

Five Forgotten Facts About The Oklahoma City Bombing

Here are five facts about the Oklahoma City bombing that may have faded from memories in the 20 years since the deadly terrorist attack

by Nolan Clay | The Oklahoman | April 12th, 2015

The changing death toll

Today — almost 20 years after the terrorist attack — the death toll is considered to be 168 people. But, for a long time after all the bodies were recovered, the death toll was reported as 169.

The count was higher in 1995 because of a severed, decomposed left leg in a black leather boot that could not be identified for months. Eventually, investigators determined the leg was from a known victim, Lakesha Levy, an airman at Tinker Air Force Base.

Turns out that in the chaos after the bombing the wrong left leg had been placed with Levy's body. The mystery continued, though, when the mismatched leg was recovered from Levy's above-ground crypt in New Orleans in 1996.

The new left leg could never be identified. Most experts agree the shaved leg is likely from a known victim — a short woman.

Fred Jordan, the state's chief medical examiner at the time of the bombing, testified at bombing co-conspirator Terry Nichols' state trial in 2004 that was his "gut feeling."

Outside the courthouse, Jordan told reporters: "I've always thought this had to be a mistake on our part. ... There were a lot of missing parts. ... But we have looked and looked and looked. Other pathologists have looked. Other anthropologists have looked. And we can't find it. ... Could it be another individual? I have to say, 'Could be. I don't know.' ... I do not know whose leg it is. That's the bottom line."

So, despite the enduring mystery, the death toll is 168, not 169.

In addition to the 168 in the official death toll, three other victims are recognized by name at the Oklahoma City National Memorial & Museum. Those three are the unborn babies of the three pregnant women killed in the blast.

John Doe No. 2

The FBI released two sketches — "John Doe No. 1 and John Doe No. 2" — at the start of the investigation. The drawings were based on a mechanic's recollection of who picked up the bomb truck from Elliott's Body Shop in Junction City, Kan., two days before the attack.

FBI agents used the first sketch "John Doe No. 1" to identify Timothy McVeigh as the bomber. Federal authorities later said "John Doe No. 2" actually depicted an innocent Army private. The soldier, Todd Bunting, had been at the shop, wearing a Carolina Panthers hat, a day later with a friend. The mechanic eventually agreed he must have been confused.

However, the shop owner, Eldon Elliott, said from the start that McVeigh was with another man — "a white male ... who wore a white cap with blue stripes." He has insisted over the years he is right despite feeling pressured by the FBI to change his account. He testified in 2004 that he could not have been confused because he had not seen Bunting the next day.

McVeigh told his attorneys another guy had come in to the store when he was picking up the truck, defense memos show. He described the man as smoking and said they spoke to each other. He suggested the man was either another customer or a delivery man. His lead trial attorney, Stephen Jones, didn't believe him.

Fateful car problems

The bomber, McVeigh, was pulled over for a traffic violation only 75 minutes after the bombing and jailed for carrying a gun.

He might have gotten away if only his original getaway car, a Pontiac Sunbird station wagon, had not blown a gasket the week before the bombing.

On April 14, 1995, five days before the bombing, he bought a 1977 Mercury Marquis without a license tag because he didn't have enough money to get the station wagon fixed. Tom Manning, the store manager at the Firestone in Junction City, Kan., sold it to him for \$250.

McVeigh took the Arizona tag off the station wagon and put it on his new getaway car.

"I had told him that ... as long as he had his registration and his proof of insurance with him, he could legally run his tag off the Pontiac 2000 on the Mercury with his bill of sale, and if he got stopped, he would — it would be legal," Manning later testified.

Despite that advice, McVeigh took off the tag when he parked the Mercury Marquis in Oklahoma City, according to a confidential statement to his attorneys. "I did not want to leave my plate on the car in case in the three days it sat there a police officer ran the plate to find the abandoned car's owner," he explained.

He said he intended to put a stolen Kansas tag on the car when he fled Oklahoma City after setting off the bomb. He didn't, leaving the tag instead in a storage unit in Kansas.

"There is a little bit of giving up involved there," he told his attorneys in September 1995. "There is a little bit of I had nowhere to go, no allies to continue anything with. ... I said, 'Let's just let fate play this out and see if I get back to the storage without the license plate.' ... It was more ... let's just see what happens."

What happened is an Oklahoma Highway Patrol trooper saw that his car was missing a tag. The trooper stopped him. The rest is history.

Pleading guilty or insanity

McVeigh considered pleading guilty in October 1996.

"He said that the prospect of him having to wait in jail for a long time before trial is not appealing to him and, quite frankly, he is becoming bored," defense attorney Rob Nigh wrote in a confidential memo.

The memo is among the defense documents that became public when McVeigh's lead attorney, Stephen Jones, donated them to the University of Texas.

McVeigh offered a number of reasons he should plead guilty, saying he was concerned about the impact a trial will have upon his parents, sister and other people who will have to testify against him.

"He fears that his mother is not mentally stable, and the added pressure will push her over the edge," Nigh wrote.

Earlier, in May 1995, McVeigh considered an insanity defense, saying he was intrigued by the requirement he prove that he did not know right from wrong, according to another defense memo.

"McVeigh explained that we could put the government on trial and establish that McVeigh did not believe it was wrong because he believed he was at war, a war initiated by the government," his attorneys wrote.

McVeigh was convicted at a jury trial in 1997 of the bombing, the bomb plot and the murders of eight federal agents. Jurors rejected his defense that the largely circumstantial case against him was not strong enough for a conviction.

An unknown end

McVeigh was executed June 11, 2001, in Terre Haute, Ind., and cremated. The location of his ashes has never been disclosed.

His occupation was listed on the Indiana death certificate as soldier.