

Bomb Suspect's Friend says McVeigh Cased Building - Witnesses Coming Forth For Immunity, Police Say

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An Army buddy of bombing suspect Timothy McVeigh has acknowledged driving Mr. McVeigh to Oklahoma City to case the federal building before it was blown up, a federal official said Friday.

Michael Fortier, 27, a Kingman, Ariz., resident with ties to militia groups, is attempting to negotiate a deal with federal prosecutors in exchange for his cooperation in the case, said the official, who declined to be named.

Mr. Fortier, who could not be reached for comment Friday, had denied being directly involved in the bombing. But he has said he and Mr. McVeigh inspected the Alfred P. Murrah Federal Building about a week before the blast.

Other witnesses have told investigators that they believe they saw Mr. McVeigh and others in Oklahoma City in the days before the bombing, looking over the building and its security.

Investigators said Mr. Fortier resembles one of several men apparently casing a federal building in Omaha, Neb., several weeks before the Oklahoma explosion. Witnesses said the men asked specific questions about the federal Bureau of Alcohol, Tobacco and Firearms offices in the building, including queries about the number of agents and how many carried guns.

Authorities have said Mr. Fortier is one of several potential witnesses in the case who are trying to negotiate deals or immunity agreements with prosecutors.

Mr. Fortier met Mr. McVeigh in the Army in 1988, helped him get a job at the Kingman hardware store where he worked and asked Mr. McVeigh to serve as his best man in his 1994 wedding.

Earlier this month, authorities searched Mr. Fortier's Kingman home and confiscated seven guns. They also took wedding pictures and videos from a Las Vegas hotel where Mr. Fortier was married.

In another development, the former wife of Terry Nichols, the other man charged in the bombing, said Friday that she's convinced he was not involved. That's because, Lana Padilla said, Mr. Nichols had recently bought a house in the Midwest with his current wife.

"Knowing what Terry was doing prior to this . . . that gives me a feeling that he could not have known the Oklahoma bombing was going to take place," Ms.

Padilla said a day after she testified before a federal grand jury in Oklahoma investigating the blast.

Also Friday, a federal judge denied a request by lawyers Johnnie Cochran and Michael Blue that they inspect the federal building to gather evidence for a lawsuit they filed for four bombing victims against a Dallas-based fertilizer maker.

The suit accuses ICI Explosives USA Inc. of negligence for not adding material to its fertilizer that would have reduced its explosive nature. ICI Explosives says it has not seen evidence that it made the fertilizer used in the bomb.

Mr. Cochran, one of O.J. Simpson's lawyers, and Mr. Blue of Oklahoma City said that without their own investigation of the building, their lawsuit could be irreparably prejudiced.