

At the Places Where Bombs Killed, a Day for Memories and Nervous Optimism

Neil MacFarquhar

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They are an unusual club, the victims of the Unabomber. Mostly academics, a few corporate executives, and one a secretary who happened to open the wrong package, they are spread at random across the country and linked only by the fact that their lives were damaged or in some cases devastated by a package from someone with a penchant for evil.

Most have never even met. But with the news yesterday that the dark odyssey of nearly 18 years might finally be ending, their common bond came flooding back with vivid memories of that terrible moment when the bomber shook their lives.

There was a tremendous bang, a loud concussion like zaaaaaaaaaaaaack," said John E. Hauser, an Air Force pilot who was working on a master's degree at the University of California at Berkeley and dreaming of being an astronaut until May 15, 1985.

All he did was move a seemingly misplaced plastic box on a computer laboratory table. The bomb permanently shredded his right arm and fingers, ripping off his Air Force Academy ring with such force that it imprinted the words "Academy" on the wall behind him. Mr. Hauser, now a 37-year-old professor at the University of Colorado, says he remembers watching the pooling blood, screaming for help and wondering "Why would someone do this?"

It is a question those connected to the three people killed and 23 wounded by the Unabomber have asked themselves countless times. The question is somewhat stronger among those who were targets, rather than being wounded at random. It is ultimately the question they hope will be answered now that a likely suspect has been found.

"I never had a sense of why he targeted me," said Percy A. Woods, 76, who retired as president of United Airlines in 1983, three years after the bomb that wounded him arrived at his home in Lake Forest, Ill., burrowed inside a novel. "I don't think any of us ever had."

Mr. Woods said he had not really formed a mental image of who the Unabomber might be, finding reports of a Harvard University degree and an academic career almost too wild to contemplate.

"I felt it had to be someone demented in some respect, he just wasn't an every day human being, but beyond that I had no idea," said Mr. Woods, who spent several weeks in a hospital and underwent plastic surgery to regain the use of his hand. He said the Federal Bureau of Investigation once considered trying to bring all the victims together to see if there was a common strand among them, but eventually abandoned the project because everyone was so different.

None of those contacted yesterday recognized the name of the suspect. But they began speculating where they might have crossed paths with him or how he might have singled them out.

Patrick Fischer, head of the computer science department at Vanderbilt University in Nashville, was on vacation when the package arrived for him. His secretary, Janet Smith, opened a wooden box with a pipe bomb, and it blew up in her face. She recovered physically in weeks, but has refused to speak about the incident publicly.

"At first I always thought it had been a random thing," Mr. Fischer said. "I figured the guy said this time I want to do a computer scientist. So he would go look up computer scientists in the Who's Who and take it from there."

But the manifesto published last year changed Mr. Fischer's mind. It smacked of careful plotting. It also made him a little more fearful, although he took solace in the fact that the bomber had never struck the same victim twice.

The victims do share some common traits. They doubted the bomber would be found. They still fear packages or even large envelopes. They were a little curious about the manifesto, but not enough to plow through the thicket of technological and sociological jargon word by word. They disliked the publicity it gave him, but think it might have helped catch him and that the person named as a suspect is indeed the bomber.

"It would be nice to hear he can't hurt anyone else," said Diogenes Angelakos, 77, a professor emeritus of electrical engineering at the University of California at Berkeley. He picked up a pipe bomb in the faculty lounge that exploded, injuring his right hand. He had also been the second man to reach Mr. Hauser the day he was gravely injured.

Mr. Angelakos thinks the violence might have been fertilized by the radical politics prevalent at Berkeley when the suspect taught there in the late 1960's.

"Those were unsettled years," he said. "Maybe he went preaching around and couldn't get any attention, so he went bombing."

The earlier victims have tried to forget about the whole thing, letting time flow over most of their concerns.

But for those closest to the more recent victims, the news touched wounds still raw.

Staff members at the California Forestry Association in Sacramento heard about the potential arrest of a suspect after a morning meeting discussing how they might commemorate the first anniversary of the death of their president, Gilbert Murray, killed when he opened a package in the group's headquarters on April 24, 1995.

"Our initial reaction is one of nervous optimism," said Donn E. Zea, vice president of the lobbying organization. "In a way it was like digging back a year ago and reigniting all the emotions of trauma, shock and horror."

He said staff members had talked to Mr. Murray's wife, Connie, and the couple's sons – one in high school and one a freshman in college – but they did not want to speak publicly. "I think the family is feeling the same anxiety that we have," Mr. Zea said. "We have been down this road before, there have been a number of different suspects, but this seems more positive."

Mr. Zea said the arrest reminded everyone what the office had looked like a year ago, right after the bomb went off. He said he had been talking on the phone to Mr. Murray about the Oklahoma City bombing and had just hung up when the explosion pushed the nail heads out of the walls in his own office.

"The office where the bomb went off itself looked like a scene that I have only experienced on international news from Beirut or Tel Aviv or somewhere, a war atmosphere with shrapnel in the walls and everything busted down. There was a chemical smell

from the bomb itself. The carpeting and all the walls had been ripped out. There was a real sense of evil to it, it was disturbing to walk through, you just felt like your privacy had been violated.”

He said Mr. Murray was a 47-year-old graduate of the University of California at Berkeley who had been there at almost the same time the suspect was. Mr. Zea also said co-workers had been struck by the fact that Mr. Murray had survived two tours in Vietnam only to die savagely in a relatively quiet California city.

The families and friends left behind after other bombs went off have tended to withdraw from public view.

In North Caldwell, N.J., neighbors said family members had kept largely to themselves since a package exploded in their kitchen on Dec. 10, 1994, killing Thomas Mosser, a 50-year-old advertising executive.

”I can’t talk to you, it is too soon,” his wife said at the kitchen door, where she was watching the evening news with a teen-age son.

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