**Columbine Report**

Community Resource Officer Called to “Back Lot”

Jefferson County Sheriff’s Deputy Neil Gardner soon would complete his second year as the uniformed community resource officer assigned to Columbine High School. Gardner, a 15-year veteran of the Sheriff’s Office, normally ate his lunch with the students in the cafeteria during first lunch period. His car would have been parked in his “normal spot” in front of the cafeteria doors - between the junior and senior parking lots.

On April 20, however, Deputy Gardner and campus supervisor Andy Marton, an unarmed school security officer employed by the school district, were eating lunch in Gardner’s patrol car. They were monitoring students in the “Smokers’ Pit,” a spot just to the northwest of campus in Clement Park where the students congregated to smoke cigarettes.

Gardner had just finished his lunch when he received a call over the school’s radio from a custodian. “Neil,” called the custodian in a panicked voice, “I need you in the back lot!”

Gardner pulled out of the parking lot near the school’s tennis courts and drove onto Pierce Street in front of the school. The “back lot” being referred to by the custodian, he assumed, was the south student parking lot by the cafeteria. As soon as he pulled onto Pierce Street, he heard another call being dispatched over the Sheriff’s radio, “Female down in the south lot of Columbine High School.” He activated his lights and siren. It was 11:23.

In his own mind, he recalled later, he thought someone probably had been hit by a car.

First Shooter Seen

As soon as Gardner pulled into the south parking lot off of South Pierce Street, he saw kids running out of the school in every direction. As he drove around toward the south lot, he also saw smoke coming from the west end of the parking lot and heard several loud explosions. Students standing on the soccer field were pointing toward the building. He could hear gunshots coming from inside the school but could not pinpoint from where.

Gardner pulled his vehicle into the senior parking lot where he had a good vantage point. He could see both parking lots, the cafeteria and the second story west entrance to the school. As he got out of his patrol car, he received a second call on the school radio. “Neil, there’s a shooter in the school.”

Numerous patrol units and emergency vehicles already were responding to the school as the Sheriff’s dispatch center reported “female down” and “possible shots fired at Columbine High School.” There was so much traffic on the police radio that Gardner could not tell dispatch he was on scene.

As Gardner stepped out of his patrol car, Eric Harris turned his attention from shooting into the west doors of the high school to the student parking lot and to the deputy. Gardner, particularly visible in the bright yellow shirt of the community resource officer uniform, was the target of Harris’ bullets. Harris fired about 10 shots from his rifle at Gardner before his gun jammed. Although Gardner’s patrol car was not hit by bullets, two vehicles that he was parked behind were hit by Harris’ gunfire. Investigators later found two bullet holes in each of the cars.

Officer Exchanges Gunfire

Gardner, seeing Harris working with his gun, leaned over the top of the car and fired four shots. He was 60 yards from the gunman. Harris spun hard to the right and Gardner momentarily thought he had hit him. Seconds later, Harris began shooting again at the deputy.

After the exchange of gunfire, Harris ran back into the building. Gardner was able to get on the police radio and called for assistance from other Sheriff’s units. “Shots in the building. I need someone in the south lot with me.”

It was 11:26 a.m. Only five minutes had passed since Jefferson County Sheriff’s dispatch center had announced a bomb explosion and subsequent fire on South Wadsworth Boulevard.

Fleeing Students Report Multiple Shooters

When Gardner called for additional units to respond to the south parking lot of Columbine High School, he had just exchanged gunfire with Eric Harris. Gardner could also hear gunshots coming from inside the building but he did not know who else was shooting, how many were in the school or where.

While he was on the radio calling for assistance, five other Jefferson County deputies already were on their way, arriving only minutes after the first report of a “female down” at Columbine High School.

As the first deputies arrived on campus, they were met by chaos and hysteria. Terrified students and teachers were fleeing in all directions from the high school in the suburban neighborhood. Others were still inside.

The deputies could hear explosions coming from inside the school. The students were telling them about bombs, guns and hand-grenades, and about gunmen with assault rifles and semi-automatics.

There were other reports of possible terrorists, four shooters, six shooters, 17 hostages. There was a man wearing a trench coat; there were two guys in trench coats. There was a guy in a white T-shirt, with hats, not with hats. The gunmen had changed clothes to blend in with the other students. There was a shooter on the roof. The gunmen were in the auditorium. No, they were in the cafeteria.

