Response in Littleton Was Swift, but Unsure

By Barbara Vobejda, Cheryl W. Thompson and David B. Ottaway
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Columbine students run from the school last month after gunmen opened fire.(Reuters)

When two teenage gunmen tore through Columbine High School on a shooting rampage last month, police officers from across the Denver area descended swiftly on the scene. But the extraordinary law enforcement response was hampered by the simplest of problems – they could not communicate with each other.

Decisions made at a hastily assembled command post had excruciating consequences. Following instructions, police moved methodically through the building, evacuating students instead of racing through the corridors in search of the gunmen. But that meant that hours would pass before SWAT teams reached a critically wounded teacher on the second floor.

Serious questions remain about whether police made errors in judgment that day, when 15 people died at the hands of Eric Harris and Dylan Klebold, including the shooters themselves. But dozens of interviews with officers and others on the scene make it clear that police faced a range of critical problems, from the lack of a common radio channel to the quandary of how to handle hundreds of terrified students.

The massacre at Columbine is quickly becoming a case study for SWAT teams across the country, parsed minute by minute, critiqued in tortuous detail – all that went wrong and right during the grueling police rescue mission.

At a time when hundreds of American cities have assembled rapid-response SWAT teams, Columbine is a vivid reminder of difficult, enduring law enforcement dilemmas. How fast should police move when faced with rampaging shooters? Should the primary goal be rescuing victims or eliminating the threat? When can caution cost lives?

For law enforcement officials, deconstructing the decisions of that day is critical for the future. The Littleton tragedy will not be the country's last school shooting, experts warn. But it represents a test no police force has ever faced: bombs exploding as unknown gunmen shot their way through a building crowded with nearly 2,000 panicking students and teachers.

The images of April 20 are still fresh: Scores of police officers milling around outside the school building, even as an ominous sign hangs in an upstairs window: "1 bleeding to death." Students pressing their shirts against a teacher's wounds for hours, showing him photos from his wallet to keep him alive.

'Beyond Worst Case'

"This is beyond the worst-case scenario they train for . . . the unthinkable," said Larry Glick, chairman of the National Tactical Officers Association.

Glick's organization is already recommending that SWAT teams train for potential crises in the schools. The group will also disseminate to other SWAT teams "a lot of lessons learned out of Columbine" when the official report compiled by Jefferson County authorities is complete, he said.

Part of the goal in the reviews will be to answer criticism that it took far too long to reach critically wounded teacher Dave Sanders, particularly given police accounts that the shooting was over in 45 minutes or less.

Others have asked why SWAT teams inside the building were not told about Sanders's plight, despite telephone calls from a student in the science room and the window sign warning that someone was perilously wounded. Lakewood police said when they saw the sign they asked to go in to rescue the victim, but were told by the commander in charge that two other police departments were already in that part of the building.

Finally, why didn't police simply storm through the building until they found Harris and Klebold?

While police were hampered by numerous problems, a slow initial response was not among them.

Neil Gardner, a Jefferson County deputy assigned to the school was patrolling nearby when a custodian called him at 11:25 a.m. to report explosions and shootings. Three minutes later, Gardner was exchanging gunfire with Harris and Klebold near a building entrance beside the library. The teenagers had come across the soccer field and opened fire in the parking lot.

Gardner radioed for help at 11:29 a.m. and within minutes, seven county deputies had arrived and were rescuing injured students from the parking lot.

For Lt. Terry Manwaring, Jefferson County's SWAT commander, the day was a jolting trip from the sublime to the unthinkable.

When he got the call he was patrolling Tiny Town, a child's fantasy park of miniature buildings nestled in the Rocky Mountain foothills. He raced – speeding at more than 100 mph down the curving mountain road – to an altered world of children, a school under siege.

He arrived at Columbine at 11:38 a.m. to find pandemonium. Traumatized people were fleeing the building. Klebold and Harris were firing shots inside, tossing homemade bombs and shooting at officers in the parking lot.

The Jefferson County Sheriff's Department quickly established a "command post," a police bus parked a half block from the school, where Lt. David C. Walcher would spend the next several hours giving orders to SWAT team leaders from other police departments.

Meanwhile, Manwaring, who was desperate to get inside the building, patched together a makeshift police team from Jefferson County, Denver and Littleton.

His team, he said, was "a pretty ragtag SWAT outfit." Most officers had no gear and were forced to share guns and vests. Eleven men shared one protective shield.

Pulling on his bulletproof vest, Manwaring asked four adolescent boys if they knew the building's floor plan, then ran to his car for paper and pen. They sketched out a maze of doors and hallways. At roughly 11:51 a.m., guided by this crude blueprint, Manwaring entered a war zone.

He carried something else too, a haunting image of a pair of hands he had seen pressed against a classroom window.

The decision by Jefferson County law enforcement officials to send in police from numerous jurisdictions, however necessary, introduced one of the day's most critical challenges – the lack of a common radio channel police could use to talk to one another.

Eight tactical teams were formed from five jurisdictions. But officers in and around the building could not communicate where they were or what they were finding.

Information that reached the early SWAT officers was conflicting. They were told at one point that they should be looking for more than two shooters and perhaps as many as six. The suspects, they were told, might have changed clothes to blend in with fleeing students.

Adding to the confusion, scores of students and teachers trapped inside were using countless cellular telephones, school telephones and even computer messages to alert police and family about where they were hiding and where police could find the suspects. Of the county's 32 emergency 911 channels, 15 were jammed with calls about the shootings.

