

The Lost Command

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WESTWORD

What may have been the defining moment in the history of the Governor's Columbine Review Commission unfolded last month. Consigned to a small meeting room in the basement of the Jefferson County Justice Center, struggling to make sense of the worst school massacre the country has ever seen and faced with an epidemic of lockjaw in the law-enforcement community -- its star act a no-show, other key witnesses abruptly unavailable -- the panel turned to its depleted roster of police experts for answers.

And heard a familiar story.

"When I arrived on the scene, it was chaos," said Mark Campbell, a captain with the Arapahoe County Sheriff's Office, one of numerous police agencies summoned to Columbine High School on April 20, 1999, in the wake of the rampage by Eric Harris and Dylan Klebold that left twelve students and one teacher dead. "The first responding officers were outgunned."

"It was one of the most chaotic things I've seen in my life," said Arapahoe County SWAT officer Bruce Williamson, who participated in the four-hour evacuation efforts. "[The SWAT teams] didn't know where these guys were. Every room they went into was hot at first."

Students who had barricaded themselves in classrooms were so relieved to see rescuing SWAT officers that they latched onto them with viselike grips, noted Robert Armstrong, a former Arapahoe County captain who was one of the first senior officers to arrive at the school. "These students would not let go of the officers," Armstrong said. "They were not able to go aggressively forward."

The commission seemed grateful to get even shreds of fresh information. A panel of criminal-justice and education professionals appointed by Governor Bill Owens

last fall to review the government response to Columbine, the thirteen-member group has no subpoena powers. Its ability to ferret out facts about the shootings depends on the voluntary cooperation of those who watched the crisis develop on April 20 and fought to end it. But some of the most crucial participants have been curiously unresponsive to the governor's summons.

For months the commission had eagerly awaited the testimony of Jefferson County Sheriff John P. Stone, whose office was in charge of rescue operations that day and spearheaded the investigation of the slayings. But Stone, besieged by nine lawsuits filed by victims' families accusing his agency of negligence, first accepted the commission's invitation and then declined, saying that the county attorney had advised him against making any comment.

Vince DiManna, the Denver Police Department SWAT captain who helped to organize the initial entry teams at Columbine, pulled out of testifying at the last minute, too, citing similar concerns about possible lawsuits against the DPD. That left the witness table to a handful of officers from Arapahoe County and Arvada, folks who'd participated in the emergency response but had no ultimate command duties -- or threats of litigation -- hanging over their heads.

Stone's absence may have been a source of embarrassment for the committee, but it was a bitter disappointment for Randy and Judy Brown, the Columbine parents who are leading a lonely campaign to recall the sheriff ("Stonewalled," April 13). For weeks the Browns and a handful of volunteers have been haunting the county's supermarkets, seeking petition signatures from passersby who, for the most part, don't want to think about Columbine anymore. Stone has ducked the couple's questions at public meetings and has refused to comment on the recall effort. After months of delays that were curtailed only by a court order, in May the sheriff issued a "final report" on Columbine that was supposed to be the final word on the matter -- and then refused to answer questions about the report, too. Now it appeared he wasn't going to have to answer to the governor's blue-ribbon panel, either.

Instead, the Browns and the commission got an earful from Robert Armstrong, who offered an impassioned defense of the command decisions at Columbine. A florid-faced, no-nonsense career officer, now a top administrator at the Colorado Bureau of Investigation, Armstrong marched through a prepared statement that bristled with bombast, conundrums and outright contradictions. One moment he stressed that the first priority was to establish a perimeter so that "this incident will not leave Pierce Street. That was my order...that we've got to contain this thing." The next he was talking about how desperately the command wanted to get officers into the school: "We fully realized we must engage these suspects."

Armstrong praised the "uncommon valor" of DiManna and other SWAT officers who put together an entry team even though they didn't have the proper equipment, hitting the school without full-body armor or helmets. At the same time, he conceded, it wouldn't do to have these officers going off half-cocked, not with all the reports of snipers, gas leaks and bombs everywhere: "We couldn't rush SWAT down the hall and set off additional bombs."

