

For Immediate Release

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Holtsville, NY

Law enforcement uses “Hidden” VIN to locate driver of attempted bombing in busy Times Square intersection — From a smoking SUV left on a Saturday evening in the Times Square area of New York City – one of the busiest intersections in the country – the expertise of the New York Police Department’s auto crime experts resulted in the rapid identification of the vehicle’s owner and ultimately the arrest of 30-year-old Faisal Shahzad, a naturalized U.S. citizen, originally from Pakistan, in 53 hours.

The lightning speed and efficient law enforcement operation in this failed bombing attempt were aided in large measure by the ability to quickly trace the ownership of an explosive-laden 1993 Green Nissan Pathfinder through the unique information source known as the Vehicle Identification Number, or VIN. The VIN codes are used by state motor vehicle authorities to maintain records of vehicles and to issue ownership (Titles) and registration documents, and by law enforcement agencies in the process of theft investigations and court actions.

When the police and bomb squad arrived at the scene they began the process of disarming the crude bomb contained in the vehicle loaded with propane tanks, gasoline, fertilizer, fireworks and alarm clocks, followed by checking for fingerprints and DNA evidence. Police quickly concluded that the SUV’s contents were intended to create a chain reaction by exploding gas tanks, propane tanks and fertilizer into a “fireball,” with shrapnel sprayed into the pedestrian-crowded street – an explosion in which the perpetrator mistakenly believed that all of the vehicle’s identification numbers would be destroyed. The critical process of first identifying – then locating – the vehicle’s owner and driver began immediately after crime scene specialists completed their examination. The SUV was then transported to a forensic garage where the Auto Crime Team began the search for vehicle identification numbers that could lead to the SUV’s owner.

Involved in the challenge of locating the vehicle’s owner, with the attention of the nation and the world focused on the alleged “terrorist” attempt, was a team of skilled detectives from NYPD’s Auto Crime Division with expertise in determining the authenticity and origins of motor vehicles. The team assigned, with close to 100 years of combined experience, comprised the following personnel: Supervising office, Sargent John Schwartz, Detectives John Wright, Tommy Burke and Karl Rugg.

The Auto Crime Team, according to one of the participants, worked nonstop for 14-hours without a break. During that time they found that the VIN tag, normally located on the dashboard, the Federal Motor Vehicle Safety Certification Standard Label, located on the driver's side door and a body plate containing the VIN, located under the hood, had all been removed. Of no surprise to the team, the SUV's license plates did not match the vehicle. According to one of the investigators, Detective Tommy Burke, "It was clear that the perpetrator(s) had some knowledge of the locations of VIN information. It was apparent that a key information pathway to the vehicle's owner was to be found in one of the multiple "confidential" VINs located on different parts of the vehicle. In this case, the Auto Crime Team began the search for component engine numbers and confidential VINs that could lead them to the vehicle's registered owner.

Using an acid wash and wire brush, the detectives were able to remove years of grime and rust to reveal sufficient VIN information in an area under the hood. After carefully investigating a number of the vehicle's structural components, such as the type of motor mounts and other details germane to the model year of the vehicle including the VIN information revealed after the rust was removed, data from other parts of the car, and checking the various VIN-related computer databases available to law enforcement, the team knew they had the "true VIN."

According to NYPD Police Commissioner, Raymond W. Kelly, "Finding the VIN was the big break in the case." The quick location of the all-important vehicle identification number, according to Kelly, "Led to the registered owner of the vehicle, and soon thereafter to the suspect who purchased the vehicle and who drove it, bomb-laden, into the heart of Times Square."

In pursuit of the vehicle's owner, the VIN data led federal agents and police detectives to Bridgeport, Connecticut, where the previously registered owner of the vehicle told police that the Nissan Pathfinder, advertised for sale on a number of Web sites, was sold to Faisal Shahzad for cash, without formal paperwork. The investigation also showed that the license plates on the rusting Pathfinder came from a vehicle found in a Connecticut repair shop.

VIN helped law enforcement trace 1993 World Trade Center terrorists

And while the VIN took center stage as the link to the Times Square terrorist, it should also be remembered that similar information was used to identify the terrorists involved in the 1993 bombing at the World Trade Center, New York City. This disastrous event, in which a van packed with explosives created a massive explosion in the building's indoor parking garage, killing six people, injuring more than a thousand people, destroying a number of lower level floors, creating a 100-foot crater, and almost obliterating all traces of the vehicle's identification number.

As part of the rubble examined after the explosion, however, investigators uncovered a critical piece of evidence, a vehicle identification number with some information that appeared to be intentionally obliterated on what proved to be one of the “confidential” VINs located throughout the vehicle: vehicle identification numbers stamped into the vehicle’s metal frame or on various equipment that investigators often rely on as positive proof of origin. A computer search of various vehicle information sources produced a match. Based on the information retrieved including the inspection report, the VIN belonged to a rented Ford Econoline van, which was reported stolen a day before the attack.

Although the investigative dynamics of the VIN have since the World Trade Center bombing received international attention, the unique identification system as we know it today has been in use since 1981. Prior to that time, with no national standard for vehicle identification, a variety of numbering formulas were used by different auto makers.

