

Blast surprised Armstrong

Associated Press

The man convicted of masterminding a fatal anti-war bombing in 1970 says he was shocked when the blast went off much too soon, long before anyone inside the targeted building in Madison could have been warned.

"When the bomb went off I had this sinking feeling that someone was killed because there probably was someone in the building and they didn't have time to get out," Karleton Armstrong said.

One person did die in the blast that devastated the UW-Madison building housing the Army Math Research Center. The bombing came at the height of campus protest activities against the Vietnam War and turned the Armstrongs and two fellow conspirators into fugitives on the run.

Armstrong and his younger brother, Dwight, commented on the bombing and its aftermath in a copyright story by free-lance writer Michael Fellner, published in today's edition of *The Milwaukee Journal*.

The story, second of two parts to appear in the newspaper, said the interviews used for the stories marked the first public account of the bombing and its aftermath by the two brothers.

They lived in Madison at the time, served prison terms for their parts in the scheme, have now cleared parole and are again residing in Madison.

The bombing on Aug. 24, 1970, killed Robert Fassnacht, a physics researcher who was working in another part of the building where the Army Math Research Center was housed.

According to the story, Karleton Armstrong still is not sure why the blast happened prematurely.

"We tested the fuse," he said. "My only guess is that some fuel oil spilled, causing the fuse to short-circuit."

The bomb itself was described as a combination of fuel oil and fertilizer inside a van the bombers parked outside the center.

The fuse, according to the story, was designed to burn for seven minutes, which the bombers believed would allow them to reach an apartment less than one mile away. One of them already had made a warning telephone call to police.

But they drove their small car only a few blocks when the blast occurred and sent them fleeing from the city. Dwight insisted they stop on their way to look back toward the bombing site.

"It looked like an atom bomb had gone off," Dwight Armstrong said. "The sky was all red. Debris was still rising in the air, almost in slow motion, forming a mushroom cloud over the city. It was eerie."

The Armstrongs, according to the story, followed a weaving route north, and, after hearing a newscast say no one died in the blast, celebrated with breakfast at a truck stop. Back on the road, they heard a radio bulletin about a body being pulled from the wreckage.

"I was completely devastated," Karleton Armstrong said. "All anyone could say was, 'Oh, my God' for at least 10 minutes. David (Fine) started crying. I was numb from grief."

The story describes how the car was stopped by a Sauk County sheriff's officer who took their identities but let them go to the Devils Lake State Park campground where they said they planned to camp.

It was two days later when the FBI got the information, and the prime suspects in the bombing became the Armstrongs, David Fine and Leo Burt.

According to the story, Karleton Armstrong and Fine returned to Madison while the other two hid in the bluffs. They returned in another car and all four went to Madison to destroy evidence left in their apartments and withdraw money from the bank.

The story tells how they drove to Ann Arbor, Mich., the same day, then to Toledo, Ohio, where they split up, the Armstrongs driving on to New York City and Burt and Fine going their own way.

The brothers, the story said, reunited at the Times Square meeting place Sept. 2. They made their way north by subway, bus and foot, stole a car, weathered a check by a police officer at Little Falls, N.Y., drove across the border into Canada and headed for Montreal, where they contacted an organization for draft dodgers and Army deserters.

They posed as U.S. Army deserters and changed their identities as they moved from safe house to safe house in the draft-dodger underground, the story said, with Karleton eventually settling into Toronto and Dwight moving to Vancouver before slipping back to the United States in 1975, but later returning to Canada after a brush with police in San Diego.

Karleton Armstrong, 22 at the time of the bombing, had been arrested in Toronto in February 1972. After unsuccessfully fighting extradition, he pleaded guilty to second-degree murder and arson and went to prison until his parole in 1980.

Dwight Armstrong, 18 when the blast occurred, was arrested in Toronto in April 1977 and went to prison until his 1980 parole.

David Fine, a 17-year-old student at the time of the bombing, was captured in San Rafael, Calif. in 1976 and served three years in prison.

Burt, a UW student in 1970, has never been found.

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