

Tests of Nerves as Terror Unfolded

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It was supposed to be another day of delicious waiting.

Students at Columbine High School could feel the kiss of spring on their skin, the whisper of summer in their ears. Trees were budding, prom had just passed, and the world beyond the drab beige walls of school was beckoning.

Just 19 days to go, they told each other, leafing through magazines in the library, going through their last dull algebra lessons, pasting together their final history projects.

Then came 11:20 a.m. Shuddering explosions could be heard in the parking lot and on the school roof, followed by a burst of--could that be gunfire?

"Get down!" a teacher yelled, standing atop a cafeteria table, and suddenly the clock stopped.

What was to be a languid time of sweet anticipation became an agonizing limbo, a span of nearly four hours when students cowered inside their blood-spattered school--in bathrooms and classrooms, closets and air ducts--while their parents collected at a nearby staging area to hope for good news, to brace for bad. The worst high school shooting in U.S. history became the longest afternoon in Colorado history, as 900 teens and their parents kept separate but parallel vigils, not knowing who would live or die.

Unable to communicate, they tried to get word to each other--"I love you," "Stay safe," "I'm fine"--through cell phones and pagers, prayers and ESP.

Little is known about exactly what happened, and exactly when, in those first panic-stricken seconds. The precise chronology may never be fully known, since

both gunmen are dead from self-inflicted wounds to the head and the survivors' memories already are blurring and running together, some beginning to think they saw things they actually heard about on TV.

What will always be grimly certain is that two masked boys in black cowboy dusters--17-year-old Dylan Bennet Klebold and 18-year-old Eric Davis Harris, who'd worked before in a tight little criminal tandem, breaking into a van last year--set off homemade bombs outside the school about 11:20 a.m., then gunned down two students and left them to die in the dry brown grass.

They then strolled calmly through the main student entrance, guns blazing, muttering the word "revenge." They were seniors out to settle scores, they said, getting even with those who'd spurned them for years.

"We've waited our whole lives for this!" they shouted.

Much has been made of the fact that the shooting spree coincided with the 110th anniversary of Hitler's birth, because both teen gunmen were entranced by swastikas and Nazis. But the assault also came three days after the prom, when a pair of such isolated outcasts would have felt more outcast than ever.

At 11:25 a.m., a cafeteria worker dialed 911 to say something awful was happening at Columbine. Meanwhile, a sheriff's deputy who stood guard every day at the front door already knew. He sprinted toward the explosions and came face to face with one of the gunmen. Briefly, they exchanged fire, each missing the other, before the deputy retreated and waited for reinforcements.

Minutes later, at 11:30, the first police officers on the scene did the same. They fired a few shots at the teens, then fell back, followed by SWAT teams, who also waited.

In time, many would wonder about the wait. Why did an hour pass between the first gunfire and the SWAT team's descent on the school? Why did five hours pass between the first explosions and the SWAT team's "all clear."

"My concern is that my dad was left there, was still alive and was not helped," says Angie Sanders, daughter of teacher William "Dave" Sanders, who suffered a

chest wound minutes after the assault began and didn't die until minutes after it all ended.

"To watch more than 200 heavily armed SWAT team and other police officers in body armor, standing around discussing strategy, while hundreds of children were trapped inside, was painful," wrote Cecil Rigsby, a Denver man, his letter printed with others like it in a local newspaper. "Where were the heroes? How many people bled to death while the police waited to act?"

So far, the police haven't defended their response in detail. A sheriff's spokesman will say only that extreme caution was called for, with so many bombs involved and with suspects looking so much like victims.

Science Closet Offered Refuge

Jessica Arzola, a soft-voiced 15-year-old sophomore with jet black hair and a light dusting of freckles, was just biting into a slice of pizza when her high school turned into hell.

She wasn't among those who thought the seniors were staging a prank or fireworks were going off. She could tell by the vast wave of human panic that something unspeakable was coming her way.

"I heard this roar," she says, "kids yelling and running, then pop-pop-pop, pop-pop-pop, and I ran into the first door I saw."

Luckily, the door led to a dark science closet filled with microscopes and other equipment. There, she and a dozen students would spend the next three hours, hiding, hugging their knees and hyperventilating. As Jessica took cover, her mother was returning from getting her hair cut. Sue Arzola was driving along, telling herself she really needed to go to the car wash today, no ifs, ands or buts. She turned down a street near the school and saw flashing lights.

Oh God, she thought.

