

Pattern of Deceit Emerges From Bomb Investigation

by J.D. Cash and Roger Charles
McCurtain Daily Gazette | 06/27/01

Stephen Jones, former attorney for recently executed bomber Timothy McVeigh, says there appears to be a pattern of deceit emerging that points to FBI senior level management in charge of the bureau's OKBOMB investigation.

Jones made the comments after learning additional evidence in the bombing case may have been wrongly withheld from the defense team while he represented McVeigh.

The existence of this additional evidence in the bombing case surfaced during a tape-recorded interview involving Kingman, Ariz., reporter, Dave Hawkins and retired FBI agent Lee Fabrizio, also of Kingman.

Aired in connection with coverage by Kingman radio station K-99 of the McVeigh execution, Fabrizio acknowledged that he met with Margo Oliphant, the widow of a well-known anti-government radical, who told the special agent that she and her late husband played host to McVeigh at their mountain retreat outside of Kingman.

The woman's late husband was Jack Oliphant, one of the reputed leaders of a radical organization called the Arizona Patriots.

Oliphant went to federal prison in 1986 and served nearly four years for his confessed role in a wide-ranging conspiracy to overthrow the government.

An essential element of that conspiracy involved plans for a series of federal building bombings.

Until Fabrizio's account surfaced, the FBI had denied there was any evidence of an association between McVeigh and Oliphant. At trial, prosecutors painted McVeigh as a loner with few friends and no links to any particular extremist group.

However, immediately after the OKC bombing there had been widespread speculation about links between McVeigh, Oliphant and the Arizona Patriots. But when the FBI interviewed Oliphant, he vigorously denied knowing McVeigh and even chastised him for taking the bloody action.

"The bastard has put the patriot movement back 30 years by blowing up a building with people inside. If he'd blown up a federal building at night he, he'd be a hero. But not this way," Oliphant told the Los Angeles Times.

A few months after Oliphant's Nov. 25, 1995, death, Fabrizio went to see his widow and got a completely different story. "I asked her if...about McVeigh, directly. Of course, that was the purpose of the interview and if he had been there. She tried to make it sound like he had been there, but she did not know him that well. Yet she characterized him..., by using ahh, as "Timmy" not Tim. A little more of ahh..., implying to me that there was a bit of a more, more of a cozy relationship there, than she would have preferred to - to come out and openly admit."

The Kingman FBI agent spoke about another lead he worked in the case. Just before the McVeigh trial began, his supervisors sent him to do an interview of a Kingman area ranch "caretaker" who had additional information.

"She knew the Oliphants very well," Fabrizio told K-99. "On one particular instance, I think it was one week before the bombing, she says they were out there, standing around in a group... her...all of them...Oliphant and McVeigh. And they told them that ahh,.. that there was something big that was going to happen the following week or the following month...or something. But at least in the very near future. And she didn't say, specifically, what it was at that point."

Jones confirmed that no witness reports were supplied to the defense team with this kind of information. "I assure you, we diligently searched for evidence of this connection and were not given anything to support it from the FBI.

"And I want to emphasize this pattern we are seeing is not the fault of the rank and file FBI agents who worked hard on this case. It appears that if those agents turned up important information that was exculpatory to our client, it was withheld somewhere up the ladder."

"You remember the Carol Howe fiasco, where every name was misspelled in her FBI interview concerning other possible conspirators at Elohim City." Jones said. "By misspelling all the names in her report, someone knew we would not pick it up in our computer searches of the thousands of pages of material we were inundated with."

Howe was the confidential informant assigned by the ATF to maintain surveillance on persons at Elohim City - a radical group in eastern Oklahoma.

In a debriefing with the FBI and ATF agents only 48 hours after the bombing, Howe provided several names of suspects she felt were involved.

However, it was two years later when the McCurtain Daily Gazette first reported about Howe's work for the government that Jones could first locate the interview and review what she reported to her superiors.

Former Agent Surprised

In a separate interview with this newspaper, the retired Kingman FBI agent provided additional details.

Fabrizio said Oliphant and the "caretaker's" interviews were done at the instruction of the OKBOMB task force in Oklahoma City. The paperwork was turned into the Phoenix and Oklahoma City field offices. Fabrizio said he could not recall the exact dates of the interviews.

"That's all in the reports I turned in. I don't know why this information was not followed up on by the FBI," he said.

The ex-agent said the FBI reports would show whether it was McVeigh or Oliphant who made the statements to the "caretaker" about warnings that "something big" was going to happen in the near future.

"It has been so long, my mind is fuzzy on that detail."

Referring directly to Margo Oliphant's familiarity with McVeigh, Fabrizio said she was very uncomfortable discussing it, but admitted she had cooked for McVeigh and other men while they discussed their business with her husband.

"You could tell she knew him much better than she wanted me to know. It was Timmy this and Timmy that," Fabrizio recalled.

Although Margo Oliphant did say so, Fabrizio's impression was that McVeigh had spent nights at the ranch.

"It's a very long drive and a hard drive up there. You need four-wheel drive and you wouldn't want to have dinner, then head back in the dark."

