

Facts clarify but can't justify killers' acts

Peggy Lowe
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March 12 - The reality was horrible enough.

But, from the first, the Columbine tragedy has been distorted by myths about the killers and their plans, what they said, and who helped them.

In the immediate aftermath, for example, some people believed that Eric Harris and Dylan Klebold, waiting in separate cars, communicated in some way about entering the school after their plot failed to drive students from the building with bomb explosions.

"Another myth," said Kate Battan, the lead investigator on Columbine.

"They didn't have body armor. They didn't have walkie-talkies. They didn't have keys to the school," said Battan, of the Jefferson County Sheriff's Office. "They didn't have all these things that the myths say they had."

With the first anniversary of America's deadliest school shooting more than a month away, investigators say they know virtually everything there is to know about it.

In recent interviews with The Denver Post, Battan, sheriff's Division Chief John Kiekbusch and others described how their final investigative report will separate fact from fiction.

- **MYTH 1:** Harris and Klebold had help planning or carrying out their attack.

FACT: They planned and executed the massacre themselves.

In the hours of videotapes the killers made before their attack, they describe a maniacal, secretive two-man mission.

The two fed off each other, not needing anyone else, Battan said.

"It was almost as though they had two lives - the one for the rest of the world and the one they shared with each other. And only each other - not even with their closest friends," Battan said.

The two conned friends and co-workers into helping them gather weapons and ammunition. But Harris and Klebold never let them know the extent of their plans.

"These kids were extremely secretive," Kiekbusch said. "They took pride, if you will, in their ability to lie."

- The idea that there were more than two gunmen was built on the reports of hundreds of traumatized students streaming out of Columbine during the attack. Kids thought they heard shots from everywhere - the roof, the cafeteria and all the classrooms, Battan said. "When you're getting that much information thrown at you, it sounds like we have 12 shooters in there, six shooters in there," Battan said. The student reports were either wrong or they heard other things - police fire, other kids or the bombs going off.

FBI Agent Dwayne Fusilier agreed Harris and Klebold acted alone. And, he said, the probe has produced answers to the many witness reports of other activity in the school.

For instance, reports of shots or explosions in the school after the killers committed suicide were probably the sounds of mechanical battering rams or sledgehammers used to breach the doors of locked classrooms, Fusilier said.

- **MYTH 2:** Harris and Klebold, in fatally shooting 13 people and injuring 21 others, did what they set out to do.

FACT: The plan was even more horrible than that.

In the cafeteria, the teens had placed two propane bombs, which they thought would explode, killing at least 450. As survivors fled outside, Harris and Klebold planned to gun down even more of their classmates.

Their plans almost immediately went awry. First, a diversionary bomb at Elmhurst Drive and Wadsworth Boulevard went off late. The cafeteria bombs were set to go off at 11:17 a.m., so the diversionary bomb was probably set to go off before that, Battan said. The call on the diversionary bomb came in at 11:21 a.m. So Harris and Klebold changed course, killing two students and injuring five more on their way into the school, then scrambling randomly through the building. They went back to the nearly empty cafeteria at one point, drinking soda from cups left on tables and finally shooting at their bombs.

"When you saw the cafeteria videotape, they walked down there and they're dejected," Battan said.

She said their expressions and actions seemed to say: "

"Why didn't my bombs go off? I know, let's shoot at them. OK, they might explode and kill me. Let's shoot at them."

Even the killers' homemade pipe bombs failed. Not one death or injury can be attributed to the bombs, Battan said. While the death toll could have been much worse, Battan and Kieckbusch will never use the word "lucky" in the same sentence as "Columbine."

"It's a touchy subject to even approach because how do you say 'We were so lucky' to 15 people? Or to 13 people? You can't," Battan said. "But at the same time, had those bombs gone off, the investigation wouldn't have taken so long because I wouldn't have had nearly as many witnesses to interview."

- MYTH 3: Harris and Klebold were members of the Trench Coat Mafia.

FACT: The Trench Coat Mafia was "a tongue-in-cheek kind of thing," Kieckbusch said, not an organized group or clique. The group was composed of about a dozen students, mostly social outcasts who hung out together. Their picture appeared in the 1998 Columbine yearbook.

