

Two Killers Rampaged as 6 Officers Awaited Aid

By Mark Obmascik and David Olinger- Denver Post Staff Writers 1999

May 16 - While Eric Harris and Dylan Klebold casually murdered classmates in the Columbine High library, at least six Jefferson County sheriff's deputies waited outside the school for help.

Two of those deputies already had traded gunfire with the killers in the opening moments of the attack. But by the time the first SWAT team trailed Harris and Klebold inside Columbine, the worst school shooting in U.S. history already was over.

According to a vast crime report released Monday by the Jefferson County Sheriff's Office, a disturbingly swift and vicious crime was followed by a methodical police response.

Harris and Klebold took only 16 minutes to kill 13 people and wound 21 others. Police took three hours and 14 minutes to find them.

The report says deputies did the best they could on April 20, 1999, under extremely difficult circumstances.

"Upon receiving a briefing about the law enforcement response to this horrible crime, U.S. Attorney General Janet Reno commented that these professionals had 'shown the nation and the world America's finest in crisis,' - " said the report signed by Sheriff John Stone and Undersheriff John Dunaway. "We agree, and wish to express our deep appreciation for their assistance." In the chaos of the crime scene, sheriff's deputies heard dozens of conflicting reports about the killers' identities and locations. While bombs detonated, alarms blared and hundreds of students ran for their lives, police struggled to coordinate a rescue.

A supposed sniper on the school roof turned out to be a air-duct repairman. There also were false reports of 17 hostages in an auditorium, six to eight heavily armed gunmen in body armor and shooters in a science room.

The report said such conflicting information hurt the department's ability to quickly rescue students.

Among the report's findings:

- Sheriff's 911 dispatchers heard teacher Patti Nielson plead for help in the school library from 11:29 to 11:36 a.m., but no police rescuers arrived until 3:22 p.m. That means that the library, where 10 students were murdered and 12 wounded in those 7 1/2 minutes, was "the last area to be checked" by SWAT rescuers.

- After dispatchers heard for hours how teacher Dave Sanders was severely wounded and being treated by two Eagle Scouts in a science room, a SWAT team finally reached him at 2:40 p.m. While Sanders continued to bleed, two SWAT officers waited "20 to 30 minutes" for paramedics to arrive. By then, he was dead.

- The first SWAT team commander on the scene did not know that a major school renovation had moved the library and cafeteria, sites of the most mayhem, to a new location on the opposite end of the building. As a result, the first SWAT team entered Columbine from the far side of the school and never encountered Harris or Klebold.

More than a year after the crime, a judge ordered Jefferson County to release the crime report Monday. Contained on a single CD-ROM disc with dozens of hyperlinks, the report would have spanned 700 pages if it were a paper document.

Sheriff's officials declined to comment on the report because the case is the subject of so much litigation. Fifteen families of Columbine victims and survivors have sued the county over its response.

KEY FINDINGS

There was **no third gunman**. A possible shooter spotted on the school roof by 911 callers turned out to be an air-conditioning repairman who hid there after the shooting started.

No one else had prior knowledge of the killers' plans.

The shooting rampage started at 11:19 a.m. and **lasted 16 minutes**, until 11:35 a.m. That included 7 minutes in the library, where Eric Harris and Dylan Klebold killed 10 of their 13 victims and wounded 12 of the 21 who were injured.

Harris and Klebold killed themselves at 12:08 p.m.

The killers **planted their two 20-pound propane bombs in the cafeteria the morning of April 20, 1999**, not the night before as some had speculated. In all, they brought **76 explosives** — pipe bombs, CO2 bombs and other devices — into the school in duffel bags, backpacks or ammunition pouches strapped to their bodies. Thirty exploded.

Had the two bombs in the cafeteria functioned properly, all 488 people in the room and 56 more in the library above it could have died.

In their yearbooks, videotapes, journals and computer files, Harris and Klebold **listed 67 people they disliked for various reasons**. Only one of those individuals was injured, and there is no evidence that he was targeted on April 20.

Based on their writings, Harris and Klebold expected the bomb they placed south of the school near Wadsworth Boulevard to divert attention from the school for a longer period of time. The failure of the cafeteria bombs to detonate and the arrival of responding officers apparently caused the gunmen to re-evaluate their planned attack, since they had **never listed the school library as a destination point**.

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"There aren't a lot of high expectations on this report," said Sam Riddle, spokesman for the family of slain student Isaiah Shoels. "The Shoels family feels strongly that there needs to be an unbiased investigation by the U.S. Department of Justice, not by someone with a vested interest in protecting his political green stamps." According to the sheriff's report, Harris and Klebold fired their first shots outside Columbine at 11:19 a.m. and killed their last victim inside the library at 11:35 a.m.

Harris killed Kelly Fleming, Steve Curnow, Cassie Bernall, Isaiah Shoels and Daniel Mauser, the report said, while Klebold killed Daniel Rohrbough, Kyle Velasquez, Matt Kechter and John Tomlin.

