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CRIME FEB 25



# How the 1993 Waco standoff began with a bloody gunbattle that federal agents now regret





Lee Hancock, Special Contributor


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Bill Buford can hear the eerie quiet as he and other federal agents ride up to the Branch Davidian compound, the silence broken by a voice on the command radio channel — "There's no one outside." Pete Mastin peers through a slit in the canvas concealing him and his colleagues and mutters, "Jesus, that thing's huge." John Risenhoover takes his first step and the zings and bangs register: *They're shooting at us*. Rounds kick up dirt as Blake Boteler runs and fires back at muzzle flashes in two upstairs windows.

 **willpry**  
ATF agents' radio calls

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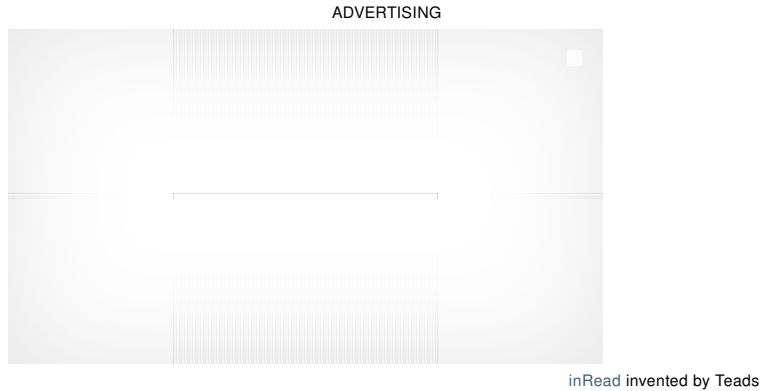
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Twenty-five years later, they tell it as if they're back on that Central Texas prairie on a gray, wet Sunday morning. It's Feb. 28, 1993, and two trucks with cattle trailers carry them and 72 other agents of the federal Bureau of Alcohol,

Tobacco and Firearms into the worst firefight in U.S. law enforcement history.

Before the morning was over, four ATF agents would be dead and 17 wounded. Buford would take six bullets. Risenhoover's right ankle would be shattered by shrapnel from a .50-caliber round.



Inside the Branch Davidian stronghold, two people would be killed by ATF; others would be wounded and three would be finished off by other followers of the sect's prophet, David Koresh. Koresh, himself wounded, would tell followers it was the final confrontation he'd foretold: They would kill and die for God and return with him, the Lamb of God, to judge the world.

#### [Breaking through the myths surrounding the 1993 Branch Davidian raid](#)

There would be a painful reckoning for ATF and the FBI. ATF's raid and an ensuing 51-day standoff managed by the FBI ended with the fiery deaths of Koresh and more than 70 followers. It prompted lawsuits, congressional hearings, an independent counsel's investigation, and conspiracy theories about government and guns.

Today, ATF agents say the raid should have been called off. There were failures of surveillance and intelligence. ATF's leaders were blind to warning signs that the raid's secrecy was fatally compromised.

"You didn't want to admit it. We'd lost so much," Risenhoover says. "I live in constant pain. I lost a big chunk of my leg. I had friends who were killed. To say we screwed up somehow betrayed their sacrifice. Eventually, you realize that we did make mistakes, and you say their sacrifice was real. They did their jobs well and they gave their lives as heroes. That has nothing to do with the fact that our managers, our leaders should've had the maturity to say, 'No. Wait.'"

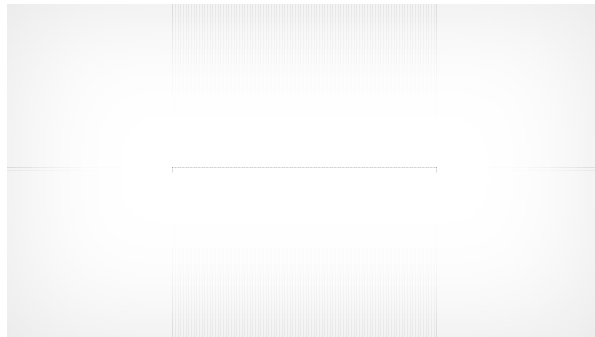
"My dream is, I would've walked in front of the entire group and said, 'Hey, time-out. We should stop for a minute and think. Think — just five minutes. Let's talk about this before we get in those trailers and go.'"