By the time Armstrong addressed the death of science teacher Dave Sanders, Randy Brown could hardly contain himself. Sanders had been shot while trying to direct kids to safety; he died, still awaiting medical aid, more than three hours later. Yes, Armstrong said, the top brass at the command post had taken notice of a sign, "1 BLEEDING TO DEATH," posted in the window of the science classroom where Sanders lay wounded. But the command was worried that it might be a trick; the question was, *who* put that sign there?

"We had no way to confirm it," Armstrong said.

That was too much for Brown. "You were on the phone with them at the time," he blurted out.

Armstrong seemed startled. Someone had interrupted his testimony...a voice from the peanut gallery...a reporter or, worse, a *civilian*...saying what, exactly?

"You were on the phone with a teacher in the science room," Brown insisted.

Armstrong turned beseechingly to the commission chair, retired state supreme court justice William Erickson. "Mr. Chief Justice," he said, "we didn't *know* that was a teacher at the time."

If there was a ripe moment to examine the logic of Armstrong's explanation -- indeed, the logic of the entire rescue effort -- this was it. If the cops were so eager to "engage" the shooters, why hadn't they answered the plea for help, even if they did suspect it was a trap? How could it be that the library, the place the shooters were most active, the room most likely to contain wounded kids if not the shooters themselves, was the last place reached by the rescue operation? The students in the library didn't have helmets or body armor, but no one was talking about their uncommon valor.

Erickson merely smiled. "Hindsight's 20/20, isn't it?" he asked. "It's extremely difficult when you have an emergency of this type to meet all the exigencies."

Before the day was over, Erickson would warmly thank Armstrong and the other officers for their testimony, stating that he didn't see how they could have responded any differently on April 20 -- an extraordinary absolution, given how little official scrutiny the police response has received to date. But then, Erickson has always maintained that the commission's purpose is not to reinvestigate Columbine but to make recommendations for future public policy.

Yet how can the commission fulfill its mission when critical facts remain so elusive? "I said at the first meeting, 'You guys have got to hunt for the truth,'" says Mike Slater, a Columbine parent who's attended all of the commission hearings. "But they've said all along that they're not out to find fault. You can see that there are a lot of questions they're not asking."

Slater believes there is ample fault to be found, if the commission were so inclined. "I think there were some officers who would have gone into the school immediately," he says, "but whoever was in charge made some real poor judgments. Someone has to take responsibility for that. A man died because they didn't do their job."

Assigning blame for Columbine may seem like a fruitless exercise at this point. After all, the two hate-gorged adolescents responsible for the havoc are no longer in a position to answer anybody's questions. ("It's my fault!" Harris wrote in his journal. "Not my parents, not my brother, not my friends, not my favorite bands, not computer games, not the media, it's mine.") It is, in any case, an exercise that will be played out in court for years to come, in the multiple lawsuits filed on behalf of the injured and the dead.

Still, there are larger issues at stake than whether any particular officer faltered under fire last year. Columbine raises troubling questions about police emergency training and preparedness, the means and tactics of responding to an incident that "breaks the mold," as Armstrong put it, and the integrity and accountability of law enforcement. Those questions are neatly sidestepped in Sheriff Stone's report, which presents a highly selective and self-serving account of police actions that day.

Drawing on the work of eighty investigators, the largest criminal investigation in Colorado history, the digitalized report offers a detailed, "minute-by-minute" account of the slayings and the rescue effort, including several audio and video clips. Although its release was anticipated as early as last fall, the material underwent extensive review by Stone and his top aides, and still wasn't available by the one-year anniversary of the massacre -- the deadline for filing lawsuits over the incident.

Victims' families have blasted the report, calling it a desperate stab at spin control and an attempt to deflect legal liability. As a result of a public-records battle initiated by some of the families, in recent weeks Judge Brooke Jackson has ordered the release of a considerable amount of raw data gathered in the Columbine investigation, including video footage from news helicopters and the cafeteria surveillance cameras; last week, officials finally released 45 hours of 911 and dispatch calls. These materials, coupled with the accounts of eyewitnesses, offer a far messier picture of the Columbine rescue effort than the one provided in the

sheriff's report; in several instances, they contradict the official timeline of events and challenge the fundamental claims that the command did not know where the shooters were and could not have moved any quicker to save lives.

