



## A Fact Sheet from the Worldwide Incidents Team

National Counterterrorism Center

8 October 2007

### Did you know the first suicide car bombing took place in Bath, Michigan in 1927?

On 18 May 1927, at 9:45 AM, in Bath, Michigan, United States, a timed explosive device exploded in the basement of the Bath Consolidated School, killing 38 children, two teachers, one school official, and two civilians; injuring 67 children and five teachers; and destroying the north wing of the school. At about 10:15 AM, the assailant drove his car to the school and detonated his vehicle-borne improvised explosive device (VBIED) at the rescue scene, killing another child, one school official, a postmaster, and two civilians; and injuring three other civilians. No group claimed responsibility, but authorities believed a lone wolf was responsible.



Remains of a Ford pickup truck from the Bath School Disaster on 18 May 1927

Called the “Bath School Disaster,”<sup>1</sup> it surpassed the 1920 Wall Street bombing as the single worst mass-murder attack in the United States<sup>2</sup> and held that dubious title until the Oklahoma City bombing in 1995. The attack was so horrific that headlines around the nation carried the tragic story for days until Charles Lindbergh crossed the Atlantic Ocean setting a more positive American record.

Some argue this attack does not meet the terrorism criteria. The motivation, however, does involve the issue of taxation. The perpetrator was Andrew Kehoe, a school board member opposed to a property tax levied to build the school. He credited the new property tax for his financial hardship, and his farm property was placed into foreclosure.<sup>3</sup>

He planned the attack over many months and secreted dynamite into the school where he worked part-time as an electrician. He planted 500 pounds of dynamite and pyrotol in each wing of the basement and attached alarm clocks to have the dynamite explode simultaneously once school was in session.<sup>4</sup>

He murdered his wife before the attack. Before making his way to the school on the morning of the attack and while bombs were ticking away at the school, he set his farmhouse on fire with his wife's body inside. He loaded his Ford pickup truck with nails, tools and other metal debris and drove to the school. Fortunately, a second set of explosives in the south wing failed to detonate, saving the lives of many children. The failure was either caused by weak batteries<sup>5</sup> or a slight delay in the south wing alarm clock, which was disabled by the shockwave of the first blast in the north wing.<sup>6</sup> After the rescuers and worried parents had responded to the school, Mr. Kehoe arrived in his explosive laden vehicle and either summoned the superintendent of schools over to his truck or stopped his truck near the superintendent. Mr. Kehoe then self-detonated his VBIED killing the superintendent, a second-grade student, and a local postmaster.<sup>7</sup>

The attack carries the hallmarks of common tactics used in today's modern terror attacks, including the use of shrapnel to maximize casualties and a secondary attack on first responders. The youngest victim was 7-year-old Ralph Cushman who died in the school bombing and the oldest victim was 74-year-old Nelson McFarren who died from the suicide car bombing.

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<sup>1</sup> "Bath School disaster," Wikipedia.com, <[http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Bath\\_School\\_disaster](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Bath_School_disaster)> 12 Dec. 2007

<sup>2</sup> Fact Sheet from the Worldwide Incidents Team, "Did you know there was a terror attack on New York City in 1920?" National Counterterrorism Center, dated 8 OCT 2007

<sup>3</sup> "Former Farm Bureau Mgr., Bath People Describe Andrew Kehoe," Clinton County Republican-News, 26 May 1927. <<http://freepages.history.rootsweb.com/~bauerle/ccrn26c.txt>> 12 Dec. 2007

<sup>4</sup> "Inquest Proves Bath Disaster was Result of Premeditated Plan; Declare Kehoe was Sane," Clinton County Republican-News, 26 May 1927. <<http://freepages.history.rootsweb.com/~bauerle/ccrn26a.txt>> 12 Dec. 2007

<sup>5</sup> Op. cit. "Inquest..."

<sup>6</sup> "Find 3 Barrels, 2 Bushels, and 7 Sacks of Dynamite" Clinton County Republican-News, 19 May 1927. <<http://freepages.history.rootsweb.com/~bauerle/ccrn19d.txt>> 12 Dec. 2007

<sup>7</sup> Op. cit. "Inquest..."