

WERE FEDS WARNED BEFORE OKC BOMB BUILT?

FUEL DEALER TOLD AGENT MAN RESEMBLING MCVEIGH TRIED TO BUY CHEMICALS 6 MONTHS BEFORE BLAST

Rocky Mountain News

Rocky Mountain News (Denver, CO)

February 5, 1997 | Kilzer, Lou; Flynn, Kevin

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Two people warned federal agents in October 1994 that a man authorities now believe was Timothy McVeigh was trying to buy chemicals for a powerful bomb.

The man approached Glynn Tipton, a manager at a racing-fuels company, at a drag strip in Topeka, Kan., and asked about buying anhydrous hydrazine and nitromethane.

Either chemical, when mixed with the common fertilizer ammonium nitrate, could make a high-explosive bomb.

Tipton knew little about hydrazine, a component in rocket fuel, so he contacted his supplier. After becoming suspicious that the person's real intent was to make a bomb, "Tipton and the supplier called the Bureau of Alcohol, Tobacco and Firearms to report this suspicious inquiry," according to newly released government court documents.

Six months later, a bomb ripped through downtown Oklahoma City, destroying the Alfred P. Murrah Federal Building and killing 168 people. McVeigh is scheduled to stand trial in Denver for the April 19, 1995, bombing beginning March 31.

Tipton's contact with the BATF was first made public in 1995. However, the government's new brief gives a detailed explanation of what happened and discloses that Tipton's supplier also contacted the BATF.

What the BATF did with the information isn't known. Spokesmen for the agency in Washington, D.C., declined comment, citing a judge's order not to discuss evidence in the case. BATF sources in 1995 said the agency felt it didn't have enough evidence to pursue the matter.

There was a five-day period during which the mysterious man who contacted Tipton could have been traced.

That's because the man called Tipton back later in the week to see if he had found the hydrazine. Tipton asked for the man's telephone number. The caller refused.

Tipton told investigators he was at a drag race at Heartland Park south of Topeka on Oct. 1, 1994, when a man calling himself John approached him between 3 and 5 p.m. The man wanted to purchase the high-powered fuels.

Records from a long-distance calling card used by McVeigh and accused co-conspirator Terry Nichols show that someone used it at 1:03 p.m. Oct. 1 from a pay phone close to the race track to call the Kingman, Ariz., workplace of Michael Fortier.

Fortier has pleaded guilty to involvement in the conspiracy to bomb the Murrah Building. Fortier and his wife Lisa will be star witnesses against McVeigh.

An hour after the call to Kingman was made, the card was used in Wamego, Kan., an hour's drive from the race track, to call Fortier again, records indicate.

If those times are correct, they indicate McVeigh had left the track by the time Tipton says he met him.

The records, however, show that a call was made Oct. 7, 1994, from Fortier's home to Tipton's company, VP Racing Fuels of Manhattan, Kan. McVeigh was believed to have been at Fortier's home at the time.

That McVeigh might have been trying to buy hydrazine and nitromethane is also significant from another perspective.

The government long has maintained that the Murrah Building bomb was made of ammonium nitrate and fuel oil.

Several critics of the investigation have alleged that such a bomb wouldn't have been powerful enough to cause the damage witnessed in Oklahoma City.

Bombs made with hydrazine or nitromethane are more powerful than same-sized bombs made with fuel oil, according to several sources on bomb-making.

One account says that a properly constructed ammonium nitrate and hydrazine bomb would create one of the largest non-nuclear blasts possible.

The government says a fuel oil bomb could have caused the damage and is expected to call an expert witness from Great Britain, Linda Jones, to so testify.

Stephen Jones, McVeigh's attorney, wants Tipton's testimony barred, in part because Tipton's identification of McVeigh as "John" is equivocal. He says he's 90% certain John was McVeigh.