

SWAT team hampered by confusion

By Peter G. Chronis
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May 16 - About the time Dylan Klebold and Eric Harris were committing suicide at Columbine High School, makeshift squads of SWAT officers were entering the Dante-esque inferno the teens had created inside their alma mater.

Critics have questioned why SWAT team members took so long to get inside the building, but in the official report issued Monday, officials say the scene was a mass of confusion and conflicting information.

When he reached Columbine, then-Lt. Terry Manwaring, commander of the Jefferson County Special Weapons and Tactics team, hastily assembled a collection of 12 officers from Jeffco, Denver and Littleton, the official report said.

"Emerging, and often conflicting, information was being reported to the Jefferson County Dispatch Center," the report said.

"There were shooters in the cafeteria, in the library, in the science room. There were six to eight heavily armed gunmen in body armor. The gunmen were mobile and active. There were 17 hostages held in the auditorium. There were snipers. There were shooters outside the building."

Much of that information was later found to be erroneous but seems intended to show what SWAT officers faced as they tried to respond to the shootings.

Nonetheless, some critics say the SWAT teams' performance on April 20, 1999, was less than exemplary. Former SWAT consultant, trainer and firearms publication editor Jim Shults, a Western Slope resident, faulted officers for not being more aggressive in entering and clearing the school.

Waiting for the shooting to stop unfortunately is almost standard procedure, he said, going back to the 1980 McDonald's massacre in San Ysidro, Calif. Another law enforcement and weapons writer questioned why so many rounds had been fired by cops with little apparent effect. Twelve officers, including four from the Jefferson County Sheriff's Office, seven from the Denver Police Department, and one from the Lakewood Police Department, fired 141 rounds during the incident.

According to the narrative, Manwaring, now a captain, was patrolling near Tiny Town, 13 miles from Columbine, when he heard the first report of shots fired at the school and sped to the scene to assemble a SWAT team.

At Columbine, Manwaring found Capt. Vince DiManna, Denver Police SWAT commander, whose own son was a Columbine student. The SWAT officers lacked their usual tactical gear, and had only two protective shields among them. At one point, Deputy Del Kleinschmidt took the wheel of a fire truck, which was used as cover for the SWAT team to approach the school, the report said.

Manwaring initially split the force in two, with a team led by Deputy Allen Simmons initially entering the school with only a "hurriedly drawn map and conflicting information" to search for "unknown gunmen among nearly 2,000 students." Simmons' team entered from the east side, immediately searching and clearing classrooms, the report said.

Loud horns and flashing lights from the fire alarm system were very distracting, according to the report, and the possibility of a hostage situation complicated it even more.

More SWAT officers entered the school, and students and staff were evacuated, the narrative said.

Sixty students were found hiding in a closet, the report said, but the kids were so terrified they initially refused to leave the room.

A sign reading "1 bleeding to death" was spotted by police marksmen on neighboring rooftops. SWAT officers reached the second floor about 2:30, the account said, and about 2:40 got to the science room where teacher Dave Sanders lay dying. Although a paramedic was reportedly on the way, after none arrived, officers decided to evacuate Sanders themselves 20 or 30 minutes later. But he had died, the narrative said. Officers entered the library about 3:22 p.m. and found 10 murdered students there, as well as the bodies of Harris and Klebold.