

Bomb Probe Obstacles Surfacing; Witness Accounts Vary On McVeigh Sightings



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On April 19, shortly before 9 a.m., a motorist the FBI calls "Witness One" passed a yellow Ryder truck parked just outside the Alfred P. Murrah Federal Building in downtown Oklahoma City. As he drove along, a crew-cut pedestrian stepped into the road, rushing toward a parking lot across the street.

This fleeting glimpse by Witness One, whose name has not been disclosed by federal prosecutors, may turn out to be the best -- and perhaps only -- eyewitness account that places suspect Timothy James McVeigh at the Murrah building site just before the massive explosion that killed 168 people, according to court documents and federal law enforcement officials.

As the nationwide investigation continues, and thousands of true and false leads are followed by federal investigators, the difficulties in pulling together a solid case against those charged with the worst terrorist act in U.S. history -- McVeigh and his friend, Terry Lynn Nichols -- have become more apparent. Despite the early break in arresting McVeigh, investigators still face many unanswered questions as they try to link him conclusively to the bombing.

The most perplexing problems at this point involve the fuzzy recollections and contradictory statements offered by eyewitnesses about McVeigh's movements on the morning of the bombing. The most reliable eyewitnesses may be those whose stories were obtained by the FBI before McVeigh's intense gaze and military bearing became etched in the public consciousness.

McVeigh's attorneys already have seized on these inconsistencies. Speaking at a preliminary hearing eight days after the bombing, McVeigh's then chief lawyer, John W. Coyle III, warned that because his client appeared on national television "every half hour for a couple of days . . . we are very concerned that because of the intense and pervasive publicity in this case that there is a very high degree of probability {that} all the alleged eyewitnesses at this point have been tainted." (McVeigh now is represented by his court-appointed lawyer Stephen Jones.)

Three witnesses besides Witness One, for example, were cited in an April 21 affidavit as recognizing McVeigh as someone they saw outside the Murrah building before the bombing. Their identification was based on a composite FBI drawing they had been shown.

But a day or two later, after seeing actual TV footage of McVeigh, the three called the FBI and said they were "not able to identify him as {the man they saw} being at the {Murrah} building," according to court documents.

Other eyewitnesses have given what appear to be conflicting statements about McVeigh and his whereabouts that morning. These accounts were described by the FBI at a federal court hearing on April 27, eight days after the explosion.

A man the FBI calls "Witness Two" was standing outside an office building that is separated from the Murrah building by a parking lot. Based on the FBI sketch of the suspect, he said he saw a man resembling McVeigh twice that morning.

The first time was between 8:30 and 8:45 a.m., when the man resembling McVeigh was seated in a yellow Mercury. Witness Two said he saw the man again a few minutes later when the yellow Mercury was speeding down an alley away from the Murrah building. He placed this second sighting just before the bomb went off at 9:03 a.m.

Witness Two also believed he saw two people in the car as it sped away. But his account appears to contradict the recollections of "Witness Three," a meter maid who said she saw a man resembling McVeigh sitting not in a yellow Mercury but behind the wheel of a Ryder truck about 20 minutes before the bombing.

As the truck approached, Witness Three told the FBI, it was traveling at low speed. She said she thought the man driving it was going to stop and ask her some questions. As she recalled, there was only one individual, the man resembling McVeigh, in the truck's cab when she spotted it around 8:40 a.m.

Yet another witness, known as "Witness Four," offered yet another version of events, apparently contradicting the meter maid's account. He said he noticed a Ryder truck that morning parked at a business location several blocks from the federal building. Unlike Witness Three, he saw two people in the truck's cab when they stopped to ask for directions "not too long" before the explosion, according to the FBI.

The FBI has not yet tested the recollections of Witnesses One through Four by asking them to identify McVeigh from a lineup. But it did hold a lineup on April 22 with four other witnesses, who had said they recognized McVeigh as someone they saw at the Murrah building in early April, days before the bombing.

Only one of the witnesses correctly identified McVeigh from among the eight individuals in the lineup. That witness told the FBI she did not see McVeigh the day of the bombing but did spot him at the Murrah building "one week before the bombing and possibly again on the 17th and 18th."

Other evidence compiled in the investigation, however, raises questions about this account. It indicates that McVeigh probably was not in Oklahoma City on the

18th and probably not on the 17th, the day he picked up a Ryder truck that had been reserved in advance.

The FBI does have persuasive eyewitness and physical evidence that McVeigh rented the truck that carried the bomb. A woman and two men who worked at Elliott's Body Shop in Junction City, Kan., have identified McVeigh as the person who signed for a Ryder truck in the name of Bob Kling. The three aided the artist who drew the original composites of McVeigh and another man who, they say, came with him to the rental office. This other man is the elusive John Doe No. 2, who has been the subject of a massive FBI hunt and remains at large.

After the explosion, investigators recovered an axle of the Ryder truck a block away from the bomb blast in front of the Regency Tower Apartments where it had hit a car. FBI bomb experts determined it had been involved in an explosion because, according to court documents, it showed "unique blast damage." Although made of heavy metal, each end of the axle had been twisted differently.

The rear bumper of the truck also showed blast damage and the side rails of the back of the truck's trailer indicated the bomb was contained inside it. A license plate, still attached to the rear bumper, and six numerals and one or two letters of the vehicle identification number on the axle showed that this was the same vehicle rented by McVeigh.

One bit of evidence that prosecutors contend may link McVeigh to the detonation of the bomb is a substance found on his clothing when he was arrested about 80 minutes after the explosion during a traffic stop near Perry, Okla. An FBI laboratory test carried out on his shirt indicated traces of an explosive commonly used in detonating cord. Staff researcher Barbara J. Saffir contributed to this report.