## The Branch Davidians

The Branch Davidian conflict emerged from a splinter group of apocalyptic believers who broke from the Seventh-day Adventist Church and moved to Waco in the early 1930s. In their earliest days, the sect's members were avowed pacifists. But from the beginning, they believed they were God's chosen and Mount Carmel was their refuge in the coming apocalypse.

In 1981, Koresh showed up at Mount Carmel as a scruffy, stuttering, near-illiterate carpenter named Vernon Howell. He'd been booted from a Seventh-day Adventist church in Tyler for interrupting services and claiming God wanted him to have the minister's daughter.

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David Koresh (right) stands with his father-in-law Perry Jones (left) and his brother-in-law David Jones in a 1989 photo showing Mount Carmel, the Branch Davidians' property near Waco, before the massive compound was built. (Steve Earley/Cox News Service)

Koresh had a photographic recall of the Bible, and he charmed the sect's aging prophetess, even claiming at one point to impregnate a woman in her 70s.

In November 1987, Koresh led followers into a shootout with a rival, the old prophetess's son. A McLennan County jury acquitted the followers of attempted murder charges, but they couldn't reach a verdict on Koresh. The sheriff's office had to return guns and thousands of rounds of ammo seized from the group.

Says Dan Weyenberg, McLennan County's chief deputy under the late Sheriff Jack Harwell: Koresh "told Jack and me: He says, 'I'll never be back in jail. You'll never lock me up again.'"

From then on, Koresh was undisputed leader at Mount Carmel. He took multiple wives, some as young as 12. Midway through 1989, he began dissolving marriages and bedding followers' wives. Some rejected his doctrine that, as the Lamb of God, only he was worthy of procreation.



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A photo taken by the McLennan County Sheriff's Department of guns seized after David Koresh led his followers in a gunfight in November 1987 against a rival prophet, six years before the 1993 standoff and siege of the Branch Davidian compound near Waco. (Dan Weyenberg/McLennan County Sheriff's Department)

That same year, federal records show, former followers began warning authorities that the group was involved in criminal acts ranging from child abuse to immigration fraud to involuntary servitude. The U.S. Embassy in Australia found the reports so worrisome that its consular officers sent cables to the Immigration and Naturalization Service, the State Department and the FBI.

In 1990, California police records show, investigators threatened to charge Koresh with kidnapping after a young female follower announced she was leaving him, and he sent the toddler he'd fathered with her to Waco. Spooked, Koresh returned the child and fled the sect's southern California outpost for Texas.

[51 days under siege: A timeline of the Branch Davidian standoff](#)

The sect soon began tearing down Mount Carmel's ramshackle houses and salvaging lumber for a new, sprawling compound. The structure had concrete-reinforced walls, a three-story watchtower and an underground bunker made with a buried school bus.

In January 1992, an Australian TV reporter went to Mount Carmel to interview Koresh.

"It makes nobody's business whether we have a gun or not in this place," Koresh declared on camera when asked about the group's sudden interest in firearms. "Guns are the right of Americans to have. They come in here with a gun, and they start shooting at us, what would you do?"



A photo taken by Dan Weyenberg for the McLennan County Sheriff's Department showing the Branch Davidian compound near Waco before the standoff and siege in 1993. (Dan Weyenberg/McLennan County Sheriff's Department)

That same month, another of Koresh's female followers defected, taking two more of his young sons. In February, after hearing testimony that an 11-year-old girl who lived at Mount Carmel with her mother was being groomed for sex with Koresh, a Michigan court gave the girl's father custody. That same month, Texas Child Protective Services began investigating other allegations of child abuse at Mount Carmel.

Koresh summoned all of his followers to Waco, saying the last days were at hand. Davidian Graeme Craddock, who flew in from Australia, told a federal grand jury immediately after the fiery end of the siege that the group understood that CPS was investigating. Koresh believed a raid was imminent, he added, "and our understanding of the Biblical prophecies is that we would undergo a long siege."

['I don't think it should be forgotten': Branch Davidians remember the Waco raid](#)

That spring, a UPS delivery man who regularly made deliveries to Mount Carmel was unnerved by armed Davidian

sentries and six-figure cash payments for COD shipments of ammo, gun parts and chemicals. In February, grenade hulls spilled from a torn box in his delivery truck.

