

Man Target of Bank Robbery Inquiry He Lived at White Separatist Compound That McVeigh Called

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A man who lived at a white separatist compound that Oklahoma City bombing suspect Timothy McVeigh called two weeks before the blast is the target of a federal investigation into a series of Midwest bank robberies.

The man, Michael Brescia, 24, has been notified by the U.S. attorney in Philadelphia that he is under investigation in connection with the robberies, two of which occurred in the Kansas City area, said Brescia's attorney, Brian McMonagle.

Authorities allege that the suspects - who called themselves the Mid-Western Bank Bandits - also were members of the Aryan Republican Army and used the money to bankroll their white supremacist movement.

“He (the U.S. attorney) said there was a grand jury investigation into the robberies and that Mr. Brescia was one of the individuals that was being investigated,” McMonagle said. “They've already subpoenaed certain members of his family.” The investigation of Brescia raises questions about whether the bank robberies are connected to the Oklahoma City bombing. McVeigh's attorney, Stephen Jones, said Tuesday that he was “very definitely” looking at a possible connection with the compound in Oklahoma and the bombing.

“I think there's something ... there,” Jones said. “And nothing we've seen or read or received in discovery has discouraged us from further pursuing a link.” Jones' defense strategy has been to raise questions about a possible bombing conspiracy that involves others besides co-defendant Terry Nichols and McVeigh.

Shortly after the Oklahoma City bombing, federal agents said they thought the suspects may have financed their activities through bank robberies but later said no evidence linking them was found.

However, that doesn't necessarily suggest that it has been ruled out, said Jim Nelson, who was the agent in charge of the FBI's bank robbery investigation in St. Louis.

“I'm sure that's always going to be looked at,” Nelson said.

“All the information we had on the bank robberies was provided to the bombing task force. It was a logical thing to pursue.” Brescia reportedly is living in Philadelphia. Attempts to reach him for comment were unsuccessful.

He lived at Elohim City, a 400-acre compound in the Ozark foothills of eastern Oklahoma, in 1994 and 1995, according to its founder, Robert Millar. Millar said he was shocked that some of his former residents were involved in bank robberies.

But Millar defended Brescia, who is engaged to Millar's granddaughter, as "a clean-cut, college-type boy." Millar said Brescia moved out after the April 19, 1995, bombing of the Murrah Federal Building. Brescia's roommate was Andreas Strassmeir, a former German army officer who McVeigh reportedly tried to call at Elohim City two weeks before the bombing.

The call was made just seconds after McVeigh placed a call to a Ryder truck rental agency in Kingman, Ariz., according to phone records subpoenaed by the government. A Ryder truck rented in Junction City, Kan., allegedly was used by McVeigh in the Oklahoma City bombing.

Two other former Elohim City residents already have been convicted in connection with the bank robberies. Scott Stedeford, 27, and Kevin McCarthy, 19, were arrested in the Philadelphia area in May. Stedeford was convicted of three bank robbery-related counts in Iowa in November. McCarthy has pleaded guilty to several of the robberies.

Two other suspects - Peter Langan, 38, the reputed leader of the gang, and Richard Lee Guthrie, 38, - were arrested last January.

Guthrie pleaded guilty to 19 robberies and was cooperating with authorities when he was found dead in his cell in July. Authorities ruled it a suicide. Langan's trial is now under way in Columbus, Ohio.

Federal investigators won't comment on whether Brescia also is a bombing suspect or the elusive John Doe No. 2. Brescia's attorney called such speculation "trash." "He had absolutely nothing to do with that mass murder," McMonagle said. "To my knowledge, he's not involved in the white separatist stuff in any way." Prosecutors think the bank robbers committed at least 22 bank robberies in Kansas, Missouri, Ohio, Iowa, Wisconsin, Nebraska and Kentucky.

A Kansas City holdup occurred on May 19, 1994, when two men robbed the North American Savings Bank at 10129 State Line Road. A bomb was left on the floor. The second area robbery was on Sept. 21, 1994, at the Boatmen's Bank at 6879 W. 91st St. in Overland Park. Two robbers left a bomb in a briefcase.

According to court documents, a search last year of a storage locker rented by the suspects in Shawnee turned up pipe bombs, weapons and law enforcement hats, jackets and badges. Literature about white supremacist ideology and Aryan Nations activities also was discovered.