The sheriff's report was supposed to explode the "myths" of Columbine, such as longstanding rumors regarding a third shooter or a special hit list of athletes. Instead, the report has spawned new myths: the myth of "bombs everywhere" hampering a swift response, for example, and the myth of impeccable police performance in the face of unimaginable horror.

Like all myths, the sheriff's version of Columbine isn't entirely fanciful. It is true, as the report claims, that the particular strategy adopted by the police resulted in the safe evacuation of hundreds of students. But that accomplishment must be weighed against the dubious command decisions that essentially turned over the school to Klebold and Harris for what turned out to be more than two hours. That the pair opted to kill themselves less than an hour into the siege rather than continue to massacre at will can be chalked up to dumb luck; perhaps, like everyone else, they expected the cops to arrive any moment.

Much has been made of the sheer size of the sheriff's report, as if loquacity equaled candor. The CD-ROM has been compared to an 800-page book, but sections dealing directly with police actions on April 20 amount to fewer than 150 pages of text, skimpier than your average mystery novel. Passages explaining the command decisions guiding those actions are almost nonexistent. Thanks to Judge Jackson's rulings, though, it's now possible to glimpse some of what is missing -- and begin to understand why it is missing.

There is a point where spin becomes lies, where omission of important facts becomes deception. In the official silence that has descended on the subject of Columbine, there is much that can be learned.

At the heart of the Columbine report's defense of police actions is the assertion that the killers struck with lightning swiftness, spreading panic and chaos throughout the school, and ended their attack before SWAT officers could arrive. "Within the span of 16 minutes, the gunmen had killed 13 people and wounded 21 others," the report declares.

The statement is false. As a *Rocky Mountain News* editorial pointed out recently, only the most tortuous interpretation of the word "killed" could make it true, since Dave Sanders was still alive, though gravely wounded, when SWAT officers found him at 2:42 p.m. -- three hours and 23 minutes after the shooting started. Yet even if you remove Sanders from the equation (which the report seems all too eager to do), the statement is still a reach. It's the first volley in a concerted effort to fix the time of death of the other twelve fatalities within the brief period that Klebold and Harris were on the rampage, as if to demonstrate that any speedier response by the rescue teams would have been beside the point.

Because of an unprecedented court ruling, all but one of the victims' autopsy reports remain sealed more than a year after the murders. Without the autopsies, it's impossible to verify the claim that the victims died instantly. Yet there are several reasons to be skeptical of that claim. Close-range shotgun wounds tend to be fatal, but are the autopsy reports so precise that there's no fudge factor whatsoever in the report's statement that Corey DePooter, the last student shot in the library, "was killed at 11:35"?

Such unqualified accounts seem even more doubtful when you consider that several critically injured students survived for hours without medical attention, including Patrick Ireland, who crawled out of a library window only minutes before the police reached Sanders. Whether their recovery would have been substantially aided by swifter rescue efforts is one of those nasty "hindsight" questions the report simply doesn't address.

Legal considerations may have played a part in developing the theory of instant death. Consider the report's treatment of the students killed outside the school,

Rachel Scott and Daniel Rohrbough. Scott was killed outside the school's west entrance by the "first gunshots," the report states, and a few moments later, Klebold shot an already wounded, fallen Rohrbough at close range, "killing him instantly."

In their lawsuit, Rohrbough's parents allege that he was shot not just by Klebold, but by an unnamed sheriff's deputy, an accusation Stone has denounced as "outrageous." Whether the allegation of friendly fire will hold up in court is anybody's guess, but Brian Rohrbough claims to have eyewitnesses who dispute the report's account of his son's death and the timeline for when various officers arrived on the scene, making the notion of a crossfire seem more plausible. In that context, the assertion that Daniel Rohrbough died "instantly" from Klebold's shot becomes a convenient form of rebuttal.