Another odd twist to the story came directly from McVeigh.

Just before his execution, the mass murderer hinted about meeting the Oliphants near their ranch.

In a letter mailed to K-99 news director Dave Hawkins, the bomber said he probably got some help from the Oliphants when a Jeep, in which McVeigh and friends Mike and Lori Fortier were riding, ran into a ditch and got stuck up in the mountains, outside Kingman.

The man and woman who came along, McVeigh wrote, fit the description of Mr. and Mrs. Oliphant. And they helped pull the Jeep out of the ditch with their pickup.

"I suspect this was him, but I didn't know him, or who he was, at the time - weird, given our common interest."

McVeigh teased, "I have heard that his ranch was a stone's throw from my favorite stomping grounds - (my) shooting area."

Stephen Jones said he always suspected there was a very strong link between the pair.

"We believed it would be very unlikely the two never met. Both lived in the Kingman area at the same time. Both used the same mail drop in Kingman. Both men shared similar political ideology and both had the same friends."

Jones said one of his investigators spent a lot of time trying to get McVeigh and Oliphant to admit knowing each other. "Eventually our investigator got Oliphant and McVeigh to hint at a chance meeting or two. We felt there was much, much more, though," Jones said.

Richard Reyna was hired by the defense team as the lead investigator. For over a year, McVeigh and Reyna argued over the details of the bombing.

Unimpressed by McVeigh's veracity, Reyna spent months tracing his client's associations with far-flung groups such as Arizona Patriots, the Aryan Nations and Elohim City. What Reyna discovered was that all three were Christian Identity organizations with a violent history, and that McVeigh was linked to each. Oliphant seemed to be the key that could unlock it all.

In the late summer and early fall of 1995, Reyna made a series of clandestine trips to Oliphant's mountain hideaway. Afterward, the investigator reported to Jones that he was given hints about men who may have traveled in McVeigh's circle.

But just as the rabid racist was growing more trusting of Reyna, the 71-year-old militant died of prostate cancer.

Learning of the death of a man he honestly enjoyed sitting around a campfire, drinking beer, Reyna dug into his pocket and paid for the funeral arrangements to help out Oliphant's widow.

When Jones heard about Reyna's generous gift, the Enid lawyer covered half the cost from his pocket.

While never able to wheedle the information he needed from Jack Oliphant, Richard Reyna discovered remarkable facts from published accounts about the old revolutionary that led him to understand why his client would have been drawn to the Oliphant ranch.

During the '80s, the Oliphant ranch served as a training camp and storage location for illegal explosives and weapons. The men who traveled to the remote location were preparing for a violent series of actions against various targets.

From information provided by informants, gang members at the camp and elsewhere were recorded making specific preparations to bomb federal buildings, and destroy dams and power lines. Their master plan - to start a racial holy war - came right from the pages of the radical racist diatribe, "The Turner Diaries."

It was the same book McVeigh called his bible.

Government indictments alleged the Arizona Patriots planned to finance this revolution with \$10 million they were going to steal from a Brinks armored car that regularly hauled large sums of cash from gambling casinos in nearby Laughlin, Nev.

The group's plot was put on hold when the FBI raided the mountain property in 1986. Jack Oliphant and seven other members of the Arizona Patriots were arrested without firing a shot. During a search of the area, agents located large quantities of bombs, explosives, illegal weapons and maps of area dams, and power and water supply lines.

The government sting operation that nabbed Oliphant and the others was called, "Operation Clean Sweep."

The far-reaching multimillion-dollar, 18-month-long investigation rounded up dozens of leading members of the far right. Trials were held in different states and numerous convictions were obtained.

It was a different story in Arkansas.

In 1988, several of Oliphant's "fellow travelers" stood trial in Fort Smith. These leading figures in the white supremacy movement were also charged with conspiracy to overthrow the government. One of those men was Richard Wayne Snell, a man Oliphant acknowledged was a family friend.

Snell, minutes after killing a black Arkansas state trooper, had been captured after a gunfight with Broken Bow police in 1984.

As it turned out, the Fort Smith trials were an embarrassing disaster for government prosecutors. All 14 men charged were found innocent of the conspiracy charges.

With the acquittals, several defendants went free, but Snell remained in prison waiting his date with an Arkansas executioner. Snell had a pair of first-degree murder convictions under his belt.

One of the homicides involved robbing and shooting a Texarkana pawnbroker. That particularly brutal crime carried the death penalty.

During the final days before Snell's publicized execution, Arkansas officials reported numerous threats from the far right. Retaliation was promised if the state went through with killing the "patriot martyr."

As scheduled, Snell's sentence was carried out at 9 p.m., April 19, 1995 - exactly 12 hours after McVeigh lit a fuse to a truck bomb parked outside the Murrah federal building.

A close examination of the evidence involving some of the men rounded up in Operation Clean Sweep shows that during the Fort Smith sedition trial, direct testimony was provided that Snell and other gang members plotted to bomb the Oklahoma City federal building in 1983. The plan was sidetracked when the bomb builder was injured in an accidental explosion.