

Sources: Bombing was revenge

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May 12 - Former members of a radical paramilitary group and a retired FBI agent believe last year's bombing of the Alfred P. Murrah Federal Building in Oklahoma City may have been revenge for the execution of one of its members.

Richard Wayne Snell, a member of the Covenant, the Sword and the Arm of the Lord (CSA), was executed on April 19, 1995 - 12 hours after an oil and gas fertilizer bomb ripped the Murrah building apart, killing 168 people.

Snell and the CSA had targeted the same federal building for bombing after the 1983 death of North Dakota farmer Gordon Kahl in a fiery confrontation with federal authorities in Arkansas.

Retired FBI agent Jack Knox told The Denver Post that he believes Snell, who killed a black Arkansas state trooper and a pawnshop owner from Texarkana, Ark., had the ability to engineer the Oklahoma City bombing from his death row cell.

"I think there was liaison or a definite communication to the people who were in the movement and Snell," said Knox, who spent the last part of his 29 years with the FBI investigating the CSA and tax protester Kahl.

Knox said members of the patriot movement knew the date of Snell's execution and that the Oklahoma City blast "might be ... in memory of him."

Knox said he received a flurry of phone calls from ex-CSA members certain that the Oklahoma City bombing "had to be connected with Snell."

A former high-ranking Arkansas prison official told The Denver Post that during the four days before Snell's execution, Snell repeatedly predicted that there would be a bombing or an explosion the day of his death.

The official, Alan Ables, said he was so concerned that he took extraordinary personal precautions the day of the execution. "Based on what I was hearing from the management team and ... briefings, I was concerned enough" to take the precautions, said Ables, a retired Navy officer who was legislative assistant to the director of the Arkansas Department of Corrections.

Ables said that Snell's execution date had been set and publicized well in advance, but it was not until two weeks before the execution that Arkansas officials realized that it was scheduled on a date revered by America's extreme right wing.

April 19 is the anniversary of the government's raid on the Branch Davidian compound in Waco, Texas, and "Patriot's Day" in New England.

And it also was the day 10 years earlier - April 19, 1985 - when members of the CSA compound in Arkansas peacefully surrendered to a force of more than 200 lawmen following a four-day standoff.

Retired FBI agent Knox said the former CSA members he knew went into shock after the Oklahoma City bombing because it "brought back memories of the CSA and what could have happened."

"Some of them were sources I had used, and they had to start therapy sessions again. It was just hurt, shock," said the former G-man.

During his investigation of the CSA, Knox established a relationship with its founder, Jim Ellison, who eventually became a government witness.

During a sedition trial of other militant, anti-government right-wingers held in Fort Smith, Ark., in the late 1980s, prosecution witness Ellison mentioned the CSA plot to bomb buildings in Dallas and Oklahoma City, according to court records.

Knox said that Ellison told him of at least one "scouting" trip, and possibly two more, that Ellison, Snell and another CSA member took to study potential bombing targets in Dallas and Oklahoma City.

Ellison told him that the explosive to be used was a C-4 plastic, not an oil and fertilizer bomb similar to that allegedly used in Oklahoma City. Snell and CSA member Bill Thomas had previously used a C-4 explosive in the unsuccessful bombing of a natural gas pipeline in Arkansas.

Ellison did not mention specific targets in conversations with Knox.

But Kerry Noble, who was second-in-command for the CSA, told The Denver Post that Ellison and Snell specifically singled out the Murrah building in Oklahoma City in conversations he had with them.

The reason the Murrah building was picked was because of its "low security; so many government offices in the same building, in the middle of America - the heartland," said Noble. "No one would suspect it; it would be more shocking than if you blew up something in Los Angeles or New York. We knew nobody would expect it."

Although the CSA manufactured homemade rockets, the conspirators had decided to use C-4 explosives against the buildings. Oil and fertilizer bombs were never discussed, he said.

Noble, who like Ellison eventually became a government witness, now denounces right-wing terrorism and speaks to law enforcement groups about right-wing organizations. Noble served time for a charge of conspiracy to possess unlawful weapons.

According to Noble, the CSA bombing plot included the Murrah building, the Dallas office of the Anti-Defamation League and a number of overpasses on major highways around Dallas. He said the CSA also hoped to pull a major robbery in Las Vegas, Nev. "There were plans to go to Las Vegas and do some kind of diamond or jewelry show and do a major heist," Noble said.

Both Knox and Noble said that the June 1983 death of Kahl, the tax protester and a Posse Comitatus member accused of killing two U.S. marshals in North Dakota, was a catalyst that galvanized right-wing extremists.

Noble said that weeks after Kahl died, Ellison attended an annual gathering of right-wing groups in Idaho.

"Ellison had gone up to the Aryan Nations for their annual meeting, and that's when he and several of the other leaders had gotten together and said enough is enough and we're going to have to start doing things to make money to finance the movement and to retaliate against the government," Noble said.

Headquartered in Hayden Lake, Idaho, the Aryan Nations is an anti-Semitic paramilitary group that advocates the establishment of a white state. When Ellison returned to Arkansas, the CSA embarked on a plan of revenge that included assassinations and bombings, according to Noble and former government officials.

In addition to the sites targeted in Oklahoma City and Dallas, the plan called for the assassination of FBI agent Knox and then-U.S. Attorney Asa Hutchinson. They were prosecuting suspects who aided Kahl in Arkansas. The CSA also targeted Federal District Judge Franklin Waters, who was presiding over the case.

