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'I don't think it should be forgotten': Branch Davidians remember the Waco raid



Dave Hiott, Justice Editor

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Editor's note: The Paramount Network's TV miniseries, Waco, premieres Jan. 24. The following story originally appeared in The Dallas Morning News on Feb. 27, 2003, just 10 years after the raid on the Branch Davidian Compound.

WACO — Inside a double-wide mobile home on 77 acres northeast of town, 63-year-old Clive Doyle proselytizes. But he's not preaching religion, and despite his mistrust, he says he's not anti-government.

He does have a warning.

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Mr. Doyle soberly speaks of the ghosts of a flawed police action that started 10 years ago Friday when federal agents engaged in a shootout with the Branch Davidians, a religious sect obsessed with an apocalyptic ending. The gunfight began a 51-day standoff that ended with 84 men, women and children burned alive or shot dead.

"I don't think it should be forgotten," said Mr. Doyle, one of the last of the Branch Davidians. Like many involved in the standoff - including law officers - he says it serves as a warning about the dangers of a faceless government.



Branch Davidian Clive Doyle, right, gets a hug from longtime friend Rick Donaldson, left, during a memorial service on April, 19, 2013, in Waco. (Rod Aydelotte/AP)

Paying greater heed to local law officers and building bonds with members of fringe groups are key to avoiding another tragedy, they say.

Because of the lessons of Waco, "going against Americans with guns is the final resort," says retired FBI behavioral expert and Waco negotiator Clint Van Zandt.



CRIME

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

Not much remains of the Branch Davidian compound they called Mount Carmel: A small, neat, tan wooden church built by supporters years ago, a closed visitors center with peeling paint, Mr. Doyle's home. And, if you look closely, under the wild grasses are the outlines of the sprawling building built in the late 1980s.

On Feb. 28, 1993, after training at Fort Hood, more than 75 agents from the Bureau of Alcohol, Tobacco and Firearms rolled onto the property in two cattle trucks and launched a military-style raid to search the complex for illegal arms and arrest sect leader David Koresh, 33, on weapons charges.

Agents hoped to catch the Branch Davidians off guard, but the sect was tipped off by reporters asking for directions and by the unusual presence of TV news crews along a nearby road.

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"People in Mount Carmel knew that they were coming," said Branch Davidian Sheila Martin, whose husband and four children died in the standoff, as did Mr. Koresh. "They shouldn't have gone ahead."



In this March, 26, 1993 file photo, a person can be seen in the lower right hand corner of the photo running back to the Branch Davidian compound near Waco (Rick Bowmer/AP)

An undercover ATF agent left the complex to urge ATF commanders to call off the raid. They not only accelerated their plan but later denied the agent had warned them and ended up paying him a legal settlement.

Mr. Koresh opened the front door to exchange words with the agents, who were pouring out of one cattle trailer with weapons drawn, ordering surrender.

Both sides disagreed on who shot first, but chaos erupted into a bloody firefight.

The popping and cracking of AK-47s, AR-15s and .50-caliber weapons issued from the compound for 45 minutes.

Four ATF agents and five Branch Davidians were killed. About 20 ATF agents were wounded, many by automatic-weapons fire and grenade shrapnel. Numerous Branch Davidians, including the sect's leader, had less grievous injuries.

'Just never believed'

"My impression was that they just never believed that the Davidians would open fire. It would just be so foolish to open fire," said Mike Bradford, a former U.S. attorney who defended the government in a lawsuit lost by survivors of the Branch Davidians but now on appeal.



CRIME

Breaking through the myths surrounding the 1993 Branch Davidian raid

Another sect member was killed later that day by ATF agents as he ran toward the property. Court testimony said three gravely injured sect members were ordered "finished off" by Mr. Koresh.

McLennan County Sheriff Larry Lynch, then a lieutenant working the phones at the sheriff's office, negotiated a cease-fire. It was touch-and-go. Sheriff Lynch worried that gunfire could erupt again at any time. "Those agents that went in to retrieve the wounded, you gotta admire them," he said.

"The seeds of defeat" for the ATF were sown early, said former ATF spokesman Jack

Killorin.

The ATF lost not only the element of surprise but its command helicopter when it was forced down by the sect's gunfire, leaving the leadership blinded.

"These were costly, costly mistakes," said Mr. Killorin.



The Branch Davidians called their large communal house and church "Mount Carmel." The FBI referred to it as a "compound." This photo was taken during the siege by disapproving FBI snipers. (*Waco: The Rules of Engagement*/Fifth Estate Productions)

The Davidians' roots go back to the 1930s, when a splinter group left the

Seventh-day Adventist Church. Mr. Koresh seized the leadership in 1988 after a power struggle that included a shootout between factions. He was a charismatic leader who brought the Branch Davidians closer together, in part by building a communal complex from the lumber of houses already on the property.

But it was his impressive knowledge of the Bible that attracted more than 100 people to Mount Carmel, where sect members listened patiently to Mr. Koresh's tireless preaching sessions, known to last 10 hours or more.



TEXAS

51 days under siege: A timeline of the Branch Davidian standoff

Mr. Koresh proclaimed himself a flawed messenger from God, a "sinful messiah" who would lead his followers in a violent battle against an evil government. Many would die and be among the first to rise again at the beginning of the apocalypse, he promised.

"We could see the logic in all these things," said Ms. Martin, a Branch Davidian since the 1960s.

Her husband was a Harvard-educated lawyer. The sect included people from across the United States and as far away as New Zealand. They were Asians, blacks, Hispanics and whites from all walks of life - engineers, carpenters and teachers.

"There was no religion as you and I understand it," said Sheriff Lynch. "He was using religion to stir up hate against the federal government. He preached if you

die fighting the beast, you'll be immediately translated to heaven."

