

# FALLOUT

An oral history of the Olympic Park bombing

by SCOTT FREEMAN  
photographs by GREGORY MILLER



The chilling FBI replication of the bomb that Eric Rudolph set off in Centennial Olympic Park fifteen years ago this month.



**A**S MIDNIGHT APPROACHED on Friday, July 26, 1996, there were still 15,000 people crowding Centennial Olympic Park. A heat wave that had kept temperatures hovering near 90 degrees for the past week had broken, and there was a cool breeze in the air.

For eight days, ever since Muhammad Ali lit the Olympic cauldron to open the Summer Games, the eyes of the world had been fixed on Atlanta. A stroll through Centennial Park meant overhearing conversations in exotic tongues, or standing in line behind someone from Ireland while standing in front of someone from Nigeria, or swapping pins with a visitor from Australia.

If you were there that evening, you may have passed by twenty-nine-year-old Eric Robert Rudolph, dressed in jeans and a blue short-sleeve shirt. A large pack was strapped to his back. Rudolph had grown up in the mountains of western North Carolina, where he had come under the influence of Nord Davis Jr. Besides being a former IBM executive, Davis was the leader of the Christian Identity movement, which posits that Jews are the children of Satan and that Christ cannot return to Earth until the world is swept clean of the devil's influences. Davis said often that the movement needed a "lone wolf"—an agent who could plan and execute an attack all on his own, telling no one.

For the past seven years, Rudolph had been a voracious reader of the Bible and of hate-filled propaganda denouncing gays, abortion, the government. He worked odd jobs, always demanding cash payment, and grew marijuana. He filed no tax returns and had no Social Security number. Two months before the Games, he told his family he was moving to Colorado, but actually he stayed in North Carolina. At some point, he decided to plant bombs on five consecutive days at Olympic venues, each one preceded by a warning call to 911. His goal was simple: shut down the 1996 Summer Olympic Games.

As the R&B band Jack Mack and the Heart Attack took the AT&T Stage that evening, Richard Jewell, a thirty-three-year-old security guard, kept watch near the sound and light tower. Born in Virginia, he moved to DeKalb County with his mother when he was six, after his parents divorced. He graduated from Towers High School and worked as a clerk at the Small Business Administration. A lawyer he befriended there would describe Jewell as earnest, sometimes to the point of being annoying.

Jewell always wanted to be a cop. In 1990 he landed an entry-level job as a jailer with the Habersham County Sheriff's Department. While working a second job as a security guard at his DeKalb County apartment complex, Jewell was arrested for impersonating an officer; he pleaded guilty to disorderly conduct and was put on probation.

He worked as a deputy sheriff for five years, and he was remembered for his zeal for the job and his tendency to wreck patrol cars. After his fourth crash, Jewell was demoted back to jailer. He chose instead to resign.

He was hired as a campus cop in 1995 at the tiny Piedmont College in Demorest. It was an ill fit. Jewell would write long, detailed reports on minor incidents. He upset college officials when he stopped someone for operating with one taillight. Although the main highway ran past the school, traffic violations were supposed to be handled by the Demorest police.

He got into trouble when he made a DUI arrest on the highway and didn't follow protocol by radioing the police department to handle the case.

He resigned in May of 1996 and moved into his mother's apartment on Buford Highway. She was about to have foot surgery; he wanted to be there for her and also to find a police job in the Atlanta area after the Games. In June he began working for a security firm contracted by AT&T, which was building a stage in Centennial Park. Jewell joked to a friend that if anything happened at the Games, he wanted to be in the middle of it.



## SATURDAY, JULY 27

*Rudolph found an out-of-the-way spot in front of the sound and light tower that faced the AT&T stage. Inside his backpack were three pipe bombs filled with gunpowder and six pounds of 2.5-inch steel nails, stuffed into Tupperware containers. The bombs were powered by an Eveready six-volt lantern battery hooked to a model rocket engine igniter and triggered by a Westclox alarm clock.*

*Rudolph put the bag on the ground, reached inside, and set the alarm to go off in fifty-five minutes. There were three benches in front of the tower. The one to his left was tucked against a steel barrier that paralleled what is now Centennial Olympic Park Drive, and he stashed the bag under that bench. Michael Cox, who worked for the Turner Associates architectural firm, and some friends were at the bench minutes before Rudolph's arrival.*

**MICHAEL COX:** We were sitting on that bench about thirty minutes before the bomb went off, and we saw Eric Rudolph in the park. He

An Alice pack like the one Jewell discovered under a bench in front of the sound tower. Inside was Rudolph's bomb.







