

Truck videotaped just before blast/Vehicle's axle `like a giant boomerang'

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DENVER - A security camera at a downtown Oklahoma City apartment building caught eerie footage of a Ryder truck passing just minutes before the bomb it apparently carried exploded, sending its rear axle hurtling back to the apartment building "like a boomerang.

Jurors in Timothy McVeigh's bombing trial Wednesday heard emotional testimony from the apartment building's maintenance man, who pushed his wife out of harm's way as the mangled axle crashed into her car.

"I saw this humongous object coming straight at us . . . spinning like a giant boomerang," Richard Nichols told the jury. "I pushed her down on the floorboard," he said, and the object slammed into the windshield.

The axle proved to be the first lead investigators followed in charging Timothy McVeigh with murder and conspiracy in the April 19, 1995, bombing of the Alfred P. Murrah Federal Building. They used a partial identification number on the axle to determine it had come from a Ryder truck rented at Elliott's Body Shop in Junction City, Kan. Prosecutors say that the "Robert Kling" who rented the truck was McVeigh using a phony driver's license. The bomb, a mixture of fertilizer and fuel, killed 168 people and injured hundreds.

Twenty-five witnesses testified Wednesday, most of them federal agents who found pieces of what they believed to be the bomb-bearing truck scattered widely around the downtown blast site. But Nichols' encounter with the axle clearly made the biggest impact.

The apartment maintenance man had agreed to meet his wife in front of the Regency Tower Apartments at 9 a.m. to take his nephew to the doctor, but was running about two minutes late when he walked out the front door. He and his wife were walking toward her Ford Festiva, his nephew in the back seat, when the explosion rocked them.

"We felt heat and pressure," Nichols said, gasping. "It kind of spun us around."

They dived for the car, with glass and debris raining on them, Nichols said. Bertha Nichols was sitting on the door jamb trying to free nephew Chad Allen from his seat belt when the maintenance man heard the axle whistling toward them, looked up and pushed his wife to the floorboard.

"I grabbed my wife and Chad, and hovered above them like an old mother hen," Nichols said.

Nichols explained for the jury the progression of still photographs made from videotape recorded by the apartment's security camera in the moments before the blast. The camera recorded his wife driving up to the front of the building, but it also recorded a large rental truck as it paused in the street.

"This is a Ryder truck," Nichols told the jury.

The video camera's internal clock marked its last recorded image, that of Bertha Nichols walking out the door, at 20 seconds past 9 a.m. The bomb detonated at 9:02 a.m.

Prosecutors called a handful of witnesses to testify to the deaths of four Drug Enforcement Agency officers and four Secret Service agents specifically named as murder victims in the indictment against McVeigh. An Oklahoma police officer on loan to the DEA, Regina Bonny, testified wearing a neck brace, having had surgery last week related to her bomb injuries.

Bonny described how Carrie Lenz, a pregnant DEA employee, was sharing the results of her ultrasound with co-workers and making jokes about the image when the blast hit. Lenz died, as did the women who were standing with her.

Prosecutors also continued to "connect the dots" in their case, through the testimony of two FBI agents.

Gary Witt said he completed the walk between a Junction City McDonald's and Elliott's Body Shop in about 18 minutes, compatible with a videotape recording at the McDonald's that shows someone who looks like McVeigh leaving the fast food restaurant about 15 minutes before Elliott's employees recall renting the Ryder truck.

Lloyd Zimms testified he covered the distance between the Regency Tower Apartments in Oklahoma City and the Herrington, Kan., home of co-defendant Terry Nichols (no connection to maintenance man Nichols) by car, driving five miles under the speed limit, in approximately 4 1/2 hours, using two different routes. Prosecutors maintain that co-defendant Nichols left his home at 3:30 p.m. April 16 to pick up McVeigh in Oklahoma City because McVeigh was parking a getaway car there. Prosecutors say the Regency Tower videotape showed Nichols' pickup truck passing 4 1/2 hours later

Caption:

Photo: An axle identified as coming from the truck used in the Oklahoma City bombing lies next to a car that it struck during the April 1995 attack

Smiley N. Pool / Chronicle