

# Grand Jury Witness Recalls Elevator Ride With McVeigh

Diana Baldwin | The Oklahoman | March 10th, 1998

A former U.S. Army recruiter said Monday a co-worker rode in a federal building elevator with convicted bomber Timothy McVeigh several months before the deadly explosion.

Bombing victim Sgt. Arlene Blanchard made the comment after testifying before the Oklahoma County grand jury Monday investigating a larger conspiracy in the Oklahoma City bombing.

Blanchard said she had been threatened with court-martial if she talked to the media without written approval following the April 19, 1995, bombing.

Blanchard was one of three witnesses to testify Monday before the grand jury that has been meeting since June 30.

She said two other Army sergeants who worked in the U.S. Army Recruiting Battalion headquarters on the fourth floor of the Alfred P. Murrah Federal Building saw McVeigh months before the bombing. They have been transferred from the Oklahoma City office, Blanchard said after testifying.

Blanchard was scheduled to get out the Army nine days before the bombing.

Two days after the bombing on ABC News "Nightline" program she said she would like to "pull the plug" on the bombers. Blanchard then was told by military officials she could only talk about what happened to her.

She said she believes comments she made in an interview following the bombing resulted in her receiving a 10 percent nonjob related disability status.

Her classification was later upgraded to a 40 percent job-related medical disability after intervention by U.S. Rep. Frank Lucas, Blanchard said.

She also said military officials included previously lost headquarter equipment with the losses calculated as a result of the bombing.

Blanchard said she welcomed the chance to testify before the grand jury because she feared a court-martial.

"Fortunately, the power of the district attorney's office and this grand jury to subpoena me is greater than the Army's attempt through these officers to keep me silent," Blanchard said.

Other grand jury witnesses were Clarice Pendley, an Immigration and Naturalization Service investigation assistant, and Claude Criss, a private investigator working with attorneys in civil lawsuits filed by bombing victims. Pendley, assigned to the Oklahoma City INS office, presented the grand jury with INS documents on Elohim City resident Andreas Strassmeir.

Rep. Charles Key and his private investigation claim Strassmeir, a German national, was involved in the bombing and should be indicted. Strassmeir has stayed Elohim City, a white separatist community in eastern Oklahoma.

INS documents show Strassmeir is an illegal alien. He also was being investigated on a firearms violation by the Bureau of Alcohol, Tobacco and Firearms. Strassmeir has said he had nothing to do with the bombing. Rev. Robert Millar, the leader of Elohim City, has said no one at Elohim City was involved.

Criss, a private investigator since 1965, appeared before the grand jury with his attorney Michael Blue. He testified about two hours.

Criss told The Oklahoman he spotted bomb sniffing dogs working with their handlers near 4th and Harvey and the federal building just after 8 a.m. that morning. He said they were going through bushes and looking in windows.

He said when he made his regular route through the police department and county courthouse that morning he saw an unusual number of law enforcement officers. An annual prayer breakfast that ended at 8 a.m. the morning of the bombing was attended by 1,200 law enforcement officers and others at the Myriad Convention center.

Criss said he witnessed eight fire trucks, with police blocking traffic, pass his office at 10th and Villa eight to 15 minutes prior to the bombing.

He said he is working for the civil attorneys handling lawsuits filed by bombing victims and their families.

Before testifying, Criss was asked by prosecutors to take a lie detector test.

"No, it doesn't bother me," Criss said. "I told her (the prosecutor) I would be happy too."

The request raises questions for Key, R-Oklahoma City, who helped spearhead the petition drive to call the grand jury.

Key said, "Five other witnesses also saw what appeared to be bomb squads that morning, so why was this person singled-out?"

"To our knowledge, he's the only one in this case not even Michael Fortier or any of the other witnesses who changed their testimony were required to take lie detector test. Shouldn't there be one standard for everyone."

Fortier signed a plea agreement with federal and state officials. He admitted he failed to notify the government about the bombing and then lied to investigators.

His sentencing is pending. Fortier has testified in trials for McVeigh, 29, and Terry Nichols, 42. McVeigh was convicted in June and sentenced to die. Nichols, McVeigh's Army buddy, was convicted of a conspiracy charge in the bombing.

Nichols is awaiting sentencing. BIOG: NAME: UPD:

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