As for Scott, investigators appear to have no doubt that she was the first to fall, based on eyewitness accounts and crime-scene evidence. But doubts remain. At least four witnesses to the shootings outside the school have questioned the sequence of events there; at a recent meeting of Columbine parents, one teacher reportedly complained that the police were trying to get her to "change her story" because it didn't square with the official account of Scott's death.

It's also worth noting that the first dispatch call after the shooting starts refers to a "female down in the south lot"-- almost certainly a reference to Anne Marie Hochhalter, who, according to the report, was the eighth person to be shot. Perhaps Hochhalter just happened to be the first victim observed by someone with a cell phone, but it's also possible that the sequence is not as clear-cut as the report indicates.

In many crime-scene investigations, ballistics evidence can clear up the ambiguities. But investigators were able to recover only one of the three bullets that struck Daniel Rohrbough, and his father has raised several issues about the ballistics data released under Judge Jackson's order.

"[Chief investigator] Kate Battan said she knew who killed each of these kids and she has ballistics to prove it," Rohrbough says. "Then they fought us in court to

keep us from seeing the ballistics. I told them, 'If you have the ballistics and can answer a few questions for me, I'll withdraw the suit.' Then they came back and said, 'We're basing the accounts of what happened on an injured eyewitness.' They don't have the ballistics. Two of the bullets were never found."

According to the sheriff's report, twelve officers fired a total of 141 rounds at Columbine, almost as many as Klebold and Harris; but the ballistics summary notes testing of only eleven police weapons. (The twelfth, a shotgun, was test-fired later.) According to the report, "the firearms of most officers who fired a weapon that day" were collected that afternoon.

"Most" isn't good enough for Brian Rohrbough. "That's against the procedure of every county in this state," he says. "There is no such thing as waiting until tomorrow to collect the guns."

The Broken Engagement

Harris and Klebold began shooting on the west side of the school at around 11:19 a.m. They finished the executions in the library at 11:36, tried to set off the bombs in the cafeteria, then returned to the library and committed suicide shortly after noon. Whatever hope the police had of ending the conflict by stopping the shooters in their tracks evaporated in that first three-quarters of an hour.

The police say they didn't know the shooters had killed themselves in the library at the end of that time, just as they didn't know that the serious shooting, for all practical purposes, ended sixteen minutes after it began. The report stresses that the first half-dozen officers on the scene, the only ones who were in a position to stop the rampage, were quickly overwhelmed -- by superior firepower, conflicting reports of multiple shooters and a tide of frightened and injured students pouring out of the school.

The confusion of that initial response is strongly reflected in the report itself: excerpts of garbled dispatch calls, scenes of deputies running in different directions, an elaborate but ultimately hazy rendition of the killers' movements

before they enter the library. One section places Harris and Klebold in the hallway outside the library, shooting and tossing pipe bombs in two directions -- toward the science area, down the stairs into the cafeteria -- at the same time Harris is supposed to be engaged in a gun battle with two deputies at the west entrance to the school.

While the killers seem to be everywhere at once, it's difficult to place the deputies anywhere for very long; they appear and disappear. Take, for example, the report's account of the movements of Jeffco deputy Neil Gardner, the school resource officer. At 11:22 a.m., Gardner is eating his lunch in Clement Park, a short distance from the school, when he receives an urgent call from a custodian summoning him to the "back lot." According to the report, it takes Gardner two minutes to drive the long way around, from the northwest side of the campus to the southwest parking lot, where he spots Harris and exchanges gunfire with him from sixty yards away. It's three minutes after that before he calls dispatch requesting emergency assistance, and then another two minutes pass before he asks for emergency medical units.

One reason for the delays is that Gardner is involved in three gun battles with Harris in the space of about six minutes. Gardner gets off four rounds when Harris is outside the west doors, then Harris retreats into the school, re-emerging a couple of minutes later, at which point Deputy Paul Smoker fires three rounds at him. Unharmred, Harris retreats again, only to fire on the officers from the library windows. This time he and Klebold are met with return fire from the growing contingent of cops arriving at the school.

