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Friend says Dunedin man blew up house to kill himself, dog

By [MARK DOUGLAS](#) | News Channel 8

Arson investigators were suspicious when a blast from a propane tank leveled a home, burned the owner and killed a dog Feb. 11.

The day after the explosion, a tipster contacted detectives telling them who did it and why. He said the man responsible was also the victim.

According to police reports obtained by News Channel 8, Jimmy Faulk told detectives homeowner Duane Cole called him moments before the explosion to say "he had opened propane tanks up inside his residence and was going to blow himself and his house up."

Faulk told investigators that minutes later, after he encouraged Cole to "open some windows and get air," the phone went dead.

No charges will be filed in the case because Faulk changed his story, according to a prosecutor. Cole's lawyer Robert Eckard said, "I don't have any information to indicate he tried to kill himself."

Eckard said Cole reached a settlement with Citizens Insurance over the fire damage but declined to share details.

Attempts to reach Duane Cole through his mother and stepson were unsuccessful.

The explosion sent part of Cole's roof flying 60 feet into a neighbor's yard, blasted out walls and flattened most of his home in the first few seconds. Fire quickly consumed what was left.

Firefighters found Cole near the backyard fence with serious burns on his thumb, hands and face. His clothes were not burned. Firefighters later discovered Cole's dog Jingles buried under debris and suffering from burns, smoke inhalation and blast trauma.

Cole remained hospitalized for a time and recovered. Jingles died after spending several days in the intensive care unit of a Tampa veterinary clinic.

Reports indicate Faulk contacted a St. Petersburg Police detective the day after the explosion and the detective contacted a Pinellas sheriff's investigator working on the case.

According to sheriff's reports released Monday, Faulk said Cole told him "he could not take it anymore," he was "depressed over his job," he "lost his wife and kids," and "he was going to end it with the dog."

Faulk said he spent 20 minutes on the phone with Cole. Faulk said Cole left the phone for a time, returned and told him, "I smell fresh air."

Then the line went dead.

Investigators later recovered the fragmented and melted remains of a 33-pound propane tank normally used to power a forklift. It was next to a charred box-spring mattress in the master bedroom.

Cole told investigators he acquired the tank from a former employer and used it with his barbecue grill. He could not explain why it was in his bedroom.

According to police reports, an expert later determined the tank was not set up for a grill.

Cole has repeatedly said he can't remember anything after trying to light a cigarette in the house and it "flared up," leading him to believe he had tried to light the wrong end.

Pinellas prosecutor Ashley Hawkins said her office spent six months investigating the case before notifying detectives Sept. 23 there was "insufficient evidence" to pursue criminal charges against Cole.

Hawkins told a reporter Faulk changed parts of the story he told detectives so she could not prove Cole's guilt.

Hawkins' supervisor Kendall Davidson said Faulk later denied he told detectives Cole had made suicidal comments or discussed opening the valves of propane tanks. Faulk did stand by his story that Cole was depressed during their phone conversation.