The deputies had no concrete information about what was actually happening inside the building. They were facing live fire and had potentially 2,000 victims and hostages.

Other Deputies in the “Hot Spot” on the Southwest Side of the School

At 11:21 a.m., Deputy Paul Magor, on patrol in the south part of the county, was dispatched to an explosion reported on Wadsworth Boulevard. He never made it to the site because two minutes later, Magor was advised of a female down in the south lower parking lot of Columbine High School, three miles to the northeast of the reported explosion.

Deputy Paul Smoker, a motorcycle patrolman for the Jefferson County Sheriff’s Office, was writing a speeding ticket on West Bowles Avenue, just west of Pierce Street, when he heard the report coming from dispatch of a female injured at the high school.

Smoker, close to the school, was heading toward the campus when the second radio call came. “Possible shots fired. Unknown situation.”

Instead of taking the streets around the park to the school’s east entrance, Smoker cut through Clement Park, driving on the grass toward the west side. The realization that something major was occurring at the school came with the sound of loud explosions, interspersed with what might be gunshots. Black webbing woven through the wire backdrop of the baseball fields obstructed his view as he approached the school from the northwest. But the sound of explosions continued.

Smoker was also scanning the area for Gardner, the community resource officer assigned to Columbine High School.

A Jefferson County patrol car came up behind Smoker and he recognized Deputy Scott Taborsky. Instantly realizing that a car provided more protection than riding astride a motorcycle, he quickly got in Taborsky’s car on the passenger side and they drove closer to the school.

A sports box, or concrete shed used for the storage of athletic equipment, obstructed their view but they could see two students lying on the ground. Both were bleeding. The first student the deputies got to was the furthest from the school, lying by the shed south of the baseball field. Wounded but still conscious, the student told the deputies that he thought the person who had shot him was “Ned Harris.”

Deputy Rick Searle was the third deputy arriving at the shed. He had driven into the area from the north between the west doors of the school and the shed and immediately heard gunshots and explosions at the west doors. He pulled his car up to the shed and attended to the wounded student while Smoker and Taborsky moved forward to rescue the second student lying unprotected on the ground closer to the school. With no paper or notepads, Searle wrote “Ned Harris” on his patrol car. He would radio that name to dispatch as soon as he could get to his radio.

Injured Students Given Cover

Taborsky drove his patrol car in front of the downed student, providing him with cover from any additional gunfire. Smoker walked alongside the car.

He was trying to see where the shots had come from as numerous students took cover behind the patrol car. In short, hysterical breaths, their stories intermingled. Gunmen were shooting inside the school with UZIs or shotguns. They were throwing hand-grenades. There were two gunmen. They were dressed in black. One was younger and “kind of thin,” maybe high school age. He was wearing a black trench coat and had his hat on backwards. The second one was taller and a little older but also wearing a black trench coat. The gunmen were randomly shooting anyone they confronted.

Because of the tremendous amount of radio traffic, Smoker was having difficulty advising dispatch of the condition of the students and the information they had just relayed about what was happening inside the school.

His first priority was to get those students who had sought refuge behind the patrol car to a safer location. Hiding behind his car, they were still too close to the scene. Their hysteria was causing more confusion. Some were bleeding. Taborsky and Smoker told the boys to take their shirts off and use them to help stop some of the bleeding of the wounded. They told them to try to help each other while the deputies figured out how to get them to safety.

Looking back at the concrete tool shed near the baseball fields, Smoker could see other deputies and Denver police arriving on scene. They devised a plan to shuttle the students away from the school grounds, using their patrol cars as protection for them.

Searle evacuated groups of students out of the area, either to officers from the Denver Police Department who took them from his car or directly to Caley and Yukon streets for emergency medical assistance. Smoker and Taborsky stayed in their positions to provide cover for the students until they could be evacuated.

Gunman Fires From Broken Window

Behind him and to his right, Smoker caught a glimpse of Gardner in the south parking lot. Gardner had his weapon drawn.

“There he is!!!” Gardner yelled to Smoker as a young man, carrying a semi-automatic rifle, appeared on the inside of the double doors.

Gardner started shooting. Smoker couldn’t see who Gardner was shooting at. A half-fence and a dumpster now blocked his view of the area where gunshots could be heard. He moved further out into the open so that the west side doors came into view. A gunman with a rifle was leaning out of a broken window, using the doorframe as cover, and shooting his weapon toward students and law enforcement.

