

## Terror on Trial: Who was Timothy McVeigh?

Editor's Note: As part of CNN.com's new Crime section, we are archiving some of the most interesting content from CourtTVNews.com. This story was first published in 2001.

**(Court TV)** -- When we first saw him, the bombing suspect was gaunt and slender in handcuffs and orange jail skivvies, his hard eyes unlit by the faintest flicker of emotion. Tim McVeigh. The name didn't mean much then but the image did. He was a poker-faced killer in a crewcut, and all across America people were asking the same question: Who is this guy?

The public's first glimpse came two days after the bombing, on April 21, 1995: Heavily-armed guards escorted the stone-faced suspect through a gauntlet of media to a helicopter that would take him back to Oklahoma City.

An angry crowd chanted "baby killer" and yelled obscenities. The bomber says he was focused on one thing: McVeigh later told his biographers he was looking for snipers, methodically moving his stony gaze in a Z-pattern he had learned in the Army, thinking that somebody -- whether an angry Oklahoman or a government agent -- might try to knock him off. He says he wasn't afraid to die, but was intent on surviving to tell his side of the story.

Six years after the bombing at Alfred P. Murrah building in Oklahoma City killed 168 people in the deadliest terrorist attack on U.S. soil, and less than a month before McVeigh will be put to death, he has told his story.

McVeigh operated with the cold calculus of a hardened soldier, but his stoic demeanor masked both the passion of a zealot and the insecurities of a young man lost in the world. Delusion and paranoia fed McVeigh's politics, but his thinking was grounded in a familiar ideology, and developed by a sane and thoughtful mind.

Like thousands of other Americans, the bomber believed that government had become too intrusive, that the principles of America's founding fathers had been compromised, and that something should be done about it. Many of these people joined fringe patriot or militia groups.

And though he shared the fascination with self-defense that characterizes militia groups, McVeigh decided to take the offensive in his own private war with the government. He truly believed that the American government was an evil entity that perpetrated violence on its own people and others abroad; he thought the lives he took on that day in April 1995 were a small price to pay he characterizes the bloodshed as "collateral damage" for striking a blow at a government institution.

No one can say for certain what led McVeigh to bomb federal building that day. But it is known that, for two years before his impulsive act, McVeigh drifted across America, restless and confused, in an apparent search for answers.

### A portrait of young bomber

McVeigh grew up in Pendleton, N.Y., an outlying suburb of Buffalo, that, though a small town, was a far cry from the rural life that the bomber would later come to idealize. His father worked in the local Harrison Radiator plant, while his mother toiled at a travel agency.

When they split, McVeigh's parents told him and his two sisters that they could choose with whom to live. Tim blamed his mother for the schism, and decided to stay with his father, whose long hours at the plant left him with little time at home.

"I can't attribute anything I am now to any lack of my parents' presence in the home ... but I do say that I have very few memories of interactions with my parents," McVeigh told Lou Michel and Dan Herbeck, authors of the recently

released book *American Terrorist*.

As a teenager, McVeigh developed two passions: computers and guns. He was intrigued by the early Internet of the mid-1980s and became an amateur hacker, once even breaking into a defense department computer. His computer skills earned him commendations in school, but, after a brief period at a local community college, McVeigh chose to discontinue his formal education.

His fascination with guns proved more lasting. McVeigh became obsessed with reading about survivalism and Second Amendment issues. He acquired several guns, and set up a generator and a store of canned food and potable water in his basement so that he would be self-sufficient in case of emergency. One of the books he read, *The Turner Diaries*, a racist novel popular in neo-Nazi and militia circles about an angry man who blows up the FBI building in Washington, would become a long-time favorite.

McVeigh found work as a security guard, but the teenager spent his free time pursuing an obsession with survivalism. To escape the Buffalo area and have a place for target practice, McVeigh purchased a parcel of land in western New York. But though the getaway provided a respite, McVeigh still found his everyday life dreary. One day he showed up at home and informed his father that he was joining the Army.

### **The Army years**

McVeigh thrived in the armed forces, embracing the disciplined lifestyle he was expected to lead and finding comfort in the solidarity of his fellow recruits. His peers were impressed; one told Michel and Herbeck, "He was more or less, to me, the epitome of infantry. You know, the extremist, 'follow me,' kind of guy." But McVeigh claims his enthusiasm for the military lifestyle was offset by a distaste for some of the more violent aspects of the Army culture he found in basic training.

"Twenty times a day, it would be, 'Blood makes the grass grow! Kill! Kill! Kill!' You would be screaming that until your throat was raw," he later told Michel and Herbeck. "If somebody put a video camera on that, they would think it was a bunch of sickos."

Whatever reservations McVeigh had didn't get in the way of his success -- he received the best score possible for infantry recruits on a test taken at the end of basic training.

