

WHAT NICHOLS REVEALED

Time Magazine

Monday, Oct. 06, 1997

When the truck bomb went off in Oklahoma City 21/2 years ago, virtually everyone in the country learned of it instantly and sat gazing at the television, immobilized by shock. Everyone, that is, except Teriy Nichols, the man accused of helping Timothy McVeigh build the bomb. Nichols didn't have cable service at the time and his TV reception was lousy, so he didn't know about the incident until the next day. While the whole wired world was rapt by the tragedy, the alleged accomplice was hanging around his house in Herington, Kansas, as if April 19, 1995, were a day like any other.

That is the story that Nichols, whose trial begins this week, told four FBI agents who questioned him two days after the bombing. Nichols is an even more inscrutable figure than McVeigh, and what went on during that nine-hour interrogation has always been one of the mysteries of the Oklahoma City bombing case. TIME has now obtained an official summary of the session, and it discloses in detail how Nichols tried desperately to save his skin, even giving incriminating statements against McVeigh. It is not clear if Nichols will take the stand, and he has made no public comments, so the most that will ever be heard from him may be these statements made to the FBI, many of them apparently false and contradictory.

The questioning took place at the Department of Public Safety in Herington, where Nichols had turned himself in after learning the authorities were looking for him because of his longtime friendship with McVeigh. According to the report, the agents read Nichols his rights and asked him his Social Security number. He gave one, but said he could not be sure it was right. He told the agents that like others who resist government control, he no longer used a Social Security number. He refused to sign a form called "Interrogation: Advice of Rights" because, he said, the word interrogation reminded him of Nazis. But he did give consent to a search of his truck and house, saying that there was nothing in either location that could be construed as bombmaking materials.

That didn't turn out to be quite true. As the interview was under way, other FBI agents conducted the search and brought the results back to the interrogators. Bags of ammonium nitrate—the fertilizer used to make the bomb—were found in Nichols' home. Confronted with this, Nichols said he planned to sell the ammonium nitrate at gun shows in small quantities. Asked why he hadn't mentioned it earlier, he said it was because "it would make me look guilty to a jury.

At times, Nichols seemed to be trying to protect his friend McVeigh. "I cannot see why he would do it," the summary quotes him as saying. Nichols also said that on April 18 he and McVeigh attended a weapons auction. That is the date that eyewitnesses at the Dreamland Motel in Junction City, Kansas, say McVeigh

apparently left with the Ryder truck used in the bombing. However, Nichols made much more significant statements about McVeigh that were very damaging. On April 16, Nichols and McVeigh drove from Oklahoma City to Herington together. The agents asked Nichols if McVeigh had said anything during the trip that would make Nichols believe McVeigh was involved in the bombing. "Yes," Nichols said. He said McVeigh was much more "hyped" about the FBI siege of Waco than he was.

Nichols told the agents that he and McVeigh had talked about various bomb making techniques, but he also made a point of saying that McVeigh was capable of building a bomb on his own. Later on, when the questioning came back to that drive on April 16, Nichols said that the talk turned to the future. "You will see something big in the future," Nichols said McVeigh told him. "What are you going to do? Rob a bank?" Nichols asked. "Oh, no," McVeigh replied. "I got something in the works." (Rules on hearsay kept these statements out of McVeigh's trial.)

The case against Nichols is not airtight, since no one has ever come forward saying they saw Nichols and McVeigh actually building the bomb. Still, the prosecution will offer a variety of evidence linking Nichols to the bombing: detonation cords and blasting caps, as well as the ammonium nitrate, found at his home; plastic drums found there that match fragments at the bomb scene; storage bins rented by Nichols that held bomb components. On top of all that, there are Nichols' inconsistent, inaccurate statements to the FBI. "In my eyes, I did not do anything wrong," he told the agents. "But I can see how lawyers can turn stuff around." Judging by his own words, Nichols seems to have done a lot of that all by himself.