Understanding the Vehicle Identification Number (VIN)

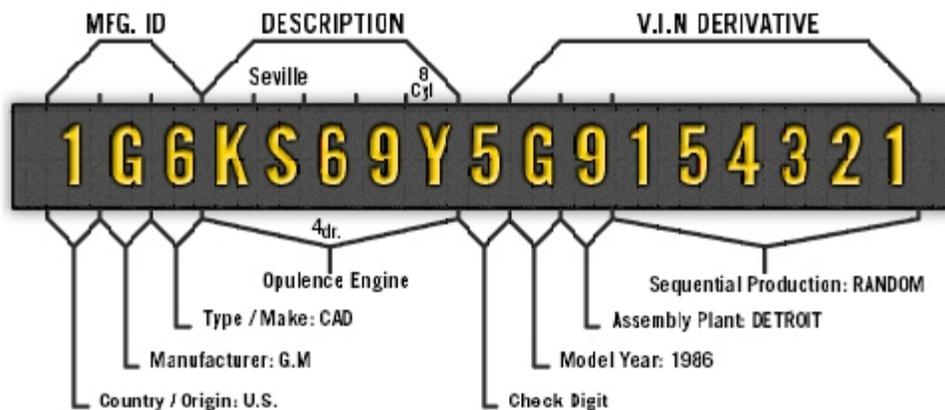
The VIN, or Vehicle Identification Number, is equivalent to a vehicle’s birth certificate. Each component of the 17-digit encrypted alphanumeric sequence represents something significant about its origin including: where and when it was made, manufacturer, model, assembly plant, and other important authentication information. Playing a key role in validating the authenticity of a vehicle – car, truck, van, SUV, motorcycle – the VIN provides critical information for investigative purposes and data that can be used to trace a vehicle’s history from the assembly line to the scrap yard. The unique alphanumeric record has been an exceptionally important component of CARCO Group’s powerful pre-insurance inspection database system since the Company was founded more than thirty years ago.

Vehicle identification number systems in use today are predicated on a pair of related standards, first issued in 1979 and 1980 by the International Organization for Standardization (ISO): ISO 3779 and ISO 3780, respectively. Similar but different versions on these ISO standards have been adopted by the United States, Australia and the European Union.

Since 1981 all vehicles manufactured for use in the U.S. have been equipped with a one-of-a-kind I.D. number, in effect, the vehicle’s fingerprint. The Vehicle Identification Number [VIN] is usually found on the lower right corner of the dashboard, as seen through the front windshield. In addition to this location the VIN can also be easily found on the driver side door or door post as part of the Federal Motor Vehicle Safety Certification Standard Label, also referred to as the EPA Label. Vehicle Identification Numbers may also appear in other less obvious locations such as the unpublished confidential VIN’s reserved for use by law enforcement.

Although U.S. auto manufacturers began the process of providing vehicle identification numbers – or chassis numbers as they were called – in the mid-1950's, by stamping or casting the identifying numbers on both vehicles and certain parts, the identification process was left mostly to the initiatives of manufacturers. The program didn't become standardized and integrated into a viable national system until the early 1980's, when the National Highway Traffic Safety Administration [NHTSA], part of the U.S. Department of Transportation, ruled that all vehicles used “on the road” must contain a standardized 17-character Vehicle Identification Number. With this action, NHTSA set in motion the VIN system that is in use today by all major vehicle manufacturers for vehicles coming off the assembly line.

Embedded in the VIN, as shown in the chart below, are informational sections that include a World Manufacturer Identification or WMI Code (*MFG. ID*), descriptive data about the vehicle's physical characteristics (*Description*) and a section dealing with data related to the vehicle's origin (*VIN Derivative*)



Key aspects of the VIN structure

- World Manufacturer Identifier (WMI)

First three characters in the VIN identify the vehicle's manufacturer using the WMI code. The U.S. Society of Automotive Engineers (SAE) designates WMI's for vehicle manufacturers and countries.

- Vehicle Descriptor Section (VDS)

The 4th to 9th positions of the VIN comprise the Vehicle Descriptor Section, which identifies the type of vehicle. Also included, where applicable, is information unique to the manufacturer about the model and body style.

- Vehicle Identifier Section (VIS)

The VIN's 10th to 17th positions represent the model year, assembly plant, and assigned sequential production numbers.

- Check Digit

The check digit facilitates VIN validation. Those knowledgeable in the variety of calculations possible using the data embodied in the VIN are able to employ the check digit to ascertain informational accuracy.

- VIN Decoders

Because of the numerous mathematical permutations possible with VIN Codes, special decoder programs have been developed to simplify the process including some that are available, at no charge, on the Internet.

Experience has proven VIN to be a dynamic investigative tool

As an investigative tool the VIN opens a window to the history of any vehicle, allowing an investigator or even a party purchasing a vehicle to learn a great deal about the origin of the vehicle. Included in the information that can be decoded from the specially encrypted 17-digit VIN is data including specifications related to the vehicle such as its year and place of manufacture, model, body style, engine type, and much more.

As terrorist threats from domestic and foreign sources increase and the role of motor vehicles to transport personnel and explosive devices continues to be an integral part of activities that put the safety of people and infrastructure at risk, the importance of responsive vehicle identification systems will be more important than ever before. Dynamic vehicle-related databases such as the systems developed by CARCO Group, National Insurance Crime Bureau (NICB), National Crime Information Center (NCIC), State Motor Vehicle systems, and National Motor Vehicle Title Information System (NMVTIS) have become invaluable, as has the ability to integrate multiple databases into a national system such as now possible through the recently initiated NMVTIS program.

For additional information about vehicle-related VIN databases systems and please visit **www.preinsuranceinspection.org** or contact:

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