

Officials See Conspiracy Of at Least Four in Blast; Probe Focuses On Suspect's Right-Wing Ties



The Washington Post

April 23, 1995 | David Maraniss; Pierre Thomas

Federal agents investigating the catastrophic bombing of the federal building in Oklahoma City sharpened their focus yesterday on Timothy James McVeigh's ties to right-wing militia groups. Law enforcement sources said they increasingly see the bombing as the possible work of a larger conspiracy of extremists seeking revenge against the government for perceived injustices, including the raid on the Branch Davidian compound in Waco exactly two years earlier.

A senior law enforcement official said "at least four" men were involved in the terrorist act last week and "there very well could be more."

Authorities questioned McVeigh, a 27-year-old veteran of Desert Storm, as he was being held at a federal prison outside Oklahoma City. Meanwhile, hundreds of agents scoured a 500-acre farm in rural Michigan; four sites in Kansas; a house on the outskirts of Kingman, Ariz.; and McVeigh's home town of Pendleton, N.Y., in search of more evidence and suspects. Late in the day, the FBI issued warrants forcing the two men already publicly linked to McVeigh -- brothers James Douglas Nichols and Terry Lynn Nichols -- to testify as material witnesses before a federal grand jury in Oklahoma.

In Oklahoma City, efforts to search the rubble for survivors and to recover bodies were halted by rain, wind, hail and the instability of the building. Workers have recovered 70 bodies, including 13 children, but the death toll is certain to go higher because rescuers have reported seeing many other bodies in the building and have located other victims in nearby offices damaged in the explosion.

James Nichols, a Michigan farmer connected by federal authorities to the Michigan

Militia, an anti-government paramilitary organization, was detained by agents at his farmhouse near the rural town of Decker and taken to Oklahoma. A federal affidavit said McVeigh had worked on the Nichols farm for several months last year, that he may have visited there as recently as 12 days before the bombing, and that James Nichols was known to have constructed bombs on his property several times last fall. McVeigh, whose parents are still alive, listed James Nichols as his "next of kin" when he was first arrested last week on charges unrelated to the bombing.

Terry Nichols, who has also been connected to the Michigan Militia and who is believed by law enforcement sources to have served in the Army with McVeigh, was detained in Herington, Kan., where he has lived since February.

Neither Nichols brother is considered by federal agents to be the man known as John Doe No. 2, the suspect described as a white man of medium build who was with McVeigh in Junction City, Kan., last week when they rented the 1993 Ford truck used in the bombing. Federal sources would say little yesterday about the search for John Doe No. 2, noting only that telephone calls to the toll-free hot line are yielding many clues as is additional physical evidence, which they declined to describe. "We are moving in on possibilities," one federal agent said last night. "The hunt continues."

While agents in Michigan examined McVeigh's connections to the Nichols brothers and various paramilitary organizations in that state, investigators found several new possible leads in Kingman, a city in western Arizona where McVeigh lived. According to federal sources and Kingman residents who witnessed the scene, several agents descended on a house on McVicar Avenue that was frequented by Nichols when he lived there. The house, according to one federal source, was thought to be a gathering point for men who had formed an anti- government militia unit. One resident was a veteran who had served with McVeigh in the Army.

According to Adeline Bleick, who lives across the street, agents approached the house in unmarked cars. "They got out a bullhorn and said 'Come out with your hands up,' " she said. A man and a woman emerged from the house and were interrogated but not arrested.

During his stay in Kingman, McVeigh worked for a time at the True Value hardware store on Stockton Hill Road. The owner, Paul Shuffler, said that McVeigh was hired "sight unseen" on the recommendation of a friend, Robert Fortier, who already worked there and had served with McVeigh in the military.

Fortier, according to other employees, constantly talked about how the federal government was plotting to disarm Americans and separate men from women and

children. The most memorable thing about McVeigh during the six weeks he worked at the store, Shuffler said, was that he came to work every day wearing Army fatigues. Federal sources said that McVeigh was seen in Kingman as recently as February. They said they were curious about his possible connection to a mysterious explosion at a Kingman trailer park.

McVeigh lived in the Canyon West trailer park for a few months last year but was evicted, according to the manager, Bob Ragin, because he played music too loudly and refused to move a junked car from the property. "He said he just got out of the Army and he'd had enough of rules and regulations," Ragin recalled. One of the notable things about the McVicar neighborhood, one resident said, was that most of the men who lived there wore pistols.

Kansas was another place flooded by federal agents yesterday in the search for clues and evidence. In Herington, the town where Terry Nichols lived, a four-block area around his bungalow on Second Avenue was cordoned off and the area evacuated as agents executed a search warrant. Fearing that the house might be booby trapped, the agents entered the house with a robot and explosive-sniffing dogs.

Federal agents brought in floodlights to help them with their all-night search of Nichols's house on South Second Street in Herington. Yellow police tape had been strung around the small, white bungalow, and the garage behind it. Tape also surrounded a splotch on the driveway near the garage where something had stained the dirt.

Investigators parked a large military truck in front of the home so they could load into it evidence collected from Nichols's house. Camera flashes could be seen through the windows as federal agents searched the house into the night.

Kay Ryff said last night that Terry Nichols had rented a 6-foot- by-12-foot trailer from her Herington U-Haul dealership April 3 and returned it the next day.

