

Recovered License Plate Providing Clues in Blast - Tag Was Blown Off McVeigh's Car, Officials Say

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A license plate police had been searching for - apparently blown off the car of Oklahoma City bombing suspect Timothy McVeigh - was found less than a mile from the Alfred P. Murrah Federal Building, federal officials said Sunday.

The tag is a key piece of evidence helping investigators determine how attackers ignited the bomb and got away, the officials said.

After the bombing, investigators made a public plea for help in finding the license tag, amid speculation that it could have been blown off the car or was switched to a getaway car. Officials declined to elaborate on how the plate was recovered.

Explosives experts from the FBI and the federal Bureau of Alcohol, Tobacco and Firearms have theorized that whoever ignited the massive bomb had only two minutes and 12 seconds to get away before it exploded.

They believe that the license tag was blown off Mr. McVeigh's Mercury Marquis by the impact of the April 19 explosion, federal officials said.

Mr. McVeigh, the only person charged in the attack, was arrested near Perry, Okla., less than 90 minutes after the bombing. An Oklahoma State trooper stopped his Mercury Marquis for driving without a license tag.

In Oklahoma City on Sunday, officials considered the future of the teetering Murrah building, as workers fetched files and property from the wreckage.

One thing appears certain, officials said: The extent of the damage probably rules out repairs to the current structure.

Among the possibilities being considered are rebuilding at the same site or elsewhere, with the bomb site dedicated as a memorial, said Les Brorson, a spokesman for Oklahoma Sen. Don Nickles.

A meeting of the Oklahoma congressional delegation has been called for Monday by Republican Rep. Frank Lucas, whose district includes the bombed building.

"They have all the options," said Judy Parnell, regional director of portfolio management for the General Services Administration. "They will also be considering the feelings of residents, victims' families and the agencies that were housed in that building."

Bad weather represents a considerable risk until the structure is stabilized, she said.

"Things are continually dropping," she said. "There is still a big slab hanging up there at the top."

Ms. Parnell said an expert in building demolition has been hired to advise the GSA on what parts of the building are safe.

In areas deemed safe, workers are removing remaining files and trash because rain turns the paper into sodden weight that puts more stress on the building, Ms. Parnell explained.

A new federal office building could cost about \$30 million, she said more than twice its price tag when it opened in 1978.

A state government official, speaking on condition of anonymity, said the building will very likely be demolished - probably with explosives - after federal agencies salvage the files they can.

Oklahoma City police said Sunday that they are allowing victims and survivors to reclaim personal items collected from the blast scene.

They have filled a 40-foot trailer with photographs, billfolds, briefcases, purses and clothing from the the Murrah Building and nearby damaged vehicles, said Lt. Darrell Hatfield, supervisor of the police property management unit.

Investigators remain confident they will catch all the conspirators involved in the April 19 attack, but federal officials said it could take weeks and possibly months to build individual cases that could hold up in court.

The bombing presents federal investigators with an intricate tangle of physical evidence, witness accounts and leads that FBI and ATF agents have already taken giant strides toward unraveling, federal officials said.

"The nature of an investigation like this such that it is almost like running a movie backwards. You come back to the moment of the explosion and you keep running the movie backward until everyone that figures in is seen and identified and linked to it," said one federal official close to the ongoing investigation. "It's an incredibly complicated process."

Mr. McVeigh - the only publicly identified suspect - has refused to talk to interrogators. Hundreds of agents have fanned out across the country, seeking to recreate his life before the morning of April 19.

"The difficulty is, there are tips and leads that would confirm almost anything if they're valid. There's been so much reporting and coverage of this case that we're

now getting Timothy McVeigh showing up in more places than Forrest Gump," one federal official said. "We have to sort through all that."

Authorities have charged two of Mr. McVeigh's associates - brothers Terry and James Nichols - with federal explosives violations. Officials have expressed confidence they will charge Terry Nichols with complicity in the bombing but are less sure about James.

Authorities are also seeking a possible accomplice known only as John Doe No. 2, who is believed to have been with Mr. McVeigh when he rented a Ryder truck used in the bombing.

Some investigators, however, say they have grown skeptical about the elusive suspect, who has been positively identified only at the truck rental agency.

"They may have him confused with Terry Nichols," one official said last week. "You never get a sighting that has Terry Nichols and John Doe No. 2 at the same time."

Federal prosecutors have until the end of May to seek an indictment of Mr. McVeigh. They have just as long to decide whether to pursue additional charges against the Nichols brothers.

A key hurdle investigators have already cleared is understanding the bomb itself. Within two weeks after the explosion, FBI and ATF bomb experts had compiled enough to build an exact replica of the 4,800-pound ammonium nitrate and fuel oil or ANFO bomb in a Ryder truck identical to the one used in the attack.

Investigators believe that the device was built in the Ryder truck at a lakefront campsite 15 miles north of Terry Nichols' Kansas home. Fragments of the truck recovered at the blast site indicate that the bomb - 20 barrels of ANFO rigged with detonator cord and TNT - took up all but 10 feet of the truck's cargo bay, officials said.

"So you've got a lot of room to put it together right in the truck," an official said.

Two aspects of the bomb were especially compelling, federal officials said.

First was the precise makeup of its ANFO component - a homemade mixture so exact that one federal official said it was "of commercial quality,"

"That tells us that they practiced until they got it right," the official said.

Second was the short interval between ignition of the device and the explosion. Officials estimate that the bomber had only 2 minutes and 12 seconds to escape after lighting the 3-foot fuse that led from the Ryder truck's cab to the bomb packed in the front of its cargo bay. Based on computer modeling of the attack

and evidence found at the scene, officials theorize that the bomber was only eight-tenths of a mile away when the device went off.

"There was such a very short period of time that the person or persons who brought the truck to the scene left themselves to get away," a federal official said. "It's very cold-blooded. I think you could properly speculate that this was very carefully planned. The plan involve almost no margin for error. It also suggests that they had carefully practiced."

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Caption:

PHOTO(S): (The Dallas Morning News: Irwin Thompson)