

FBI Waited to Check Out Tip on Nichols - OKC

Associated Press | April 14, 2005

WASHINGTON - The FBI initially dismissed a tip that convicted bomber Terry Nichols had hidden explosives and they might be used for an attack this month coinciding with the anniversary of the Oklahoma City bombing.

While the FBI has found no evidence supporting the idea that an attack is in the works for the April 19 tenth anniversary, the information that explosives had been hidden in Nichols' former home in Herington, Kan., turned out to be true.

The tip came from imprisoned mobster Gregory Scarpa Jr., 53, a law enforcement official said this week. Scarpa is an inmate in the same maximum-security federal prison in Florence, Colo., where Nichols is serving life sentences for his role in the 1995 bombing of the Alfred Murrah federal building that killed 168 people. Timothy McVeigh was convicted of federal conspiracy and murder charges in the bombing and executed in 2001.

Scarpa learned about the explosives from Nichols, mainly through notes passed between them, said Stephen Dresch, a Michigan man who is Scarpa's informal advocate.

Dresch gave the information to the FBI in early March. But FBI agents did not search the vacant house until March 31. The bureau did not act more quickly because Scarpa failed a lie detector test, said the law enforcement official, who declined to be identified because of the sensitivity of the investigation.

The FBI lab continues to examine the materials for fingerprints and other clues that might show where the explosives originated and who may have had them before they got into Nichols' home.

Scarpa, a member of the Colombo organized crime family serving 50-plus years on drug trafficking, conspiracy and racketeering convictions, first communicated information about the explosives on March 1, then provided more details on March 10 and 11, Dresch said in letters sent to the staffs of two members of Congress and to the FBI's Detroit office. Scarpa revealed the location of the house on March 11, Dresch said.

The first letter said Scarpa learned from another prisoner, assumed by Dresch to be Nichols, "the location of a bomb on U.S. soil." The second described two rock piles in the crawl space beneath Nichols' former home. Under one, it said, were cardboard boxes wrapped in plastic. Those details match what the FBI said it found.

Aides to Reps. William Delahunt, D-Mass., and Dana Rohrabacher, R-Calif., acknowledged receiving the letters by fax. Delahunt's office received the letter on March 1 or 2 and forwarded it to the FBI, said Steve Schwadron, the lawmaker's chief of staff. The letter to Rohrabacher was not read until after the FBI search had been done, Rohrabacher spokeswoman Rebecca Rudman said.

The FBI refused to comment on the delay.

The bureau has faced harsh post-Sept. 11, 2001, criticism accusing it of failing to adequately investigate tips and intelligence.

Delahunt has chided the FBI for its dealings with informants, while Rohrabacher is considering requesting a hearing on the bureau's handling of the Oklahoma City investigation.

"I'm more concerned that the FBI didn't do a thorough job investigating this location 10 years ago than I am about how long it took to follow through on an informant's tip," Rohrabacher said.

Dresch, a Michigan economist, principal owner of Forensic Intelligence International and former state lawmaker, speculated that the FBI didn't act more quickly because Scarpa has a long, contentious history with federal authorities.

Valerie Caproni, now the FBI general counsel, was a prosecutor in Scarpa's 1998 trial in Brooklyn, N.Y. At the time, Scarpa testified he spied for the FBI on four suspects in the 1993 World Trade Center bombing, including convicted mastermind Ramzi Yousef, while they were jailed together in Manhattan.

Scarpa said he passed on to the FBI plans that said associates of the four men would kill a prosecutor in one of Yousef's trials and attack a federal judge he declined to name as well as unspecified "government installations."

Caproni and U.S. District Judge Reena Raggi scoffed at Scarpa's claims, which the judge called insignificant at best and more likely "part of a scam."

Freelance journalist Peter Lance has argued in his recent book, "Cover Up," that Scarpa's information was accurate and included tips that could have led the FBI to Khalid Shaikh Mohammed, Yousef's uncle, long before the Sept. 11 attacks Mohammed purportedly helped plan.

Lance has obtained transcripts of Scarpa's interviews with FBI agents in which he provided details of his dealings with Yousef.

Scarpa's father, the late Gregory Scarpa, was an FBI informant whom senior officials allowed to keep working with the bureau in the 1990s even though they suspected him of murder, according to Lindley DeVecchio, Scarpa's FBI handler.