

Hazy portraits of suspects emerge

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HERINGTON, Kan. -- Heavily armed federal agents evacuated a residential neighborhood here yesterday while demolition experts in full protective gear searched the home of one of the men in custody and prepared to raid a nearby storage shed believed to be connected to the deadliest terrorist bombing in US history.

As a massive investigation that stretched from Michigan to this rural farming town continued to produce stunning developments, a sketchy portrait of the suspects began to emerge of former US military men who officials say may be linked to a paramilitary confederacy that sees the US government as the enemy and is seething with anger over the government's actions two years ago in Waco, Texas.

Those who knew the suspects say they didn't know them well. It appears the men had originally come to the area after being assigned to the nearby Fort Riley Army base, but had settled into the civilian community only in the last few months.

Timothy James McVeigh, 27, the first to be officially charged in the case, was a US Army soldier based at Fort Riley. A native of the Buffalo area, he served in the Persian Gulf War, but had become immersed in the last two years in the hateful rhetoric common to "the militia," according to an FBI affidavit by a co-worker. "The militia" is a network of paramilitary groups that specialists say is growing in number here. Detained just 80 minutes after the bombing on motor vehicle and weapons charges, he came chillingly close to being released by local law enforcement before they realized he was the target of the national manhunt.

The other main suspect, who is still unidentified and at large, is believed to have a military background and to have been based in the area.

Terry Lynn Nichols, who at least one investigator identified as a former US Army soldier, was being questioned yesterday after he turned himself in at the Herington police station. An Army associate of McVeigh's, he had not been officially charged, but was being considered a "material witness." Nichols and his brother, James, who is also in custody, owned a farm in Michigan and, FBI officials said yesterday, were believed linked to the well-organized Michigan Militia.

In Junction City, 15 miles from Herington, McVeigh and the other main suspect were regular customers at a Texaco gas station and minimarket. Two employees there, Sylvia Niemczickat and Debra Carter, confirmed that the two men were "a perfect match" to the composite sketches. The women, who have met with FBI

officials, say they are sure the two men had been at the store as recently as Monday.

"McVeigh would buy Marlboros. The other one, I don't know his name, would usually pay for the gas. They were like everyone else, they'd just come in and out, nothing special," Carter said.

Junction City, a county seat amid a brown-and-green quilted landscape of dairy and grain farms, is bustling with young men in crew cuts from nearby Fort Riley, where McVeigh was assigned. There is a demolition unit based at Fort Riley, but officials refused to say whether McVeigh had been affiliated with it.

On Monday, investigators said, the two men rented a yellow Ryder truck from the Elliott Body Shop in Junction City, just a few miles from the gas station. An axle of that truck was found two blocks from the bomb site and traced back to the rental agency, investigators said.

Lea McGowen, owner of the Dreamland Motel, in Junction City, may have provided investigators with the first big break in the case when she told FBI officials that a man who fit the description had registered at her hotel between April 14 and 17 under the name McVeigh. She said he stayed until just two days before the bombing. On the last day of his stay, he parked a yellow Ryder rental van in the hotel lot, but very far from his room. She asked him to move the vehicle, and he became agitated, she said.

"You have no idea how frightening it is, how angry I am, to think that the bomb may have been loaded into the vehicle at that time," she said. "Before that he was talkative, he didn't seem strange. He was neat and clean. Nothing out of the ordinary, except for the truck."

Although police say Nichols is not a suspect, neighbors say there were things about him that seem strange.

When he bought a light-blue home with an American flag on the front porch in Herington two months ago, he seemed like a "pleasant, clean cut" guy, said Jeff Hallam of American Family Insurance Agents, who sold him a policy. But he "did not have a Social Security number," Hallam recalled.

Other neighbors said that the day he moved in, he had only a small U-Haul trailer. But then, late at night for the next three consecutive nights, he and about four other men moved heavy crates from two pickup trucks into the house. Some neighbors said the men also carried large white buckets into the house.

"I watched them do it. It was real strange," said Mike LaRussa, a laborer at a rock quarry.

Another neighbor, Georgia Robinson, said, "They were pretty friendly." But, she added, Nichols also had large, wooden crates in the back yard that said "Base 10."

Federal investigators and demolition experts yesterday surrounded the home, using a remote-controlled robot to examine the premises for explosive or possible booby traps before they went in and investigated. They also surrounded a storage unit in the Industrial Park behind a Pizza Hut on Route 77 just outside of Herington. The unit was rented in the name of "one of the suspects," investigators said. Dickenson County Sheriff Curt Bennett said agents were investigating whether the storage unit may have been where the suspects constructed the bomb.

In the aftermath of the explosion, McVeigh was stopped because his car did not have a license plate and he was allegedly carrying a 9mm handgun. He was taken to the local police station, and was scheduled for a bail hearing Thursday. The judge's calendar delayed the hearing until Friday, when police suddenly realized they had a suspect in the worst terrorist episode on American soil.

"He was pretty nonchalant," said Bennett, who escorted him to federal authorities in Oklahoma City while a jeering crowd of thousands called out for his blood. "He was real quiet. He didn't show an ounce of remorse or even thought."

Eric Gordius, 24, who was raised in Chelmsford, Mass., but is stationed at Fort Riley, was one of the many "flattops," as they call the young soldiers sporting crew cuts, struggling to understand it.

"It's like being stabbed in the back," Gordius said. "If the information is right, then I fought with this guy in Desert Storm. We're supposed to be on the same side, and now he has done the worst thing in America I've ever heard in my lifetime."