Investigators also have examined whether the bombers had filled a container of gasoline at a Junction City Coastal Mart, according to a Coastal employee who asked that his name not be used.

Another team of agents, meanwhile, spent the day in another small Kansas town, Marion, where Nichols had worked on a cattle ranch for six months last year before moving to Herington. Jim Donahue, the owner of the ranch, recalled that during Nichols's time there, he constantly complained about taxes and government. When Nichols left, Donahue said, he was in the company of McVeigh. Donahue said Nichols told him he was going to Arizona to sell guns.

In Las Vegas, KVBC-TV reported that two people were picked up for questioning from what was believed to be the home of Terry Nichols's ex-wife, but the FBI declined to comment, the Associated Press reported.

Interviews with people who know McVeigh suggested he came out of the military a changed man -- more strident and paranoid than he seemed earlier in life.

McVeigh grew up in Pendleton on the northern edge of Buffalo. His parents were divorced when he was 10, but he was, according to neighbors and friends, a quiet but optimistic young man who made money for himself by holding sidewalk casino parties. The family house, where his father still lives, is a small beige bungalow on the main thoroughfare in town.

McVeigh, who has two sisters, graduated from Starpoint High School in 1984. His yearbook motto was "People are able because they think they are able." He was voted "most talkative" by his classmates.

Wendy Stephany, who was in his class, said he "wasn't a troublemaker and didn't hang out with troublemakers." Between high school and the military, McVeigh worked for a short time as a security guard near the Buffalo airport. His supervisors there said he had a short fuse and had trouble working with others.

Although his military records have been closed by federal agents since he was picked up in connection with the bombing, it appears that McVeigh served in the Army from about 1989 to 1992 and was a Bradley vehicle gunner in the Persian Gulf War. He was described by comrades as a good soldier, but an odd one. One sergeant in his Army infantry unit, James Ives, told the Associated Press that if McVeigh was given a target "it's gone." But another former member of his unit, Robert Copeland, said McVeigh was a loner who never associated with other troops. Ives recalled that McVeigh had wanted to join the Special Forces but was injured and was "extremely disappointed."

During the end of his military career, according to former comrades, McVeigh apparently started spending much of his time off-base associating with paramilitary right-wing groups. He told friends later, according to one friend, that while he was in the service the Army had placed a computer chip in his buttocks to keep track of him.

It was in the military that McVeigh befriended Terry Nichols, and not long after his discharge, he found his way up to the farm in Michigan, where he lived and worked for parts of 1993 and 1994. He became known to people around the Decker area as the cocky war veteran who carried a semiautomatic pistol and loved to attend gun

shows. Neighbors said yesterday they were occasionally treated to explosive shows on the farm during McVeigh's stay. One Decker resident said that McVeigh and the Nichols brothers were like little boys who "liked to play with things that blow up."

If McVeigh's extremist tendencies were already apparent before he reached Decker, they were only made more intense during his association with the brothers, both of whom were known to detest the federal government and shared a fascination with the civilian paramilitary groups burgeoning in that state. Federal sources said the Nichols brothers and McVeigh were seen attending meetings of the Michigan Militia.

According to an FBI affidavit filed Friday in Oklahoma City, a former co-worker told federal agents that McVeigh was enraged by the way federal agents handled the confrontation at the Branch Davidian compound in Waco, Tex., in 1993. He was not alone in that regard -- the Waco conflagration has been a rallying point for right-wing extremists over the past two years -- but McVeigh's feelings about it were so intense that federal agents took note of him even then.

One federal law enforcement source said McVeigh visited Waco before the final standoff and was photographed there by agents who were concerned about violence from Davidian sympathizers. Two agents who had been in Waco during the 1993 confrontation recognized McVeigh when his photograph appeared on television this week. McVeigh came away from the Waco incident "extremely angry," according to the federal affidavit, and spoke of it constantly afterward.

Federal agents have taken note of the meaning that April 19 might have in the Oklahoma catastrophe. April 19 was the day of the Waco confrontation, the day of the Oklahoma City bombing, the false date McVeigh gave for his birth on a rental car record, and the date of the Battle of Lexington during the Revolutionary War, which has also been used as a patriotic date of inspiration by right-wing groups.

As the key suspect and to this point only person charged in the bombing, McVeigh has become the target of a nation's wrath. He has two court-appointed lawyers, federal public defender Susan Otto, whose car was buried in the explosion, and private defense lawyer John W. Coyle III. Coyle told CNN he would seek to have the trial moved out of Oklahoma City because he thought it would be impossible to get a fair trial there.

"In this particular circumstance . . . where so many federal court officers -- U.S. attorneys, court personnel, everyone -- were impacted by the blast, I can't imagine how anyone, no matter how well intended, can give this objective consideration, including ourselves as lawyers," Coyle told the Dallas Morning News.

Coyle met briefly with McVeigh yesterday but would not comment on his client's demeanor. Federal sources said McVeigh has not been especially cooperative in providing them leads to the other suspects.

Staff writers Malcolm Gladwell in Pendleton, N.Y., and Serge Kovaleski and Rene Sanchez in Decker, Mich., and special correspondents Thomas Heath in Marion, Kan., and Kathryn Wexler in Kingman, Ariz., contributed to this report.