A spray of bullets and shotgun pellets from both Harris and Klebold was reported to have killed Corey DePooter, Rachel Scott, Lauren Townsend and teacher Dave Sanders.

The sheriff's report concluded that Harris and Klebold had not planned to shoot classmates studying in the school library. They expected to shoot fleeing students after a devastating pair of homemade propane bombs blew up the school cafeteria.

But their bombs, placed in the cafeteria just before lunchtime, failed to explode. Harris and Klebold sat in the parking lot, waiting. At 11:19 a.m. they stopped waiting.

"Go, go," the killers shouted outside the school as they opened fire on classmates outside the cafeteria during a lunch hour.

Within seven minutes of the first shots, two deputies had traded gunfire with Harris. The first was Neil Gardner, the school resource officer. Responding to a "female down" call, he spotted Harris at the school doors. At 11:24 a.m., Harris emptied his 10-round rifle at the deputy, striking two nearby police cars. Gardner returned four shots before Harris disappeared into the school.

Two minutes later a second deputy was locked in a gunfight with Harris. Paul Smoker, who had been writing a speeding ticket nearby when the 911 call came, found Harris shooting at him from a broken window in a set of double doors to the school. Smoker fired three rounds before Harris disappeared again.

By 11:30 a.m., there were four other deputies at the school. Scott Taborsky had arrived to help Smoker tend to wounded students. Paul Magor had set up a roadblock to the school. Rick Searle had joined the rescue effort, tending to students behind the cover of Taborsky's patrol car. Kevin Walker was stationed outside the cafeteria, ready to rescue or cover for escaping students.

Steve Davis, a spokesman for the sheriff's department, declined to say why none of those officers entered the high school, calling that issue beyond the scope of the report.

At 11:29 a.m., the gunmen walked into the library, where 56 people had taken refuge. In the next 7 1/2 minutes, they killed 10 people and wounded 12 others.

Their last victim was shot one minute before the first SWAT team leader, Lt. Terry Manwaring, arrived and set up a command post.

Manwaring led the SWAT response into what seemed a war zone with a rough sketch of the school interior. He mistakenly believed the cafeteria was on the east side of the school. It along with the library had been relocated four years earlier to the west side.

At 12:06 p.m., the first SWAT team entered the east side of Columbine.

Harris and Klebold had spent the previous half-hour wandering from the library to the cafeteria below, where they repeatedly tried to set off the giant propane bomb that failed earlier. At 12:05 p.m., they exchanged gunfire one last time through the library windows with police outside. Then they lit a Molotov cocktail, put guns to their heads and, by 12:08 p.m., killed themselves.

Police didn't know the killers had committed suicide, in part because a 911 dispatcher had disconnected a live phone line inside the library.

While panicking students fled the school, SWAT teams methodically searched classrooms. At 2:40 p.m, more than three hours after teacher Dave Sanders was shot while evacuating students, a SWAT team found two Eagle Scouts, Aaron Hancy and Kevin Starkey, trying to save the teacher's life with first aid.

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Earlier, another teacher had held up a sign in the classroom window: "1 bleeding to death." Though the two Scouts were "reluctant to leave the teacher behind," a SWAT officer took the teens from the school, the report says. Sanders died while two other SWAT officers waited for a paramedic.

A lawyer for Sanders' daughter Angela said he was dismayed by the police response to the dying teacher.

"What is so disturbing is that they consciously decided to leave Dave Sanders there, bleeding to death, notwithstanding a myriad, a multiple different ways to rescue him, including SWAT teams going in through any of one of the 25 exterior entrances or including going through the glass through the window," said lawyer Peter Grenier.

The overall attack left the Columbine building and grounds riddled with spent bullets and shotgun shells. Harris fired 121 rounds, 96 from his short-barreled rifle, 25 with a sawed-off shotgun. Klebold fired 67 times, 55 with a TEC-DC9 assault pistol, 12 with another sawed-off shotgun.

Twelve law enforcement officers from Jefferson County, Denver and Lakewood fired a total of 141 rounds. All but 20 were fired by Denver police.

According to the report, nobody was killed or wounded by police fire. That finding contradicts a claim by Daniel Rohrbough's family, who filed a lawsuit against Jefferson County claiming that law enforcement agents killed their son.

The official report confirmed previous accounts that Klebold and Harris seemed to enjoy themselves.

As the killing began, witnesses heard one of the gunmen shout, "This is what we always wanted to do. This is awesome!" Other witnesses reported hearing them laugh as they fired. "While this report establishes a record of the events of April 20, it cannot answer the most fundamental question - WHY?" the sheriff's report states. "That is, why would two young men, in the spring of their lives, choose to murder faculty members and classmates? The evidence provides no definitive explanation, and the question continues to haunt us all."