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Fugitive linked to bombing case arrested by feds

NEW YORK TIMES NEWS SERVICE

A federal dragnet spread over three western states ended yesterday in the arrest of a gun-loving biochemist who is wanted for questioning in the April 19 bombing of the Alfred Murrah Federal Building.

Federal marshals arrested Steven Garrett Colbern on a federal firearms charge, unrelated to the Oklahoma City bombing, when a hotel owner in Oatman, Ariz., recognized him as a guest at his hotel and pointed him out.

Ted Tonioli said he recognized Mr. Colbern from pictures shown to him only a short time earlier by federal agents.

Mr. Colbern is the most recent prospect to be the elusive "John Doe No. 2," federal officials said.

Tom Nixon, chief deputy of the U.S. Marshal's Service in Phoenix, said Mr. Colbern was arrested yesterday afternoon. When agents approached, Mr. Colbern pulled a revolver from his pants pocket, Mr.

Biochemist apprehended on gun charge

Nixon said.

The agents wrestled Mr. Colbern to the ground and disarmed him, he said. The suspect was taken to nearby Bullhead City, and is scheduled to appear today before a federal magistrate in Phoenix.

The death toll in the explosion rose to 168 after a man died in the hospital from injuries suffered in the blast. John Youngblood, 52, was on the fourth floor of the federal building in the Department of Transportation office when the blast occurred.

Mr. Tonioli, owner of the Oatman Hotel, said in a telephone interview that he pointed Mr. Colbern out to marshals when he saw Mr. Colbern

buying a newspaper. He said they quickly approached Mr. Colbern and arrested him.

"They drew their guns and told him to get down on the ground," he said. "Then they double-handcuffed and loaded him into a car. He was hollering a little bit. He didn't like it when they put the cuffs on him."

A federal official in Washington said Mr. Colbern is wanted for questioning because of his reported friendship to jailed bombing suspect Timothy McVeigh.

There are also suspicions that Mr. Colbern may have been traveling in a brown pickup in tandem with a car driven by Mr. McVeigh after the explosion in downtown Oklahoma City, the official said.

The official, who spoke on condition of anonymity, said authorities also want to talk to Mr. Colbern because of his suspected ties to the militia group Arizona Patriots, which has headquarters in Kingman.

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U.S. marshals arrest Steve Colbern in Arizona, where the owner of a hotel recognized Mr. Colbern from photographs.

Fugitive

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Ariz., where Mr. McVeigh once lived.

Oatman, where Mr. Colbern was arrested, is about 25 miles southwest of Kingman, near the point where Arizona, California, and Nevada borders meet.

But the official in Washington cautioned that Mr. Colbern, 35, has not been identified as the John Doe No. 2 depicted in composite drawings circulated by the FBI.

"I just don't want to get people's hopes up," the official said.

Another senior federal official in Washington, who spoke on condition of anonymity, said Mr. Colbern may have associated with bombing suspect McVeigh.

"We have found a letter from McVeigh addressed to 'S.C.' and Colbern is thought to have used McVeigh's mailbox address in Arizona," the official said last night.

The official said Mr. Colbern's arrest "might help us clear up the mystery of John Doe No. 2." But, the official said, "We are not saying he is John Doe No. 2."

Shortly after the explosion, the worst act of domestic terrorism in United States history, Mr. McVeigh was stopped and arrested on I-35 in Perry, Okla., 60 miles north of Oklahoma City. His car was stopped because it had no license plate, and he was arrested when he was found to be carrying a gun and a knife, police said.

Terry Nichols surrendered to police in Herington, Kan., on April 21 after learning from news reports that his name had been linked to the bombing. Charges of blowing up the federal building have been filed against both Mr. McVeigh and Mr. Nichols. If convicted, they could face the death penalty. The two remained in solitary confinement yesterday at a federal prison in El Reno, 30 miles outside Oklahoma City.

Yesterday, the FBI, the Bureau of Alcohol, Tobacco, and Firearms, and the U.S. Marshal's Service formed a task force to catch Mr. Colbern, who was wanted on a federal warrant that says he failed to appear for trial on an unrelated weapons charge. The task force search covered California, Nevada, and Arizona.

The 6-foot-1, 195-pound Mr. Colbern was described as having a passing resemblance to the husky, square-jawed person depicted in the John Doe No. 2 composite drawing.

Bruce James, deputy U.S. marshal in Los Angeles, said Mr. Colbern had a scar on his right arm, but that he did not know whether the scar could be mistaken for a tattoo,

which has been included in the description of John Doe No. 2.

"The subject is considered armed and dangerous," Mr. James said.

On July 20, 1994, Mr. Colbern was arrested in Upland, east of Los Angeles, and charged with a federal offense of illegally carrying a gun silencer in his car. Police also found in the car two handguns, a Chinese-made assault rifle, and a mechanism used to convert a semiautomatic weapon into a fully automatic machine gun, a federal official in Los Angeles said.

The warrant for his arrest says he failed to appear for trial on Sept. 4, 1994, said the official, who did not want to be identified.

Mr. Colbern lived off and on in a trailer home in Bullhead City, about 20 miles northwest of Oatman. Neighbor Maybelle Hertig described him as an unfriendly man who nearly always wore fatigues and who received large shipments of ammunition through the mail.

Ms. Hertig said FBI agents Thursday closely examined a brown and beige pickup parked outside Mr. Colbern's trailer. But, she said, "that truck hasn't moved for six years."

Ms. Hertig said that 1½ years ago a parcel service delivered a heavy box filled with large gun shells to their home, and that it was addressed to Mr. Colbern. She said her husband asked Mr. Colbern what he was going to do with so much ammunition.

"He said, 'Well, we use it for target practice. We have a club,'" Ms. Hertig said. She said Mr. Colbern told her the shells were used to shoot large guns near Phoenix.

Ms. Hertig said a box of ammo addressed to Mr. Colbern was deliv-

ered two months later to a neighbor across the street.

More recently, Mr. Colbern was accompanied by another man, also dressed in fatigues, when he came to the trailer park, his neighbor said.

"I've seen him with the same gentleman at least three or four times," Ms. Hertig said, adding, "They would come in at night and leave early in the morning."

According to school records, Mr. Colbern enrolled in the University of California, Los Angeles, in the fall of 1979, but did not graduate with a bachelor of science in chemistry until March, 1989. During that period, he dropped out of school three times. He studied biological chemistry at UCLA for a brief time in 1991, but later dropped out, records show.

Most recently, Mr. Colbern was said to be living with his father in Oxnard, Calif., where — as a 1978 high school graduate — he was described as a student who excelled in science.

In another development yesterday, a convenience store clerk in Newkirk, Okla., said that on the day before the bombing she saw a man outside her store who matched the description of John Doe No. 2.

The clerk at the Newkirk Easy Mart, on the Oklahoma-Kansas border, said the man was in a yellow rental truck. Such a truck was used to carry the 4,800-pound bomb to the federal building. FBI spokesman Dan Vogel in Oklahoma City declined to comment on the report.

The clerk, who did not want to be identified, said she also thought she saw Terry Nichols and his blue pickup. That man, she said, walked into her store while three companions stayed outside.