Noble said that the conspirators were aware of the huge loss of life the bombings would cause. But he said the targets were picked to conform with the warnings contained in two "declarations of war" - one issued by the CSA in 1983, and the second by the neo-Nazi group The Order in 1984.

Noble said the CSA and The Order declared that for every member of the "movement" killed by the government, the movement would kill two-to-seven times as many people in return. Organizations comprising the "movement" tend to have a white-supremacist orientation and a basic belief that existing government is evil and should be overthrown. Noble has no doubt that the attack on the Murrah building was a continuation of The Order's declaration of war, which was never rescinded. He said he believes that Snell's execution played a greater part in the bombing of the Murrah building than Waco. Noble said that he heard the first bulletins about Oklahoma City over his car radio.

"As soon as I heard it, I thought, "Man, they've done it. They actually went and done it.' They started talking about foreign terrorists, and I said, "There is no way. It's the right-wing.'

"Dates are so important in the movement," he said. "Everything has to have some kind of significance, either with the dates or numbers or something. So you had that. You had Snell being executed that same day, and it was the same building I knew that we had targeted. Everything just fit together."

Snell, who killed a Texarkana pawnshop dealer for no reason other than that Snell believed he was Jewish, was somebody you didn't cross, said Noble.

Retired FBI agent Knox said that not only was he marked for assassination by Snell but that Snell actually broke into his house and vandalized it.

"When I met him in Texarkana (at) the murder trial, he was a different kind of person," Knox said.

"He was one of the few people I ever had difficulty communicating with. Ellison, you could communicate with him, and the rest of them. There was no way to reach Snell."

Ables said that on four to five occasions during the four days before his execution, Snell mentioned that "there was going to be a bomb, there was going to be an explosion" the day of his execution and somebody in the Mideast would be blamed.

Those comments, plus other information Arkansas officials received, caused Ables to take precautions.

"I took some precautions personally because of what ... I perceived as some really strange possibilities here," said Ables, who survived the Beirut bombing.

Ables clearly remembers Snell's final words.

"His statement was, "Governor Tucker, look over your shoulder, I wouldn't trade places with any of you or any of your political cronies. Hell has victory, I'm at peace.'"

In the hours before his 9 p.m. execution, Snell chuckled and laughed as he watched television coverage of the Oklahoma City disaster, Ables recalled.

When he heard news of the Oklahoma City explosion, Ables said he immediately suspected people with links to Snell.

"Snell ... was the kind of guy who did a lot of writing for a lot of these militia groups," Ables said. "He was well-connected. He was in the network."

During its 12 years of existence, the CSA was involved in a series of episodes that included the arson of a Missouri church, the firebombing of an Indiana synagogue and the attempted bombing of a natural gas pipeline.

According to Knox, he was singled out for assassination by the CSA because he persuaded the daughter of a man who helped shelter Gordon Kahl to testify against her father. The CSA considered his actions "Biblically wrong," said Knox, and that "made me evil."

Knox said he has talked to the FBI about his concerns that the Oklahoma City bombing is linked to Snell's execution.

And Ables said soon after the Oklahoma City explosion the FBI obtained prison records listing Snell's visitors and the persons he wrote.

"They've (the FBI) been involved all along," said Ables.

Attorneys for bombing suspect Timothy McVeigh have also taken an interest in the Snell execution, claiming in court documents that the government has paid too little attention to any possible connection between the Oklahoma City bombing and Snell's death.

Noble said that in the 1980s, Snell was an "emissary" between various radical right-wing groups who would "go from group to group and pass information and get reports." He said McVeigh reminds him of a young Snell.

"He's like somebody who would go from group to group to relay information and deliver stuff," said Noble of McVeigh. "He is a loner, it looks like."

According to Noble, the assassinations were nearly carried out but were foiled when the van carrying six CSA members, including himself, Ellison and Snell, crashed and was totaled. Noble said he and Ellison were not to take part directly in the assassinations, but Snell and two other men were.

"Me, Ellison and one of the other elders (of the CSA) were going to stay in Fayetteville and make ourselves publicly known, an alibi type of thing, and the other three, which included Snell, were supposed to go and actually do the killing," said Noble.

"We were just driving them for support. We weren't actually going to do anything because we were the leadership, we were supposed to be protected."

The targets of the assassination were in nearby Fort Smith, and one of the targets, then-U.S. Attorney Hutchinson, chuckles now about how it ended.

"They had, in fact, left their compound to carry out their mission when they had a wreck on the way. They were coming and in Eureka Springs got derailed by a snowstorm," said Hutchinson, laughing.

He said the government first learned of the assassination plot from an informer after the attempt failed. Maps and diagrams of the homes of Knox, Hutchinson and Judge Waters were later seized at the CSA compound in April 1985.

Noble said the bomb plot did not materialize because CSA members were still concentrating on the assassination aspect of their revenge plan when their activities were shut down.

Noble said the radical right movement is at a critical point currently, with the older "founding fathers" of the movement starting to die off.

Those people want to see something happen before they die, and the "young bucks," who were teenagers when the CSA and The Order were around, want to prove themselves, said Noble.

"There is a doctrine in the movement about earning your place in the kingdom," said the former CSA leader. "And the only way to earn your place . . . is demonstrated by the criminal acts that you do.

"For these younger guys to prove themselves worthy of the Kingdom of God, they've got to be willing to commit all kinds of crimes. And those crimes have to get worse and worse over time."