Between March and the end of April, records show, the sect bought nearly 60 assault rifles and parts to build more, as well as 11 pistols, hundreds of 30-round assault-rifle magazines, night-vision and ground-sensing gear, grenade shells and 120,000 bullets.

In May, the UPS driver alerted the Sheriff's Department. Weyenberg, the chief deputy, called ATF. "I was smart enough to know that we could not handle it alone," he says. "They were the only one agency that was interested in doing anything."

## Gearing up

In October and again in November 1992, Bill Johnston, then chief federal prosecutor in Waco, reviewed the ATF's findings and concluded there was probable cause for a search warrant for federal weapons violations — including purchases of machinery and materials for converting assault rifles to illegal automatic weapons.

But ATF officials in Washington wanted more evidence and ordered an undercover operation.

"It took too long," Johnston says. "And what the Davidians were doing was hardening, arming and getting more paranoid."

In January 1993, ATF agents posing as technical college students moved into a farmhouse across Double EE Ranch Road from Mount Carmel. From day one, the undercover agents knew they were being watched. As they moved in, they saw someone staring at them through binoculars from the compound tower. Several Davidians came with beer and tried to invite themselves in.

Another neighbor soon confided that sect members thought the undercover agents' cars were too new to belong to college students, so Koresh suspected they were from the FBI. None of that got back to Bill Buford and other agents planning the raid, Buford says, nor did surveillance photos, including an image of a woman pointing a rifle out the compound's front door.

An initial idea of surrounding the compound and asking the Davidians to come out was discarded after Buford and another agent interviewed former sect members and learned that Koresh taught followers they had to die to fulfill his prophecies. "They said, 'They'll hold out as long as they can, and then they'll kill themselves,'" Buford says.

ATF's final raid plan hinged on surprising Koresh's male followers as they worked in a construction pit outside the building, separated from women and children and guns. Agents would subdue the men, while other agents rushed inside and secured the upstairs room where former Davidians said the group's guns were kept. Buford says the Houston-based agent overseeing the undercover operation told planners that the men were in the pit every day about 10 a.m.



"It wasn't till a long time afterward that I talked to the guys in the undercover house, and they said, 'We never said they were out there every day.'" Another agent involved in raid planning meetings told federal investigators, "In retrospect, you look at it kinda like little warning lights kept coming on and people either ignored 'em or turned them off."

Some of the biggest warning signals involved Waco news outlets. ATF managers unwittingly heightened local media interest by trying to persuade the *Waco Tribune-Herald* to delay publishing an investigative series on Koresh until after ATF took action. The editors told ATF they wouldn't delay publication. Raid commanders moved the raid up a day to Sunday, Feb. 28; they figured the newspaper's series would start that day and they could get in before Koresh was expecting any official reaction. But the paper started publishing "The Sinful Messiah" series Feb. 27. And a *Tribune-Herald* reporter got tipped by a local source to the new timing for the raid, so its editors had nine staffers in position on Sunday morning.



*Waco Tribune Herald* reporters Mark England (left), Tommy Witherspoon and Marc Masferrer take cover in a ditch as the gunbattle rages. (The Associated Press)

A photographer from Waco TV station KWTX was tipped by his girlfriend, a dispatcher for the ambulance company that ATF had hired to be on standby for the raid. So he and a TV reporter were there together that morning. Another KWTX photographer came separately.

In the hours just before the raid, agents in the undercover house saw more cars than usual on the roads near Mount Carmel. They later told investigators they assumed the passers-by were gawkers or reporters curious about the newspaper's scoop.

An undercover agent driving other agents into position for the raid saw a media car on the road. Its occupant was talking to a Davidian. It turned out the media car belonged to a KWTX cameraman who was trying to find the compound; he didn't know the identity of the stranger who stopped to offer directions.

Only after the raid would federal investigators learn the cameraman inadvertently revealed that ATF was coming. Other agents in the undercover house watched the same Davidian drive back to the compound about 8:30 a.m. Other than that Davidian and a few others going in and out, no one would venture outside the compound. That key information wouldn't be passed to the ATF team leaders, who had planned to cancel the operation if no one was seen working outside.

