When he heard the noise in the hall, Adam Foss leaned out of the choir room, the room where the confident singers of Columbine High School in Littleton, Colo., rehearse the kinds of songs that student choruses have sung for generations.

Hours later, he remembered seeing the barrel of a shotgun. He remembered seeing a flash of fire. He remembered seeing a teacher go down. He realized he was trapped in a school under siege.

Mr. Foss, 18, scrambled back into the choir room, he said, and herded the other students into a closet, an 8-by-8-foot room, the kind of musty, stuffy place where robes or sheet music are stored. Not knowing whether the gunman was poised to blast the closet or had gone away, Mr. Foss and his friends barricaded the door with a filing cabinet and waited.

The boys peeled off their shirts -- the closet was hot, and they dared not open the door. They lifted one or two classmates with asthma who had trouble breathing toward the ceiling, where the ventilation seemed better. Together, they waited as the minutes ticked by until the police swept through the school and shouted that it was safe to come out.

But in that terrifying moment late yesterday morning, the everyday routine of a suburban high school had given way to uncertainty, and then to panic, as two assailants familiar with the layout of the school moved through the halls, guns blazing. Later the authorities said they had every reason to know their way around the school: They were students there.

Bullets zipped through the walls of a science classroom. Glass doors burst in a shower of tiny fragments. Pipes ruptured as the gunmen set off explosions that penetrated the walls of the two-story building.

Some students froze where they were -- by their lockers, in the cafeteria, at their desks. Others tried to make a quick getaway, hoping not to catch the attention of the gunmen.

"Me and my friends got to my car and drove off," said a student whom The Associated Press identified only as Janine. Eliza Madden, a 16-year-old sophomore, fled barefoot after losing her sandals in the confusion.

Still others tried to sneak out. Some had an easier go of it than others. Mr. Foss's twin brother, Nick, had been in a restroom when the shooting started and was grazed on the head by a bullet. He tried to pull himself to freedom through a crawl space in the ceiling, but as his mother explained it later, the ceiling gave way under his weight and he tumbled to the floor in a classroom. Eventually, he made it out.

In the halls, shots ricocheted off lockers as the gunmen in trench coats and combat boots opened fire with what students said were semiautomatic weapons.

One teacher tried to call the police. One of the gunmen shot the teacher in the head, said a sophomore, Jenny Matthews.

Another student, Jake Apoeaca, told The Associated Press: "At first we thought it was fireworks, then we saw them shooting. He saw us and then he started shooting at us. Then a guy in a white T-shirt threw two hand grenades on the roof. We hit the ground, and then we started running."

Teachers told students to do whatever they could to do to get out. In the cafeteria, students began crawling across the floor. In the library, smoke from the fusillade set off a fire alarm. Amanda Stair, a 15-year-old sophomore, told The Rocky Mountain News that one gunman had shot the alarm. All around her, she said, students cried and screamed.

"Don't worry; they said," she continued, referring to the gunmen. "You're going to be dead in a few minutes."

Some students carrying cellular telephones called relatives to say that they had not been hit. Kendra Curry called her grandmother and said that she was huddled with Adam Foss and the others in the choir room. Miss Curry's mother, Lorie, said that the grandmother had called the rest of the family.

Hundreds of police officers from the Denver area were preparing to retake the school, room by room. Franetic parents were sent to an elementary school less than a mile away, where they waited for word of their children. From time to time, teachers at the elementary school would tell parents milling about on the sidewalk to come in, that children had been taken there and were inside on the stage.
There were parents at the elementary school who could not find their children. One woman was talking on a cell phone, crying and saying: "Her name is not on any list. They don't know where she is."

At the high school, students were running to freedom, their hands over their heads, some dashing out a back door and past a yellow fire engine, some following police officers who were running backward as they crossed the nearest street.

The students boarded buses in groups of 40 or so -- school buses and city buses that had been waiting to carry them to the elementary school.

First one bus pulled up at the elementary school, then 5 to 10 minutes later, another one. As the buses lumbered into the driveway, red, tear-stained faces could be seen looking out the windows, looking for parents and friends -- who were, of course, straining to see who was aboard.

As the buses came to a stop, parents cried out their children's names: "Ashley!" "Jody!" "Mickey!"

"Obviously the parents who found their children are happy," Gov. Bill Owens said. "The other ones ----" His voice trailed off.

In the crowd was Scott Carlon, a 16-year-old sophomore. As he started to talk about what he had seen at the high school, a girl named Jane ran up and said: "Call your mom. Is your sister O.K.??"

He did not know what had happened to his sister, Kim, a senior.

One mother and daughter saw each other, embraced, crying and trembling as their anxiety turned to relief. The mother, Isabel Naslund, said she had scrambled over fences and past roadblocks to reach the elementary school.

Her daughter Julie, a 15-year-old freshman, described an attack that had surprised and, at first, confused students and teachers alike.

"Everybody thought it was a joke, a senior prank," Julie Naslund said.

Students had been expecting an onslaught of balloons filled with shaving cream a few days ago, she said, but that did not happen. So when the popping started, she said, many students figured it was just the seniors acting up.

Mr. Carlon said he was in the auditorium when the gunmen opened fire.

"I looked out into the hall and to my left, there was a guy right there, shooting," he said.

In the auditorium were three teachers and about 40 students, Mr. Carlon said. They locked the doors, sealing themselves in and, they hoped, the attackers out.

"About every minute we would hear a big bang, a bunch of big bangs," he said, "with gunshots in between."

He said a custodian came in and told everyone to lie down, then described a route that would lead them out of the building safely. They escaped in about half an hour.

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GRAPHIC: Photos: Bill Curry, left, talked on the telephone with relatives yesterday after hearing that his daughter Kendra and niece Kami had barricaded themselves in a closet with 20 others at Columbine High School. The girls' family members were standing by for news of what was happening in the school. (Kevin Moloney for The New York Times); Outside Columbine High School, an officer attended to duty while a student wept in grief. (George Kochaniec/Rocky Mountain News)(pg. A17)

Chart: "CHRONOLOGY: Other Shootings Involving Students"

MAY 21, 1998 -- Two teen-agers were killed and more than 20 people were hurt when a 15-year-old boy allegedly opened fire at a high school in Springfield, Ore. The boy's parents were killed at their home. He is awaiting trial. On a police videotape, he was asked why he began firing. He responded, "I had no other choice."

MAY 19, 1998 -- Three days before his graduation, an 18-year-old honor student allegedly opened fire in a parking lot at a high school in Fayetteville, Tenn., killing a classmate who was dating his ex-girlfriend. He is awaiting trial.

APRIL 24, 1998 -- A science teacher was shot to death in front of students at an eighth-grade dance at a banquet hall in Edinboro, Pa. A 14-year-old student awaits trial. The motive is unclear.

MARCH 24, 1998 -- Four girls and a teacher were shot to death and 10 people were wounded during a false fire alarm at a middle school in Jonesboro, Ark., when two boys, 11 and 13, opened fire from the woods. The police did not suggest a motive. Both boys have been convicted in juvenile court on murder charges and can be held to age 21.

DEC. 1, 1997 -- Three students were killed and five were wounded in a hallway at Heath High School in West Paducah, Ky. A 14-year-old student pleaded guilty but mentally ill to murder and is serving life in prison. When asked why he did it, he said he did not know.

OCT. 1, 1997 -- A 16-year-old boy in Pearl, Miss., killed his mother, then went to his high school and shot nine students, two fatally. He has been sentenced to life in prison. The alleged mastermind of the attack awaits trial. The authorities have said the teen-agers were in a cult-like group.

(Source: Associated Press)(pg. A17)

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