

Receipt Shows Head of FBI Anti-Terrorism Task Force in OKC Hours Before Blast

By J.D. Cash
January 21st, 2002
McCurtain Daily Gazette

Despite statements to the contrary preserved in a national best-selling book, a hotel record obtained by the McCurtain Daily Gazette indicates the director of the FBI's Terrorist Task Force and founding commander of the Hostage Rescue Team, Danny Coulson, checked into a hotel in Oklahoma City – hours before terrorists struck the Murrah building on April 19, 1995.

Additional evidence obtained through a Freedom of Information Act (FOIA) request notes the FBI sleuth was in Oklahoma City as part of a secret project set up by former Attorney General Janet Reno.

Known only to a handful of agents in the Criminal Division of the FBI, Reno had months earlier ordered the FBI to form a special task force to gather intelligence on suspected terrorists operating inside a myriad of America's so-called right-wing religious and militia groups.

Evidence of Coulson's late-night trip to Oklahoma City fits squarely with a substantial body of details found in hundreds of pages of other official documents obtained by this paper – evidence revealing weeks of planning by an elite corps of drug and counter-terrorism experts who were closely monitoring members of various far-right groups they considered religious extremists and possible threats to the safety and security of the nation.

Since the bombing, officials at the Department of Justice have repeatedly assured victims that the FBI had no advance knowledge of any plot to bomb the Murrah federal building. Thus, evidence of the pre-bombing arrival of the FBI's Terrorism Task Force – ahead of the terrorists – would be a monumental disaster for an agency whipsawed by scandals last year after the discovery of thousands of pages of eyewitness statements that had not been released to bomber Timothy McVeigh's attorneys in the same case.

Days after the bombing, Danny Coulson submitted for reimbursement a number of expenses related to his travels during the bombing investigation. Included was a computer-generated hotel billing record at the Embassy Suites Hotel on South Meridian in Oklahoma City where Coulson stayed during the initial investigation.

According to that Embassy Suites record: On April 19, 1995, FBI agent Danny Coulson (sp) checked into the hotel at 12:20 a.m.

Nine hours later, the Murrah federal building would become a smoldering ruin and downtown Oklahoma City cast into blood-soaked chaos.

The Embassy Hotel receipt – submitted by the FBI’s “top gun” in the agency’s long running war against terrorists – belies statements recorded in his book, *No Heroes: Inside the FBI’s Secret Counter-Terror Force*, co-authored with Time Magazine’s Elaine Shannon.

Published in May of 1999, Coulson wrote that he was in Fort Worth the morning of the 19th, when the bombing occurred in Oklahoma City. He said he and his wife were down in the Lone Star state, house-hunting and staying with friends.

“We were finishing-up breakfast with some old friends in Fort Worth when we heard the first news bulletin, something about a big explosion up in Oklahoma,” Coulson wrote.

“My pager went off, displaying a number I knew by heart. ‘It’s the SIOC,’ I said. The Strategic Information and Operations Center at the Hoover Building in Washington. John O’Neil, the headquarters official in charge of domestic terrorism investigations, answered. His voice was flat.

“I guess you heard a bomb went off in Oklahoma City. Nine oh two a.m.”

“Yes, it’s all over the news.”

“A lot of people have been killed and injured. We don’t know what we have. Ricks needs help. Can you catch the next flight?”

“We’re right in the middle of thunderstorms,” I said. “Nobody in Texas is getting on a plane. I’ll drive.”

Coulson then went on to describe a harrowing trip through rain and high winds as he made his way to the crime scene in Oklahoma City – arriving in the early afternoon. He reported in a separate record of travel to the FBI that he left Dallas at 11 a.m. and checked into Embassy Suites at 1:30 p.m. the day of the bombing.

As founding commander of the FBI’s elite Hostage Rescue Team, Coulson is credited with building the clandestine unit from the ground up.

The HRT is the government’s civilian equivalent of the top-secret Delta Force and the FBI’s primary unit responsible for counter-terrorist operations. In times of crisis this unit deploys to the location of known terrorist targets or crime scenes – operating on orders from Strategic Information Operations Center (SIOC), located on the fifth floor of the Hoover building in Washington, DC.