Yet at this point the fleeting "engagement" of the shooters abruptly ends. By 11:30 a.m., Jefferson County has six deputies on the scene. There are several wounded and dying students on the west side of the building and a flood of 911 calls about explosions and gunfire inside the school. Where are Gardner and the others? According to the report, they're setting up a perimeter and evacuating students who happen to make it out of the school on their own; one deputy is directing traffic on

Pierce Street. Lacking "long guns" equal to the firepower displayed by Harris, nobody seems keen on following the killers inside, even though several officers can hear more shots being fired within the school.

It's possible that the deputies are ordered to withdraw pending the arrival of SWAT teams. (A lawsuit filed by Kacey Ruegsegger, one of the students wounded in the library, claims that one officer tried to rush into the school but was ordered to "stand down.") Perhaps the risk of a crossfire involving fleeing students is just too great. Perhaps, as Rohrbough's lawsuit alleges, such a crossfire has already occurred. But whatever the reason, there is an abrupt shift in the mode of response, from confrontation to containment.

The decision not to pursue the shooters inside is a costly one. The engagement breaks off at a time when 911 calls from the office area and the library, as well as the officers' own observations, leave no doubt about where the killers have gone: They're in the library, shooting 22 people, killing ten.

The Myth of Immediate Entry

In interviews with *Westword* last April, a few weeks before Judge Jackson ordered Stone's office to release its long-awaited report, Jefferson County Undersheriff John Dunaway and Denver police captain Vince DiManna both insisted that the first SWAT team entered Columbine by 11:45 a.m.

The report tells a different story. There was no command structure on site to authorize immediate entry by 11:45; in fact, it isn't clear who was in command at Columbine for the first half hour or so. Lieutenant Terry Manwaring of the Jeffco SWAT team established a command post at the school at 11:36, and the report states that Lieutenant Dave Walcher assumed "the role of incident commander" at 11:45, but elsewhere it notes that Dunaway put Walcher in charge after the undersheriff's arrival -- at 11:52.

The first SWAT team to enter Columbine went in at 12:06 p.m., on the southeast side of the school. That's the opposite side of the school from the library, where, at

that moment, Harris and Klebold were about to kill themselves or already had. But the sheriff's report all but credits his department for the suicides, which police didn't discover until three hours later: "The number of law enforcement officers on scene within minutes...plus the entry of SWAT inside the school minutes before their suicides denied the gunmen additional time to plan further actions or take other lives or hostages."

Despite that boast, the SWAT entry didn't exactly ruin the killers' day. It's doubtful that they even knew the first team was at the east door; the second team didn't go in the west side until more than an hour later. And once inside, the teams moved with slow, interminable deliberation. It took nearly four hours to clear the entire building, and the wounded in the science area and the library weren't reached until the latter stages of the search.

Why did it take so long? The report dwells on numerous potential and real hazards facing the teams: smoke, alarms, unexploded bombs, a gas leak (Harris and Klebold evidently turned on valves in the science labs), communication problems, accounts of a sniper on the roof and up to eight shooters, and so on. But any SWAT scenario assumes a strong dose of the unknown, and several of the dangers that supposedly slowed them down have been overstated or were quickly cleared up.

For example, dispatch calls reveal that the sniper report was discounted shortly after noon -- the hapless suspect turned out to be an unlucky repairman. As for the "bombs everywhere" excuse, the majority of the 44 unexploded devices found in the school were still among the killers' gear in the library; the teams didn't even know those bombs existed until the very end of their operation. Most of the remaining "live" bombs scattered about weren't ticking propane tanks but much tamer "crickets," small gas canisters filled with gunpowder that were about as "live" as an unlit firecracker. Even if a perp was still around to light a fuse or two, the bombs probably would have to be inserted in an unsuspecting officer's rectum in order to prove lethal.

As it turns out, bombs and snipers couldn't possibly have hindered the teams' efforts more than their own commanders' conservative tactics and apparent ignorance of the school layout. The dispatch and surveillance tapes indicate that these two factors played an enormous part in the sluggish response. In the case of Dave Sanders, they may well have finished what Harris and Klebold started.