He was assigned to Fort Riley, Kansas, a training ground for the operation of tanks and other armored vehicles. Chosen to be a gunner in a Bradley fighting vehicle (an armed transport- like a light tank), McVeigh scored an unprecedented 1000 out of 1000 points in a live-fire test. Because of his success, McVeigh was invited to try out for Special Forces a goal of his since joining the Army. But McVeigh wouldn't get his chance. Saddam Hussein invaded Kuwait, and he, along with thousands of other American soldiers, was sent to the Persian Gulf.

When allied generals finally decided to go on the offensive, McVeigh drew a dangerous assignment. His Bradley would spearhead a column of vehicles, leading the way for a tank and likely drawing the first enemy fire.

"He sent us in first as a sacrificial lamb. It happened to be my vehicle," McVeigh later said (Michel and Herbeck). "That's one of the decisions a military commander has to make, without regard for life. He decided that the nine lives in the Bradley are worth doing it this way."

At the time, however, McVeigh wasn't so sanguine about the plan. "I think we're all going to die," a fellow soldier recalled him saying. "We're going to get pushed through by the f-----' tank."

But McVeigh's fears turned out to be groundless as the battle -- and the war in general -- quickly turned into a rout. And on the second day of the conflict, McVeigh's shooting skills paid off; he made a shot so astounding that he was awarded several medals for it. From a distance of nearly 2000 yards, McVeigh hit an Iraqi soldier manning a machine gun nest in the chest with his cannon.

"His head just disappeared...I saw everything above the shoulders disappear, like in a red mist," he recalled. The incident shook McVeigh, especially when he later discovered that many of the Iraqi soldiers did not want to be fighting and were equipped with vastly inferior weaponry.

"Saddam, if he ever showed up," McVeigh wrote in a letter from Kuwait to a friend back home. "Chickenshit bastard. Because of him, I killed a man who didn't want to fight us, but was forced to."

"When he came back, he seemed broken," McVeigh's aunt told The New York Times. "When we talked about it, he said it was terrible there. He was on the front line and had seen death and caused death."

## **Coming home**

McVeigh may have had his misgivings about the war, but he was also proud and patriotic after the victory. One of the first soldiers to return to America, he was treated to a hero's welcome. In addition, he was extended another invitation to try for Special Forces. The problem was that McVeigh couldn't hack it. His time in the Gulf had left him drained and out of shape. McVeigh returned to his assignment at Fort Riley, bitterly disappointed.

Back in Kansas, he grew more aloof and alienated from his fellow soldiers. In addition, McVeigh developed a reputation as a racist. At one point, he even signed up for a trial membership in the KKK, although he chose not to renew because he found the Klan too focused on issues of race and not enough on Second Amendment rights, he later claimed to Michel and Herbeck. Less than a year after he had returned to America a hero, McVeigh dropped out of the Army, telling his commanding officer, "I just feel I need to leave."

McVeigh returned home with high hopes of finding a good job and settling down into civilian life. Without a college degree and in the midst of a recession, however, McVeigh found obtaining a good job difficult and eventually settled for a security guard position he found tiring and tedious. But his employment difficulties were only part of a general malaise, one that he attributed to the adjustment from his time at war.

"You've seen the extremes, experienced the ultimate highs, lows, and realities. Who gives a s--- about conversation about the weather, or who's late for work, or who stubbed their toe? The daily grind, all of a sudden, has gotten much more intolerable," McVeigh would later tell his biographers.

As McVeigh became more and more disenchanted with developments in his life, his criticism of government also became more heated. He liked to talk about politics with his sister and co-workers, and also fired off several angry letters to local papers.

"The 'American Dream' of the middle class has all but disappeared, substituted with people struggling to just buy next week's groceries. Heaven forbid the car breaks down," McVeigh wrote to the Lockport Union Sun & Journal, later adding, "At a point when the world has seen communism falter as an imperfect system to manage people, democracy seems heading down the same road. No one is seeing the 'big picture.' Maybe we have to combine ideologies to achieve the perfect utopian government. Remember, government-sponsored health care was a communist idea. Should only the rich be allowed to live longer? Does that say that because a person is poor he is a lesser human being and doesn't deserve to live as long, because (?) he doesn't wear a tie to work?"

McVeigh's comments, ones that many Americans could identify with at the time, took on a chilling, extremist tone at the end of the letter. "America is in serious decline," he wrote. "We have no proverbial tea to dump. Should we instead sink a ship of Japanese imports? Is a civil war imminent? Do we have to shed blood to reform the current system? I hope it doesn't come to that, but it might."

The bomber became increasingly virulent, and far-fetched, in his critiques of the federal government. He took to railing to Jennifer about conspiracies involving the Rockefeller family and the United Nations.

But most of all, McVeigh harped on threats to the right to bear arms taking exceptional umbrage at the government's

siege of Randy Weaver's cabin in Ruby Ridge, Montana. Soon afterwards McVeigh left home, saying he was looking for a "free state" in which to live.

Soon after McVeigh hit the road, government authorities attempted to raid the Branch Davidian compound. Incensed, McVeigh dropped his plans and headed for Waco, where he sold bumper stickers supporting the Davidians for a few days. When he left town, McVeigh began two years of roaming America that would bring him to 40 different states.