Because of the well-publicized disasters the HRT encountered at Ruby Ridge in 1992, and at Waco in 1993, the FBI made changes in the agency's strategic and tactical procedures.

Beginning in 1994, additional support and pre-operational training was made available to senior FBI personnel likely to confront domestic terror threats.

FBI Director Louis Freeh created the Critical Incident Response Group (CIRG) and based its operations at the FBI's training camp in Quantico, Va.

Director Freeh and others believed Ruby Ridge and Waco would have turned out far differently had there been better communications between field commanders and FBI's crisis managers, while operations were ongoing. In

the future, senior personnel would be closer to the action.

Cross-trained with elements of the Navy SEAL's and Delta Force units, the HRT melds the world's most advanced civilian law-enforcement tools and equipment with an elite corps of hardened FBI agents to produce a potent strike force capable of handling the most dangerous domestic terror threats, while skirting the constitutional restraints restricting the use of the military in domestic police operations.

Some have been unimpressed with the results, however. Months following the bombing in Oklahoma City, Iowa Sen. Charles Grassley lashed out at the overall track record of the HRT.

"This is the start of the militarization of the FBI," he warned. "The swashbucklers are in control."

Janet Reno's Plan

Coulson's assignment in Oklahoma was tied to an FBI investigation that this paper has learned was part of a highly sensitive operation that few outside the Criminal Division of the FBI knew existed until long after it was disbanded.

FBI documents obtained by the Gazette indicate Coulson's activities in Oklahoma City were part of an intelligence operation established by then-Attorney General Janet Reno.

On the 19th, Coulson noted on his travel records that his investigation in Oklahoma City was related to "MC-111."

Several days later, Coulson's voucher indicated his assignment in Oklahoma was "MC-117" – the official FBI case number assigned to the bombing of the federal building.

The Gazette learned that FBI MC-111 (MC stands for “major case”) evolved from VAAPCON – a project Reno started in 1994.

At Reno’s instruction, the FBI began gathering intelligence on right-wing religious groups and cults that espoused the same hate rhetoric found at Pastor Butler’s

Aryan Nations in Idaho and at Christian Identity enclave Elohim City in Oklahoma.

But critics charge that in practice, Reno and the FBI took the project much further – gathering a vast database of intelligence on people active in the anti-abortion movement with absolutely no history of criminality.

Reno said she suspected some of these groups were doing more than preaching racial separatism and anti-abortion politics. She told senior FBI agents to look into the possibility that a conspiracy was at work inside the so-called Christian-right movement in America, a conspiracy possibly linked to the surprising growth of the armed militia movement.

During the mid ‘90’s, the rapid growth of militia groups was taking place at the same time a wave of violence targeting abortion clinics and abortion services providers was also making headlines. Convinced there must be a nexus, Reno ordered the FBI to investigate.

Deep inside the bowels of the Criminal Division of the FBI during this period, VAAPCON was reportedly not well received. Some agents questioned whether it went beyond constitutional bounds in spying on citizens just because of their religious affiliations or stated beliefs.

Reno countered that her authority came by virtue of legislation Congress passed months earlier in response to the abortion clinic bombings and related violence.

In August 1994 an FBI task force began investigating individuals and groups suspected of having connections with a nationwide conspiracy to commit violent acts against reproductive health care providers and other targets. “MC-111” was the case number assigned to that very brief and ill-fated investigation.

A few months after the bombing in Oklahoma City, MC-111 was quietly shut down. Officials reported they could find no such “right-wing conspiracy” in America.

The FBI’s VAAPCON Task Force investigation and MC-111 remained secret until a Washington, D.C.-based public interest group, Judicial Watch, discovered faint clues of the surveillance operation.

Following up on a tip, Judicial Watch filed a FOIA request and received a tiny number of documents related to the covert operation. Although the government

refused to release all the records requested, what the agency did release was sufficient to confirm rumors of the Reno's efforts to infiltrate and monitor the activities of various Christian-based organizations. While the Department of Justice acknowledges today that the VAAPCON Task Force investigation once existed, it continues to withhold some 100,000 documents, representing the fruits of the pervasive project, citing "privacy considerations" as the rationale for the continued secrecy.