At 8 a.m., Robert Rodriguez, one of the agents living in the undercover house, went to the compound for a final check on conditions inside. Koresh sat down to talk with him in a front foyer. Shortly after 8:30 a.m., Koresh was called into another room. He returned pale and shaking.

"He turned, looked me straight in the eye and said, 'Neither the ATF nor the National Guard will ever get me; they got me once and they will never get me again,'" Rodriguez told other agents when he got back to the undercover house just after 9 a.m. "He keeps repeating, 'They're coming; the time has come.'"

Several ATF snipers in the undercover house heard that and began packing their gear, certain the raid would be canceled.

Rodriguez phoned raid deputy commander Chuck Sarabyn and blurted, "Chuck, Chuck, he knows, Chuck. He knows we're coming, OK?" He later recalled Sarabyn only wanted to know that the group wasn't grabbing guns or making preparations.

Sarabyn, who couldn't be reached for comment, has denied Rodriguez was so specific in his warning. The overall raid commander, Phil Chojnacki, also denied hearing such detailed warnings from Sarabyn.

An ATF agent who was next to Sarabyn when he took Rodriguez's call told federal investigators that Sarabyn hung up stuttering and wild-eyed. The agent recalled asking what was wrong and Sarabyn responding that Koresh had told Rodriguez the ATF and National Guard were in Waco and coming for him. The agent recalled asking what they were going to do. He told investigators Sarabyn responded: "I think we can do it if we hurry."



Federal Alcohol Tobacco and Firearms agents help a wounded fellow agent away from the compound after gunfire erupts. At far right is ATF Agent John Risenhoover, whose ankle was shattered during the firefight. (Rod Aydelotte/The Waco Tribune Herald)

At the Bellmead Community Center, ATF's raid staging area, John Risenhoover was in the parking lot when Sarabyn ran up. "He says, 'They got tipped off, they know we're coming. If we hurry, we can get it done.'" Buford and Mastin were among the more than 60 agents who later told investigators they heard Sarabyn say that, too.

Buford, Mastin and others asked Sarabyn questions. He told them Rodriguez had reported everything was relatively quiet. "And so we saddled up," Mastin says. "The final 'go' decision was based on momentum. Just straight momentum."

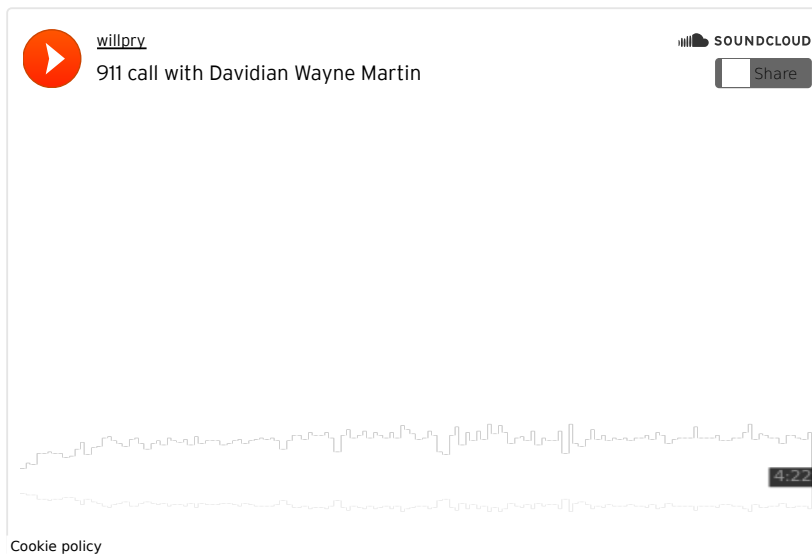
Though everything should've told them not to go, "that pressure, that momentum of these big operations, they just start taking on a life of their own. You get the mission creep," Boteler says. "They had what we call 'go fever' in the tactical word. Go fever is, 'We've got all this ready, let's get it done.' Go fever gets people killed."

"None of us were immune," he adds. "I hear somebody say as we were getting on the trailers, 'If they know we're coming, then why are we going?' That's the one utterance I heard. I never even thought that not going was an option."

I guess in my mind, we're the police. We have a lawful warrant. ... I had never found a group that would stand up against 80 to 100 police officers and say, 'We're not coming out.' I just couldn't imagine it. I don't think anybody expected that, even after we had been compromised."