Dunaway has characterized the immediate-entry plan as a dicey solution to a bad situation, an effort to mount an "active shooter response" more quickly than conventional SWAT procedures would allow. But as the Arapahoe County officers conceded at the commission hearing last month, that response actually amounted to a clock-burning room-to-room search for hostages. This was not a high-risk rapid invasion, designed to take out terrorists, but a systematic evacuation that involved busting through dozens of locked doors and setting up officers to direct the flow of evacuees to safety. By its very nature, the procedure was bound to take hours in a building as large as Columbine, but it had the advantage of not exposing anyone's backside -- especially not those of the commanders outside, who authorized the laborious search and then failed to modify it, even as it became clear that the only shooting still going on was the teams' own cover fire.

The tactical blunder was compounded by several miscalculations concerning the best points of entry into the school and the direction the search should take. There's no reason to doubt that the SWAT teams wanted to get to the "hot zones" as quickly as possible. Some members of the team even had a personal stake in the matter; DiManna, for instance, had a son and a niece at Columbine that day. From the 911 calls, it seems clear that the commanders had a pretty good idea that the hot zones were the library (the last place the shooters had been observed, firing out the windows shortly before their suicides), the cafeteria and the science area. But SWAT leader Manwaring, unfamiliar with the layout of the school since a recent renovation, apparently didn't know how to get to those areas. Working from hastily drawn maps provided by students failed to solve the problem; an hour after he arrived, the report states, Manwaring was still trying to find a decent floor plan.

Why Manwaring didn't consult with Deputy Gardner, principal Frank DeAngelis or any of the teachers who'd escaped about the quickest route to the library is one of the deeper mysteries of the police response. His "conflicting information" about the location of the library and the cafeteria, which form a prominent double-decker wall of glass on the west side that's hard to miss, is the only explanation the report offers for why the first team was sent in on the southeast side, to be swallowed up immediately in a warren of hallways and classrooms.

The westside entry was even more problematic. It took Manwaring's team nearly half an hour to travel from the southeast corner of the school to its northwest corner, using a fire truck as cover. There the team rescued badly wounded student Richard Castaldo, an event the report states took five minutes (the sequence actually lasted more than ten, according to the helicopter footage). In the course of the rescue, the team "observed an undetonated explosive device" in front of the west entrance. Manwaring decided to ram the doors, figuring the fire truck could take the brunt of any bomb blast, but the truck got stuck in the mud.

And that, the report explains, is how the second team ended up making its entry at 1:09 p.m. from a window leading to the faculty lounge, a location on the lower level rather than the upper level, closer to the cafeteria than the library above. Omitted from this account is one vital detail: Even if the "live" bomb at the west doors made that an unacceptable entrance, there was another door several feet away. That door, an emergency exit, opens into a narrow hallway that leads directly into the library. You can see into the library from that door, the same door that dozens of students used to make their escape after the killers left the library at 11:36 a.m. ("They ran to the safety of the waiting patrol cars and armed deputies who could give them protection and lead them to safety," the report burbles.)

Did the SWAT team know where that door went? Were they working in such a void of critical information that they failed to grasp its importance? The report's silence on this matter is deafening; it's as if the door doesn't exist.

Brian Rohrbough tries to conjure up the image of wounded students rushing out that door to the waiting arms of police officers -- and grimaces in disgust. "You have to know kids in there are injured and bleeding to death," he says. "You don't go in? How could you ever wait outside that open door after seeing those kids come out?"

The report states that the west team liberated students locked into the kitchen area and then entered the cafeteria at 1:32 p.m. Actually, the cafeteria videotape shows that the team didn't clear the cafeteria until 1:45. In almost two hours of effort, the team had managed to secure only a small area of the building, rescuing thirty students and staff members in the process.

From there the group moved on to the lower hallway, ignoring a flight of stairs to the upper level. They would not return to the stairs until they finished clearing the lower level half an hour later, even though those stairs were the fastest route from the cafeteria to the library and the science area, the same stairs Harris and Klebold had taken in their trips back and forth, from hot zone to hot zone.