Matthew Depew, 16, who was hiding in a room off the cafeteria, talked by cell phone to a police officer for two hours. Ben Lausten, one of 60 students huddled near the choir rooms for more than three hours, also spent much of that time on the phone with police. And Aaron Hancey, a Columbine junior who tried to stop Sanders's bleeding, was on the telephone with his father who in turn had called paramedics and was relaying instructions back to Hancey.

Crucial information coming out of the building, however, was not reaching the officers inside.

Manwaring and Denver Police Capt. Vince DiManna, who was also part of the first SWAT team, said they were never told that a teacher was gravely wounded upstairs.

Theory, Reality Collide

In theory, throwing together a makeshift SWAT team is a "horrible idea," said Victor Keppeler, a police studies professor at Eastern Kentucky University.

Officers who have not worked together, he said, cannot anticipate each other's moves or communicate with practiced hand signals and gestures.

"They never should, in my opinion, allow officers that didn't train together to work in a team," Keppeler said.

But police commander Joe Pelle, who was at Columbine as head of the Boulder SWAT team, argues that textbook rules did not apply.

Forming an emergency team, he said, "is an extremely risky thing to do. You're basically deciding somebody on your team is likely to get shot. ... In most situations you wouldn't do that. However, when you have evil people killing children, all the other stuff goes out the window. Somebody has to get in there and stop it."

That was Manwaring's goal.

Once inside the building, the officers found themselves in an unimaginable environment – blaring fire alarms, glaring security strobe lights, halls filled with water from the sprinkler system.

"All this time, you're trying not to get shot," Manwaring said. "We have no idea where the shooters are. Every time we rounded a corner, we didn't know whether it was a good guy or a bad guy. . . . I didn't know how sophisticated they were. I just knew they were armed and were better equipped than we were."

He tried to pinpoint the location of gunfire and detonating bombs, but found it impossible.

"We were getting all sorts of information from outside," he said. "Two to six shooters. They're in this part of the building; no, they're in this part. Seventeen hostages on the east side. You have kids inside, you have kids outside. A shooter here, a shooter there. Both shooters down. We had kids calling us from the attic. Calls were coming from the auditorium, the business office and the math room. Where the hell's the math room?"

Manwaring's roughly drawn floor plan did not suffice to guide officers through the modern, expansive structure of 80 classrooms. They relied on radio instructions from supervisors at the command post to find their way.

The commanders, in turn, relied on Columbine Principal Frank DeAngelis, who was huddled there with them, sketching the school layout with a marker on a white erasable board.

Second Swat Team

A second SWAT team entered the building shortly after noon. At 12:20 p.m., police put out a call for more ammunition. After 1 p.m., a third SWAT team went in. Eventually, more than 50 officers would be inside the building.

Police movement through the school was excruciatingly slow. Behind virtually every classroom door and in every office, police found pockets of students and teachers, hiding, sometimes begging for help. Not knowing if any of these students could be the suspects, police searched them, then escorted them, hands up, out of the building.

Among police experts, the wisdom of a methodical approach is a point of debate. Why didn't the police send some officers to find the shooters?

The answer lies in a standard SWAT approach, which emphasizes team safety and, in this situation, would view all students as potential suspects.

Jessica Arzola, who hid for more than three hours in a second-floor closet, said when the SWAT team found them, the students were ordered to lie on the floor with their hands behind their heads. She said she was frisked four times before leaving the building.

"Every wall we got to, they frisked us," Arzola said.

Like many smaller jurisdictions, Jefferson County and other Denver suburbs maintain part-time SWAT teams, made up of officers who spend the bulk of their days as detectives or on street patrol. The SWAT concept – "special weapons and tactics" – has grown increasingly popular, with the number growing to at least 4,500 nationwide.

But in many jurisdictions, training is usually limited to drug busts and hostage scenarios, situations that pale beside the events in Littleton.

Clearer Communications

Littleton Fire Chief William L. Pessemier, who headed emergency rescue teams on the scene, urged visiting Attorney General Janet Reno to view Columbine as a wake-up call for a more thorough police and fire training that crosses geographic barriers.

The day of the shootings, Pessemier said, paramedics from 10 jurisdictions were talking with each other through a common emergency network, but they could not communicate with police.

"We needed to know where SWAT teams were bringing the victims out of the building to arrange for our people to meet them," he said, describing how his teams rescued three victims by moving in close to the school, without helmets or bulletproof vests, as Harris and Klebold fired from a library window.

Ultimately, Pessemier solved the problem by working out of the police command post and, like the SWAT team leaders from various jurisdictions, relaying information to his own team by radio.

While fire officials have engineered a common radio channel among jurisdictions, the lack of one for police has been a recurring obstacle in major disasters, including the 1995 Oklahoma City bombing.

"It's been a problem. It was a problem at Columbine. And it will continue to be a problem" until SWAT teams standardize their equipment, said Glick.

Most of the officers on hand that day argue that the police response should not be criticized, that standard police practice has to be reinvented on the fly in extraordinary circumstances.

Nevertheless, the Columbine chronology is stark:

Police say the shots fired by the killers ended before noon that day.

It was 3 p.m. when SWAT officers found Dave Sanders.

At 3:30 p.m., police found 12 dead in the library, including Harris and Klebold.

An hour later, at 4:30 p.m., SWAT teams declared the school safe.