## The raid and gunbattle

The Davidians had 45 minutes to prepare. Several surviving Davidians later told authorities they donned load-bearing ammo vests and grabbed automatic assault rifles. Someone broke out boxes of 9mm bullets in the kitchen and people grabbed handfuls to load magazines, Davidian Graeme Craddock later testified. Several children released during the siege told authorities they saw Wayne Martin wearing two grenades on a chain around his neck while other men only got one; Martin, a Harvard-educated lawyer, would call 911 and scream "Call it off!" after the gunfight began.



Rodriguez jumped into his truck, hoping to talk face to face with Sarabyn before the agents headed out. He was too late. Rodriguez later recalled yelling, "Why? Why!" And I remember there was a silence in the command post, and I ran out, went down the stairs, and I started crying."

When ATF's cattle trailers pulled into Mount Carmel's driveway, some agents believe Koresh thought they were farmers and came out the front door to shoo them away. Koresh and his followers would later claim he stepped out and yelled for the agents to stop and talk because they had women and kids inside. The agents recall only that he glared and stepped back inside as they began bolting from the cattle trailers, yelling, "Police!"

Gunfire erupted.

It was awful, and in moments, surreal. Boteler remembers pausing from firing to introduce himself and shake the hand of an agent he didn't know. In the next instant, he recalls alerting the agent to take a shot.

Risenhoover recalls lying wounded beneath a truck, his ankle shattered and smoking, as a kid in an upstairs window took potshots at him with a .22 rifle: "We were playing gun tag."

Buford led a team of agents from the New Orleans division up ladders to the second-story room where they thought the sect's guns were stored. He says some colleagues later angrily questioned why he went forward instead of taking cover when he heard the sharp bap-bap-bap of automatic AK-47s. Three of the four ATF agents killed were shot in that part of the operation.



Bill Buford and his ATF teammates attempt to enter the compound's weapons storage room on the second floor. (KWTX-TV)

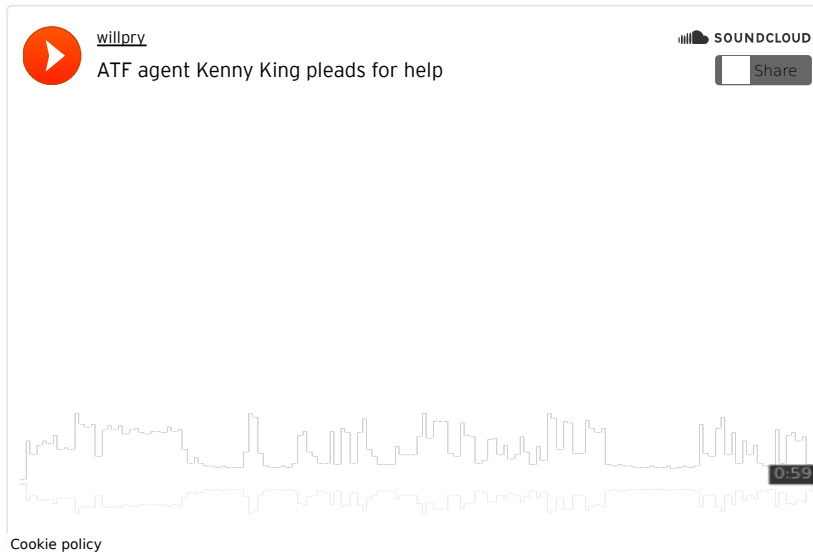
"I didn't know what was going on in front and they were counting on us going into the arms room," says Buford, a former Green Beret. "My thinking, like an old military guy, was what you do in a near ambush? You fight through it. That was stupid."

Once through the upstairs window, Buford saw mostly empty rows of gun racks, and then his partner was badly hit. He shot a figure running toward him, firing an AK-47.

Gunfire exploded through the walls, then through the floors. Hit in the hip and upper thigh, Buford fell into a wooden box and saw it was full of grenades as he pushed himself up. He told his partner they had to get out of there.

Mastin agonized, listening to his friend Kenny King plead for help.

"I'm hit bad. Hit — bad. Rolled off roof. Other side of roof," King radioed. "I have no one with me. ... I need help."



