

Truck driver who saw McVeigh can never forget the horror.



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OKLAHOMA CITY - If not for 10 seconds and a green light at the corner of 5th and Robinson, Rodney Johnson could have been the 169th victim to die on April 19, 1995, in what he calls "an American war zone."

A cook named Billie, who rode in the back of Johnson's catering truck that morning, might have raised the body count to 170.

In the predawn darkness yesterday, Johnson drove 200 miles from Dallas, where he now lives, to wait at the place where he lost most of his faith in mankind.

"I just couldn't stand it any longer," he said. "I was born and raised in Oklahoma. What happened here that day is a big part of why I decided to leave. Still, I just couldn't be sitting in Dallas when the verdict comes down. I just had this need to be here."

Like most every morning, Rodney Johnson, now 32, was behind the wheel of his "Rolling Inn" catering truck as it made its way down 5th Street, toward a factory in the Bricktown section of the city.

"We passed the Regency Towers and came up on the Murrah Building at 5th and Harvey. I remember saying to Billie that something don't feel right," Johnson said, as he walked his way through the memory.

"I noticed a Ryder truck on the right, parked up toward the front of a swing-in area they had outside the Murrah for deliveries. Usually there was a UPS truck there every morning. But it wasn't there that day.

"A small white box truck was parked a few feet behind the Ryder in the lane of traffic I was in. A brown pickup was parked directly across the street.

"I began to move out to my left - still hoping to make the green light - when I see these two men cross directly in front of me.

"Now, my truck's sort of bearing down, OK . . . and we're talking a sizeable truck. I had a full kitchen with fry-o-laters 'n' all back there. Still, it don't faze these two guys one bit.

"They're crossing like they got someplace to be. But they ain't runnin', either. When I'm on 'em, that's when McVeigh looks right up at me. Looks me right in the eye. I haven't closed my eyes to go to sleep in two years, I don't see his face," Rodney said.

"Anyway, I make the light at 5th and Robinson, pass the YMCA on my left, get just about to the crest of the hill, when suddenly everything goes a bright, hot white.

"Only way I can describe it is the sun came crashing down. Like some kind of sun flare, a huge flash.

"First, I heard something hit the truck. Found out later, it was an axle. Then, I felt the back of the truck lift first" he said. "When the concussion wave hit . . . the whole truck left the ground. Seemed like we were in the air forever, part of this blizzard of stuff flying around.

"The truck crashed down front wheels first," Rodney said. "I'll never forget watching all my windows crack from the top down, like hundreds of spiders making webs."

Rodney Johnson stepped out of his catering truck and into an "instant midnight of smoke, silence and screams."

The man on his way to serve a hot breakfast would spend the longest morning of his life extracting scores of blood-soaked strangers from the wreckage.

Of those, the lone face he sees, the one that still halts his voice and sends a shudder through his burly frame, belonged to a man he could not save.

"People were screaming and this gentleman was in a chair, sort of. He'd lost an arm and both legs and his eyes were open . . . just staring at me. There was nothing I could do for him. But I still see him."

The FBI listened to Rodney Johnson's story many, many times. In January, he was told it would not be heard in Denver.

"I can put Tim McVeigh in Oklahoma City," Rodney said. "Problem is I put someone else here with him. And the government decided they weren't going down that road.

It's a tactical decision. That's what they told me.

"I can understand the need to nail down a conviction they think they can get," Rodney Johnson said. "But I know what I saw. Hey, I'm looking for some relief from this verdict. But I know there's plenty of other questions floating around out there.

"What happened here was an act of war," Johnson said. "Now, this is the sacred ground of war. It takes more than two people to wage a war on America's sovereignty and cause the havoc I saw.

"I only hope that someday we'll get a verdict on that."