A Serial Bomber Strikes Again

Elizabeth Gleick

December 26, 1994

The tidy white package, about the size of two videocassettes stacked together, looked innocuous enough — no different, in fact, from millions of other packages landing in homes and mailboxes across the country this holiday season — and it sat on the kitchen table for about a day before Thomas Mosser got around to opening it. When he did, however, on the morning of Saturday, Dec. 10, it proved deadly: the blast nearly decapitated Mosser as he stood there in his bathrobe, and it carved a crater about two feet wide in the kitchen counter. It was only the most chilling sort of luck that no one else was injured — Mosser's wife Susan and daughters Kim, 13, and Kelly, 15 months, as well as a neighborhood child, were in other parts of the big North Caldwell, New Jersey, house.

But what people who knew the 50-year-old advertising executive still cannot fathom is why — why Tom Mosser? Recently promoted to one of the top jobs at Young & Rubicam and described by friends and colleagues as quiet and reliable, he was a family man who on the day of his death had planned to go Christmas- tree shopping with his wife and children. "I haven't gotten used to talking about him in the past tense," says his old friend James Dowling, an executive at Burson-Marsteller, a public-relations firm where Mosser worked for 25 years. "If you were a friend of Tom's, you were a friend for life." Dowling and Mosser often played golf together and took their eldest daughters for an annual holiday dinner in New York City. "With deaths by natural causes, it's easier, because you think there is a reason for it," Dowling notes. "Here there is no reason."

The question of motive is precisely the matter troubling investigators for the FBI, who believe the mail bomb that killed Mosser was the work of a devious serial bomber who has eluded them for 16 years. Their ongoing investigation — dubbed Unabom because the criminal's early targets were people at universities and airlines — has drawn together a string of 15 incidents since 1978 that have killed one other person and injured 23. But while authorities can say with certainty that this latest blast bears some of the Unabomber's trademarks — the return address on the package named a fictitious sender in Northern California, where the bomber is thought to reside, and the device, like earlier ones, was an intricately built pipe bomb inside a handmade wooden box — they have not as yet determined what links his various targets. And although a task force of 25 agents from the FBI, the Bureau of Alcohol, Tobacco and Firearms, and the U.S. Postal Service is working around the clock on the case in San Francisco, investigators seem to have made little progress in catching their methodical madman. Says James Fox, a former chief of the New York FBI office who worked on a Unabom case in 1993: "I don't think we're much closer than we were 16 years ago."

The Unabomber's first four attacks were in Illinois and included a 1979 explosion in the cargo hold of an American Airlines flight en route from Chicago to Washington that caused 12 injuries from smoke inhalation. The only known sighting of him took place in 1987, when he left a concealed bomb outside a Salt Lake City computer store. A witness there helped police fashion their composite sketch of a white man now in his late 30s or early 40s, nearly 6 ft. tall, with fair hair, a thin mustache and glasses. Then

the bomber vanished for more than six years, leading some authorities to speculate that he may have been in prison or a psychiatric facility. In June 1993 he re- emerged when a bomb injured Charles Epstein, a geneticist at the University of California at San Francisco. Two days later, Yale computer scientist David Gelernter was seriously wounded in the blast from a package sent to his New Haven office. The same day as the Yale attack, the New York Times received a letter that predicted both bombings, saying, "We are an anarchist group calling ourselves FC. We will give information about our goals at some future time." (Eleven of the bombs have contained metal parts, designed to survive the explosion, inscribed "F.C.")

Though investigators have been sifting the evidence in search of some sort of pattern, one of the more disturbing aspects to the case is, in fact, the lack of a real pattern. Only about half of the packages have been mailed to specific individuals; the others have been left outside for curious passersby to find. In 1985 Hugh Scrutton was killed when he stepped out the back door of his RenTech Computer Rental store in Sacramento, California, and picked up a crumpled paper bag lying on the ground.

The number of victims involved with high technology prompted some speculation that the bomber might have lost a job to automation — and that F.C. might stand for "f— computers." But not all of the bombs have these initials, just as not all of the targets have received an advance call or letter telling them to expect a package. (The FBI has denied reports that Mosser received such a call the day before his death.) And although Y&R has such companies as Digital Equipment and Xerox as clients, investigators are not convinced that Mosser — who was recently cited in the New York Times for his promotion — was targeted for a computer-related reason.

The most information has come from the bombs themselves. Bit by blown-up bit, FBI investigators have pieced together a psychological profile of their prey. They can tell by the handmade wooden boxes and by the tiny, handcrafted screws that he is a meticulous, even compulsive, man. He spends hours, they say, cutting, filing and whittling little bits of metal and wood, removing any hints of their origin. According to retired FBI bomb expert James Ronay, the bomber also assembles and disassembles the whole thing several times before he is through. He has "an uncontrollable urge to fool with this thing as much as possible," Ronay explains. "And ultimately you put it down and have it kill somebody — that's your ultimate gratification. He's leaving a little of himself at each crime scene."

The process, authorities say, is so time consuming that the bomber must be a loner. He may also be, warns San Francisco FBI special agent Jim Freeman, who is heading up the Unabom task force, "a quiet person, a typical 'nice-guy' neighbor."

Quiet, perhaps, but increasingly dangerous. According to former FBI agent Fox, the bomber has refined his technique over the years; the later bombs are more sophisticated, activating only when the package is opened. "He's evolved," says Fox. "This guy's done a wonderful job in self-education."

According to Mark Logan, the assistant special agent in charge of the San Francisco division of the ATF bureau, the bomber may work in a "somewhat eccentric" way at

his job, though authorities can't say what that job is. Many suspect he may have some connection to a university. The package that killed Mosser had a fictitious return address typed on it — "H.C. Wickel, Department of Economics, San Francisco State University" — that has so far yielded nothing.

While investigators last week continued to dole out information on their progress and to urge the public to call a toll-free hotline with tips (1-800-701-BOMB), the seeming randomness of Mosser's murder left some people wondering if they might be next. Many advertising agencies beefed up their security procedures, and sales of such devices as X-ray metal detectors skyrocketed. Some computer users on the Internet discussed the case in private E-mail messages but avoided the public bulletin boards, loath to call attention to themselves. But John T. Horn, head of corporate security at Kroll Associates, a New York-based security company, is careful to keep the matter in perspective. "It's highly unlikely that you'll get one in the mail," says Horn, who himself fielded dozens of anxious calls last week. "One event doesn't make it an epidemic." Some of those with the most to fear agree. "Sure, it bothers the hell out of me — like any terrorist act would," says one prominent computer scientist. "But it's not going to change the way I do things." Says FBI investigator Lou Bertram, who worked on the case until he retired in 1988, "the longer he's out there, the better the odds that he's going to be caught. He has to make a mistake."

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