

John Ferrugia's Reporter's Notebook: Covering Columbine

ABC7 7News Denver

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I was working at my desk at about 11:25 a.m. on April 20th, 1999 when someone from the news desk rushed in telling me there might have been a drive-by shooting at Columbine High School.

Could I jump in the helicopter with the pilot and photographer to check it out?

In minutes we were flying fast to Columbine and as we approached I noted two police cars parked on the grass outside what I later knew was the library. From the air, it seemed the officers were exchanging fire with someone inside.

On the ground I could see what appeared to be three people down.

I was immediately on the radio telling the news desk that this was much more than a drive-by shooting.

As we began to shoot pictures from the air, we noted what appeared to be someone on the roof of the building and I immediately recognized that, if it was a gunman, he would have a direct angle on the officers crouching behind their patrol cars.

As I was about to relay that information to the news desk, the police radio crackled that someone was on the roof. Shortly, a flare came up from the ground indicating to the pilot we should land.

A police commander on the ground asked if he could put an officer in our helicopter as there may be multiple gunmen in the building and on the roof putting officers and civilians in danger.

The chopper only held three persons -- the pilot, the photographer, and me. That would mean I would have to give up my reporting perch from above.

In a quick decision (that was initially roundly criticized by many journalists) I gave up my seat as long as the 7NEWS helicopter could stay in the airspace around the school and our photographer could continue to shoot uninterrupted, sending live pictures back to the station and to the rest of the world. I also made a deal that I would be able to stay inside the police perimeter.

For me, the decision was simple. The police officers on the ground were vulnerable from a shooter on the roof, as were people within hundreds of yards of the school. Lives were on the line and I believed my first duty was to help protect those lives if I could. But, we also protected our right to report by having our photographer inside the Columbine airspace and continually feeding information about the incident.

Our decision to allow an officer in the helicopter paid off for our viewers and viewers around the world. Our live pictures from the air, especially those of Patrick Ireland's dramatic struggle to get out the library window, brought the world an understanding of the horror of Columbine. Pictures of the ad hoc SWAT team rescues also gave investigators a clear understanding of what tactics were needed in future school shootings.

Meanwhile, I was able to report, via cell phone, for a very long period inside the police perimeter, explaining the surrealist vision of young people shot and wounded struggling out of the area to safety.

As a correspondent for CBS News in the 1980s I had been in war-torn Beirut during the civil war and along the Afghan-Pakistan border during the Russian war in Afghanistan. In those settings, one is prepared to see the worst as it is a war zone -- bodies ripped apart by violence.

I was totally unprepared to see the worst in a residential neighborhood, with manicured lawns, where the dogs were barking and people were interrupted on their morning walks. There was, even for someone who had been in a war zone, a complete disconnect.

Could this really be happening?

Yes.

The gunshots and wounds and blood and horror were real.

Later, as I worked investigating the story and its aftermath I was one of only about half-dozen reporters who reviewed the home movies videotaped by the killers. Those tapes are now sealed by the court. They showed two very disturbed young men who had descended into the depths of self loathing. These two teens hated themselves and so many others. They laughed at their parents for not checking their rooms and the Harris's garage where so many of the deadly bombs were made. They laughed and joked about how many they would murder. It was clear throughout that the killers were equally responsible for the attack. The home videos undercut the myth that Harris was the leader and Klebold the follower.

In watching the two, talking about their attack, showing off their weapons, and suiting up for the assault it was so clear they had divorced themselves from the reality of the murders they were about to commit. I found that the most terrifying moment of the video was when Harris fondled his sawed-off shotgun like a demented child with a new toy. At one point Klebold was playing with the shotgun trying to close the slide with a round hung in the chamber. Harris was videotaping and the viewer could see the gun pointed directly at the camera as Klebold struggled with it.

Harris cried out in alarm knowing the shotgun could go off.

It could have killed him.

I caught myself watching ... tense, wide-eyed, in-the-moment ... wishing it had.