

ANTHRAX, AGAIN

The NYT has what they bill as the most comprehensive profile of the alleged anthrax killer yet.

Before I get into the important new details from the profile, can you help me with this detail? This is billed as a comprehensive profile. Yet when the NYT gets around to describing the attacks, here's what they say:

Days later came word of the anthrax letters. First, the death of a tabloid photo editor in Florida, Robert Stevens. Then the poison letters mailed to NBC News and The New York Post with notes declaring "Death to America! Death to Israel!"

And finally the letters to Senators Tom Daschle, Democrat of South Dakota, and Patrick J. Leahy, Democrat of Vermont, spewing deadly spores through the postal system and across official Washington.

Particularly given that one of the biggest unexplained details of the "attacks" is how, right after the last attack and just a month and a half after Judy reported on a more potent anthrax program, Judy got an envelope full of fake anthrax. Don't you think the NYT could have mentioned those details?

Nevermind—we know how they like to pretend Judy never existed.

Speaking of which, one detail I was previously unaware of is that the Army quashed an investigation led by Ft. Detrick's own scientists.

When institute scientists began their own review of the evidence, nervous Army officials ordered the inquiry dropped.

That, too, seems worth more detail.

The story also reveals more details about the fibers found on the envelopes sent to victims—yet virtually unmentioned in the FBI’s limited releases about Ivins.

Meticulous study of tiny brown fibers found stuck to the envelopes led nowhere.

Those are the brown fibers that didn’t match Ivins’ own hair, nor any of his clothes that the FBI carted away from his house.

And it turns out that Ivins testified before a grand jury in 2007.

In May 2007, Dr. Ivins – assured by prosecutors that he was not a target of the investigation – testified under oath to a grand jury on two consecutive days. He answered all the questions about anthrax. Only once did he plead his Fifth Amendment right against self-incrimination, when he was asked about his secret interest in sororities.

Given the timing, I’d be curious why over a year passed and they got no closer to Ivins.

But the biggest revelation of the story is that the most dubious (IMO) theory of the case came from the woman who first pitched Ivins as a suspect. You’ll recall that the only logic the FBI offered for why Ivins would twice drive to Princeton to mail anthrax is that the mailbox was on the same street as an office for a sorority that he obsessed about?

Well, the person who first suggested he might be responsible did so, partly, based on her allegation that Ivins had stalked her because of her affiliation with the same sorority. That person is Nancy Haigwood, who knew Ivins from grad school at UNC.

There was more to Bruce Ivins than his Army colleagues imagined, and Nancy Haigwood knew it.

She met him in 1976 in the biology department at the University of North Carolina, where he was a post-doctoral fellow and she was a graduate student. She found him odd and tried gently to disengage, but he kept in touch, pressing her with questions about her sorority, Kappa Kappa Gamma.

[snip]

Outside her home in Maryland in 1982, a vandal spray-painted her sorority's Greek initials, "KKG," on her fence, sidewalk and fiancé's car window. A year later a letter she had not written appeared under her name in The Frederick News-Post, defending Kappa Kappa Gamma and the hazing of recruits. She was certain Dr. Ivins was responsible.

She said she had found Dr. Ivins's attentions creepy. She never told him her Maryland address, but he found it anyway. Later, in e-mail messages, he mentioned details about her sons that she had not shared with him.

"He damaged my property, he impersonated me and he stalked me," said Dr. Haigwood, now director of the Oregon National Primate Research Center.

Apparently, in spite of his alleged stalking, she still accepted and read email from Ivins—including an email he sent in November 2001 showing himself working with the Ames anthrax.

Dr. Ivins titled his e-mail message "In the lab" and attached photographs: the gaunt microbiologist bending over Petri dishes of anthrax, and colonies of the deadly bacteria, white commas against blood-red nutrient.

[snip]

"Hi, all," he began the e-mail message.

"We were taking some photos today of blood agar cultures of the now infamous 'Ames' strain of Bacillus anthracis. Here are a few." He sent the message to those who ordinarily received his corny jokes and dour news commentaries: his wife and two teenage children, former colleagues and high school classmates. He even included an F.B.I. agent working on the case.

[snip]

"I read that e-mail, and I thought, He did it," the fellow scientist, Nancy Haigwood, said in a recent interview.

[snip]

In November 2001, when she got the e-mailed photograph of Dr. Ivins working with anthrax in the laboratory, she noticed that he was not wearing gloves – a safety breach she thought showed an unnerving "hubris." That fed her hunch that he had sent the deadly letters.

Later, when Ivins had become a suspect, the FBI recruited Haigwood to try to bring Ivins out.

Early in 2006, with the investigation largely stalled, Nancy Haigwood heard from two different F.B.I. agents. Four years after she had reported her suspicions of Dr. Ivins, the bureau suddenly seemed interested. "They said, 'We need your help,' " Dr. Haigwood recalled. She was frustrated by the delay, but when the agents asked her to strike up a new correspondence with Dr. Ivins, she reluctantly complied. "I was afraid of this man," she said. "I was convinced he had done it, and I was afraid he'd send me an anthrax letter."

[snip]

As the bureau's undercover informant,

Dr. Haigwood struck up a breezy e-mail correspondence about scientific grants, pets and travel. Dr. Ivins complained about psychological screening and other “rather obnoxious and invasive measures” imposed at Fort Detrick since the anthrax attacks.

“I got so tired of the endless questions that I finally got a lawyer, after almost three dozen interviews,” he wrote in late 2006, referring to interviews by the F.B.I. agents. One session, he said, was “virtually an interrogation.”

Is it any wonder, with Haigwood as their undercover informant, that their sole explanation for their biggest non-scientific hole in the case is that this is all about Haigwood and her sorority?

For the moment, then, I remain of the same opinion as Senator Leahy: there’s no reason to believe Ivins acted alone, and plenty of reason to believe he did have help.