

# TERROR IN OKLAHOMA: THE INVESTIGATION; Just Before He Was to Be Freed, Prime Bombing Suspect Is Identified in Jail

By DAVID JOHNSTON

**WASHINGTON, April 21**— One of the most hunted men in the world, wanted as "John Doe No. 1" in the bombing of the Federal office building in Oklahoma City, was right where the authorities wanted him -- in jail. Except the F.B.I. did not know it, and his jailers almost let him go.

It was not until today -- less than an hour before the authorities in Perry, Okla., about 60 miles north of Oklahoma City, were ready to let the man go -- that a routine check of his Social Security number and the wanted poster released hours before convinced them and Federal authorities that an inmate they had arrested on Wednesday could be the suspect with the light-brown crewcut.

The inmate, Timothy McVeigh, had been stopped on Interstate 35 about 90 minutes after the bombing because he was driving without a license plate on his car, the authorities said. But the arresting officer, Highway Patrolman Charles D. Hanger, discovered that Mr. McVeigh had a Glock 9-millimeter semiautomatic pistol in a shoulder holster, local law-enforcement officials said, and he was held on weapons charges.

Mr. McVeigh, a former Army enlisted man at Fort Riley, Kan., gave the base as his address when he bought the gun, which he owned legally, Federal authorities said. They said that Mr. McVeigh and a companion had rented the truck used in the bombing from a Ryder truck rental agency in Junction City, Kan., near Fort Riley, on Monday.

The pair provided the rental agent with information from a forged South Dakota driver's license that bore the issue date of April 19, 1993, the day that the Federal Bureau of Investigation began a tear gas attack on the Branch Davidian compound near Waco, Tex. The confrontation ended with a fire and the deaths of about 80 people, including many children.

The positive identification of Mr. McVeigh, announced this afternoon by Attorney General Janet Reno, pushed the already speedy investigation of the Oklahoma City bombing to an even quicker pace.

Registration slips that Mr. McVeigh signed as he checked into the Dreamland Motel near Junction City led Federal authorities to a farm in rural Michigan, which Mr. McVeigh had listed as his address, and to two men who had lived at the farm.

One of the men, Terry Lynn Nichols, surrendered to the authorities in Herington, Kan. The other was his brother, James Douglas Nichols, who was still living on the farm, in Decker, Mich., about 80 miles north of Detroit.

Terry Nichols was questioned at a police station in Herington. He had driven to the Public Safety Office, arriving in a battered blue G.M.C. diesel pickup truck. The vehicle had an infant car seat in the back and a sticker on the bumper that said "American and Proud."

Almost simultaneously in Michigan, in images drawn from crime dramas, law-enforcement agents with automatic weapons converged on the farmhouse. The agents found James Nichols there. They said later that he agreed to cooperate.

The authorities said they were searching the farm for evidence in the bombing case. Law-enforcement officials said they suspected that the 500-acre farm might have been used as kind of proving ground to test explosives like the

ammonium nitrate and fuel oil components used in the Oklahoma City blast.

The officials described the Nichols brothers as potential witnesses, not suspects. The officials said the brothers were associated with the Michigan Militia, one of the growing number of armed citizen organizations around the nation that fiercely oppose the authority of the Federal Government, particularly agencies like the Treasury Department's Bureau of Alcohol, Tobacco and Firearms that enforce gun laws.

It was unclear whether either Nichols brother was "John Doe No. 2," the bushy-haired man whose face was flashed around the world as the second suspect in the bombing. It now appears that neither brother is that man.

Mr. McVeigh was stopped for not having license plates on the yellow Mercury he was driving at about the legal speed limit. Trooper Hanger stopped Mr. McVeigh at 10:20 A.M. Wednesday, 10 miles north of a Perry exit. The bomb had exploded at the Federal building about 9 A.M.

When the F.B.I. went to the authorities in Perry, Mr. McVeigh was on his way to court, where he was to have been arraigned on the traffic and weapons charges and released on \$5,000 bond. Mark Gibson, an assistant district attorney, said the F.B.I. called the county sheriff, Jerry Cook, at about 10 A.M. today, half an hour to an hour before Mr. McVeigh's appearance in court. The Federal authorities had matched his Social Security number with a number entered by local authorities into a national crime computer data base after his arrest on the weapons and driving charges.

Mr. Gibson said that only the fact that he and the judge were busy with other matters on Thursday and this morning delayed Mr. McVeigh's release. Mr. Gibson said in an interview that when the sheriff passed a note to him in court this morning, saying that Mr. McVeigh was the suspected bomber, he thought that it was a courthouse joke.

After pulling Mr. McVeigh's car over, Trooper Hanger, who has a reputation among his colleagues for going by the book, had noticed a bulge under the shoulder of Mr. McVeigh's jacket, Mr. Gibson said. Pulling his own revolver, Trooper Hanger asked to search Mr. McVeigh, who admitted to having the Glock pistol in a shoulder holster.

Mr. McVeigh was also found to be carrying a six-inch knife. The trooper reported that Mr. McVeigh was calm, saying he was driving cross-country. Mr. McVeigh was very polite, answering questions, "yes sir," and "no sir," saying he had served in the military and as a security guard.

"No, sir, I did not intend to break your laws," he told Trooper Hanger, according to the prosecutor. "I just carry the gun for protection."

County prosecutors had prepared charges of carrying a concealed weapon, transporting a loaded weapon and driving without a license plate or insurance. These charges, none more serious than misdemeanors, were dismissed today when Mr. McVeigh was turned over to the F.B.I.

A judge had set bond at \$5,000, but Mr. McVeigh, carrying \$2,000, could have borrowed enough from a bail bondsman with \$500 down, Mr. Gibson said.

Mr. Gibson said that local authorities had not recognized Mr. McVeigh from the published drawing.

Amid all the scrambling for evidence at sites scattered across the Midwest, law-enforcement officials tried to adjust their thinking about the explosion, which had brought international terrorism to mind.

Ms. Reno said today that for the first time since the blast that it seemed to be a domestic case. Other officials said they remained open to all possible motives, including international terrorist links. But the new evidence drew the spotlight of suspicion on anti-Government militants who might have launched the attack as a retaliatory protest to events like the Branch Davidian assault near Waco.

Officials of the Bureau of Alcohol, Tobacco and Firearms were housed in the building destroyed in the bombing.

Militant groups opposing gun control have blamed the agency for heavy loss of life in the siege of the sect's compound.

Chart: "HIERARCHY: How the Manhunt Is Organized" In addition to the 500 Federal Emergency Management Agency workers coordinating the rescue effort in Oklahoma City, there are more Federal resources devoted to the criminal investigation into Wednesday's bombing. The inquiry is headed by the F.B.I., and drawing on local police departments if needed.