

The Road To Capture

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Elaine Shannon and Michael Weisskopf

Nov. 04, 2002

Killings, clues and miscues ...

It took police 18 years to nab the Unabomber. At just 22 days, the sniper probe was comparatively speedy; still, it snaked through numerous wrong turns and culs-de-sac:

OCT. 2 A shot is fired into a store window; no one is hurt. Within an hour, a man is killed in Montgomery County, Md.

OCT. 3 D.C. police stop the sniper's blue Chevy Caprice for a "minor infraction" and scan the tag number. It comes up clean. Two hours later, a witness reports seeing a dark-hued, perhaps burgundy or cranberry Caprice leaving the scene of the day's fifth and final murder. Police post a lookout for the car

OCT. 7 Sniper leaves tarot card, left, and message stating, "Mister Policeman, I am God." Police retrieve shell casing in matted grass near shooting

OCT. 8 A Baltimore police officer finds Muhammad asleep in his car outside a Subway sandwich shop and scans both his New Jersey plates and Washington State license through law-enforcement databases. Nothing out of the ordinary shows up. According to the Baltimore Sun, Muhammad tells the officer that he is on his way to New Jersey to visit his father, asks for directions to Interstate 95 and drives away

DETOURS

Police spotted the blue Caprice on several occasions, though they focused instead on white trucks

OCT. 12 Police release a composite image of a white box truck, below, and say they are also looking for a white Astro van with a ladder rack

OCT. 13 Chief Moose says there is no "big push" for information on the Caprice

OCT. 14 Witnesses report seeing a dark-colored Chevy or Chrysler fleeing the Home Depot shooting, but police home in on a witness's description of a cream-colored van

...then one big week

The next six days were the most crucial to the chase, but they were also the most hectic and confused as the dragnet spread cross country from the D.C. area to Montgomery, Ala., and Washington State. Here's what we know so far:

OCT. 17 A man identifying himself as the sniper calls police. A federal law-enforcement official tells TIME that he also mentions Montgomery, Ala., and says, "I did something down there." According to the official, the task force then contacts Montgomery, Ala., police to ask about unsolved crimes

OCT. 18 The sniper calls the Rev. William Sullivan of St. Ann's Catholic Church in Ashland, Va., above, raving, "I am God." In garbled speech, the caller refers to the D.C.-area shootings as well as a crime in Alabama. Thinking he has a prankster on the line, Sullivan hangs up and does not report the call

OCT. 18 Police arrest Matthew Dowdy, right, the man who falsely claimed he saw a cream-colored Astro van fleeing the Home Depot murder

OCT. 19 Sniper leaves letter, above, demanding \$10 million and saying he will call police the next day. The sniper also rebukes the task force for "incompetence"[sic] claiming his calls to five separate entities—including the FBI and an Ashland priest—

were treated like a "joke." The postscript: "Your children are not safe anywhere at anytime"

OCT. 20 Heeding the sniper's reference to an Ashland priest, investigators interview Sullivan. After Sullivan points them to Alabama, officers contact Montgomery, Ala., police chief John Wilson, right, who describes a Sept. 21 shooting of two women outside a liquor store in which one woman died

OCT. 21 A man purporting to be the sniper calls police. The call is traced to a pay phone at a Richmond, Va., Exxon station. When officers swarm the area, they find a white minivan, below, and arrest two illegal immigrants with no connection to the sniper shootings

OCT. 21 Investigators fly to Alabama to pick up evidence from the Sept. 21 murder, including a fingerprint that was never submitted to the FBI. Either this evening or the following morning, the print is run through national crime databases and matches the name of Malvo, who was picked up on an INS violation in Dec. 2001. The INS file mentions John Muhammad

OCT. 22 Police find a second letter again demanding \$10 million. Sniper wants the cash wired to a deactivated stolen credit card. Moose announces it is "not possible electronically" to comply

OCT. 23 Agents descend on the Tacoma, Wash., duplex where Malvo once lived and retrieve a tree stump containing bullet fragments. Meanwhile, a U.S. Marshal asks Baltimore, Md., police to run a check on Malvo and Muhammad. The Oct. 8 run-in pops up, linking Muhammad to the Caprice. Moose announces a warrant for Muhammad, who is thought to be driving the car, and says, "You asked us to say, 'We have caught the sniper like a duck in a noose'"

OCT. 24 Just before 1 a.m., trucker Ron Lantz, above, spots the Caprice, below, and dials 911. At 3:30 a.m., a massive police team rushes in. Muhammad and Malvo are awakened and arrested

OCT. 25 Montgomery County prosecutors announce they have filed six counts of first-degree murder against each of the two suspected snipers and plan to seek the death penalty for Muhammad

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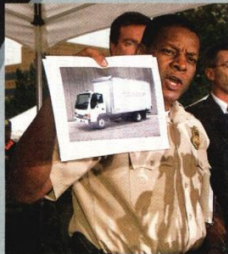
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By ELAINE SHANNON AND MICHAEL WEISSKOPF

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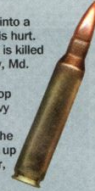
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The search for Muhammad and Malvo took investigators across the country

TIME Correspondents Melissa August, Perry Bacon Jr. and Eric Roston contributed to this story

THE WASHINGTON POST

O. You will place a million dollar in bank of america account on [redacted]

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MATT COOMANS/AL—CORBIS SYGMA

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AP/WIDE WORLD

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AP/WIDE WORLD—PHOTOS BY AP

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A critique of his ideas & actions.



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