During this period, he spent chunks of time living with two friends from the army with similar political views. Michael Fortier, who lived in Arizona, and Terry Nichols, who owned a farm in Michigan with his brother, would later become central figures in the Oklahoma City bombing.

But McVeigh also spent time on the gun show circuit, moving from show to show, selling copies of The Turner Diaries and other paraphernalia. In the gun show culture, McVeigh found a home. Though he remained skeptical of some of the most extreme ideas being bandied around, he liked talking to people there about the United Nations, the federal government, and possible threats to American liberty.

McVeigh was in Michigan, at Terry Nichols' farmhouse, when the ATF and FBI raided the Branch Davidian compound, and about 80 members of the cult died in the ensuing inferno. When McVeigh saw the images on television, he stood and wept in the Nichols' living room. Afterwards, his anti-government rhetoric became more heated; ATF caps emblazoned with bullet holes and flares that could be used like missiles appeared amongst his gun show wares.

"I didn't define the rules of engagement in this conflict," McVeigh said to Michel and Herbeck. "The rules, if not written down, are defined by the aggressor. It was brutal, no holds barred. Women and children were killed at Waco and Ruby Ridge. You put back in (the government's) faces exactly what they're giving out."

McVeigh also became more interested in conspiracy theories. Determined to find out for himself, on several occasions McVeigh visited sites that were rumored to house government secrets. Once he even broke into Area 51, the tract of land in New Mexico where conspiracy lore says government hides evidence of aliens.

While in Arizona, McVeigh found a mentor in Walter "Mac" McCarty, a 72-year-old former marine who shared his political views. McVeigh sought out the older man for conversations about Waco, Randy Weaver, the federal government, and the Second Amendment, according to the Washington Post. "I gathered that he was following the right-wing, survivalist, paramilitary-type philosophy," McCarty told the Post. "I also got the sense that he was searching for meaning and acceptance."

A powerful personal paranoia began to take hold of the bomber. He was a well-known figure at gun shows, and on one occasion had conversed with a man he knew to be an undercover government agent. When Congress passed the assault weapons ban in the fall of 1994, McVeigh became convinced that more Waco-like raids were in store - and that he was a likely target.

In response, McVeigh began stockpiling weapons and supplies at the small home in Kingman, Arizona where he had settled. The siege mentality enervated his neighbor Fortier. But the discomfort with which his friends viewed McVeigh's paranoid preparations was nothing compared to the shock when he informed them, in the late fall of 1994, that he was moving to the "action phase" of his conflict with the federal government.

The circumstances of the bombing preparations are in dispute. What is known is that McVeigh informed Nichols and Fortier of his intentions, and convinced the former to help him purchase the necessary materials and prepare the bomb. McVeigh has consistently claimed that nobody else was involved; Nichols remained silent when offered a chance at lenience by giving up other conspirators.

But whatever the truth about a larger conspiracy may be, it is clear that McVeigh was a principle figure in the bombing, and that he gave a good deal of thought to the plan. Though his denial of knowing that a day care center

was located in the Murrah building is plausible, McVeigh had many months to consider the number of innocent people that would perish in the blast. Driven equally by personal desperation and a perceived righteousness, he proceeded anyway.

## **Waiting to die**

McVeigh thought that his terrible act would serve as a call to arms for Americans with similar politics. He couldn't have been more wrong: most extremist and militia groups joined the chorus of condemnation coming from the rest of America in the aftermath of the bombing. The Oklahoma City bombing was supposed to make him a martyr for the right-wing fringe. Instead, he earned the title of "most hated man in America."

In the years since, McVeigh has given only a few public interviews and statements, aside from his long conversations with Michel and Herbeck. One comment is particularly interesting in light of the present circumstances.

"What are we doing with the death penalty? It appears (government agencies) use violence as an option all the time," the bomber said in a 60 Minutes interview last year. These last remarks may explain both McVeigh's decision to drop his appeals and his request -- quickly rejected by authorities -- to have his execution broadcast on television for the American populace.

After his execution date was set, many commentators have warned that McVeigh may still be after his long-sought martyrdom. As the first federal prisoner to be executed in 33 years, he has certainly affixed the media spotlight on the death penalty.

Whatever his aspirations to martyrdom might be, McVeigh seems resigned to his execution and reportedly going through his final preparations in a methodical fashion. "He understands the procedures, he understands the decisions he has to make," says attorney Nathan Chambers. And McVeigh has already chosen his last words, a poem by William Ernest Henley, according to Michel and Herbeck.

"Under the bludgeonings of chance  
My head is bloody, but unbowed.  
Beyond this place of wrath and tears  
Looms but the horror of the shade,  
And yet the menace of the years  
Finds, and shall find me, unafraid.  
It matters not how strait the gate,  
How charged with punishments the scrolls,  
I am the master of my fate:  
I am the captain of my soul."