

BOMBING CASES OFTEN TAKE LONGER TO SOLVE

EXPERT: NUMBER OF ATTEMPTED ATTACKS HELPS INVESTIGATION

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New York City's "Mad Bomber" left dozens of bombs in crowded public places during the 1940s and '50s. He was nabbed in 1957, ending what a police commissioner called "the greatest manhunt in the history of the police department."

It took almost 20 years for federal authorities to catch Theodore Kaczynski, the infamous Unabomber, who mailed pipe bombs and other homemade explosives to his victims from 1978 to 1995.

And Salem police never made an arrest in connection with a spate of tennis-ball bombs that showed up in late 2000 and early 2001.

Now, many people are wondering when -- or whether -- the person or people who planted four pipe bombs on Salem vehicles Aug. 10 will be brought to justice.

Bomb experts said that it's too early to conclude that a task force investigating the case is stymied or to assume that the attempted bomber will elude arrest.

"Remember how long we took to solve the Unabomber?" said Jimmie Oxley, a University of Rhode Island chemistry professor who is recognized as a national expert on pipe bombs.

Kaczynski, 64, is serving a life sentence for his 17-year bombing campaign.

It's that sense of continuing menace that makes investigating a bomber different from tracking a robber or other types of criminals, said Oregon State Police Sgt. Steve Sigurdson, who has spent 18 years on the bomb squad.

"If you have someone out there who could still be building devices, there's an expediency toward finding and arresting that person quickly," Sigurdson said. "That's why this is an extreme public-safety issue; any information people can provide is extremely useful. You may think what you saw was nothing, but it could actually be a key piece of information investigators need."

Four bombs were found Aug. 10, two still wired to the undercarriages of sport utility vehicles and two on the ground that authorities presume fell from vehicles.

Officials said that all four bombs were capable of killing people and were made by the same person or people. Police bomb squads rendered them harmless. In one instance, disabling a bomb produced an explosion that sent a cloud of debris at least 50 feet in the air, witnesses said.

Oxley, who has conducted pipe-bomb research and consulted with the U.S. government on terrorism issues, said Salem's attempted bombings appear to have been an odd blend of malicious intent and danger, along with possible bungling.

"This one sounds deadly. To me, it sounds unusual that there would be four on the same day," she said. "What's odd, though, is the fact that they were unsuccessful, that one out of the four didn't cause death. So either the person is very inept or intended to be unsuccessful. If so, it's hard to believe that they would open themselves up for such a catastrophic criminal charge."

Former FBI agent John Walzer agreed.

"Whoever is doing this, they're on a mission," said Walzer, who now acts as a regional director for Fortress Global Investigations, an international security consulting firm. "Four pipe bombs; they gave a lot of thought to it."

The fact that there were four bombs and four potential victims improves the chances of nabbing the perpetrator, Walzer said.

"If there was just one victim, one bomb, you'd have less to work on," Walzer said.

Investigators can look for common threads between the bombs and the potential victims and trace those commonalities back to the bomber.

Evidence has been turned over to a California laboratory run by the U.S. Bureau of Alcohol, Tobacco, Firearms and Explosives.

Most bomb cases are evidence-driven, police said. Unlike a robbery, in which little physical evidence is left behind, the act of leaving a bomb provides investigators with a treasure trove of information.

"There's going to be all the parts we have to look at," said Salem police Sgt. Bob Beverly, who has led the city's bomb squad for eight years. "We look at every piece and see how it's put together. It'll give us some kind of clue as to what the bomber was thinking and their level of sophistication."

Whether significant evidence was lost during the bomb-dismantling process is hard to tell, Oxley said.

"It's always counterproductive from an investigative standpoint if they blew them up," she said. "But a lot of times, there are other considerations, like safety. This is always an issue between bomb squads and forensic labs. If you have to blow them up, sometimes it doesn't leave much to

analyze. Presumably, they took lots of photos of them so they're looking at their physical characteristics."

The officers in this case have a mixed bag of evidence available to them. The bomb found at the Roth's grocery store on Lancaster Drive NE exploded while state police worked to disarm it, but a bomb found in a parking garage at Salem Hospital was disarmed intact by Salem police, Beverly said.

Both bombs still will yield clues, but the one recovered from the hospital and the two others recovered intact from other locations will be more valuable to the investigation.

"Our crime scene was basically the size of a parking space," Beverly said of the hospital-garage site. "The state police crime scene was three blocks square. All the parts are there; they're just smaller and farther apart."

Additional aspects of the investigation probably include checking with Salem-area stores about recent purchases of materials that might have been used to make pipe bombs and exploring links among the targets, Oxley and other experts said.

So far, the only common thread is that three vehicles came from South Salem, police said. A fourth potential victim remains unknown, and that person might not have known that a bomb fell off his or her vehicle.

In many bomb cases, police also have to contend with copycat criminals. For example, several arrests of copycats were made during Salem's tennis-ball-bomb scare. All of the arrests were of teenage pranksters.

Copycat bombers generally don't hamper the investigation of the original crime aside from slowing down the police officers who then must track down and arrest the copycats, Beverly said.

"Generally speaking, the copycat isn't going to know all the ins and outs," he said. "There are going to be some differences in bomb design we're going to be able to see. They'll be apprehended and prosecuted, but no one will mistake them for the original bomber."

As they enter the second week of the case, Salem police and the ATF are offering a \$5,000 reward for information leading to an arrest and a conviction. Special agent Julianne Marshall said the ATF remains committed to the inquiry.

In 1957, detectives tracked New York's "Mad Bomber," George Metesky, to his home in Waterbury, Conn., where they found bomb parts.

Diagnosed with paranoid schizophrenia, Metesky spent 17 years in a hospital for the criminally insane. Freed in 1973, he lived quietly until he died in 1994.

In the annals of notorious pipe bombers, Kaczynski, who killed three people and injured 29 with his homemade bombs, stands out from the rest, Oxley said.

"Certainly, the Unabomber is the most well-known guy for doing pipe bombs," she said. "His were unique in that he made everything himself. He made his own screws. He experimented with his chemicals in making them. In the end, he evidently was signing his bombs with some sort of a little signature so that nobody else could claim his bombings."

The "Unabomber" moniker was coined long before Kaczynski, a former math professor, was caught. It was derived from his initial targets: universities and airlines.

This month, an odd postscript was added to the Unabomber saga: a California judge ruled that items seized during a 1996 raid on Kaczynski's Montana cabin will be sold online. Items will include books, clothing and tools. People won't be able to buy about 100 bomb-making items that were confiscated.

The proceeds of the sale will help fund the \$15 million compensation package that Kaczynski was ordered to pay his victims.