

Two brothers face Mich. bomb charge Alleged to work with McVeigh on explosives tests

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OKLAHOMA CITY -- Two brothers held as material witnesses in the bombing here were charged yesterday in Michigan with conspiring to make bombs several years ago with the chief suspect in the case.

An FBI affidavit supporting the criminal complaint against James and Terry Nichols described them as antigovernment extremists who had experimented in bomb-making with Timothy McVeigh as far back as 1987 at James Nichols' northeast Michigan farm.

As the official death toll rose to 96 from last Wednesday's bombing at the Alfred P. Murrah Federal Building, rescue work bogged down and hopes for survivors faded.

Meanwhile, the federal investigation produced chemical evidence on McVeigh's clothes linking the 27-year-old former Army sergeant directly to the Oklahoma bomb, law-enforcement sources told the Globe.

In Washington, a federal law enforcement official said the car McVeigh was driving when he was stopped for traffic violations shortly after the bombing showed traces of nitrates and high explosive, but that it was not yet possible to conclusively link them to the bombing.

McVeigh, held in an Oklahoma prison, was refusing to speak to authorities, saying he was a political prisoner, CNN reported. It said McVeigh would give only his name, rank and serial number -- the only information a prisoner of war gives his captors.

Authorities said McVeigh's thumbprint was recovered on a note discovered in the patrol car of the Oklahoma state trooper who arrested him last Wednesday, the Dallas Morning News reported. The note, written on the business card of an explosives dealer, read "need more five-pound sticks of TNT by May 1," officials said.

In Kansas, federal authorities were checking a report that a huge amount of dynamite and blasting caps was stolen from a quarry near Junction City, Kan., and may have been used in the nation's worst terrorist attack.

The FBI also released an enhanced portrait of "John Doe No. 2," who along with McVeigh allegedly rented a truck in Junction City believed used to carry the fertilizer-fuel oil bomb detonated in Oklahoma City.

The criminal complaint against the Nichols brothers, brought in Milan, Mich., does not tie them to the Oklahoma bombing. It alleges that they and McVeigh -- who was charged last week in the Oklahoma bombing -- met on numerous occasions at the Decker, Mich., farm to build and test a variety of homemade bombs from 1987 through 1994. According to the six-page affidavit by agent Patrick Wease, James Nichols told FBI agents that "he believed that Timothy McVeigh had the knowledge to manufacture a bomb."

The complaint says the FBI found 1,400 pounds of fertilizer containing ammonium nitrate at James Nichols' farm, in addition to fuel oil and other chemicals that can be used to make bombs.

The affidavit also cites several neighbors' accounts of James Nichols advocating murder of federal officials, expressing hatred for the government, and denouncing the deadly 1993 raid on the Branch Davidians in Waco, Texas, exactly two years before the Oklahoma bombing.

The criminal complaint allows authorities to continue holding the Nichols brothers, who had been in custody only as material witnesses.

McVeigh listed James Nichols' Michigan farm as his address on some forms and said when arrested that Nichols was his next of kin.

Investigators were also reported to be testing bits of blue plastic found embedded in Oklahoma victims' bodies to see if they match blue plastic drums found in a search of Terry Nichols' Kansas home.

In Junction City, FBI agents spent nine hours yesterday combing two rooms rented on the night of April 17 -- 36 hours before the bombing -- by John Doe No. 2 and a second man who the manager said gave the last name Nichols. The manager of the Great Western motel, who asked to be identified only as Peter, said John Doe No. 2 had a Ryder rental truck -- the same as that believed used in the bombing -- which he parked in the farthest possible corner of the motel's lot.

Ten minutes after that suspect checked in, the man who gave his name as Nichols checked in. They both left on the morning of April 18, the manager said.

Federal agents were also investigating two other Kansas leads yesterday: the reported theft of 300 sticks of dynamite and 1,400 blasting caps from a rock quarry in Marion, Kan., next to Junction City, and a reported purchase of 3,000 pounds of ammonium nitrate, a key bomb ingredient, from a feed-and-grain store outside Junction City two weeks before the Oklahoma attack.

A spokesman for Marion County Sheriff Edward Davies said it was not yet clear whether there was any link between the bombing case and the blasting cap theft.

A much smaller amount of explosive than that stolen would be required to set off the fuel oil-ammonium nitrate mixture.

At the site of the ravaged Murrah building, persistent threats of collapsing debris prevented searchers from reaching areas believed to hold as many as 120 more victims: the Social Security office and the day-care center. Oklahoma City Fire Chief Gary Marrs said rescuers had moved into small portions of the two sections late Monday night and had recovered the bodies of three children. Another source said workers had spied the bodies of at least two additional children yesterday, but had not cleared enough debris yet to get to them.

"It's like trying to dismantle a mountain with a 5-gallon bucket," Oklahoma Gov. Frank Keating told "CBS This Morning." "It's just lots of shifting, and it's a very tragic, very grim process."

Authorities said they still hoped to complete the retrieval operation by week's end if weather allows. While they are unsure exactly how long it will take to remove the remaining bodies, officials are trying to bring life in the area back to something resembling normal.

Only 14 square blocks enclosing the bombed-out building remained cordoned off as of yesterday morning, down from 50 square blocks initially, and officials said several more would be reopened today. Hundreds of people have been able to return to work, though many stores remain shuttered or unusable in the vicinity.

Also yesterday, McVeigh's mother, Mildred Frazer, issued a statement from her home near Fort Pierce, Fla., asking to be left alone and saying: "I feel deep sympathy for the victims and families involved in the Oklahoma City bombing . . . I have had only brief contact with my son the past 10 years and only know details from what I have been watching on TV."

Adam Pertman reported from Oklahoma City and Peter J. Howe from Boston. Charles M. Sennott of the Globe Staff contributed from Junction City, Kan. Wire service material was also used.