

A Day of Death and Fear in Colorado

By Tom Kenworthy

Washington Post Staff Writer

Wednesday, April 21, 1999; Page A1

(EDITOR'S NOTE: Steve Davis, spokesman for the Jefferson County Sheriff's Department, at a 5:30 a.m. EDT press conference Wednesday, revised the number of casualties to at least 15 and possibly 16 dead, including the shooters, and at least 23 hospitalized with wounds.)



Columbine High School students wait for their fellow students and friends to escape the building where gunmen opened fire. (Reuters)

LITTLETON, Colo., April 20 – Two heavily armed young men stormed a suburban Denver high school at midday today and, in a shooting rampage on a scale unprecedented in an American school, killed as many as 25 students and faculty members.

The gunmen, whom police and fellow students described as disaffected outcasts, were found dead this afternoon in the library of Columbine High School after what police described as their "suicide mission." A third young man, described as a friend, was taken into custody but not charged. At least 20 other students were wounded.

Approaching the school from a nearby soccer field about 11:30 a.m., just as the first lunch hour began, the gunmen opened fire, moving into the cafeteria and then through the school, shooting apparently at random as hundreds of students fled in panic and hundreds of others took shelter in classrooms and libraries.

"We heard gunshots and 200 to 300 people ran into the neighborhoods," said Paul Freeman, a freshman who was in the cafeteria. "I was running and I heard everyone scream, 'He's in here,' " Freeman said. "Girls were crying and stuff."

The killings brought the country face to face once again with the tragic spectacle of seemingly senseless murder in the schools, renewing a horrific chain that since 1997 has included two killed at a school in Pearl, Miss.; three at a school in West Paducah, Ky.; five at a school in Jonesboro, Ark.; and two at a school in Springfield, Ore. Measured by the number killed, the shooting today was the worst by far.

After hunching in terror in their hiding spots, many of the students were rescued hours after the gunmen opened fire by SWAT teams from four local police forces. Authorities and students who fled the school said the gunmen also carried explosives, which they detonated in several spots inside the building. One girl was seriously wounded by shrapnel.

The suspects were not immediately identified as hundreds of police officers continued to sweep the 2,000-student high school for more victims and survivors. They were described as members of a group known as the "Trench Coat Mafia."

The small group, said Columbine senior Zach Piercy, was composed mostly of seniors who wore black clothing and black trench coats to school and sounded doomsday warnings about the Year 2000 and the end of the millennium. Some of their classmates described them as white supremacists absorbed by Gothic fantasies.

Students who escaped from the rampage said the gunmen appeared to target athletes, who frequently teased the dozen or so members. "A lot of the wounded kids were wearing sports clothes like football jerseys and hats," Piercy said.

Jefferson County Sheriff John P. Stone told reporters late this afternoon that as many as 25 people were killed in the shooting rampage, which lasted for more than an hour after deputies first responded to the school. By early evening, SWAT team members and bomb squad units were still methodically sweeping the sprawling brick school for additional victims and survivors hiding in classrooms.



(The Washington Post)

"It appears to be a suicide mission," said Stone, one of hundreds of police officers from Denver and suburban police forces who crowded the area throughout the afternoon.

Officers were executing search warrants of the suspects' homes, said Stone, and had found at least one explosive device at one of their houses.

Bomb disposal squads worked into the evening to disarm two explosive devices found in two vehicles in the student parking lot, as well as other explosives near or on the bodies of the two gunmen in the school library, said Steve Davis, a spokesman for the Jefferson County sheriff's department.

Davis said as many as 10 of the dead were found in the library. Additional bodies were found in the cafeteria and in hallways. Davis said 20 wounded victims were taken to area hospitals.

Jefferson County Commissioner Rick Sheehan said Columbine High School officials were aware of a group of students he described as "rambunctious," but he said they were unable to keep close enough track of the group to know in advance of the

shooting rampage. "There's no way we have the kind of manpower to keep an eye on that," Sheehan said.

When asked whether he had been aware of the so-called Trench Coat Mafia, Sheehan said, "Not by any stretch of the imagination were we aware of any individuals this crazed or chaotic in their thinking."