After the bombing, the FBI seized this pay phone—the one Rudolph used to call 911. It is now kept at the FBI's Atlanta division headquarters.

really stood out; well, it was his backpack that stood out, because it was huge. It wasn't a hiker's backpack; it was big and boxy. I remember wondering, why in the world would somebody be wearing a backpack like that?

*Sometime after midnight, the band took a break. During the lull, a group of seven college-aged men walked up to the three benches in front of the sound tower. Five of them sat on the middle bench; the other two sat on the bench above the bomb.*

*They were drunk and rowdy, which drew Jewell's attention. He noticed they had two large bags. The one in front of the middle bench looked like a canvas cooler, and he saw them pull fresh Budweisers from it. The other was a large, green, Army-style backpack that was shoved under the bench by the steel wall.*

*Jewell called over Tom Davis, a GBI agent who was working security in the park.*

**TOM DAVIS:** [He] flagged me down and told me he'd been having a problem with drunks throwing beer cans into the tower. He said, "They won't listen to me; I need someone in law enforcement to talk to them."

We walked around the tower and saw a couple of guys picking up beer cans. Richard Jewell said, "That's a couple of them, but the rest have left." Then those two left. We're standing by the tower, and he looks down at this bench and says, "One of them must've left that bag."

**RICHARD JEWELL:** It was just that casual. Tom turned around and hollered at them, "Did you all leave a bag up here?" And they said, "No, it ain't ours."

*There were at least a couple hundred people sitting on a grassy knoll in front of the tower. Davis and Jewell quickly asked those closest to the benches if the bag belonged to them. When no one claimed it, Davis followed procedure; he declared it a suspicious package and called for the bomb team. Jewell radioed his supervisor.*

*They then cleared a fifteen-foot perimeter so the bomb team would have room to check out the backpack. It was 12:57 a.m. One minute later,*

*Rudolph called 911 from a pay phone five blocks away from the tower. He announced in a calm, flat voice, "There is a bomb in Centennial Park. You have thirty minutes." He was wrong; they had only twenty-two. While Davis waited for the bomb team, Jewell went inside the five-story sound tower.*

**JEWELL:** I went to each floor very quickly and [said], "We've got a situation in front of the tower. Law enforcement is on the scene, and they [are] checking it. I don't know what it is right now, but it is a suspicious package. If I come back in here and tell you to get out, there will be no questions, there will be no hesitation. Drop what you're doing and get the fuck out."

After I got to the top, I came back down, and the whole time I was counting people. I wanted to make sure I knew how many people I had in the tower. [There were] eleven people.

*By the time Jewell emerged, the bomb team had arrived. So had Jewell's supervisor, Bob Ahring, an assistant police chief from Blue Springs, Missouri.*

**JEWELL:** The guys looked at it from every angle, and then finally one of them took out a penlight and laid down on the ground and crawled under the bench, and then he loosened the bag and shined the light inside. All of a sudden . . . he just froze, and then he crawled out just as slow as molasses in wintertime.

**BOB AHRING:** I asked one of the guys, "What have we got?" I could see he was shaken. "It's big," he said. "How big?" I asked. "Real big," he said. I said, "Do we need to evacuate?" The guy just vigorously nodded his head.

*Davis and Ahring were quickly joined by other officers to help get the crowd away from the tower, and to do it without inducing panic. Jewell hurried back into the tower, which stood to take the brunt of the impact if the bomb exploded.*

**JEWELL:** I said, "Get out! Get out now!" Went to the second floor: "Get out! Get out now!" Third floor, nobody was there. Up to the

## About This Story

For this oral history, Scott Freeman relied on both archival and fresh interviews. He also reviewed nearly 20,000 pages of legal documents compiled from Richard Jewell's lawsuit against the *Atlanta Journal-Constitution*. Most of the *AJC* editors and reporters involved have never spoken publicly about the paper's coverage, so Freeman drew from portions of their sworn depositions. The court file also contains interviews con-

cerning the bombing coverage that an *AJC* reporter conducted for a story that was never published. Quotes from Richard Jewell come from FBI files and depositions. Freeman drew additional information from the FBI case file and interviews, as well as from a Justice Department audit of the Jewell investigation. Eric Rudolph discussed the Olympic Park bombing in a manifesto posted on the Army of God website. Some quotes have been edited for clarity. Disclosure: *AJC* lawyer Peter Canfield represents

Freeman in a lawsuit filed over one of his books, and Bryant Steele was Freeman's city editor at the *Macon Telegraph* in 1983.

