

'Fooling Around' Held Cause of Fatal Blast

By Philip D. Carter

Washington Post Staff Writer

BEL AIR, Md., March 10—Maryland state police theorized today that a black activist, "fooling around" with a powerful bomb, accidentally blew himself, his driver and their borrowed car to shreds near here late Monday night.

The theory, based on evidence gathered at the scene, was offered by authorities as a tentative explanation of the deaths of Ralph Edward Featherstone and his unidentified passenger.

The same evidence, some black spokesmen here argued, could just as easily point to murder.

There is not much evidence to go on. After more than 12 hours of labor, police were still poking through shrubs and grass for scattered remains of the men and their car this afternoon.

The dismembered bodies were in the Baltimore morgue and the twisted remnants of the car in the garage of the state police barracks at Benson, three miles from here.

On the strength of evidence gathered by this evening, Lt. Col. Thomas Smith, chief of operations for the Maryland state police, concluded that the dead men were "transporting" a bomb when it exploded. Dr. Werner Spitz, a pathologist with the State Medical Examiner's office, supported that view.

"The examination of the vehicle by our experts . . . indicated that there was a stronger possibility it was transported than that it was an explosive device put there by somebody else," Col. Smith declared.

Although he acknowl-



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Lower arrow shows Rte. 1 site where two Negro men were killed when their car was demolished by a bomb explosion.

edged that "I'm no explosive expert," Dr. Spitz concurred. "The pattern of the injuries suggest the conclusion that the explosion started at that point where the passenger in the right front seat had his feet," he said.

Death, said Dr. Spitz, was caused by a "tremendous blast," a "substantial explosion." And "as such" he said, "I don't think it (the bomb) could be hidden."

Under questioning, he said he doubted whether an explosive device that powerful could have been hidden under the front seat or in the glove compartment of the car.

"I tend to believe the explosion came as he (the unidentified passenger) bent downward with his hands in front of him."

"Other criteria," he said "don't substantiate" the possibility that the device may have been hidden under the automobile floorboard, Dr. Spitz said. He did not elaborate.

Conclusion Grounds

Both men said they had based their conclusion on the conditions of both car and the victims. Featherstone, said Dr. Spitz, lost his right arm in the blast. The other man—who, according to the police theory, was crouched over the bomb when it exploded—lost both arms, both legs, his jaw and part of his skull, Dr. Spitz said.

During his post mortem, Dr. Spitz said, he found "pieces of metal of all sizes and shapes embedded in the body of the passenger." Included, he said, were "rivets and plain pieces of metal." He added "he did not have

a bone in his body that was intact."

The explosion occurred just a quarter of a mile south of the Bel Air city limits, at the intersection of business route U.S. 1 and a quiet country lane called Tollgate Road.

Featherstone, police said, was driving south from Bel

Air in a borrowed 1964 white Dodge Dart.

At the time of the explosion, according to state police Major Paul J. Randall, a state trooper named Richard Alvin Lastner was driving 200 yards ahead of Featherstone's car. Lastner heard the explosion, Randall said and drove back to the blast site.

There, he and the platoons of officers who soon joined him found the two men's smoking remains.

The front wheels and engine of the car, witnesses recalled today, were blown about 150 yards south on U.S. Rte. 1. The roof of the car was hurled over and behind the 19th century toll house that stands at the roadside 10 yards from the explosion site.

The rear end of the car was knocked northward many yards. Scraps of metal, few larger than as-man's fist, were scattered around a 150-yard radius.

The windows of the old toll house were blown out, its window frames shattered and its green shutters jarred from their hinges.

Origin of Blast

As reassembled in the garage of the state police barracks, the car's wreckage showed definite signs of a massive explosion somewhere near the right front seat.

The floorboard on that side was missing. The right side of the engine seemed to have been ripped up and away. The right door seemed to have blown outward with great violence. The car's drive shaft seemed to have been bent downward.

"We're not talking about a couple of sticks of dynamite" Col. Smith said as he showed the wreckage to newsmen. "This was a helluva powerful force."

Among pieces of evidence

retrieved by police, Col. Smith said was a letter addressed to "Campanero Rolf" from a man who signed himself "Roberto."

Smith, who would not show the letter to newsmen, said it "remarked about their visit together." There was an "indication," he said, that the letter came from Cuba, addressed to Featherstone.

Another document re-

trieved by police, Col. Smith said was a letter addressed to "Campanero Rolf" from a man who signed himself "Roberto."

Some black spokesmen, however, speculated that the victims had been murdered. They suggested that the exploded car may have been ambushed at the intersection by bombers, or was sabotaged by a bomb hidden under the car's floorboard or by the front seat or in its glove compartment.

"I think that Smith's information doesn't necessarily prove anything," said Walter Lively, a black activist from Baltimore. "We think an explosive was either planted or thrown into the car."

He suggested a third possibility—that the car had been stopped, the two men bludgeoned to death, and then both the car and its occupants blown up.

"We want all avenues investigated," Lively said. "We don't want the police to push the idea that here were two fools, who at the same time were experts in explosives, who just blew themselves up."

In an evening press conference, Smith of the state police stuck fast to his view. The car's passenger, Smith said he believed, was bent over working on the device when it went off. He said he was still open, however, to "other possibilities."

Two men assigned to military explosives units noted at the outset of an interview that it was difficult for them to form judgments merely on the basis of description.

Force Cited

One said that the force of the explosion apparently was so great that it would be extremely difficult to determine where the device had been located in the car.

It appeared to him that "too much was missing" and that the explosive would have "demolished everything no matter where it was."

The second expert said it might be assumed that the missing section of floorboard was an indication that the bomb had been placed beneath it.

From the information given him, he said, there was no way to conclude whether the device was inside or outside the car.

covered, Smith said, was a three-page typewritten "revolutionary" message that was "enough to make us feel this fellow was involved in some way in a revolutionary black group."

The message, he said, included "stuff about guns and dynamite" and remarks to the effect that "if we die, we die."

He said the document was composed in a "literary" and "rambling" style and that it was neither signed nor addressed to anyone.

Smith said there was one eye-witness to the explosion, whom he would not identify. He said another man and a companion, on their way home from a nearby bowling alley, had just turned left on Tollgate Road in front of Featherstone's car when the explosion "lifted his car up." he did not identify those witnesses, either.

A shell service station diagonally across the highway from the explosion scene had closed at 11 p.m. and was not attended at the time of the 11:45 incident.

Nearby residents heard