Wounded students lay inside the school for several hours as frantic police officers tried to reach them. One bloodied student, his right arm limp, dangled from a second-floor window before being rescued.

Students described scenes of almost unfathomable horror as the gunmen moved through the school, shooting indiscriminately and setting off what appeared to be explosives. Frantic students hid in labs and classrooms, some calling parents with cellular phones to assure them they were safe and in hiding. Hundreds of panicked parents descended on the school in this community of 35,000 southwest of Denver, anxiously awaiting word of their sons and daughters.

"This is a wonderful neighborhood and a wonderful school," said Scott Cornwell, who waited behind a police tape for word of his son Matt, an 18-year-old senior who was pinned down in the school's choir room and had called, whispering that he was all right. "You just don't think it will happen here."

President Clinton, who last year hosted a White House conference on the issue of school violence after similar incidents, appeared in the briefing room tonight to urge that Americans "do more ... to recognize the early warning signals" of troubled children with the capacity for violence.

Clinton said that he was reluctant to call the trend toward high school shootings an "epidemic" but that "there are a lot of kids out there who have weapons ... and who build up these grievances." He pledged the assistance of the federal government in helping Colorado authorities respond to the incident.

Gov. Bill Owens, who said he has a 16-year-old daughter in high school, told reporters near the elementary school where many of the fleeing students were taken: "We can't imagine what the parents are going through today."

Owens condemned a "culture of violence" that he said gave rise to such tragedies, and added, "These are children who don't have the same moral background as the rest of us. ... It's just something you can't explain."

When asked whether stricter gun controls were needed, Owens replied, "I'm not going to get into this. There are kids still in the school, and we'll talk about that later."

The shooting came as the Colorado State Legislature is close to enacting new gun legislation liberalizing the state rules for carrying concealed handguns and just two weeks before the National Rifle Association's annual convention is held in Denver.

Students who saw the gunmen said the two were wearing the trademark fatigues and black trench coats of the millennium group. A third, apparently the friend, wore a T-shirt.

Piercy said it was mostly athletes who mocked and teased the members of the group, who in addition to their black clothing often painted their faces in "weird" psychedelic patterns.

As hundreds of heavily armed police officers, FBI and federal Bureau of Alcohol, Tobacco and Firearms agents arrived on the scene, accompanied by dozens of ambulances and other rescue vehicles, frantic parents were directed to a nearby elementary school to await word of their sons and daughters. In the late afternoon, an armored personnel carrier operated by the Colorado National Guard arrived on the back of a tractor-trailer and was dispatched to the front of the school to help remove the wounded.

But scores of others came to the school where they tearfully waited behind yellow police tape as the chilling reality of what had happened became known.

Elaine Brookfield came to await word of her son Brandon, a Spanish teacher at Columbine. "I'm just furious this can happen to good productive people, that they can get hurt and killed by thugs," she said. "I'd just like to beat the [expletive] out of whoever did this."

Chris Wisher, a 16-year-old sophomore, was outside the school with a friend when he saw the gunmen approach across a soccer field. "I heard what I thought was fireworks," said Wisher, but his puzzlement quickly turned to panic as he realized the gunmen were firing live ammunition directly at him from a distance of about 100 yards.

"They were just shooting randomly," said Wisher. "We felt shots going by us, and we fell to the ground."

Wisher said he recognized one of the shooters as a student member of the Trench Coat Mafia. "They all hang out together and don't have many friends. They got made fun of a lot. They looked like troublemakers."

Jason Greer, a 16-year-old sophomore, said he heard shots immediately after he walked into the cafeteria for lunch. Fleeing, he said he saw "one person laying face down when I left, as I was ducking through a doorway."

Stone, the Jefferson County sheriff, said officers found some explosives inside and outside the school but could not identify them. The two dead suspects found in the library "possibly" died of self-inflicted wounds, he said.

Asked for a possible motive, Stone said: "I wish I had an answer."

Staff writer William Claiborne in Washington contributed to this report.