

Bomb Suspect Ordered Held For Grand Jury Inquiry

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OKLAHOMA CITY -- A federal magistrate last night ordered chief bombing suspect Timothy McVeigh detained for a grand jury investigation, as authorities mounted a nationwide search for an alleged accomplice who they fear might strike again.

Calling evidence against the 27-year-old former Army sergeant "highly credible," US Magistrate Roland Howland ordered that McVeigh continue to be held without bail as prosecutors mount their case against him.

Yesterday, authorities put out a nationwide alert for an Arizona license plate they said may have been moved from McVeigh's car. They said another suspect known as "John Doe No. 2" could be using it and planning another strike.

At a hearing on whether to keep McVeigh jailed, FBI Agent John Hersley said his "primary responsibility is to find the other subject to prevent another bomb from going off."

Hersley also testified that witnesses reported seeing McVeigh and another man driving away from the federal building shortly before the explosion.

Authorities issued the alert for Arizona plate number LZC 646, hoping either to find a piece of evidence bolstering the case against McVeigh or, if it was moved to another vehicle, to lead them to McVeigh's alleged bombing partner. Sighting reported

At the hearing on McVeigh, held at the El Reno federal prison 30 miles west of here, Hersley said Kansas witnesses spotted McVeigh a day before the bombing in the Ryder rental truck apparently used to transport two tons of explosives.

Hersley said the truck's license plate was recovered at the site of the Alfred P. Murrah Federal Building, badly burned but intact.

Hersley also said McVeigh's clothing tested positive for explosive residue. He said three witnesses thought they saw McVeigh outside the federal building before the blast but could not pick him out of a lineup.

In his ruling, Howland said: "The court finds an indelible trail of evidence that starts in Junction City," where McVeigh rented the alleged bombing truck, "and ends up at the front door of the Murrah building."

It remains unclear how many people may have been involved in the bombing plot. The Los Angeles Times reported in today's editions that federal investigators believe four or five people were involved in constructing the estimated 4,800-pound bomb,

which included about two dozen 55-gallon barrels filled with an explosive mix of fuel oil and ammonium nitrate fertilizer.

The Times said McVeigh's 21-year-old sister, Jennifer, told friends earlier this year that "something big is going to happen in March or April and Tim's involved," according to FBI agents who interviewed the friends. That quote echoes McVeigh's reported comment to his friend Terry Nichols two days before the bombing that "something big's going to happen."

Reporters observing the proceedings said McVeigh, sitting stone-faced with shackles around his waist, followed the proceedings intently with no emotion, perking up only when one attorney showed the court a newspaper with banner headlines about the case.

Before arguments on keeping McVeigh in jail, both of his court-appointed lawyers asked to be replaced because they knew blast victims.

"We heard it; we smelled it; we lived through it. We are witnesses to this event," said defense attorney Susan Otto, who dramatically listed 10 friends and associates who had perished in the explosion. Change of venue denied

Howland, the prison magistrate presiding over McVeigh's hearing, denied the lawyers' immediate request to be removed but did launch a nationwide search for replacements. Howland also rejected a request for a change of venue, which the attorney argued was necessary because McVeigh cannot receive a fair trial in Oklahoma.

The hotly sought Arizona plate suggested evidence of more links between McVeigh and James Nichols, a farmer from northeastern Michigan. Nichols and his brother Terry were charged Tuesday in Michigan with conspiring to make bombs at James Nichols' farm over several years.

The Nichols brothers were not linked to the Oklahoma bombing then, but yesterday federal prosecutors pressed to have Terry Nichols held longer in Kansas, citing evidence and contacts between Nichols and McVeigh "that relates Nichols to this crime."

The license plate belongs to a 1983 Pontiac station wagon McVeigh registered in Arizona in February that, according to Michigan records, James Nichols sold to McVeigh for \$100.

The Daily Oklahoman reported Monday that McVeigh, five days before the April 19 bombing, traded a 1980s-model Pontiac and \$250 cash for a Mercury in Junction City, Kan. He was arrested driving that Mercury without a license plate 90 minutes after the bombing.

Terry Nichols served with McVeigh at Fort Riley near Junction City, and McVeigh listed James Nichols as his next of kin when he was arrested, authorities have said.

In Oklahoma City yesterday, cool temperatures and clear skies, along with increasingly stable conditions within the federal building, helped rescuers accelerate their efforts. Authorities here variously predicted that the last of the bodies would be removed by the end of the weekend or sometime next week.

Of the 110 officially reported dead last evening, 15 were children. And 105 people remained unaccounted for, including five children.

Weldon Kennedy, the special agent in charge of the FBI investigation, said that law enforcement personnel had conducted interviews all around Oklahoma City, in Kansas and other areas where they believe clues might be found. "We have hit every single place that could possibly provide accommodations, food service, etc.," he said.

Kennedy dismissed as "incorrect" reports that authorities had attached a name to John Doe No. 2.

Though Kennedy said he could not discuss many aspects of the case, he added that more than 10,500 people had called the FBI's 800-number tip line, providing "many valuable leads and evidence."

In other developments yesterday:

- Justice Department officials denied a Fort Worth Star-Telegram report that authorities have found a diary in which McVeigh and associates outlined plans to set off simultaneous bombs in Oklahoma City, Phoenix and Omaha. Kennedy and a Justice Department spokesman, Carl Stern, also said they had no information about a diary.

However, Stern said, "Of course we've received reports that McVeigh planned other attacks. We take them all seriously" and check each out.

- The New York Times said that investigators, trying to determine how McVeigh and Terry Nichols had large amounts of cash despite sporadic work histories, were investigating several bank robberies around the Midwest between January 1994 and March 30. Several involved robbers using the threat of explosives.

- A Wisconsin sheriff said a crumpled business card found in an Oklahoma police cruiser after McVeigh's arrest was from Paulsen Military Supply in Antigo, Wis. Langlade County Sheriff Dave Steger said the store owners told the FBI they had no knowledge of McVeigh. SIDEBAR STATUS OF SEARCH Data on those whom authorities have mentioned in the Oklahoma bomb plot investigation. KNIGHT-RIDDER TRIBUNE/GLOBE STAFF GRAPHIC

Adam Pertman reported from Oklahoma City and Peter J. Howe reported from Boston.