

Investigators: Rudolph likely received help

'A few' in N.C. suspected of leaving food

By **DON PLUMMER** in Murphy, N.C.
dplummer@ajc.com
and **BILL TORPY** in Atlanta
btorpy@ajc.com

Authorities believe Eric Robert Rudolph probably had help during the five years he was hiding out near Murphy, N.C., and investigators are focusing on a handful of people who may have aided him, law enforcement officials said.

Federal officials say they are exploring all logical leads but refuse to shed much light on their investigations.

Even so, a law enforcement official, who asked not to be identified, said investigators are focusing on "a few, maybe three or four" people who may have helped Rudolph by leaving food, clothing and other supplies where he could find them. Others might have helped by providing him with shelter against the harsh mountain winters.

Cherokee County's sheriff investigators have been helping federal agents locate and interview area residents, Sheriff Keith Lovin said Wednesday.

Lovin won't say what the agents are asking, but said his detectives have sat in during the interviews on the chance they may be able to use information gained to lodge state charges.

"This case still holds the possibilities for surprises," Lovin said.

Rudolph is in Birmingham on charges he bombed the New



JOHNNY CRAWFORD / Staff

Federal agents (right) go down a steep trail earlier this month near a campsite they believe was used by Eric Robert Rudolph while he was a fugitive.

Woman All Women Health Care Clinic on Jan. 29, 1998. He will later be tried for three other bombings in the Atlanta area, including one at the 1996 Olympics. He has pleaded not guilty to the charges in Birmingham.

Behind a guarded drive leading to a National Guard armory between Murphy and neighboring Andrews, a small band of federal agents continues to distill information gathered during interviews with people who may know where and how Rudolph spent the past five years.

Cherokee sheriff's deputies have helped FBI and ATF agents search for other locations where Rudolph may have camped or stored supplies, Lovin said.

But searching Cherokee County, which comprises 467 square miles, is a big job, Lovin said.

Rudolph told local authorities soon after his May 31 capture that he had lived off the land since disappearing after the Birmingham bombing. He told jailers about two campsites. One is near Andrews. The one he was



ALAN MARLER / Associated Press

using when he was arrested is within sight of the Murphy high school and a short walk from a 24-hour Wal-Mart.

Tom Brown Jr., the founder of the Tracker School and a renowned primitive-survival expert, said he visited both camps found by the FBI last weekend. His inspection left him certain they were "intermediate" camps and that Rudolph's larger base camps lay somewhere else.

Brown assessed Rudolph's survival skills as average, the kind that soldiers learn in rudimentary survival and evasion classes — which Rudolph took when he was in the Army in the late 1980s.

"A true survivalist could stay in the woods without coming out," said Brown, who mocked Rudolph's methods for including trash bin diving and stealing food and clothes. "There's no difference between Mr. Rudolph and a homeless person in Central Park coming out to hit the garbage."

Brown believes that Rudolph had help, at least for a time.

"All you need is one fanatic to

help him," he said. "He's too well-groomed, too clean [when he was captured]."

Brown said he will send a letter to the FBI urging agents "to redirect their search to more productive areas." He said he was recommending 11 areas where other camps may be found. He would not say where.

He said he is making his recommendations after gleaning information from his visits, from where a truck that Andrews health food store owner George Nordmann said Rudolph stole was found in July 1998, and by poring over topological maps.

"The only thing that works is tracking, following footsteps; otherwise, you're just following randomly," said Brown, who said he offered help to the search in 1998 but was declined.

Brown said his visit to Rudolph's campsites last weekend left him disappointed.

"I thought he'd have more savvy," said Brown, who rated Rudolph's skills "a little bit better than a Boy Scout."