

Riddle of Rap Brown: Dead? Alive? In Hiding?

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Special to *The Inquirer*

BEL AIR, Md., April 3. — Is Rap Brown dead? If he is, how did he die? And where is his body?

And if he is hiding or fleeing, why?

These are among the riddles which still hang like smoke wisps over a spot on U. S. Highway 1-B, near Bel Air, where almost a month

ago two of Brown's trusted lieutenants were blown apart by a bomb in their borrowed car.

Although it has not been formally announced yet, for fear of setting off a black reaction, the state of Maryland has closed its investigation into the explosion the night of March 9. Indeed the closing may never be announced.

Nevertheless, the deputy state

medical examiner and the police have concluded that Ralph Edward Featherstone, 30, and William Herman Payne, 26, were accidentally killed when a huge dynamite bomb in their possession prematurely exploded.

Despite the extensive investigation, much of it remains secret or sketchy. There has been no inquest and there are no plans to hold one. And the police conclusion is the same one reached minutes after the blast and announced by authorities in order to keep Maryland's black communities cool.

For these reasons, in the face of considerable evidence to support the police conclusions, militant and moderate Negroes who have seen their leaders assassinated, harassed, jailed, and killed by police action, distrust the official explanation. But aside from the bitter history of the past, the suspicious blacks

have no concrete evidence of their own.

The Student National Coordinating Committee issued a statement the morning after the explosion calling the deaths "vicious murders."

Along with militant groups like SNCC, moderate black leaders have raised questions about the deaths of Featherstone and Payne and the police verdict.

And all their questions seem to lead to the larger one — the whereabouts of former SNCC Chairman Hubert (H. Rap) Brown.

Brown's trial on charges that he had incited a 1967 riot in Cambridge, Md., began in Bel Air the day of the ex-



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THE PHILAD

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plosion — a Monday. The trial had been moved from Cambridge because another riot was feared if proceedings were held there.

LEFT NEW YORK

According to Brown's pretty, young wife, Lynn, he left his New York home for Bel Air Saturday, March 7. She did not know how he would get to Bel Air. He was to have appeared in court Tuesday, after the pre-trial motions had been disposed of Monday.

The blast at 11:42 Monday night shattered any chance of holding a fair trial in Bel Air. At the request of defense attorneys William M. Kunstler and Carol Broege, Judge Harry Dyer transferred the case to Howard County, outside Baltimore. The new trial date is April 20.

Kunstler and Broege, and Brown's wife — who does not appear perturbed — say they have no idea where the defendant is, or whether he is dead or alive.

COVER-UP CHARGED

But they are inclined to give weight to suggestions by SNCC that the police explanation for the Featherstone-Payne deaths is a cover-up, and that there is a "very real possibility that the body of H. Rap Brown was removed from the scene of the murder by the racist white power structure in order to avoid massive reprisals in the U. S."

Lt. Col. Thomas S. Smith, chief of operations for the Maryland State Police, calls this possibility "nonsense." He suggests instead that it was raised by SNCC to cover an attempt to bomb the Harford County Courthouse in Bel Air, and an escape by Brown to avoid prosecution.

The key to what has happened to Brown is somewhere in the explosion that killed Featherstone and Payne, for



AP Wirephoto

Black militant H. Rap Brown has been missing since March 7, when he left his New York home to stand trial in Bel Air, Md., on arson and riot charges. Rumors persist that Brown may have died in car explosion that killed two of his lieutenants.

it was around that time that Brown dropped from sight.

BORROWED CAR

Sometime Sunday, March 8, Featherstone borrowed a 1964 Dodge Dart from Miss Jean Wiley, a Washington black activist. Why he borrowed it Sunday is not known. But it was learned that the FBI told Maryland authorities that Brown was reported in the Washington vicinity that Sunday. Featherstone, one of Brown's closest friends, could have borrowed the car to meet and chauffeur Brown. That Featherstone got the car on Sunday gives credence to the police report that Brown was in Washington by then.

Clarence Davis, of Aberdeen, Md., who worked closely with SNCC and Brown's attorneys on the upcoming trial, said it was for security reasons that Featherstone and Payne drove the 75 miles from Washington to Bel Air.