A Jefferson County dispatcher discovered how important those stairs were well before noon. One of the earliest and longest 911 calls came from Denver police officer John Lietz, who was on the phone with students trapped in the kitchen area. Aware of the shooting in the library, the dispatcher asked Lietz "if the library is close to the cafeteria." Lietz, a Columbine parent, didn't hesitate.

"The library is right upstairs from the cafeteria," he said. "There's a stairway from the commons directly up."

"Directly above," the dispatcher noted.

A Hero's Death

To reach Dave Sanders, whose life was slowly draining away in an upstairs science room, the SWAT officers had to overcome a wealth of "obstacles," the report notes, including burnt carpet and empty bullet casings.

No kidding. Here's the report's strained account of what the officers found when they finally climbed the stairs from the cafeteria, around 2:30 p.m.:

"The top of the stairs opened into an intersection of two hallways... A pipe bomb had exploded and singed the carpet in front of them. Glass had shattered everywhere. There was blood in a large area on the carpet in front of them, on one of the windows, and blood made a trail into one of the other science rooms. Live ammunition rounds and spent casings were lying on the floor."

The harder the report tries to explain away the delay in reaching Sanders, the more it makes the SWAT officers look foolish -- a crack team dodging bullets that were lying on the floor. There was an ongoing concern about a possible third shooter still lurking somewhere on the upper level, but the slow-mo slinking around doesn't square with the notion of an active shooter response -- which, according to DiManna and others, often involves trying to draw fire in order to get a fix on the location of the gunman. The real explanation for the long, long wait Sanders endured may have less to do with the messy hallway than with command decisions that were made over the previous three hours.

The command had detailed information about Sanders's position and his condition almost from the start. Shortly before noon, a dispatcher contacted Manwaring: "Is there any way to get to a victim in Room 3, second level...they cannot control the bleeding," she said.

"We don't have a secure inside door we can get in," the SWAT commander replied.

SWAT had that secure door fifteen minutes later, after the first team made its entry on the east side. But the path from there to the science area was a circuitous one, and the team would have had to modify its room-to-room search procedure to get there in a timely manner. The procedure was never altered.

Why? According to statements made by Armstrong and others before the review commission, the commanders believed that the absence of any hostile gunfire after 12:10 p.m. meant a possible hostage scenario, not dead gunmen. That assumption

never wavered, not even as more officers poured into the building and discovered that the kids behind the locked doors were not hostages, but in hiding -- "staying put," as 911 dispatchers had told them to do.

Several calls throughout the afternoon kept SWAT leaders informed about Sanders's deteriorating condition, but officers still seemed confused about his location. The report states that the sign in the science window was spotted at 2:15; helicopter footage indicates the sign may well have been visible to officers on the south side of the building -- who were only a ladder's length away from Sanders -- earlier than that. In any case, dispatchers knew about the sign hours earlier because of the phone link with students in the room with Sanders. The students even offered to break a window to show the police exactly where they were -- but were told not to do so, for fear of attracting the attention of the gunmen. (Oddly, that concern didn't lead the police to dissuade the students from tying a shirt on the doorknob to mark their location; at one point, they suggested that the room's occupants "start yelling" in order to help the officers find them.)

Sanders was still conscious when SWAT members found him at 2:42 p.m. Another twenty to thirty minutes elapsed before a paramedic could reach the room, following a "safe" route set up by the police. By then it was too late.

Before the paramedic arrived, the report states, two SWAT deputies had already decided "to evacuate the wounded teacher themselves or at least move him closer to an exit." Inexplicably, they dragged him into a storage area at the back of the room instead.

He died there, still waiting for deliverance.

In Dubious Battle

Many people performed heroically at Columbine last year. That fact has never been in dispute, and the release of the audio and video record of the tragedy brings some of the heroics into sharp relief: gutsy teachers evacuating students, police

dispatchers keeping their cool despite a barrage of panicked phone calls, officers under fire trying to relay information about explosions, fires and possible suspects.