By now, the first paramedics were arriving, and the first firefighters, and reporters, and helicopters, and neighbors, and onlookers, and six SWAT teams,

which were beginning to find bombs sprinkled about the campus. Someone official-looking told her to head for nearby Leawood Elementary School and wait there for word of her daughter. Reluctantly, she did as she was told. Like so many parents, she resisted the impulse to run toward the school doors and rescue her child.

At the waiting area set up for parents, she joined an ever-growing throng, many parents already sobbing, already fearing the worst. She made friends with some who would get good news, along with her. She met others who would hear the worst news of all, who would be quietly taken aside by police and asked for their children's dental records.

Somehow, Arzola knew her daughter was safe. She knew Jessica would be lucky enough to find a good hiding place. But, as time wore on, she also feared that Jessica might suffer a panic attack, might dart out into the line of fire.

So mother sent daughter a telepathic message: Stay calm, sweetheart. Everything will be OK.

Jessica felt like she got the message.

"I was in shock at first, crying, shaking," she says. "Then I stopped. Suddenly. And just calmed down."

Tyler Berch, a blond 16-year-old sophomore who looks as though he was just scissored from an Abercrombie & Fitch catalog, was sitting near Jessica in the cafeteria when the school halls began to fill with smoke and searing heat from the bombs. A teacher ran by. Schoolmates ran by, some making the sign of a gun with their fingers. Bullets were whizzing off lockers, shrapnel was flying.

"Get down," someone was screaming, probably Sanders.

Berch got down, then out.

"I let my friends go first," he says, "and then I went. A girl fell in front of me. I was going up the stairs and I heard nine shots from a semiautomatic rifle, and then a dull boom of a shotgun."

Unlike so many students, Berch didn't turn to see the gunmen, who now were methodically mowing down every schoolmate in their path, injuring in those few minutes most of the two dozen students and teachers who would be sent to local hospitals. Berch kept running, then ducked into an upstairs science classroom, where he dove behind a desk just as the door to the room was obliterated by a bomb, or a shotgun, he didn't know.

A group of teachers then led Berch into an adjacent science lab, along with a group of other students. Scrunched together, trying to stay calm, Berch and the others heard bombs, gunfire, screaming, for half an hour. Also, he says, the fire alarm kept up a constant droning--"boing, boing, boing"--that made everything spookier.

When a pipe bomb came flying through the shattered window of the classroom, igniting a fire, one of the teachers grabbed a fire extinguisher and quickly doused the flames. Then, Berch and those trapped with him plotted what they would do if the gunmen stormed the door. They decided to fight back with what was at hand: combustible solutions and acids, chemicals with which they could scald or burn any intruders. So for the next few hours, they prepared to mix various volatile concoctions, readying a counterattack.

It was about then, as his son was getting a chemistry lesson he'd never forget, that Berch's father landed in Salt Lake City on a business trip. As he stepped off the plane, airport TVs were broadcasting the gruesome scenes from Colorado. Berch's father peered at the TVs, saw that the scenes were from his son's high school, "and five minutes later he was on a plane back to Denver," Berch says, his voice choked with pride.

Resembled Scene From Video Game

It was about 11:45 when the gunmen split up, one staying in the cafeteria, one walking upstairs to the library, where all but three of the 13 who died in the assault would later be found.

By now, the gunmen were giddy with blood-lust, making a sport of who would live and who would die. One asked a girl if she believed in God. When she said yes, he shot her. One asked a girl to beg for her life. When she did, he shot the girl kneeling beside her. One paused over a victim, exulting at the sight of his exposed

brain. One asked a victim shot several times if he was still breathing, then shot him again. With each kill, the teens cackled and shouted as though playing one of the morbid video games they loved.

Just before noon, they reunited in the library, and it may have been then that they announced they were hunting blacks and jocks, which is why Landon Jones, the hulking star fullback of the Columbine Rebels football team, feels so grateful to have left the library around 11 a.m.

They don't come any jockier than Jones, who also stars on the basketball and baseball teams. There was no way, he says, the gunmen would have let him live.

He only left the library because he needed supplies to finish his history project. His friend Corey DePooter might have come along, but DePooter was done with his project, so he decided to stay put, hang out in the library.

See ya round, they told each other.

By the time Jones returned to the school, smoke was curling from the building, blood and water were seeping under the doors, and gunfire was crackling like thunder in the nearby Rockies. Later, Jones learned that his football coach, caught in the open field beside the school, was taking cover behind a toolshed. There, the coach found a boy "whimpering," Jones says, "with a hole in his knee and a bullet in his cheek."

"It seemed like a movie," Jones says, "all action-packed."

By the stroke of noon, he believes, his friend DePooter was either dead or moments away from dying.

