

ATF's Explanation Disputed

Sunday, July 30, 1995 - McCurtain Sunday Gazette

By J.D. Cash with Jeff Holladay

Three elevator repairmen for the Alfred P. Murrah Federal Building dispute the escape claim made by ATF's resident agent on the day the Oklahoma City building collapsed from bomb explosions April 19. The men, who were on the scene just minutes after the devastating blasts, told the Gazette that the ATF chief's claims were simply not possible.

Because of what it said were widespread rumors that ATF agents had evacuated the Murrah building prior to the blasts, the ATF sent out a news release from its Dallas office and agent-in-charge Lester Martz on May 23 saying the allegations were "entirely false."

That story also claimed that the head of the local ATF, office in the Murrah building, was just departing the building in an elevator when the blasts occurred: "ATF's Resident Agent in Charge Alex McCauley was with a DEA agent in the elevator when the bomb exploded. The elevator dropped in a free fall from the eight floor to the third. The two men were trapped in the smoke-filled elevator. The emergency buttons and the phone were inoperable. On their fourth attempt they managed to break through the doors and escape the elevator.

Pure fantasy, says repairman Duane James. He clearly recalled checking and double-checking each elevator that terrible morning just to make certain no one was trapped in one, James told J.D. Cash. Of the six passenger elevators, five were stopped between floors, their doors blown inward, prompting the safety mechanisms to freeze them in place, he said. "Once that occurs, the doors cannot be opened — period," James said. "What I and some others did was kick in the ceilings on each of those elevators and determined that no one was in them."

He said only one passenger elevator could later be repaired and operated manually, "and that one was sitting at floor level on three or four.

"And it had no one in it and was, very possibly, sitting at that floor when the power went off after the blast. Certainly, it had not 'free-fallen,' he said, nor had any of the others. He also said that he and other maintenance people also checked to see if any of the emergency switches had been tripped. Those switches limit speed and cut power to the elevator if they start accelerating too fast for some reason — such as a "free fall," he explained. "None of those switches were tripped on any of the elevators in that building," he said. "I, along with other men with our company, checked the equipment several times.

"Absolutely no elevators dropped that morning."

In fact, James added, it is impossible for modern elevators such as those in the Murrah building to "free fall" or drop "unless you cut the cables because they are counter-balanced to protect the occupants from just that sort of danger."

More Confirmation of Explosives

Meanwhile, despite claims to the contrary by the ATF, the McCurtain Gazette has obtained more photos and eyewitness accounts confirming that the Bureau of Alcohol, Tobacco and Firearms maintained a huge cache of weapons and explosives in the Murrah building at the time of the April 19 explosion that killed 268 people — the worst such incident in the nation's history.

The Gazette had previously reported on July 7 that an eyewitness interviewed by J.D. Cash told of removing a substantial number of weapons and explosives from the ninth floor of the stricken building some two weeks after it was torn apart by bomb blasts.

Those weapons included a TOW antitank missile and ammunition. Now, two more civilians have come forward to describe the arms magazine in even more stunning detail. The two witnesses (whom we will call Andy and Tom in order to protect their anonymity) add even more credibility to the concept that secondary explosions at the building were the result of explosives illegally stored by members of federal law enforcement agencies that office on the ninth floor of the Murrah building. Andy, a civilian contractor hired to perform certain functions for the GSA during the rescue operations, actually helped the ATF, DEA and Secret Service remove weapons and gun safes from the ninth floor about two weeks after the explosion.

Recalling the amazing variety of weapons the ATF agents had stored in the remains of their magazine, he exclaimed: "They had everything! ... Home-made zip guns, AK-47s, sawed-off shotguns, AR-15s, M-16s — literally hundreds of guns. You name it, they had it all ... any kind of weapon you could ever want." He also said he recalls seeing an ATF agent with a five-gallon bucket of hand grenades.

Being a Vietnam combat veteran, he was no stranger to military-style explosives and said the grenades were green-colored but smooth surfaced, probably concussion rather than fragment grenades. He said the ATF moved the weapons from the ninth floor into the basement parking garage, then hauled them away in a truck.

But on the west side of the building, he said, there were literally mounds of cases of ammunition.

He recalled the walls of west end of the site where the ammunition was stored had been blown out.

"The stuff was everywhere," he said of the ammunition. Tom, another eyewitness to the ninth floor weapons room, also provided a vivid description of the remains of the ATF arsenal:

"What is left of that (ATF magazine) room is in the far southeast end of the ninth floor but much of it was blown away and (apparently) disappeared into the rubble right on top of the America's Kids Day Care Center," he said.

Equally horrific, the room sat atop the area where most of the casualties in the building occurred in the April 19 disaster. Popularly referred to by rescuers and the media as "the pit area," it is a coned-in area on the east side of the building where the worst of the human carnage took place ... and which took rescuers some 30 days to work through.

'Scandal of the Decade'?

In a related matter, the Gazette has learned that a well-known Oklahoma trial attorney has been retained by a victim of the Oklahoma City bombing disaster. Asking that his name not be included in the story, the attorney said his client has provided him with startling evidence that, indeed, there were secondary explosions the day of the bombing. He believes they were the result of illegally stored explosives in the building.

One Oklahoma attorney, who has examined much of the evidence amassed, said "possible malfeasance by these federal law enforcement agencies could lead, in terms of dollar amount, to the largest classaction lawsuit in Oklahoma history."

Same Story from FBI

Despite a call for an investigation of the ATF by some victims and families of the victims of the bombing, the FBI has never wavered in its official explanation that the bomb blast was caused by a single explosion from a fertilizer-and-fuel oil bomb in a rental truck parked outside the federal building.

The Gazette, however, reported in an exclusive copyrighted story on May 4 that the Oklahoma Geological Survey's seismographs showed two separate and distinct blasts rather than a single bomb. Though shunned by the Associated Press and other news media, to whom it was sent, the story gained wide currency via the Internet and FAX machines and has prompted increasing skepticism of the "official" version.