However, Davis said there had been reports that Brown was in Bel Air and Featherstone was going to meet him. But no trace of Brown has been found in Bel Air.

CALL DENIED

Some SNCC sources said there was a report that Brown's brother, Ed, had called Featherstone in Washington and asked him to meet

Rap in a Bel Air motel. Ed Brown, contacted in Baton Rouge, said he made no such call.

With Featherstone at the wheel and Payne beside him, the car approached the intersection with Toll Gate Road, and drew beside an abandoned old, stone toll house. It blew up, scattering debris for hundreds of feet. The speedometer was jammed at 57 miles per hour.

Bel Air was being watched closely by state and local police that night. State trooper Richard A. Lastner was alone, driving his patrol car about 200 yards in front of Featherstone's car. He may have had them under surveillance.

QUICK TO ARRIVE

He said later he heard the blast and looked in his rear view mirror in time to see the debris coming down. Within moments, according to the report of Lastner and other officers, witnesses and other police gathered at the scene.

The Fire Department, the FBI, explosives experts, and top Maryland officials were called. But not until a reporter called attorney Kunstler, who was staying in Havre de Grace, were any of Brown's supporters notified.

Davis, accompanied by friends, arrived at the scene at about 2:15 A. M. By that time, Smith was telling reporters that Featherstone, who had been identified by a driver's license, and his companion had been blown up by a bomb they were carrying.

EXPLOSIVE SITUATION

Davis disagreed and charged Smith was jumping to conclusions. Smith later admitted he was. But, in an interview, he said there was some reason for his initial findings and he was anxious to keep a tense situation from exploding.

Davis also suggested the

other dead man was Brown. But after looking at the upper torso of the still unidentified Payne, which was all that was left of him, Davis was convinced he was wrong.

The following morning, pieces of the car were reassembled in a state police garage nearby. The deputy medical examiner, Dr. Werner Spitz, began examinations of Featherstone, whose body was flung 130 feet from the car, and Payne.

Inside Payne's abdomen Spitz found a piece of finger. A piece of a thumb had been found in the wreckage. It was enough to identify Payne as the dead man, and led Spitz to his 1962 Navy medical records.

Every characteristic Spitz found on the half-man, matched Payne's Navy record, except one big thing. The teeth in the mouth of the body had only one cavity; the Navy record shows five, and cavities don't disappear.

Spitz pronounced the Navy record inaccurate, and since everything else matched, concluded the dead man was Payne. As a clincher, he reconstructed part of the dead man's face and took pictures of him.

Friends and relatives quickly identified Payne from the pictures.

TOSSED OR PLANTED?

But SNCC suggested that Brown might also have been killed or hurt in the explosion and spirited away. And they hint that the bomb could have been thrown into the window of Featherstone's car or planted beneath the seat to kill Brown.

Col. Smith said the bomb could not have been thrown into the car because an examination of the wreckage clearly shows all the windows were closed.

And he said chemical analyses by the FBI disclosed that the bomb was made of dynamite sticks rather than plastique or pure nitroglycerine.

"If someone were out to kill them," said Smith, "they would use two or three sticks, which could have been hidden in the car. But the force of

the blast shows that about ten sticks were used, and together with the detonator and timing device, such a bomb could not fit under the seat. There is only a five-and-a-half inch space."

From the size of the bomb, Smith concluded, "it could only be used against buildings." And he theorized that Featherstone had cruised by the courthouse, and having found it well guarded, had asked Payne to reset the alarm-clock timer for a later moment.

"In the darkness of the car, and as it went over a few bumps in the road," Smith said, "Payne could have been turning the alarm set too far one way or the other."

In support of this theory, Smith noted that Spitz had recovered from Payne's head a complete disc battery, and from his chest cavity metal debris which the FBI said could have been parts of "an electrical firing system for a bomb."

AGREE ON POINT

Rap Brown's lawyers and SNCC sources said they agree that Payne was probably bending over the bomb when it exploded.

But they hold to the possibility he could have been reaching down to pick up a bomb he had just discovered, and that had been put there to explode in Brown's face.

They cannot believe that Brown, if he is alive and able to do so, would not have contacted them.