Shot six times in the chest, arms and legs, King lay alone in a rear courtyard, only able to move a finger to key his radio. For the next two hours, King's voice sounded weaker each time he radioed that he was bleeding out.

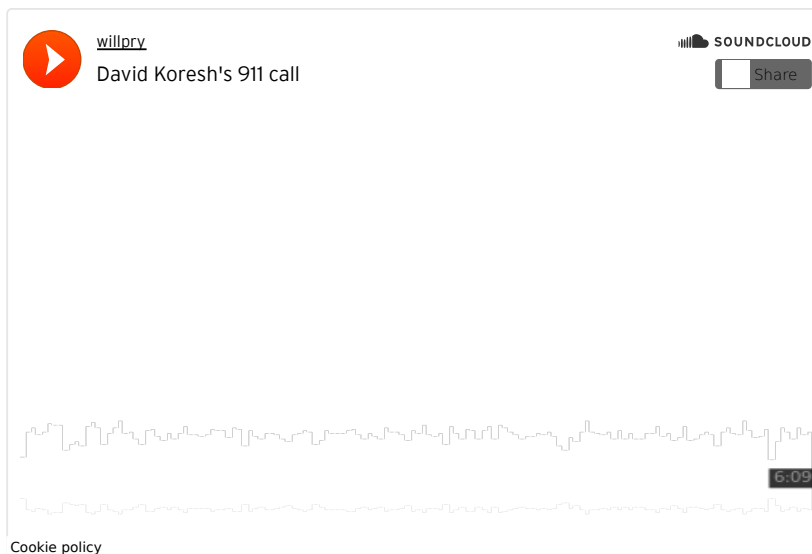
Communication failures slowed efforts to stop the shooting. It took more than 40 minutes for the sheriff's lieutenant who took the Davidians' first 911 call to reach anyone with ATF or even the sheriff's deputy assigned to ATF's command post.



ATF agents walk alongside an ambulance filled with wounded comrades as they retreat from the Mount Carmel compound after their raid went awry. (The Associated Press)

Inside the undercover house, the ATF agent who eventually negotiated a ceasefire with Koresh didn't have a number for the compound until nearly a half-hour into the shootout.

Texas Rangers who investigated the incident eventually estimated that by the end of the gunbattle, ATF agents had fired 1,100 rounds and the sect fired more than 10,000.



When Mastin finally got clearance to rescue King, he and other agents walked around the building with hands up. Three Davidians appeared, brandishing AR-15s. Mastin recalls saying, "I'm going to get my wounded folks."

"We'll kill you!" he recalls the Davidians shouting. "You need to get off our property!"

The agents dragged King's limp body. His foot caught on a metal pipe. King yelped. "That was the first time I knew he was alive," Mastin says.

Boteler remembers how blood streaked the road as they walked away from the compound. In the coming days, he and other agents say, they cringed at the photos and video footage of what looked like a defeated army.





ATF agents help Bill Buford away from the Branch Davidian compound on Feb. 28, 1993, after gunfire erupted as the agents attempted to execute an arrest warrant on Branch Davidian leader David Koresh and search for illegal weapons. (The Associated Press)

Mastin, head of ATF's New Orleans regional office, would bury three of his agents killed at Mount Carmel and then a fourth he considers a Waco casualty, one of two ATF agents who committed suicide after the incident.

Mastin was in East Tennessee for one of his agents' funerals when he finally saw TV footage of the firefight. "I just stopped and stared and said, 'How did they get that? That's right over my shoulder. Where did they get that? How did they get that? Who is that?'"

"I think that's the first time that I ever realized that the media had been there, and if they had been there, how in the hell did they know about it? How in the hell did our operational security so badly fail that these people were right on top of it?"

In a Waco hospital room, Risenhoover decided to sue the newspaper, the TV station and the ambulance company, charging that their actions compromised the raid. Waco was Risenhoover's hometown; he was furious and a lawyer friend was willing to file suit for him in federal court in the middle of the siege.

Mastin and Buford would be among dozens of agents who joined the suit. They say their motivation wasn't money so much as sending a message to the media that heedless pursuit of prize-winning scoops could have deadly unintended consequences.

"I had a kid at that time in ATF, a young agent," Mastin says, "and I didn't want somebody somewhere to break a story and get him shot."

