

***Lawmen Defend Response Times, Tactics "They were as quick as any SWAT Team," says L.A. Sheriff's Official Who Reviewed Incident (Special Pullouts)***

Byline: Garry Massaro- News Staff Writer, Rocky Mountain News

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Guns and grenades, carnage and confusion confronted police as they entered the killing zone of Columbine High School on Tuesday.

The school was littered with dozens of homemade bombs, bloody bodies and hysterical students in hiding -- each one a potential killer, officers said.

"We've got kids shot, shots fired, kids down and shots fired by deputies," Jefferson County sheriff's Lt. Terry Manwaring told the first 11 SWAT officers at the scene.

That was about 11:40 a.m., 15 minutes after the first 911 call from the school, officers said.

Police are facing mounting criticism and questions after the shooting, which left 15 dead. Police didn't secure the high school until 4 1/2 hours after the deadly rampage by Eric Harris and Dylan Klebold began.

Students and others have complained that wounded teacher Dave Sanders bled to death because help was too slow in coming. Sanders was slumped over in a classroom, bleeding from two bullet wounds he sustained minutes after the gunmen stormed the school.

By the time paramedics reached Sanders, he was dead, said Dr. Chris Colwell of Denver Health Medical Center, triage director at the scene.

"We weren't going to be able to save him," he said. "But he's the one, you wonder, had you been able to get there three hours earlier, whether we would have been able to. You just don't know."

Police aren't pleased, either.

"The information never came to us that there was a teacher bleeding in a classroom," Denver police Capt. Vince DiManna said.

Less than an hour after the first 911 call, DiManna led one of the first two SWAT teams to enter the building.

Even if the SWAT team members had information about Sanders' location, they would have had to search and secure each room leading to the classroom because they didn't know where the gunmen were, DiManna said.

"We kept expecting them to be barricaded, setting up an ambush, getting ready for their last hurrah,"

DiManna said.

Police bristle at the notion that they could have acted quicker, charging toward the sound of gunfire and confronting the teen gunmen, perhaps preventing some of the deaths.

"We're not the military. We can't have collateral damage. Our job was to save the lives of as many innocent as we could," said Denver police Lt. Frank Vessa, a SWAT commander.

Los Angeles County sheriff's deputies reviewing the incident said officers followed proper procedure for securing a shooting site.

"They were as quick as any SWAT team," said Los Angeles sheriff's Sgt. Jack Ewell. "I know it's very tragic some students were killed. But from a SWAT side, we look how many they were able to save."

The confrontation for law officers began at 11:27 a.m. when Jefferson County sheriff's Deputy Neil Gardner, stationed at the school, traded shots with the gunmen.

Gardner called for help. Two other deputies arrived at 11:29. They traded shots with the killers.

Nine minutes later, Lt. Terry Manwaring, Jefferson County's SWAT commander, arrived and called for help from all Denver-area police.

Manwaring commanded the operation throughout, DiManna said.

DiManna, whose son was inside the school, arrived about 11:45 a.m.

The first SWAT officers entered the front of the school about noon. A second team led by DiManna approached the rear about the same time. DiManna's team exchanged gunfire with the killers while rescuing a wounded boy lying outside the building. They approached the building again and retrieved the body of a girl.

They entered the building on a third approach at 12:15 p.m., DiManna said. He heard no gunfire.

"But there were fire alarms going off, there was the hiss of water gushing from a pipe in the ceiling in the cafeteria," DiManna said. "So we don't know if there was additional gunfire, because we couldn't hear it."

The search through the cafeteria was slowed because of bombs.

"Most of the bombs were on the stairs," DiManna said. "Were there timers on them? Was there a trip wire running on the top of the carpet waiting for someone to shuffle his foot into it? We had to check each one.

"Then we find kids: kids hiding in walk-in coolers, kids hiding in restrooms, kids hiding in classrooms. We've got to get these kids out. They're in shock. So we have to lead them out, past the bombs. We

have to tell them to hold hands, hold someone's belt, hold anything so we stay in line."

Television pictures of SWAT teams standing behind an armored car and firetrucks were misleading, DiManna said.

"That was like 1:30, 2 o'clock. That was the third wave of SWAT team officers to arrive," DiManna said. "Basically, the shooting was done."

DiManna said the search for survivors and the killers was hampered by the following:

Officers were forced to conduct a tedious search of more than 250 rooms and closets because they didn't know where the killers were. In some rooms, they found cowering students who had to be led to safety, past the bombs. They couldn't leave the students behind because they didn't know where the gunmen were.

Police were warned that the killers were changing clothes to blend in with fleeing students. So officers frisked all students before leading them to safety.

Some students hid behind locked doors. So officers had to use a battering ram to break in.

Officers were told there could be as many as six killers.

Police had only a hard-to-read floor plan of the school.

Officers had trouble communicating because there was no universal radio channel for the SWAT officers, who came from at least five jurisdictions.