

First responders to tragedy like Aurora face horrific memories

By Tom McGhee *The Denver Post* *The Denver Post*

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As news spread of the mass murder at an Aurora movie theater, Joe Tennant's heart sank, and memories of carnage at Columbine High School in 1999 flooded back.

"When the event started unfolding, it took me right back to Columbine, it opened some old wounds," the Denver police bomb squad member said Sunday.

"At Columbine I saw all the carnage firsthand," he said, as two students, Eric Harris and Dylan Klebold, went on a rampage that left 13 dead and 24 injured, before the two committed suicide.

"I knew what those officers were facing. I knew going into the theater was going to be horrific and I felt for them so much," said Tennant.

But in short order Tennant, 56, was at the apartment of the alleged shooter James Eagan Holmes, 24, trying to dismantle a welter of explosive devices.

Holmes was arrested at the Century 16 theater in Aurora early Friday morning after a shooting at the premiere of "The Dark Knight Rises" in which 12 people died and 58 were injured.

When arrested, Holmes told police there were explosives in his apartment, at 1690 Paris St. in Aurora, and investigators found a complex web of booby traps in the apartment.

Tennant on Friday worked as part of a team to methodically unravel the explosive puzzle.

When police officers and other first responders confront slaughter their training kicks in and they do their jobs, said retired Denver homicide Detective Jon Priest.

"They are trained to be effective responding to these critical incidents," said Priest, who aided in the Columbine investigation and was on the scene when the shooting at the school in Jefferson County ended.

"In order for me to be effective I have to take my emotions out of it right now, I can deal with those emotions later," he said.

For the uniformed law enforcement officers who must secure the scene, the events can be especially difficult, Priest said.

When they arrive, they confront chaos, and don't know if those responsible are lying in wait for them.

Whether they are officers, paramedics or firefighters, first responders don't have time to prepare themselves for the things they must witness, said John Nicoletti, a psychologist who works with local police departments.

"This type of situation is too much, too ugly, too soon. The enormity of the situation overpowers the brain," Nicoletti said. "They don't have the opportunity to prepare for this. They are helping people while at the same time they are overpowered with the enormity ... that is where training takes over and resiliency. "

Paramedics and others who wait until police secure the scene may have time to prepare for what they will witness, but the delay may not prevent them from being haunted, Nicoletti said.

Nightmares about Columbine troubled Tennant for a time after he worked on the case. They still surface occasionally, he said.

His wife, who watched as he listened to early reports of the Aurora massacre, told him that his demeanor changed

drastically, he said.

"It is something that can never be wiped from your mind," Tennant said. "All I can do is encourage people to talk and try to get some help and not be the tough guy and keep so many of those emotions inside."

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