

McVeigh's missing license plate may be on John Doe 2's vehicle, police say

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OKLAHOMA CITY _ Authorities investigating last week's terrorist bombing here pressed their search Friday for a missing license plate registered to prime suspect Timothy McVeigh and spotted on a vehicle in a videotape taken minutes before the blast.

An accomplice of McVeigh's identified only as John Doe 2 may have used the vehicle for his getaway from the bombing at the Alfred P. Murrah Federal Building, authorities believe.

The bomb is now believed to have been set off by a crude hand-lit fuse, no longer than 6 feet, meaning the bomber or bombers had only a few minutes to get out of the truck and out of the area, an investigator said Friday.

The FBI said the license plate, Arizona tag LZC-646, was on McVeigh's yellow 1977 Mercury Marquis as recently as five days before the April 19 bombing. The plate was not on the car, however, when McVeigh was stopped by a state trooper 60 miles north of here in Perry, Okla., less than two hours after the blast.

The videotape from a security camera on a nearby apartment building shows both the Ryder truck believed to have carried the massive bomb and a second vehicle _ not the Mercury _ bearing the Arizona tag, a federal law enforcement official in Washington said Friday. Officials did not publicly describe the second vehicle.

Several witnesses have identified McVeigh as the man who drove a Ryder truck up to the building minutes before the 9 a.m. explosion, authorities said. According to investigators, McVeigh even stopped and asked one passerby for directions at Fifth and Harvey streets, site of the Murrah building.

As the confirmed death toll rose to 118 Friday, a new picture of the moments following the blast emerged from tapes of 911 emergency calls released by local police.

As fire and rescue crews raced to the area surrounding the Murrah building, they ran into heavy smoke from burning cars.

Firefighter: ``We need to get someone _ get a pumper over here on Robinson, we could put out these car fires, and cut down on your black smoke a little bit."

Radio Call: ``The whole front of the federal building is gone, all floors to the roof. You have roof and windows gone out of the old county building up here. Can you get those commands set up?"

Several callers and arriving rescue personnel described the horror as it unfolded:

Radio Call: ``I need at least three ambulances at the corner of Fifth and Hudson. I've got three patients that are in critical condition."

Radio Call: ``We've got about four or five criticals right now and about a hundred walking wounded."

Then there were the children:

Firefighter: ``Is there a possibility we can get the police department dogs to help us with locations? We are supposed to have at least 25 to 30 children in this area, and we have only found about four or five. Can we get heat sensors or police dogs, please?"

One caller described workers on the seventh floor of the federal building desperately trying to escape by tying sheets together and hanging them out of windows.

Later there was panic when rescuers believed they had found a second bomb:

Radio Call: ``Come on out, come on out, get out of there. Let's go. Get out."

Radio Call: ``All companies, come out of the building right now. Everybody evacuate the federal building."

Radio Call: ``Remove all your personnel from the building immediately, possibly explosives planted in the building. I repeat, evacuate the building immediately."

There was no second bomb, but the damage had been done.

As the criminal investigation scattered investigators all over the country Friday, the search for victims continued amid the rubble of the bombing site. Collapsing debris brought a halt to the rescue and recovery effort inside the building. Workers spent the day dismantling the rubble pile from the top trying to remove unstable bits of debris.

With nearly 100 families still waiting for word of their loved ones, authorities expressed frustration at not being able to work as quickly as they would like.

After 10 days of searching, investigators say they may now have recovered more than half the bodies from the building. Among the more than 75 people now

estimated to be missing are four children who had been in a day-care center on the second floor.

Late Thursday night, a massive slab of concrete shifted overhead and threatened to collapse on the more than 100 people searching for bodies in an area of the building commonly called "the pit," where a large number of the missing bodies are expected to be recovered.

"The men and women in there really want to bring this to a close," Assistant Fire Chief Jon Hansen said of the rescuers. "We are staying focused on that so that the families of the missing can have some peace."

Officials described the disemboweled building as a "house of cards," which makes it difficult to move debris without causing something else to shift.

"We have to be careful because we don't want to add to the casualty count," said Maj. Homer Jones of the city Fire Department. "With a bomb this size, we have no way of assessing how many of the support columns have been affected."

Despite the great odds against it, Jones said rescuers continued to hope they would still find people alive in the building. No one has been found alive in it since the night of the blast.

"We remain optimistic that there are survivors, because of the void areas that were created by the explosion," Jones said.

Sgt. Lynn McCumber of the Fire Department said rescuers were still able to find bodies with the aid of heat detection devices.

"Nine days later, that is incredible," McCumber said, adding that the bodies were also in remarkably good condition. He speculated that the chilly days following the blast and the below-freezing nighttime temperatures might be responsible.

Throughout the day Friday, well-wishers continued to visit the site. The first to arrive was a group of Texans from Waco, who said their city now shared a deep pain with Oklahoma City.

Sgt. Jack Goodwin of the Sheriff's Department in McClennan County, which includes Waco, decried any effort to portray the Oklahoma bombing as avenging the deaths of Branch Davidian cultists killed two years ago in a fire that consumed their Waco compound.

"This disaster didn't cure the first disaster," Goodwin said.

McVeigh, 27, a Gulf War veteran, was ordered Thursday to stand trial in the Oklahoma bombing, the worst terrorist attack in U.S. history. He is being held

without bail. An FBI affidavit said McVeigh, known to hold extreme right-wing views, was particularly agitated by the federal government's conduct at Waco.

Two friends of McVeigh, brothers Terry and James Nichols, have been charged with conspiracy to manufacture illegal explosives in Michigan in 1992 and 1994 _ when they had contact with McVeigh.

Terry Nichols is being held in Kansas as a material witness. And Thursday night in Milan, Mich., a federal magistrate continued until 11 a.m. Tuesday a hearing to determine whether James Nichols, a farmer in Decker, Mich., should remain in custody or be released on bond.

The hearing was delayed for two hours when a new lawyer _ hired by a group of James Nichols' friends and neighbors calling itself ``Sanilac Concerned Citizens for Justice" _ arrived at a federal prison where the hearing was being held.

Nichols now has until Tuesday to choose between the new lawyer, Robert Elsey of Grosse Pointe, Mich., or Miriam Siefer, the chief federal defender in Detroit.

Siefer said after the hearing that if the government could not present evidence directly linking Nichols to the Oklahoma City bombing _ which it has yet to do _ he should be set free until a trial on the existing explosives charge.

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