### SOURCES FOR QUOTES

Richard Jewell – *Depositions, FBI files*  
Michael Cox – *Interview with author*  
Tom Davis – *Interview with author*  
Bob Ahring – *Interview with author*  
John Fristoe – *Interview with author*

Ed Hula – *Interview with author*  
Nancy Geery – *Interview with author*  
Bryant Steele – *Deposition, interview with author*  
Ray Cleere – *Deposition*  
Dick Martin – *Deposition*  
Kathy Scruggs – *Deposition*  
Ron Martz – *Deposition*  
Lin Wood – *Interview with author*  
Peter Canfield – *Interview with author*  
Bert Roughton – *Deposition*  
John Walter – *Deposition*  
Watson Bryant – *Interview with author*



fourth floor. Told the video guy, “Let’s go! Let’s get out of here!” Went up to the [light box], said, “Let’s get out of here! Let’s go now!” They were wanting to cut their spotlights out. I grabbed both of them and pushed them down the stairs.

I came down to the video floor. The guy’s putting videocassettes in his briefcase. I reached over there and grabbed him by the arm and just drug him down the stairs with me. Came down to the third floor. It was clear. Went down to the second floor. Everybody had cleared out of there. Went down to the first floor. Checked it again. I was the last one out of the building.

One of the troopers walked up, “Is the tower clear? Is the tower clear?” I said, “Yeah, it’s clear, 100 percent clear.”

If we’d had three more minutes, we’d have [cleared the area]. All these benches were still full of people. They wouldn’t move. Every one of them had four and five people on them. The [officers] lined themselves up with the benches. When that thing went off, they took all the shrapnel that those people would have took.

**DAVIS:** I know exactly where I was standing when it went off; I was eighteen steps from where it detonated. It was very loud, and it was very forceful. The vacuum it created was immense and shoved me forward. I remember the heat from it on my back.

**AHRING:** I was just ten yards away. The concussion knocked me forward six feet, and I wound up on the ground. There was smoke everywhere, the smell of gunpowder. There was a sudden deathly quiet throughout the whole park, and I could hear the whistle of shrapnel whizzing through the air. It was the eeriest thing I’ve ever heard in my life.

**JEWELL:** I’d been out of the tower maybe a minute and “kabang!” It knocked me forward, and I fell down on my hands and knees. As I pushed myself back up, I looked to my right because that’s where the blast come from. Those troopers that had been lined up with those benches were flying through the air. It had knocked them that far. I started running to those—hell, they’re my buddies. I get to the first guy and I’m helping him lay down. I’m telling him, “Just lay flat, man. We’ll get you some help, man.”

Every one of these guys is a bigger fucking hero than I am. If I’m a hero, there ain’t a word to describe these guys right here. I mean, it wells me up every time I think about it.

*Alice Hawthorne, forty-four, who had driven from Albany, was killed by shrapnel. Hawthorne was hit six times, including a fatal wound to the*

*head. Melih Uzunyol, a Turkish news cameraman, died of a heart attack while rushing to the scene. In total, 111 others were injured. Ahring was hit in his left shoulder and lower left leg. Davis was hit as well, in the buttocks. But the GBI badge holder in his back pocket blocked the shrapnel.*

*Among the injured was John Fristoe, a stagehand who heard about the bomb threat from security and was walking toward the tower to warn a friend inside. The force of the blast caused a whiplash that collapsed a disc in his neck, an injury that almost paralyzed him.*

**JOHN FRISTOE:** Ms. Hawthorne, I saw her. She was coming down the hill [head over heels]. Seriously. It was horrible, man. *[begins to weep]* I’m sorry. I’ve never witnessed a murder before.

**DAVIS:** It was utter chaos. We had troopers down and agents down. There was screaming and hollering. I remember checking on Ms. Hawthorne. She had already expired. A man beside her was bleeding profusely from the stomach area where shrapnel hit him.

*The Centennial Park bombing put the city into a state of shock. The immediate question was whether the Games would continue—was it even safe for the Games to continue? Ed Hula covered the Atlanta Games for WGST-AM. Today he is editor of Around the Rings, a web-based publication considered an authoritative media source of Olympic news.*

**ED HULA:** There were questions: Is this an isolated instance? Will there be more of these? How can we go on with the Olympics with a couple of people dead?

Some said the Games shouldn’t continue, but they did. There was precedent—the Munich Games in 1972. That was more dastardly, more consequential, and much more of a significant event than the Centennial Park bombing. And those Games continued.

**NANCY GEERY:** During the Olympics, I worked at a recruiting firm. Everyone was caught up in the spirit of the Games, and I wanted to be involved, so I worked nights in a Swatch kiosk selling watches. I was in the park the night of the bombing. It was very festive, a lot of camaraderie. Afterwards there was fear in the back of your mind. I was twenty-six at the time. I had tickets to the track and field finals, really fantastic seats, and I went. At that age, I was not as afraid of things. Now? Oh no, I would’ve never gone back there.

