

▼ OKLAHOMA BOMBING TRIAL

Witnesses say McVeigh changed

He wasn't the same after Persian Gulf War, longtime neighbor says

By **MICHAEL FLEEMAN**
The Associated Press

DENVER — Timothy McVeigh blushed, smiled and even laughed Monday as penalty-phase witnesses chronicled his life, from a happy-go-lucky teen-ager and model soldier to a disillusioned veteran fixated on the disaster at Waco.

"I'm torn, confused," McVeigh's longtime neighbor Richard Drzyzga said in a choked voice. "There is a part of me that still remembers him from a little

kid. And then there's a part that sees what everybody else sees on TV and gets angry. And I can't put the two together."

Drzyzga, who lived four doors down from the McVeigh family in Pendleton, N.Y., recalled that after McVeigh served in the Gulf War he disappeared for about a year, and then one day in 1993 sent him a videotape critical of the FBI's deadly raid on the Branch Davidian compound near Waco, Texas.

"It scared me," he said. "It scared me to the point that I turned to my wife and said, 'What the hell has he gotten into.'"

McVeigh's attorneys sought to spare him the death penalty by showing jurors the human side of the convicted Oklahoma City bomber. They began with a parade of Persian Gulf comrades to tell how he was a compassionate "soldier's soldier" with a top-gun aim and a bright future.

"He was it, the man, the top dog of the company," said Bruce Williams, who served in a cramped Bradley fighting vehicle with McVeigh during the 1991 war against Iraq. "I just assumed he would go and do great things."

McVeigh, who showed no emotion during last week's prosecution testimony about the horrors of the bombing, appeared more animated than at any time in the trial, swelling with pride and often smiling as his old buddies sang his praises. Later, he dropped his head and placed his hands over his mouth when a neighbor told how he went off to war with the tearful prediction:

"I'm coming home in a body bag."

Capt. Jesus Rodriguez, his chest loaded with medals, took the stand to describe McVeigh as "an outstanding soldier" who helped save a fellow soldier's life and was cool — and accurate — under enemy fire.

"He did what he was told," said Rodriguez, who chose McVeigh as his personal gunner. "He anticipated what had to be done, took pride in his work. He had a genuine care for how we looked in front of the company."

And, a grinning Rodriguez said, McVeigh liked strawberry Pop-Tarts, which he would get in the mail during the war and share with Rodriguez, to the ribbing of other soldiers who joked that McVeigh

was kissing up to the boss.

Under cross-examination, the veterans acknowledged they hadn't seen McVeigh since at least 1992 and knew nothing about his life, thoughts or plans in what prosecutors say is the critical year before the April 19, 1995, bombing of the Alfred P. Murrah Federal Building.

But they did detect warning signs. Bradley gunner William Dilly said under cross-examination McVeigh was always urging him to read "The Turner Diaries," a racist novel that begins with the bombing of a federal building by revolutionaries. He also described how McVeigh had an odd habit of taking battlefield pictures of dead Iraqis.

And one defense witness, McVeigh's childhood friend Vicki Hodge, hinted at McVeigh's changed personality when he left the Army in late 1991 after a failed effort to qualify for the elite Special Forces.

"He seemed maybe just a little bit disillusioned," said Hodge, who hasn't seen McVeigh much since that time.

When she did know him — from fourth grade until they parted ways after high school — McVeigh was the class clown and a gangly teen who had the nickname "Chicken McVeigh," a play on Chicken McNuggets. It was later shortened by friends to just "Chicken."

"I loved Tim," she said. "He's my second brother. And I still always will love him."

Two teachers testified McVeigh was a bright, friendly and outgoing student who got high test scores and was voted "most talkative" by his senior class.

Vincent Capparra also spoke of McVeigh's friendliness as an employee at an armored car service in the mid-1980s. But the testimony took a dark turn when he told how McVeigh caught children throwing egg-filled snowballs and warned one that he "could really blow up his house."

The defense penalty phase is expected to wrap up with witnesses explaining McVeigh's anger over the government siege at Waco, which came exactly two years before the federal building bombing that killed 168 people.

The same jury that last week convicted McVeigh of murder and conspiracy in the blast is expected to begin deliberating as early as Wednesday whether he should die by injection or be sentenced to life in prison without parole.

The defense presentation must counter two and a half days of gut-wrenching testimony from survivors describing their shattered lives, and the portrayal of McVeigh as an cowardly, angry bomber willing to kill children to avenge Waco and spark a second American Revolution.

Lead attorney Stephen Jones made it clear McVeigh would not take the stand.

Among those testifying Monday was former Army buddy Howard Thompson, who said he found McVeigh to be outspoken about current events, but who never forced his views on others.

"He was a soldier's soldier," Thompson said.

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