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**HEADLINE:** High School Massacre Columbine bloodbath leaves up to 25 dead

**BYLINE:** By Mark Obmascik, Denver Post Staff Writer

**BODY:**

JEFFERSON COUNTY - Two students, cloaked in black trench coats and armed with guns and bombs, opened fire Tuesday at **Columbine High School**, killing as many as 25 people and wounding at least 22 others in the worst school shooting in U.S. history.

Police found the two suspects shot to death in the library.

The masked shooters first targeted specific victims, especially ethnic minorities and athletes, then randomly sprayed school hallways about 11:30 a.m. with bullets and shotgun blasts, witnesses said. The bloody rampage spanned four hours.

"I saw them shoot a girl because she was praying to God," said Evan Todd, 15, a sophomore. "They shot a black kid. They called him a nigger. They said they didn't like niggers, so they shot him in the face."

School hallways were booby-trapped with at least 12 bombs, some on timers, which still were exploding at 10:45 p.m. One suspect's coat was laced with explosive devices, and undetonated pipe bombs were planted around bodies, police said.

Students described the shooters as part of an outcast group of a dozen or so suburban high school boys known as the Trench Coat Mafia who often wore dark trench coats and had German slogans and swastikas on their clothes. The suspects were identified as Eric Harris, 18, and Dylan Klebold, 17.

The murders came on the 110th anniversary of Adolf Hitler's birth.

"I've heard numbers as high as 25" deaths, said Jefferson County Sheriff John Stone, adding that 17 were confirmed. "When we did make entry into the library, it was a pretty gruesome scene." He called the murders a "suicide mission."

Byron Kirkland saw the massacre begin: "There was a girl crouched beneath a desk in the library, and the guy came over and said, 'Peekaboo,' and shot her in the neck," said Kirkland, a 15-year-old sophomore. "They were hooting and hollering and getting big joy out of this."

Aaron Cohn, 15, a sophomore, said he was ducking beneath a table when he suddenly felt a gun barrel pressed to his head. A gunman said: "All the jocks stand up. We are going to kill you," Cohn said.

Bree Pasquale, a junior, said: "You could hear them laughing as they ran down the hallways shooting people. He put a gun in my face and said, 'I'm doing this because people made fun of me last year.'"

She escaped unshot but splattered with a fellow student's blood.

Meanwhile, Brittany Bollerud, 16, hid under a library table and saw only the gunmen's shoes and long trench coats. "They yelled, 'This is revenge,'" she said. "They asked people if they were jocks. If they were wearing a sports hat, they would shoot them."

"I saw (a teacher) on the floor bleeding from everywhere. He was trying to direct kids, but he couldn't talk," said Rachel Erbert, a 17-year-old senior. "It was really scary. Kids were falling, and you'd help them up. I thought I might get shot."

By 3:45 p.m., shots still rang out inside the school. While more than 200 law enforcement officers and four SWAT teams tried to stop the gunmen and evacuate wounded high school students, paramedics frantically treated victims in makeshift triage units on the front lawns of houses outside the suburban Jefferson County school.

At one point, a bloody boy dangled down from a second-floor window and was caught by two SWAT-team members. Another person held up a sign in a classroom window: "Help, I'm bleeding to death."

"There are some who were killed as they were hiding under desks," said an officer who was inside the school. "Some looked like they were trying to crawl away. They were executed - shot in the head."

With news of the murders being broadcast locally and nationally on live television, Columbine High School looked like a war zone. Medical helicopters landed on nearby athletic fields, then whisked the wounded to six local hospitals. More than 2,000 people across metro Denver waited in line to donate blood.

Panicked parents rushed to the school for news about their children. Some talked to their trapped children on cell phones.

At 6:25 p.m., Jefferson County District Attorney Dave Thomas told parents gathered inside Leawood Elementary School that at least 10 bodies could not be removed immediately from the high school because there were bombs near the bodies.

Parents were told to bring their children's dental records. Some parents vomited.

Search warrants were executed Tuesday night at the suspects' homes, the district attorney said. The sheriff said the gunmen used at least one automatic assault rifle and several shotguns in the attack.

At 8 p.m., Michael Shoels was still awaiting word on his son, Isaiah, an 18-year-old senior. Shoels feared his son was targeted because he was black.

"This late, it's not looking good at all," Shoels said. "It's like a dream I'm trying to wake up from. ... I just wish everybody would pray for my family." Shoels' two other children also attend Columbine, and they were safe.

The shootings were the latest in a series of school shootings since 1997 that have shocked the nation and led to calls for tighter security and closer monitoring of troubled students. Two people were killed at a school in Pearl, Miss., three at West Paducah, Ky., five at Jonesboro, Ark., and two at a school in Springfield, Ore.

President Clinton opened a news conference Tuesday by calling for prayers for the students, teachers and staff at Columbine. The murders came as Gov. Bill Owens and the Colorado Legislature have tried to pass a bill to liberalize the state's concealed-weapons laws.

Jenni LaPlante, 18, said one of the suspected shooters was calm Tuesday morning at a before-school bowling class. She said the student was extremely smart.

"He knew all the answers. If we were reading Shakespeare, he would know the hidden meaning," LaPlante said.

"I've never seen them lash out at anyone," LaPlante said. "But I would say, 'Why do you guys wear all that German stuff? Are you Nazis?' And they would say, 'Yeah, Heil Hitler.'" LaPlante said she never knew whether the suspects were joking.

One shooter was in Michele Fox's creative-writing class.

"They hate our school. They hate everything about it," said Fox, 18, a senior. "In our class, we have to read out loud and stuff, and they would always write about death. They wore black trench coats with combat boots and their pants tucked into them."