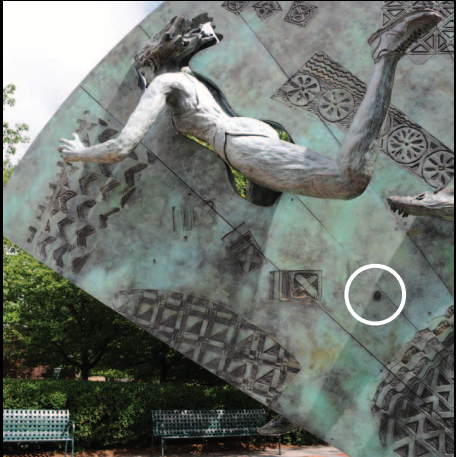
**COX:** The city had been on a euphoric high because of the Olympics for weeks and weeks. The bombing was a sucker punch to the gut. I was outraged that someone would do that to the Olympics in my hometown.

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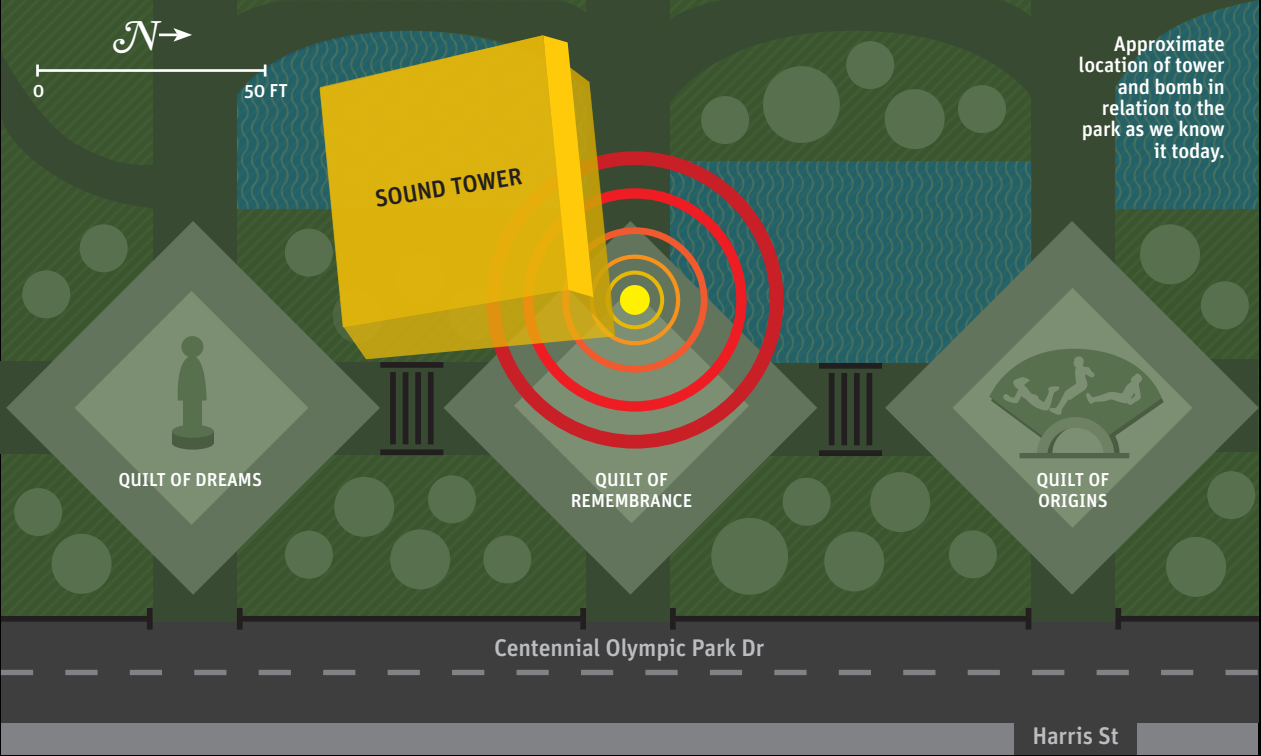
The pressure on the FBI in the wake of the bombing was intense. This was the Olympic Games. The entire world was watching.



Rudolph eluded capture for almost five years; in 1997 Jewell (with his mother, Bobi, seated behind him) testified before Congress; Jewell cleared the five-story sound tower minutes before the bomb exploded; a nail (circled) from the bomb can still be found in the statue dedicated to the Olympic spirit at Centennial Park.



> Read stories from our archives on the bombing at [atlantamagazine.com/olympics](http://atlantamagazine.com/olympics)



FBI MOST WANTED POSTER: GREGORY MILLER; JEWELL AND BOMBING AFTERMATH: ASSOCIATED PRESS; STATUE: CAROLINE KILGORE; MAP: SHERI WILSON