But Harris and Klebold weren't in the picture and they weren't part of the group, Battan and Kieckbusch said.

They did wear black, Western-type dusters into the school, but only as a way to hide their weapons.

- MYTH 4: April 20 was chosen as a political date, either for Hitler's birthday or for the day after the anniversaries of the Oklahoma City bombing and the fiery end to the standoff between federal officials and members of the Branch Davidian sect near Waco, Texas.

FACT: The teens actually planned their attack for Monday, April 19, although investigators don't know why. It didn't happen that day because "maybe they just weren't ready," Battan said.

The two bought more ammunition from a friend, Mark Manes, the night of April 19.

"I think it was nearing the end of the school year," she said. "They certainly had to do it before school ended. Otherwise, what's the point?"

- MYTH 5: Harris was the leader, Klebold his lamblike follower.

FACT: In their goodbye videotapes, Klebold appears to be much more malicious, full of hate and rage at virtually everyone. Harris sometimes appears to be kind, especially when he talks about his "terrific" mother and worrying about how his parents will cope after he's dead. Battan said the report won't cover much of the boys' psychological history, but their relationship could be addressed in the final report. And although no one witnessed their suicides, Kieckbusch said there's no evidence to show Harris killed Klebold. They each died at their own hands.

- MYTH 6: Harris and Klebold targeted blacks, Christians and jocks.

FACT: No one group or individual was sought out, Battan said. For example, if the two were really looking for jocks, they wouldn't have gone to the library, she said.

"This was not about killing jocks or killing black people or killing Christians," Battan said. "It was about killing everybody." Said Kiekbusch: "They put themselves above everybody. They hated everybody." Harris and Klebold were heard remarking about God or Christianity, Battan said, because the killers were taunting their schoolmates, who were saying things like, "Oh, God." The killers used religion, race or anything to belittle their victims. Nor did Harris and Klebold seek out Isaiah Shoels, the only black student killed, although they did make a racial remark about him, Battan said.

- MYTH 7: The killers wore body armor, carried walkie-talkies and had keys to the school.

FACT: Student witnesses have told police that they saw Harris and Klebold walking in separately, each from the areas where their booby-trapped cars were later found.

"If they're sitting there and the bombs aren't going off, I can imagine one gets up and starts to walk in and the other sees him and he starts to walk in," Battan said. "I have students that see them both walk in separately." The two met up, ascended a set of outside stairs and went into the school's west entrance.

The walkie-talkie-and-keys report came from one student, who was hiding in the the kitchen pantry with other kids. The student told a 911 operator that he heard the gunmen outside the door and, "I can hear their keys jangling, I can hear their walkie-talkies," Battan said the boy said.

What the student actually heard were janitors and security personnel attempting to safeguard students, Battan said.

- MYTH 8: Bombs were planted throughout the school in the days before the attack, perhaps on prom night the weekend before.

FACT: Harris and Klebold brought the bombs into the school around 11 a.m. on the day of the shootings, investigators say. This myth, too, was driven by faulty witness reports and a disbelief that two high-school students could cause so much destruction.

Investigators went back to the witnesses who reported they saw bombs in the cafeteria and kitchen. The devices turned out to be steel cylinders for the soda-dispenser machines.

- MYTH 9: There was a larger plot by Harris and Klebold to escape Columbine, murder people in their neighborhood, hijack a plane and dive-bomb New York City.

FACT: This myth arose five days after the April 20 attack, when officials released various pieces of a journal kept by Harris and Klebold.

The idea was "one of those fantasy things, like, "Wouldn't it be cool if we got away and were able to do this?' "

Battan said.

Harris and Klebold planned to die at Columbine, something they made clear in their farewell videotapes, Battan said.

"Their cars were set to go off," Battan said. "How were they going to get away?"

- MYTH 10: A neighbor heard the sound of breaking glass - presumably as part of the bomb-making process - coming from the Harrises' garage the day before the attack.

FACT: Battan said perhaps the neighbor heard something being dropped in the garage, but it wasn't what went into the bombs.

"There was not glass in any of these bombs. So why would you be breaking glass?"