In the early 1990s, members began attending gun shows, trading weapons and stockpiling arms. Reports of a grenade shipment triggered a seven-month investigation, and the ATF obtained a search warrant for the complex and an arrest warrant for Mr. Koresh.

There was ample warning about the sect.

For years, "we had lots of calls about gunfire and automatic gunfire," Sheriff Lynch said.

But rumors that children were being abused by Mr. Koresh alarmed the ATF, and the agency chose to try a swift raid to safely separate them from the adults.

"These people were looking for a violent, suicidal engagement and would take out their own children," Mr. Killorin said. "I don't think that evil presents itself to us with fangs showing ... it often looks like us."



Bonnie Haldeman, mother of David Koresh, prays in a chapel built on remnants of the burned Branch Davidian compound on Friday, February 28, 2003. (The Associated Press) (ROD AYDELOTTE/AP)

Bonnie Haldeman, Mr. Koresh's mother, lived at the complex before the standoff. She said her son took several wives - some under the age of consent - because it was justified by Scripture. "He showed it to us. I may not have humanly agreed with it, but I accepted it," she said.

"As far as molesting little children, he didn't do that ... he was told to have children for God, and those were good children. We had studies and studies and studies and had to accept that."

Mistakes made

Tim Evans, attorney for a sect member acquitted at the Branch Davidians' criminal trial, said law enforcement made the mistake of stereotyping the Branch Davidians.

"There is no doubt there were people in the Branch Davidian complex who had unlawful weapons and who were committing crimes," said Mr. Evans. "That should not be the issue used to justify what law enforcement did."

Ideally, agents would have joined Sheriff Jack Harwell and Mr. Koresh on the front porch to "sip ice tea and talk," said Danny Coulson, a retired deputy assistant FBI director whose agency took over the standoff scene after the shootout.

"If David Koresh said, 'Go to hell, Jack,' at least we could have reported back to the American public that we tried."

The ATF also has been criticized for not simply waiting for the opportunity to grab Mr. Koresh from the compound.

After Waco, federal agents began to develop better relationships with anti-government militants and members of other fringe groups, to keep an eye on them and even reason with them.

"In an agency like the ATF that primarily has gun jurisdiction, that automatically puts them on the wrong side of the fence with Second Amendment supporters," Mr. Coulson said. "You have to reach out."

"We have to have an ongoing dialogue," Mr. Van Zandt said.

But, Mr. Killorin wondered, if Mr. Koresh had been arrested in town or out jogging,

"would his followers then commit mass suicide or a mass attack based on information that he had been apprehended?"

Mr. Killorin is not convinced that much could have changed the outcome, considering the apocalyptic bent of the Branch Davidians.

"It's not surprising that Osama bin Laden could employ people to commit suicide and fly planes into buildings. ... Waco is a monument to our understanding that such things can and will happen."

A Treasury Department report, congressional investigations and the ATF itself were sharply critical of the agency's performance in the raid. Mr. Killorin said numerous changes have created a culture of accountability.

Two top commanders were fired for going ahead with the raid when it was compromised, although they were later reinstated to desk jobs after due process problems arose in their cases.

Jack Zimmerman, who went inside the complex during the standoff as an attorney for one of the sect members, said he is surprised the ATF still exists. "But you'll notice that they haven't done any large-scale mass attacks since then," he said.



FROM THE ARCHIVES

Flashback: While Waco's Branch Davidian compound siege raged on, hawkers and opportunists swarmed

The agency was also criticized for allegedly planning the raid for publicity when facing budget cuts.

"They set up in advance a table of preprinted press releases, had two press officers and a bevy of fax machines" at a Waco command center, Mr. Evans said.

Mr. Killorin said the agency would never risk violence for better public relations.

"I can remember standing there trying to get my heart and mind around the fact that we had lost four agents," he said. "We'd never die for publicity."

Last of the Davidians

The last of the Branch Davidians at Mount Carmel, about a half dozen people who gather every Saturday at the church, say they are studying the Bible, in part hoping to find meaning in what happened 10 years ago. They wait for another prophet.

"Our hopes are that God will step in, there will be a resurrection, and those of us who died in the past will be brought back and God will begin to set his kingdom up," Mr. Doyle said. "If that doesn't happen any time soon, the fact of the matter is most of the survivors will die. ... Quite a number of the ones who are left are very, very old."

Many Branch Davidians have begun new lives elsewhere. There's no plan for a new commune.

Nine members were convicted on weapons charges after the standoff, five also on manslaughter charges. Seven remain in prison on sentences up to 15 years. Eleven

were acquitted on charges of conspiracy to murder federal agents.

Mr. Koresh's mother, Ms. Haldeman, who lost 13 grandchildren in the fire that consumed the complex at the end of the 51-day siege, travels to Mount Carmel to join prayer services when she can, driving from her home in Chandler, near Tyler.

"I don't hate any of them," she said of the federal agents. "I don't have time for that. We're all going to have to answer to God someday. I feel anger, but I don't know exactly who at."

Mr. Doyle was accused by investigators of helping other Branch Davidians start the April 19 conflagration that left 74 members dead. Court testimony showed that traces of fuel were found on his clothes after he escaped the blaze. His daughter Shari, 18, died in the fire.

Mr. Doyle, never found guilty on any charges, says he remains at Mount Carmel to tell the Branch Davidians' story from his perspective.

His warning about the government: "If they think they've got something to do, then they go ahead and do it and lie about it until everybody finds out what they actually did."

Mr. Killorin, who retired last year as head of the ATF's Atlanta office, says it isn't that simple.

"This wasn't a group of ruthless automatons attacking an innocent Bible study group," he said. "There were human beings on both sides."

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