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Neighbor tells of seeing car driving around before blast

Patriot Ledger staff

BOSTON — Less than an hour before a bomb exploded and killed a Boston police officer in a Roslindale neighborhood, a suspicious car was spotted nearby, a resident testified Friday.

James McKernan, a retired firefighter who lives across the street from the blast site, said he saw a blue or gray compact car parked in a nearby crosswalk about 45 minutes before the explosion on Oct. 28, 1991.

"I looked at the driver, he looked at me and drove away," McKernan said. "I made a mental note of the plate number" but could not recall it or describe the driver after the blast.

After McKernan returned home from his walk, he testified, he heard the explosion that killed Boston bomb squad officer Jeremiah Hurley Jr. and severely injured his partner, Francis X. Foley.

McKernan was one of five who testified Friday in the trial of Thomas A. Shay, 21, of Quincy in U.S. District Court. Shay is accused of planting the bomb in an effort to kill his father, Thomas L. Shay of Roslindale.

Assistant U.S. Attorneys Paul V. Kelly and Frank A. Libby Jr. asked experts to identify pieces of wood, plastic, tape, wire and paper that came from the bomb.

A blasting cap and some dynamite were found in a wall of the house that faced the driveway where the explosion occurred. A sales manager for the Austin Powder Co., of Kingston, N.H., said the Austrian-built blasting cap was one of about 600,000 sold in New England in 1991.

On Tuesday, a bomb expert is expected to testify that no one can be sure what caused the detonation of the remote-controlled device. The possible explanations include an inadvertant signal from a cellular phone in the neighborhood, an intentional detonation from someone nearby, or jostling by the bomb squad officers.