Smoker shot three rounds before the gunman disappeared from the window. He could hear gunfire continuing in the building, but nothing from outside. More and more students came running from the building and sought the protection of the deputies and the patrol cars.

While Smoker and Taborksy were with the students fleeing the west side of the school and Searle was transporting groups of them to safety, Gardner called for ambulances. He had just exchanged gunfire with Harris for the second time and could see the first victim, the girl initially reported “down” in the lower level parking lot, and at least three more wounded near the cafeteria. They were dangerously close to the gunman’s fire.

Possible Grenades Detonated

Magor, driving from the south toward Columbine High School, arrived at the high school at 11:27 a.m., parking his patrol car on Pierce Street at the southeast corner of the student parking lot. He was protecting the entrances to prevent suspects from escaping out of the parking lot onto Pierce Street, and he was also blocking traffic so the gunmen would not fire upon civilians driving by.

Magor immediately was approached by an older adult he assumed was a teacher who reported that there was a person in the school with a gun. At the same time, dispatch announced on the radio that possible grenades had been detonated.

Six Deputies Are On Scene

Deputy Searle was on the upper grassy area on the southwest side of the school, behind Taborsky and Smoker, and was assisting with the evacuation of the students from that area. He drove close enough to Taborsky’s car to evacuate the first eight to 10 students. In three separate trips, Searle was able to transport the wounded to the medical triage area at Caley Avenue and Yukon Street.

On the south side of the school in the parking lot south of the lower level main doors was Deputy Kevin Walker. Walker had driven in through the south student parking lot off Pierce Street. From his vantage point, he could see the entrance to the cafeteria and could help rescue and evacuate students fleeing from the south side

By 11:30, within four minutes of Gardner’s reports of shots being fired in the building and the need for additional units, six Jefferson County deputies, including Gardner, were on scene. Gardner had already exchanged gunfire with Harris twice, once when Harris shot at him as he arrived in the south parking lot and again from inside the west entrance doors. Smoker had shot at Harris during the second exchange between Gardner and Harris. Taborsky, Smoker and Searle were providing immediate cover and evacuating students as they fled the school. Searle, with the help of Sheriff’s Deputy Neal Schwieterman and several Denver officers, gave first priority to the wounded, transporting them in their patrol cars to emergency medical triage being set up to the south. The armed deputies had also set up an inner perimeter around the school, covering the school exits on the south, west and east sides in case the suspects would attempt to escape.

Gardner called dispatch. All units around him were under fire.

Explosions Shake the Cafeteria

The explosions at the high school continued. Smoker saw the glass windows in the cafeteria flexing with the reverberations. The bombs were shaking the whole cafeteria and the noise, he said, was “unbelievable.”

“This was not the dope deal gone bad,” he later recounted. “There was an unknown inside a school. We didn’t know who the ‘bad guy’ was but we soon realized the sophistication of their weapons. These were big bombs. Big guns. We didn’t have a clue who ‘they’ were. But they were hurting kids. I couldn’t imagine something like this happening.”

Walker, on the south side of the school, reported an explosion by the south double doors that blew out two of the windows. Also a member of the bomb squad, Walker realized the firepower of the explosions. “You could feel the explosions,” he explained. “You could see the windows flexing out and then being sucked back in again.” To his left, but in his line of vision, he saw a fireball explode in the cafeteria.

As the cafeteria lit up with the explosion, six students ran out of the south cafeteria doors and headed toward Walker. The deputy directed them to take cover behind several cars, covering them with his own gun while they positioned themselves away from the line of fire. “Are we going to die?” one hysterical young woman kept asking him. “No, you’re not going to,” he reassured her.

Walker radioed to dispatch that he had six students with him, but did not have any safe path to evacuate them from the parking lot. By this time, dispatch had also announced possible shooters on the roof. So in addition to covering the south doors and the cafeteria windows, he was watching the roofline. To the east of the cafeteria area, and on the second story, he saw a girl at an upper window. She was pounding on the glass and holding up a sign. But it was too far away and the windows too reflective to read the sign. He just could not decipher what it might say.

His thought was that the gunmen might come out the south doors from the cafeteria and jump the fence into the neighborhood just south of the school. He was watching the south exits, intent that they would not make it to the fence.

Walker momentarily caught a glimpse of one of the gunmen through a window on the upper level in the southwest corner. He radioed dispatch with a description of the gunman as wearing a

“white T-shirt with some kind of holster vest.”

