of the building, while others continued the painstaking search for bombs. Bomb squad commanders called off the clearing process, though, after an overly tired technician lowering a pipe bomb into a special disposal trailer at about 10:40 p.m. bumped the device into the side, setting off an explosion that threw 15 live bombs out of the trailer. "We were getting a lot of pressure because the evidence people and the command staff and the families—everybody wanted into that school," explains Deputy Dan Davis, a member of the Arapahoe bomb team. "But we couldn't say that it was safe for them to go there." Parents who were still waiting at Leawood Elementary for word of their missing children were advised by 11:30 p.m. to go home for the night.

At 7:30 a.m. the following morning, April 21, the coroner and a team from the JeffCo Sheriff's Office returned to the library, followed by two forensic teams, to collect evidence, identify the deceased, and take videos and photographs of the crime scene. Investigators, relying primarily on physical descriptions provided by waiting parents the previous night, identified all the victims by noon, and officials notified the families soon after.⁴¹ With the preliminary investigation finished, bomb technicians returned and discovered 19 more bombs under the bodies of Harris and Klebold. The bodies were finally removed from Columbine late that afternoon. "If it ever happens to anybody again, I would

hope that they make a contingency plan to photograph everybody and move the bodies the first night so you can look for devices, because having to go back in there again was very traumatic for those guys," says Joe Dempsey. "We would have felt better had we known that we were able to take the kids out of the library that first night."

Before a full-fledged investigation of the incident could begin, the bomb squads still had to clear the rest of the school, including the backpack-strewn cafeteria, where technicians had already found a large propane tank bomb that had failed to explode. Given the enormity of the task, and the desire to move forward quickly, the Bureau of Alcohol, Tobacco and Firearms brought in dogs trained to sniff out explosives, and took them through as the experts in the library were finishing. That afternoon, after the dogs completed their work, officials declared the building safe enough for investigators to enter. But perhaps due to sensory overload from all of the ammunition, detonated bombs, and other explosive materials in the building, the dogs missed one of the two largest bombs in the school—a second 20-pound propane bomb with a timer hidden in a duffel bag in the cafeteria. After a technician spotted the bomb Thursday, he ordered everyone from the building, and bomb squad members returned for a meticulous backpack-by-backpack search.

According to plans and homemade videotapes later uncovered by investigators, Harris and Klebold had timed the two propane bombs to explode in the cafeteria at 11:17, when the room was likely to be teeming with almost 500 students. The two then planned to shoot those students who tried to escape.⁴² They had set the car bombs, meanwhile, to go off about 20 minutes after the cafeteria bombs, as emergency personnel rushed to the scene. Had the plan worked as envisioned, bomb experts say, the exploding tanks and ensuing giant fireballs probably would have killed or injured many of the students in the area, and might have caused parts of the library to collapse into the cafeteria. "The good Lord was looking after this school and all those kids because neither one of those bombs went off in the cafeteria," says Robert Armstrong of Arapahoe. "That's a big thing. Bad bomb makers made for a lot of live kids. We've got to be thankful for that."

In all, bomb technicians found 76 explosive devices at the school, as well as two bombs in the field, 13 in the two cars, and eight more at the two students' houses, for a total of 99. "Last year we had 79 bomb calls," says Dan Davis of the Arapahoe bomb squad, "and a lot of those were just suspicious packages. This was well over a year's worth of devices in one

night." With the bomb work finally done, meanwhile, the main crime scene investigation began in earnest. When completed in mid-June, seven teams had collected more than 10,000 pieces of evidence, taken some 10,000 photographs, and conducted about 5,000 interviews. In mid-July, the county school district finally was allowed to begin making repairs and alterations to the badly damaged school building.⁴³

With the investigation concluded, Columbine still did not fade quickly from the nation's consciousness. Over the following months, commentators, politicians, and others—backing a range of causes from gun control, to curtailed violence in movies, to increased parental involvement—pointed to the shootings at the high school as a poignant and powerful symbol of the need for change in American society. While residents in the Columbine area also mulled these issues, for many, an examination of the emergency response, itself, became the primary focus. Newspaper articles critical of law enforcement actions appeared within days of the shootings, and several months later, the families of victims brought lawsuits against emergency responders, the school, and even the parents of Eric Harris and Dylan Klebold.

Even without this outside scrutiny, though, the shootings at Columbine would remain etched in the minds of all those who were there on April 20, 1999, whether students, teachers, or SWAT members. And for many, the questions raised by the experience would never be easily answered. "I think about this thing every day of my life," says JeffCo SWAT member A.J. DeAndrea. "I have to read about it every day in the newspaper. I see those kids lying there every day. I've soul searched, what could I have done differently? What could I have done better?" He adds: "The only way I could have changed it is to have been right there, to know it was going to go down, and to have been able to engage them the second that they started. And lives still would have been lost."

Notes

1. It would be months more before some investigators accepted that the carnage unleashed that day had been the work of just those two.
2. Though the school had a Littleton address, it actually lay about two-and-a-half miles outside the city border.
3. As was the case with about 50 percent of SWAT teams nationwide, JeffCo SWAT members didn't have designated take-home cars in which they