

Affidavits Trace Steps Leading To Blast

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HERINGTON, Kansas -- On Easter Sunday, Christians in this farming community were celebrating the Resurrection and flocking to family gatherings. But Terry Nichols was busy answering phone calls from Army buddy Timothy McVeigh and shuttling him from Oklahoma City back to Kansas.

During the hours that ticked by from that Sunday until Wednesday at 9:02 a.m., when a huge truck bomb ripped the face off the Alfred P. Murrah Federal Building in Oklahoma City, the two men were in almost constant contact, according to court affidavits filed by the FBI. Their movements -- through the patchwork of newly seeded fields of Herington to the strip of gun shops and cheap motels around the Fort Riley Army post in nearby Junction City -- appear to be the nexus of activity that led to the bombing, the FBI affidavits say.

As federal agents learn more about McVeigh's and Nichols' past, as well as the steps they allegedly made in the weeks and days that led up to the bombing, they are developing a clearer picture of the two men.

They were close friends while serving at Fort Riley. Since 1992, they had been bound together by extreme antigovernment views. Both held a fiery resentment against the federal government's actions in the 1993 siege of the Branch Davidian compound in Waco, Texas, which McVeigh expressed in letters to a local newspaper and Nichols read about in pamphlets seized from his home.

These bonds were nurtured while McVeigh lived for a time on a Michigan farm owned by Nichols and his brother, James, where the three men practiced making small bombs in the corn fields, the FBI says. They also drifted in different directions, McVeigh heading to his hometown near Buffalo, N.Y., and to Arizona, and Nichols heading for the Philippines to visit the family of his wife.

But in recent months the two men returned to their old stomping grounds. This time they saw themselves as fighting for a different army. Their own brand of far-right anarchy came together here at the crossroads of vast farmlands and a transient military community.

What brought them back to the area around Fort Riley is a question federal agents are aggressively pursuing. FBI, CIA and Army Intelligence investigators are fanned out across the post, Junction City and the rural landscape that surrounds them, interviewing soldiers and gun dealers and fertilizer salesmen to determine why the conspiracy seems to have come together here. They are continuing to pursue anything that could lead them to the fugitive identified only

as "Suspect John Doe No. 2," who is believed by investigators to have served in the military with McVeigh and Nichols.

It is here that the fertilizer, a pelleted ammonium nitrate sold at agricultural supply stores and used in the crude but powerful bomb, is believed to have been purchased. It is here that federal officials believe the detonating devices -- dynamite or blasting caps or both -- were obtained. It is here the yellow Ryder truck that officials say carried the bomb was rented.

McVeigh is still the only suspect charged in the bombing. Nichols, who federal agents have linked to the conspiracy, is being held as a material witness rather than a suspect. His brother, James, is also being held as a material witness.

Reconstructing movements

Based on FBI affidavits, court records and dozens of interviews with soldiers, store owners and motel managers, the following is a time line of the two men's specific movements over those days leading up to the explosion:

On Easter Sunday afternoon, McVeigh called Nichols from Oklahoma City, saying he needed a ride back to Kansas. Nichols left Herington -- where the small home he bought the month before contained a cache of explosives and weapons, including an anti-tank missile -- and made the nearly five-hour drive to Oklahoma City to pick him up.

Barrelling along Interstate 35, Nichols' blue GMC truck, with the bumper sticker "Proud to be American," pierced the vast darkness of the Kansas plains. Just past midnight, according to an FBI affidavit based on statements from Nichols, McVeigh gave him a cryptic and ominous description of his mission:

"Something big is going to happen," McVeigh told him.

"Are you going to rob a bank?" Nichols asked.

"Something big is going to happen," Nichols repeated.

In the predawn darkness Monday, they arrived back in Junction City, where McVeigh was renting a room at the Dreamland Motel. He had checked in on April 14, Good Friday, and had quibbled with the owner, Lea McGowen, to bring down the price from \$25 to \$20 a night.

All the rooms at Dreamland have a motif, McGowen said, and McVeigh landed in the "Soldiers Room," which has framed prints of the US cavalry, Fort Riley and Col. George Custer nailed to its thin walls. He paid cash and parked a beat-up yellow 1977 Mercury Marquis with an Arizona registration plate next to his room.

The two men knew this area well. They had both been assigned to the 1st Infantry Division stationed at Fort Riley. They were soldiers from the storied "Big Red

One," which was steeped in the hell and glory of warfare from the beaches at Normandy to the rice fields of Vietnam to the sands of Kuwait. But when they signed up for basic training on the same day in 1988, it was the height of Ronald Reagan's America and the middle of an intense buildup of American military might. The two soldiers were discharged from the service in 1992.

McVeigh, a decorated veteran of Desert Storm, left with some bitterness after trying hard, but failing, to make the Special Forces. Later in 1993, he was tested for possible "Gulf War syndrome" ailments at a clinic in New York, according to the Buffalo News. Nichols was discharged based on "personal hardship," although records do not make it clear what the hardship was.

When the two men returned to Junction City, the post was no longer roaring the way it was during their tour of duty. This was the post-Cold War cutback. It is visible in the rundown look of local businesses and the sinking morale of the soldiers on the post. Used fake license to rent truck

On Monday morning, McVeigh and another man, believed to be "John Doe No. 2," went to Elliott's Auto Body just outside Junction City to rent a Ryder truck. They used a South Dakota driver's license with a fake name to rent the truck, and McVeigh drove it back to his hotel, where he parked it in the furthest corner of the parking lot, more than 200 feet from his room.

At the Great Western motel just down the road, two men, one fitting the description of "John Doe No. 2" and another who signed in with the name "Nichols," checked in to separate rooms, according to the motel manager.

On Tuesday, April 18, McVeigh checked out of Dreamland and the other two men checked out of Great Western.

That morning, McVeigh called Nichols at his home in Herington, according to FBI records. The two men met at approximately 7:30 at an undisclosed location in Junction City. They traveled approximately 15 miles back toward Herington to a self-storage unit they had rented. Investigators believe this may be the location where the chemicals for the bomb had either been stored or where the chemicals were actually mixed to make the explosive concoction of fertilizer and fuel.

According to an FBI affidavit, McVeigh then borrowed Nichols' truck and returned it with the words, "If I don't come back in a while, you'll clean out the storage shed." Which, the affidavit says, Nichols did on Thursday.

In the meantime, McVeigh and the unidentified fugitive made their way from Junction City to Oklahoma City, presumably with the huge bomb. On the morning of the bombing, McVeigh is seen on videotape obtained by the FBI standing in front of the federal building.

After the blast, it is believed John Doe No. 2 fled the scene in a separate car. McVeigh was stopped for speeding in his yellow Mercury approximately 90 minutes after the blast, and was found to be carrying a loaded 9mm Glock semiautomatic pistol with "cop-killer" bullets. It was not until two days later, and only minutes before he was to be released on bail, that local investigators realized they had the FBI's bombing suspect in custody.

"It couldn't have been any closer," said Assistant District Attorney Mark Gibson. "It may have been the only bit of luck we've had on this whole thing. The rest has just been tragedy."