Ambulances Arrive Amidst Gunfire

Two Littleton Fire Rescue Units, responding to Gardner’s call for medical assistance on the south side, entered the south parking lot and drove toward Walker’s position.

Traditionally, fire and rescue personnel do not come into active scenes. They assemble nearby until law enforcement determines the area safe and allows them to enter. Yet unaware of the danger, the rescues drove close to the downed students lying outside the cafeteria and jumped out of their vehicles. They looked toward the law enforcement personnel who had moved in closer to cover them. “Is it safe?,” they mouthed to the officers.

“NO!!!! It’s not safe!!!!” was the response. “Get ‘em and go!!!! Get ‘em and go!!!!!”

As the paramedics jumped out to rescue the injured and law enforcement moved into positions to protect them, gunfire erupted from the second story library windows above the cafeteria. Walker saw a muzzle flash from a library window and he and Gardner returned the fire.

Denver police officers also provided suppression fire to the library windows, allowing the paramedics to retrieve Sean Graves, Lance Kirklin and Anne Marie Hochhalter. The fourth student, Dan Rohrbough, was determined to be deceased. The paramedics rushed the living to medical attention.

After the rescues had retrieved the injured and exited the scene, the gunfire coming from the library windows ceased. Officers could still hear shots from inside the school but the shooting outside had stopped.

SWAT Teams on Scene

Gardner turned his attention to a group of 15 students huddled behind a vehicle in the parking lot just a car away from him. One at a time, he evacuated the students down the line of cars to the protection of the last car farthest away from the school and the shooters.

Other students began to escape, some out a side door of the cafeteria, and the officers would “leapfrog” them back to Gardner or other waiting deputies. Two Denver officers rescued the six students near Walker in the south lot.

Meanwhile, Deputy Al Simmons and a hastily assembled SWAT team from Jefferson County Sheriff’s Office and Denver and Littleton Police Departments, had just entered the school on the upper east side. Lt. Terry Manwaring, SWAT commander, had deployed Simmons’ team on the east and directed a second half of the ad hoc team around the north side to the west. From the radio traffic, Manwaring knew there were students injured and active gunfire on the west side.

SWAT NARRATIVE

Deputies Hold the Perimeter

The deputies, all of whom had responded to the high school within four minutes of Gardner’s call for assistance, held their perimeter positions as the Jefferson County, Littleton and Denver SWAT teams went into the building. They remained at their positions until around 3:30 p.m, providing cover and evacuation as students and teachers came out from different areas of the school. The deputies checked each person for injuries and weapons, and then transported them to safety and to anxious families and parents.

It was the deputies on the ground and one in the Channel 7 helicopter who first saw the injured male figure at the second-story library window and realized the young man was intent on coming out. But there was nothing but a concrete sidewalk below to break his fall.

Frantically waving and yelling, the deputies got the attention of the Lakewood SWAT team and the armored truck in the south parking lot. The image of the rescue of Patrick Ireland as he fell into the arms of two SWAT members standing atop the truck’s roof caught the attention of the world.

“Everybody was working as a team,” Gardner explained. “We saved a lot of kids and a lot of lives that day – even though we didn’t know who the ‘bad guys’ were.”

Officers on the East Side Assist Escaping Students

Sgt. Ken Ester, then with the Jefferson County Intelligence Unit, arrived at 11:41 a.m. on the east side of the school and assisted Deputy Magor on Pierce Street to the south. The deputies were helping students running from the school and preventing other students from trying to go back to the school once they had run to Leawood Park.

At 11:44 a.m., Deputy Bob Byerly was on the northeast inner perimeter of the school, assisting students who were escaping to Clement Park. He maintained a visual on the north side of the school as well as a partial view of the northeast doors.

By Day’s End

By day’s end, nearly 1000 law enforcement officers and emergency medical personnel were on scene. Those first responders were responsible for the evacuation and rescue of nearly 2,000 students and over a hundred faculty and staff from the school. Many provided emergency first aid and helped get the wounded to medical attention. They secured the perimeter around the school, preventing any escape of the suspects. They managed the crowds forming, keeping them at a safe distance from the school, and coordinating the reunion of students and parents. Within the first hour, they had a list of names of possible suspects and were beginning to piece together information on the perpetrators from witness accounts. They helped in traffic control and set up outer perimeters, joining in several SWAT sweeps of the school, removing bombs and explosives, and securing the scene