Despite all the media coverage of Columbine, some of the most impressive deeds done that day have scarcely been mentioned. The cafeteria video shows two school custodians, Jon Curtis and Jay Gallatine, rushing back and forth to shoo students to safety and lock doors so the killers can't get to them. Armed only with radios, Curtis and Gallatine dodged bombs tossed from above and persisted in their task, saving many lives in the process. The two men continue to decline interview requests to this day.

But the audio- and videotapes also reveal many of the mistakes and failures of the Columbine rescue effort, and not enough attention has been paid to them. A Jefferson County dispatcher was on the phone with a frantic and wounded teacher, Patti Nielson, for more than four minutes before the killers entered the room. The dispatcher asked her if she could lock the doors or block them. When the library began to fill with smoke, the dispatcher advised her to "keep everyone low to the floor." But the dispatcher never asked if there was another way out of the library.

The report treats this lapse as irrelevant. "Nielson knew they had nowhere to go," it states. "The last time she saw the gunmen, they were outside (near the emergency exit from the library) and they were heading inside the hall that led to the library." This is a gross distortion. According to the official timeline, the killers spent almost three minutes roaming the hall outside the main entrance to the library -- and Nielson told the dispatcher the gunman was right outside the main door, which is a considerable distance from the emergency exit. Once the shooting started, another 911 operator on the line with a staffer in the principal's office asked if there was another exit from the library; the staffer said no.

"As far as I know, I've lost everybody in the library," a dispatcher told a SWAT officer a few minutes later.

Although Nielson dropped the phone after the killers came in, the line remained open until 11:52 a.m., when it was "terminated" by dispatch, thereby denying

authorities the sounds of Klebold and Harris returning to the room at noon, opening fire on police below, then committing suicide. But with all the confusion over possible additional shooters and the commanders committed to a hostage scenario, it's unlikely that even perfect knowledge of the suicides would have altered the response at that point.

Just what was known by the officers who went into the school remains in dispute. For months, several SWAT members have insisted that they didn't have critical information that their commanders clearly did have: reports of multiple victims in the library, reports of a badly wounded teacher in the science area. The "communication problems" have been blamed on the incompatible radio frequencies used by different agencies, but the report acknowledges that the inside teams had ongoing, if limited, communication with the command. The degree to which the front-line troops may have been misled, in every sense of the word, can be gauged in Arapahoe County SWAT officer Bruce Williamson's testimony before the review commission last month.

Williamson, who arrived at the scene around one o'clock, was under the impression that "the initial team went in at the last place they knew these guys were." Although his unit assisted in clearing the science area, he was not one of the officers who went into the room where Sanders was, he said, and didn't know he was there. As he remembered it, the search of the library came somewhere in the middle, rather than the end, of the operation.

Williamson's version is strongly at odds with the report. But then, the report's version is at odds with the evidence on several points. "There was no one injured in the cafeteria as a direct result of Harris and Klebold's actions," declare the findings of the investigative team assigned to that area. Yet the common video shows a teacher running in the foreground as an explosion goes off at 11:27. The teacher first clutches his leg, then is bowled over by the blast. A limping, similarly dressed figure, identified by two sources as the same teacher, can be seen exiting the school in footage of the evacuation effort shot by a news helicopter that afternoon.

The teacher's name doesn't appear on the official list of the wounded. According to the sheriff's report, the injury never happened.

The key Columbine questions can't be answered by the sheriff's slickly packaged and deeply flawed report, or even by well-meaning line officers like Lieutenant Williamson -- who, after answering the commission's questions, stayed behind to field a few more from reporters while his colleagues hurried to their cars.

Uncomfortable in the spotlight, Williamson displayed a brief flash of emotion after the cameras were turned off.

"We did everything we could," he said, memories of April 20 tugging at his voice. "I went home and hugged my kids."

Williamson didn't pretend to have the answers. The men with the answers weren't at the commission meeting that day. They were not standing in front of cameras. They were not in the line of fire at all.

They were taking cover, waiting for the enemy to give up.