As all Littleton schools went into "lockdown," police called for still more ammo. Semiautomatic weapons could still be heard rippling through the halls of the school, shattering glass windows, and occasionally the gunmen would come to the windows and fire at students trying to flee. They hit at least one.

Brett Kostalnick couldn't find anywhere to hide, so he crawled into the ceiling, into an air duct, and scurried along like a mouse from room to room, poking his

head through the ceiling tiles occasionally and telling whomever he found, in various classrooms and closets, about safe routes of escape.

By 12:30 p.m., the first SWAT team was inside the school, beginning a slow, painstaking sweep, searching every backpack, every desk, every corner, looking for more bombs. They suspected the whole school was booby-trapped, and they weren't completely wrong. More than 30 bombs were found, some weighing up to 20 pounds.

Outside, police also found three friends of the gunmen, wearing black coats and combat fatigues, creeping toward the school in a nearby field. The police arrested all three, then later released them but held out the possibility that accomplices were involved in planning the assault.

Students Urged to Stay Off Phones

Most students say the explosions and gunfire stopped around 12:30. An eerie calm then set in, only to be replaced by a new sound: pagers chirping all over the place as parents tried frantically to locate their children.

Some teens had phones with them, which they used to call parents, to say they were scared but safe. TV stations urged any students who might somehow be watching to stay off the phones rather than risk alerting the killers to their whereabouts.

As the first SWAT team began its sweep of the building, Klebold's father called police, saying he had a sinking feeling his son was involved. He offered to go to the scene to try to communicate with the teen. But police said they'd had no contact with Klebold and didn't need the father's help.

By 2:30 p.m., SWAT teams began freeing large groups of students. In single file, they began liberating different hiding places, sending teens streaming from different exits, hands over their heads, into the waiting arms of police officers, who frisked and questioned them, fearing the gunmen might try to blend in with the victims.

But it seems likely, the police now say, that the suspects were long dead by then. Both died in the library of self-inflicted gunshot wounds; one to the temple, the other to the back of the head.

By 3 p.m., a caravan of yellow school buses was headed toward Leawood to deliver their precious cargo safely to frantic parents. But as the afternoon grew longer, each joyous reunion had its grim twin: the devastated face of a parent waiting in vain for her child to step off the bus, or waiting in vain for his child to appear on a list of known survivors.

“He’s not here,” a mother cried, holding a trembling hand to her mouth, scouring a list of names. “He’s not here.”

It wasn’t until 3:30 that SWAT teams entered the library, a room of blood-spattered books and teens hunched in the fetal position, most shot execution-style. Within the schoolwide horror, this was the gruesome core, and doctors called in to examine and identify the dead would be unable to speak about it calmly in the days ahead.

By 4 p.m., the Sheriff’s Department was saying that 25 or more were dead, a number inexplicably off by 10.

Half an hour later, at 4:30, a SWAT team declared the building safe.

But because of the possibility that other students helped plan the attack, that accomplices might soon be arrested, the school was treated as a massive crime scene, and an exhaustive investigation was launched. Photographs were taken, videos were made, bullet holes and casings were marked, evidence was collected in countless plastic bags. Through the long night, as a dwindling number of parents continued their vigil at Leawood, the 15 dead remained unmoved.

For friends and family of the 13 dead victims, the limbo that began Tuesday would continue overnight, and through the next morning, and long into the next night, and would end, finally, late Wednesday, when the bodies were removed.

But by then, a lifelong limbo of grief was only just beginning.

What Happened at Columbine High School

The shooting at Columbine High School that left 15 dead--including the two gunmen--and more than two dozen injured, began at lunchtime. Here's a reconstruction of the events (times are approximate):

- * 11:20 a.m.: Explosion and gunfire are heard. Gunmen shoot and kill two students near parking lot.
- * 11:25 a.m.: Teens wielding shotguns enter building through student entrance, then enter cafeteria, shooting as they go.
- * 11:45 a.m.: One gunman remains in cafeteria while other goes upstairs to library, where he taunts students and makes them beg for their lives.
- * Noon: SWAT team is on scene finding explosive devices outside school.
- * 12:30 p.m.: SWAT team is in building, searching every part of school for bombs.
- * 2:30 p.m.: Police begin freeing trapped students and busing them to Leewood Elementary School.
- * 3:30 p.m.: SWAT team enters library, finds 12 dead.
- * 4 p.m.: Sheriff's Department announces as many as 25 are dead, a number that stands until following morning, when number of fatalities is revised to 15.

Sources: Staff reports; Jefferson County School District; Denver Post; Associated Press