Ben Grams, a junior, called the Trench Coat Mafia group "a bunch of unwanted kids who were teased and pushed around a lot."

Another student said the group talked often in class about beheading people, and many often sang and quoted songs by shock-rocker Marilyn Manson. Some also wore bands that read, "I hate people."

Students said the bloodshed began when two students - dressed in black trench coats and masks that were taken on and off - hurled at least one bomb onto the school roof during the A-track lunch hour. Another bomb was stashed in a backpack and left by the front door.

John Cook, 16, a sophomore, was eating lunch outside with friends when the violence started.

"These guys opened fire on every thing that looked human," Cook said. "They were shooting at some kids down below, then they pointed at us and started shooting. Bullets were bouncing everywhere. Two guys next to me got hit."

As the gunmen hustled into the school and through the hallways, panic spread. Casey Fisher, 15, was buying his lunch in the cafeteria with a friend. "My friend came out and he was standing 10 feet from the guy, and they shot him and he fell to the ground," Fisher said.

Karen Nielson, a cafeteria worker, said, "I tried to help the others, but he just kept firing."

Some witnesses reported hearing as many as 15 bomb blasts. At one point, a bomb exploded and hurt several students, including one girl later hospitalized with eight shards in her chest.

"I was running for my life," said Crystal Enney, 18, a senior.

Smoke spread, and the fire alarm blared. In the chaos, some students sprinted to safety. Others were gunned down in the hall. A few tried locking themselves in bathrooms.

In Katie Crona's freshman earth-sciences class, students dived under their desks. In the next classroom, students could hear windows being blasted out by gunmen. A few students escaped and told how others had been shot.

"We sat there in a circle for four hours. We were huddled together. It was terrifying," Crona said. The students heard someone tugging at their classroom doorknob, but it was locked. The gunmen continued on.

The worst carnage was in the library, where the gunmen terrorized 45 fellow students with bullets - and maniacal laughs.

"They were going around asking people why they should let them live," said Todd, the 15-year-old sophomore. "Once when they shot a black kid, one of them said, 'Oh my God, look at this black kid's brain! Awesome, man!'"

"They came up to me, pointed a gun at my head and asked if I was a jock. I said no. Basically I lied. They said, 'It's revenge time on jocks for making us outcasts.'"

Jonathan Vandermark, 16, a sophomore, said he passed three bodies in a stairwell as he and other students were rescued from the biology lab by a SWAT team. Shards of glass were everywhere, he said.

Vandermark was about 20 feet away from one of the shooters when gunfire broke out. He described the weapons as being like Uzis. Other witnesses recalled a sawed-off shotgun and at least one handgun. "A teacher who tried to help us was shot in the arm," said Vandermark, who hid in the biology lab.

Meanwhile, Scott Cornwell, father of senior Matt Cornwell, received a cell-phone call from his trapped son, who was barricaded in the choir room with 40 other students.

"He was whispering. He said, 'Dad, we're inside. There are 40 of us. What's going on?'"

The father took his cell phone to a police commander, who told them, "Get away from the door!"

Police said they found the two suspects shot to death in the library. Several bombs were found in one suspect's house, and police later uncovered two cars parked outside the school that had been booby-trapped with bombs.

Today the Colorado Legislature had been scheduled to debate a bill to liberalize the state's concealed-weapons laws, but all legislative work was canceled because of the shootings.

Gov. Owens, who supports liberalized concealed-weapons laws, comforted families at the crime scene with his wife, Frances, but refused to comment on the gun legislation.

"We're not immune from the problems you see in other parts of the country," Owens said. "Perhaps our innocence is lost today."

Some Columbine students said some warnings about trouble from the Trench Coat Mafia were scrawled as graffiti on bathroom walls. "You'd go in there and it would have 'Columbine will explode some day,' or 'All jocks must die,' or 'Kill all athletes,'" said Doug Mohr, a senior football player. "There'd be pictures of guns and swastikas."

Jefferson County School District administrators said they didn't know about any racist or threatening graffiti. "I visited the students there and it appeared to be a creating environment, where students feel safe," said schools superintendent Jane Hammond. "We were not aware of the Trench Coat Mafia until today."

A photo in last year's yearbook listed one group as the "Trenchcoat Mafia." School principal Frank DeAngelis could not be reached for comment.

Some students said the tragedy could have been worse had it not been a "senior skip day."

The day is known in circles as "4-20" - when students around the country skipped school to smoke marijuana. Aside from it having been April 20, the police code for a drug bust in Los Angeles is also 4-20.

"This is the big day for (smoking marijuana)," said Columbine student Jason Greer, 16.

Many students were aware of the day's significance, and many chose not to attend school Tuesday.

"I can't believe something like this would happen at Columbine," said Joyce Oglesbee, mother of senior Tara Oglesbee. "It's a top-class school, preppy and perfect. We haven't even had a senior prank."

**GRAPHIC: PHOTO:** The Denver Post/Shawn Stanley A Columbine High student leaves the school with the assistance of a plainclothes police officer. **PHOTO:** Special to The Denver Post/Steve Starr One of the last groups of students leaves Columbine High School with their hands over their heads in case one of the gunmen attempted to sneak out among the victims. Tuesday's incident was by far the deadliest in a string of school shootings that have rocked the nation in recent years. **PHOTOS:** Kiebold Harris **PHOTO:** The Denver Post/Shawn Stanley A Colorado National Guard member readies an armored personnel carrier near Columbine High School. **GRAPHICS:** The Denver Post Columbine High School How the rampage unfolded Shooting scene (map)

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