

Buddy of McVeigh Tells of Scouting Trip

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WASHINGTON -- An Army buddy of Timothy McVeigh, the first suspect charged in the Oklahoma City bombing, has told federal authorities that he and McVeigh inspected the Alfred P. Murrah Federal Building there as a target several days before the blast, law enforcement officials said Friday

Michael Fortier, a close friend of McVeigh from their days together at Fort Riley, Kan., also told the authorities that McVeigh confided to him about plans for the bombing months earlier when McVeigh was with him in Kingman, Ariz., the officials said.

Fortier made the statements to federal prosecutors as part of negotiations toward a possible deal in which he may cooperate with the government, said the officials, who spoke on condition of anonymity.

Fortier said the two men drove from Arizona to the federal building in Oklahoma about a week before the bombing in a visit that officials said appeared to be a trip to inspect the nine-story structure.

Fortier has denied that he had any direct role in the bombing. Nevertheless, authorities have been intensely interested in him since the blast. They had questioned him and searched his trailer in Kingman and an adjoining storage shed but had said they had no basis to suspect him of involvement.

The offer of cooperation could represent an important breakthrough in an investigation that has appeared stalled in recent weeks, with hundreds of federal agents working nationwide in a frustrating search for possible conspirators. In addition to McVeigh, one other man, Terry Nichols, has been charged in the April 19 blast, which killed 167 people, including a nurse who died in the rescue effort.

Fortier's discussions with the government began after he was subpoenaed earlier this month to testify to a federal grand jury in Oklahoma City. Rather than testify under oath, Fortier apparently approached the government about a negotiated settlement and made his statements about McVeigh in an initial offer of the kind of evidence he could provide.

It was not clear whether prosecutors believe Fortier is culpable in the case or could be charged as an accessory to the bombing.

It is possible that he would seek full immunity from prosecution in return for his information, but prosecutors may be unlikely to accept such a deal from anyone with knowledge of the blast.

The officials said that federal prosecutors were unlikely to agree to any deal without closely examining his account because they are wary of entering into any arrangement now that might later prove unwarranted if investigators find additional evidence implicating him in the attack.

It was unclear whether Fortier provided the government with any information about the possible involvement of Nichols or other possible confederates in what the authorities have said they believe is a wider circle of conspirators.

Fortier's statements, if investigators verify them, represent the most important break in the ranks of silence of McVeigh's few known associates and the first person to directly implicate McVeigh in the bombing.

Nichols, who turned himself in to authorities three days after the bombing, told investigators McVeigh had told him days before the blast that "something big" was about to happen. But he denied further knowledge of the plot, an assertion prosecutors rejected after linking him to purchases of the kind of fertilizer used in the attack.

Federal agents said they were optimistic that Fortier could rejuvenate an investigation that has seemed to slowly lose momentum in recent weeks. Investigators have recently seemed unable to move the case forward after the thousands of tips to a public hot line dwindled and each fresh lead seemed to take agents to another dead end.

Fortier, according to other soldiers who served in their unit at Fort Riley, was one of McVeigh's closest friends in the Army. They lived in the same barracks for nearly three years, beginning in 1988

Caption:

Photo: Warr Acres police Lt. R.L. Patty and his daughter Christy view a memorial service staged Friday for the 12 law enforcement officers killed in the bombing of the Oklahoma City federal building (p.16) Associated Press