Bomb Probe Beginning Today May Answer Questions

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By Jeff Holladay

An explosives and demolition specialist with the Oklahoma Miner Training Institute in Wilburton said today he has no trouble believing damage to the Alfred P. Murrah Federal Building in Oklahoma City on April 19 was caused by the blast from a Ryder rental truck loaded with Ammonium nitrate and fuel oil.

But two McCurtain County demolitions specialists split on their assessment - one saying he believed the damage was possible from a single bomb, another speculating that there was a secondary explosion from C710 or plastique explosives illegally kept in the building.

Mickey Bradley, one of the state's leading authorities on mining demolition, said he had "no heartburn" with news accounts that the blast came from a single source.

Nor did Larry Raymond, a blaster for Meridian stone's quarry just past the McCurtain County Higher Education Center.

Raymond, who has been working with explosives for 26 years, said he never gave much thought to blowing up a building. Yet it seems possible to him that the potent mixture of between 1,000 and 2,000 pounds of ammonium nitrate and fuel oil could have wrought such damage, he said.

Plastique Explosives?

But an ex-Army sergeant and demolition specialist from McCurtain County, who asked that his name not be used, said he's been skeptical from the beginning that the explosives in the truck caused all the damage.

Having viewed TV footage and seen illustrations of the bomb path, the former Army engineers demolition specialist has expressed skepticism almost from the beginning.

His contention is that, even as powerful as the blast from the truck bomb was, it would have been partially deflected and could not have caused the upward explosions from the bottom part of the building.

His own theory is that there was C-4 explosives or plastique in the building, probably in the hands of the ATF. "You can throw it across the room at a wall and it won't explode...you can stomp on it and it won't explode," the ex-Army sergeant said.

"You've got to have a special fuse to set it off; otherwise, it's not dangerous. You can shape it just like Play-doh. And just a little goes a long way.

"So it's not all that unusual to have law enforcement agents carry it with them to blow open a door on a raid. "They probably wouldn't store any other kind of explosive material in that building," he added.

"But they probably thought C-4 was perfectly safe since it takes a fuse to set it off."

"Yet C-4 also explodes without a fuse under 3,500 pounds of pressure - and the one eventuality the federal agents apparently never considered was a bomb blast that might trigger the plastique," the ex-military demolitions specialist said.

Time Element Debate

Bradley, however, has trouble believing there was a secondary explosion in the Murrah building some 10 to 11 seconds after the initial blast - an interpretation given seismographic readings by a geophysicist with the Oklahoma Geological Survey.

And while Dr. Ray Brown ofthe Oklahoma Geological Survey had trouble reconciling the second "event" on the seismograph machine with building collapse, Bradley said he didn't. "The ammonium nitrate and fuel oil mix creates more gas than any other type of explosive," Bradley said.

"So I have no problem believing a tremendous shock wave lifted the floors of the building, causing them to collapse in pancake fashion."

The time frame also was consistent for the collapsing floors, he said. But it wasn't for any secondary explosion.

Bradley said he worked with a Tulsa demolition expert last summer in bringing down the old 17 story Cotton Exchange Building in Dallas. "It took 11 seconds for it to get to the ground," he said.

And Bradley said he's convinced that if there had been a secondary explosion set off by other explosives in the building, it wpuld not have taken it 10 to 11 seconds to occur.

Reaction time in a secondary blast would have been within one second, he said.

"The total chemical reaction from the heat and gases takes place in just milliseconds, not seconds," he said.

A typical mine explosion, for example, takes just 4/1000 to 7/1000 of a second to occur, he said.

It is possible, though highly improbable, that there could have been a secondary explosion, Bradley concedes, but says he just can't imagine the circumstances.

The ex-Army demolition sergeant's explanation is that it likely took that long for the building to begin settling down - and that when it did, the huge pressure set off the C-4.

You can put a match or a lighter to it, he said, and it won!t explode. But under 3,500 pounds of pressure per square inch, it'll go off without a fuse, he said.

Bomb Probe Begins Today

Whatever the case, Bradley said, "As of today the bomb investigation begins in earnest with the completion of the search and rescue phase."

He said the FBI's bomb-investigation unit will lead the investigation, and Bradley calls them among the "best bomb experts in the world."