

'John Doe No. 2' Officially Eliminated as Bomb Suspect

Probe: Sources say man is a soldier who was in Ryder agency the day before McVeigh's alleged arrival. FBI hasn't ruled out an additional suspect.

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WASHINGTON — The Justice Department on Wednesday officially erased "John Doe No. 2" as a suspect in the Oklahoma City bombing, but added that the FBI is investigating whether someone else helped accused terrorist Timothy J. McVeigh rent the truck that carried the deadly explosive.

Sources close to the case said the man identified as John Doe No. 2 in widely circulated sketches is Todd D. Bunting, a 23-year-old Ft. Riley, Kan., soldier who was at the Kansas Ryder truck rental agency within 24 hours of the time on April 17 when McVeigh allegedly rented the vehicle used in bombing the Alfred P. Murrah Federal Building.

Bunting is a private first class who apparently went to the agency, Elliott's Body Shop, to help a sergeant move his belongings to the central Kansas Army base, sources said. Bunting, an infantryman assigned to fighting vehicles, is away from Ft. Riley on personal leave until the end of June, Army officials said, and could not be reached for comment.

Without using Bunting's name, the Justice Department statement said the FBI had interviewed "an individual who was in Elliott's Body Shop in Junction City, Kan., on a day other than the day [April 17, 1995] that the truck that contained the explosive that damaged the Murrah building was rented."

"That individual resembles the sketch previously circulated as the second of two men who rented the truck on April 17, and who has been called John Doe 2," the statement continued. "The bureau has determined that the individual who has been interviewed was not connected with the bombing.

"The FBI is continuing to investigate whether there was a second man who participated in the rental of the Ryder truck on April 17."

A Justice Department official said the statement was issued in response to The Times' story Wednesday reporting that federal authorities believed they had identified John Doe No. 2, but thought he probably had nothing to do with the attack.

While the identification of Bunting may solve one mystery for investigators, it causes other problems. Government sources said that Bob Elliott, the rental agency employee who provided details for the nationally circulated sketches of John Doe No. 2, was confused in linking him with McVeigh. But Elliott, who helped create a sketch of McVeigh that proved highly accurate, is said to be insisting that a second man was in the agency with the accused bomber.

Elliott's error about John Doe No. 2 could be explained by the extraordinary amount of "confusion, pressure and activity" at the shop in the days after the bombing.

Another government source noted that "witnesses' memories can play funny tricks," but noted that while he confused the timing of Bunting's visit, nothing detracted from Elliott's ability to recall facial details.

Even so, the mix-up could undercut the credibility of Elliott, a major government witness if criminal trials begin in the case.

McVeigh's lawyer, Stephen Jones, said he believes investigators are scrambling now to try to shore up Elliott's credibility. "But now it turns out that he's less than certain about whether there ever was a John Doe 2. This calls into question serious problems about the witness's credibility and whether he can ever truthfully testify that Mr. McVeigh was inside his rental agency."

Jones said the government has blocked his investigators from talking to Elliott, and that he would ask a federal judge to order the government to allow him access. Jones' investigators have been turned away twice at the shop, the second time after Ryder officials said they could talk to Elliott.

For the past three days, an FBI agent has been parked outside the shop and has prevented Jones' investigators from entering, the lawyer said.

If any damage is done to Elliott's credibility, however, it is unlikely to undermine the case against McVeigh because the government has amassed substantial physical evidence linking him to the bombing, a source close to the case said. "We've got enough to bury him," he said.

Bunting, who joined the Army on March 17, 1994, is on personal leave in connection with the death of his mother-in-law, Alma Lee McKay, in an auto accident Monday near her home in Florence County, S.C., Army officials said.

A local paper, the Florence Morning News, on June 7 reported that the FBI had questioned Bunting and his wife. A government official said Wednesday that the newspaper's account was "right on the money."

His wife, Denise, told the newspaper that her husband was at Elliott's Body Shop on April 16, the day before McVeigh allegedly was there, to help Sgt. Paul Hertig, then of Ft. Riley, move to the base from his residence off base.

The two men were returning a Ryder truck that they had used in the move, Denise Bunting told the newspaper. Hertig has since been reassigned, the Army said, and could not be reached Wednesday.

"The proximity in time between McVeigh's and Bunting's appearances at Elliott's Body Shop is apparently where the confusion occurred in the descriptions provided to the FBI by employees, Denise Bunting said she was told by the FBI," the Florence paper reported.

While the first composite sketch of John Doe No. 2 bore no resemblance to her husband, she said the second sketch "bore a striking resemblance to her husband," the newspaper said.

Bunting has a tattoo on his left arm, according to a picture provided to the Florence paper. That was one of the distinguishing characteristics that the FBI included in its description of John Doe No. 2.

Ostrow reported from Washington and Serrano from Ft. Riley.

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