The agents eventually won a confidential settlement reported to total more than \$15 million from the newspaper, the TV station and the ambulance company.

ATF's senior law enforcement leaders would come under fire, too. They and the raid commanders would lose their jobs after publicly denying the commanders knew they had lost the element of surprise when they launched the raid.



Floodlights slice through the night sky behind the Branch Davidian compound near Waco in March 1993 as the siege ground on for days and then weeks until federal agents moved in again on April 19. (The Associated Press)

Waco continued to smolder. For years, federal law enforcement agencies ordered their agents to say nothing publicly and fought the release of records and evidence. In the void, simplistic conspiracies overtook facts. Those conspiracies metastasized after revelations that government agencies lied about details of what went wrong and government officials and lawyers refused to acknowledge that official actions played any role in the deaths of more than 70 Branch Davidians.

Much of mainstream America began believing in a cautionary tale of evil federal forces persecuting an offbeat religious sect, goons grabbing guns for better publicity and bigger budgets.

Waco myths darkened and spread, inspiring an angry Army veteran to build a truck bomb and blow up the federal building in Oklahoma City.

Buford and other veterans of the 1993 incident say their guilt was compounded by the Oklahoma City bombing that left 168 people dead on April 19, 1995, the second anniversary of the Branch Davidian siege's fiery end. "It bothers me a lot," Buford says. "It all comes back to Waco."

Waco's ghosts reawaken with each new anti-government confrontation — from the Montana Freemen to the Republic of Texas to the Nevada Bundy clan to lesser-known gun-cult outposts along the country's fringes. The Columbine High School shooters originally timed their attack for April 19, the anniversary of both Waco and Oklahoma City, because they hoped to beat Oklahoma City's body count. Eric Rudolph, the Atlanta Olympic Park bomber, chose 4-19-93 as his code to authenticate his messages to the public and police.

The conflict that drew world attention to that bleak stretch of blackland Texas prairie has morphed into American myth. Waco was America's first domestic 24-hour cable-news snuff spectacle. Those of us old enough to watch it unfold live on CNN recall the addictive voyeurism that shaped today's nonstop disaster-and-disinfo-tainment news cycles. In the quarter-century since, what happened in Waco has come to reflect and distort what we revere and fear about government and guns.

Those who were there see through harsher lenses, cut by guilt and loss and pain. Many of them will gather in Waco on Wednesday to remember. For them — for Buford and Mastin, Boteler and Risenhoover and the others — what happened on Feb. 28, 1993, is an American tragedy.

*Longtime Dallas Morning News reporter Lee Hancock covered the Branch Davidian standoff in Waco and its years of repercussions. This retelling of the raid that started it is based on interviews, court documents and federal records. She is now a freelance writer working on a history of the siege and its aftermath.*



A FBI Hostage Rescue Team photo taken from one of the government's sniper positions as fire engulfs the compound at the end of the siege on April 19, 1993. (FBI)

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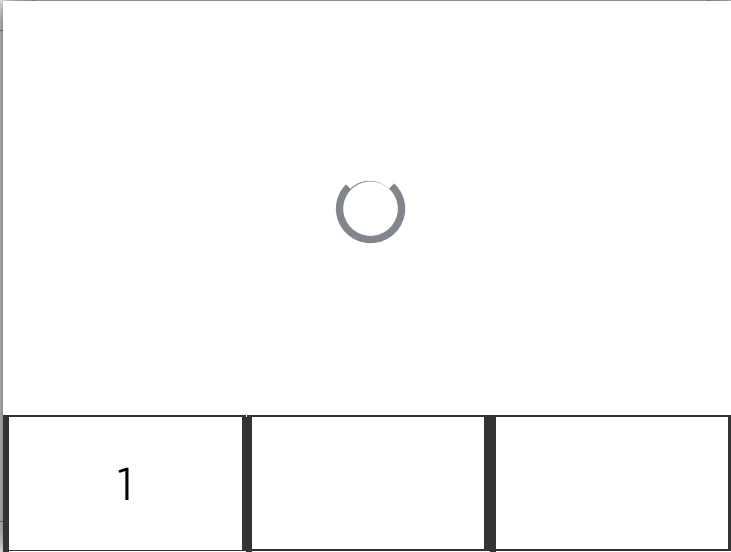
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