

'It was like I was supposed to be there'

Former FBI special agent credits divine intervention for his contribution to Oklahoma City bombing case.

by Nolan Clay | *The Oklahoman* | April 13th, 2015

Oklahoma City bomber Timothy McVeigh might have gotten away 20 years ago if FBI Special Agent R. Scott Crabtree had just followed orders.

Crabtree, who retired from the FBI in 2007, played two major roles in the early days of the investigation in Kansas, where the bomb was made.

“At the risk of sounding a little corny, it’s like I was supposed to be there at that time,” Crabtree told *The Oklahoman* in a telephone interview for the 20th anniversary of the tragedy.

Crabtree was the agent who came up with the idea to get a sketch of the man who had picked up the bomb truck. His quick thinking led to McVeigh’s arrest in Perry two days after the bombing.

And, he was the agent chosen to lead the questioning of McVeigh’s close friend, Terry Nichols, in Herington, Kan., two days after the bombing. That interview lasted for hours. Crabtree by the end had concluded Nichols more likely was a participant, not just a witness.

Crabtree became the lead interviewer in part because he had been born in Herington and knew the area. Nichols in 1995 had just bought a house there. The agent’s knowledge of the area helped him catch Nichols lying during the interview.

“I believe to a great degree there was some guidance from somewhere, some divine power or fate — whatever you want to call it — that had me there,” Crabtree said.

Crabtree was an FBI supervisor in Washington, D.C., when he took an opening in Salina, Kan., in 1993 to be nearer his ill mother in Omaha.

He was at work in the windowless one-man office in Salina on April 19, 1995, the day of the bombing, when he got the orders to go to Elliott’s Body Shop in Junction City, Kan.

The FBI had just determined the bomb truck had been rented from that business. His instructions were to get the rental paperwork from the body shop and then take it to Washington, D.C., himself for fingerprint analysis.

His wife met him on the interstate with a bag of clothes for the flight.

But Crabtree was an experienced agent. He’d been with the FBI since 1982 and he quickly realized after arriving at the body shop that there was a real opportunity there.

The body shop’s mechanic, Tom Kessinger, had really focused on the customer who picked up the truck using the fake name “Robert Kling” because of something that was said. So Crabtree pushed his bosses to use a sketch artist.

"I got ... a real good feeling from Tom that he could, I thought, provide a good sketch. It was like this has to be priority one because we can't leave this and come back to it," Crabtree told *The Oklahoman*.

"You work enough bank robberies and kidnaps and that kind of stuff and you realize the urgency of catching these things while the trail's still hot," he said.

His bosses agreed, and Crabtree stayed in Kansas to oversee the effort.

The rest is history.

Early the next morning, the FBI flew out a sketch artist who interviewed the mechanic, another body shop employee and the body shop owner. The FBI artist drew up two sketches "John Doe No. 1" and "John Doe No. 2."

The FBI released the sketches worldwide and agents showed them around Junction City. At the Dreamland Motel, the motel owner recognized the first sketch — recent guest Timothy McVeigh. "That was a huge break, of course," Crabtree said.

Two days after the bombing, agents tracked down McVeigh to the Noble County Jail, where he was being held on a weapons offense after a traffic stop. McVeigh had been minutes away from bailing out.

Crabtree believes it might have taken a day or so for another agent to coordinate getting a sketch artist had he just followed orders. As it turns out, that would have been time enough for McVeigh to have gotten out of jail and away. "Thankfully, we moved stuff along fast enough," he said.

Crabtree wasn't done, though.

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>>R. Scott Crabtree

Former FBI special agent



For four days, he worked around the clock — pretty much without sleep — chasing down leads.

"I grabbed a little cat nap here or there. I was totally wasted," he said.

Crabtree was so tired two days after the bombing that he was ready to let other guys go ahead and do the interview of Nichols.

But he went ahead at the urging of another FBI special agent, Daniel Jablonski.

“He basically said, ‘Scott, you’ve got to go. You’ve got all the pertinent information here. You know the locations. You know the geography. You know everything that’s happened up to now in terms of the rental and the canvas. You have to be there,’” Crabtree said.

Nichols did not confess that day, instead mixing truth with lies to try to make incriminating actions look innocent. His statement, though, provided new leads and was key to the prosecution at Nichols’ two trials.

Nichols is serving life in federal prison for his role in the bombing. After his convictions, Nichols admitted to the FBI, his family and a U.S. congressman that he had a major part in the plot.

Crabtree recalled the 1995 interview as being very weird. He remembered Nichols had a very cavalier, cool attitude.

“He didn’t look like he was sweating. He wasn’t nervous. He was none of that stuff. It was to me amazing — when I look back on it — that he could have had that attitude as he was being questioned, particularly as the night went on, as he knew the noose was getting tighter.”

Crabtree, 58, now lives in Virginia, near Washington, D.C. “I wish I could have done more,” he said.