

McVeigh Wasn't Silent After Arrest; Suspect Is Portrayed As Polite and Smooth



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In his first meeting with government agents after the bombing of the Alfred P. Murrah Federal Building, Timothy J. McVeigh blurted out a statement investigators believe further incriminates him in the worst terrorist attack ever on U.S. soil.

McVeigh was being held in the tiny Noble County Jail in Perry, Okla., on a routine traffic charge when FBI agents paid him a visit two days after the April 19 bombing.

Did he know why they had come, they asked, according to documents in the case.

"Yes," McVeigh replied. "That thing in Oklahoma City, I guess."

Until that moment, McVeigh had not been told that he was a suspect in the case, the FBI contends.

It was April 21, and what had begun as a massive FBI manhunt for suspected international terrorists had quickly and surprisingly moved to McVeigh's jail cell, only an hour's drive from the blast site.

Through FBI reports, government search warrants, the sheriff's logs and jail booking cards, as well as more than a dozen witness statements and interviews, a full picture has emerged of the eventful 48 hours from the time McVeigh was stopped by an unsuspecting law enforcement officer for driving without a license plate to the moment when FBI agents James L. Norman Jr. and Floyd M. Zimms arrived at the Noble County Jail.

The records have remained confidential since the bombing, many of them ordered sealed under a protective order issued by a federal judge.

Obtained by the Los Angeles Times, they reveal a McVeigh sharply different from the one sources had portrayed. He was not the silent soldier who gave jailers only his "name, rank and serial number." Rather, he was often polite. And smooth.

Oklahoma State Highway Patrol Trooper Charles J. Hanger told the FBI he stopped McVeigh at 10:20 a.m., just short of 80 minutes after the bomb went off

in Oklahoma City. McVeigh was headed north on Interstate 35, driving a yellow 1977 Mercury Marquis with no license plate.

McVeigh was the first to step from his car. When he showed his driver's license to Hanger, the officer noticed a bulge in McVeigh's jacket and asked him to open his jacket.

McVeigh acknowledged he had a gun -- a .45-caliber Glock military assault pistol, with a Black Talon impact-expanding bullet in the chamber, hanging in a shoulder holster.

Taken into custody and assigned prisoner No. 95-057, McVeigh initially was charged with unlawfully carrying a weapon, transporting a loaded firearm in a vehicle, failing to display a license tag and having no insurance.

On April 21, the FBI arrested McVeigh in jail. They told him he would be flown to Oklahoma City. He said he was concerned about "my safety." Asked what he meant, McVeigh said, "You remember what happened with Jack Ruby."

Later the government, with McVeigh's consent, took hair samples from his head, forearms and pubic area. They took scrapings from under all of his fingernails -- apparently in search of bomb residue.

On the way back to his cell, he could see news reports on a nearby TV describing his arrest and the crowd massing outside the jail. But Sheriff Jerry Cook said McVeigh never asked for a bulletproof vest, a claim McVeigh made in a Newsweek interview.

Back in his cell, McVeigh was losing his composure. He began to rant to Tiffany Valenzuela, a female inmate from Tulsa, Okla., in a nearby cell.

"I don't know what the deal is," she remembered him saying. "After this sketch of the guy who bombed the federal building . . . they say it looks just like me. . . . But he's got a double chin and bigger ears than I do. . . . That's not me."

In a statement to authorities, she said she told him to sit down, to calm down, to not be afraid, because "if you didn't do anything" you shouldn't be scared.

That bolstered him. "Okay," he said. "I'm not scared. I'm not scared right now."