

THE CULTURE

'Waco' Through the Eyes of a Former Branch Davidian

For Clive Doyle, the new mini-series 'Waco' isn't just TV drama—it's personal.

By Alex Hannaford

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On April 17, 2013, in Waco, Clive Doyle, a Branch Davidian and survivor of the 1993 standoff between federal authorities and the sect, points out on a scale model where he escaped the fire that eventually destroyed the compound.

John L. Mone/AP

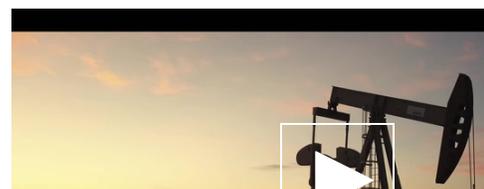
Three black SUVs, two trucks pulling horse trailers, and two military vehicles drive swiftly down a road, flat farmland stretching out for miles on either side. A helicopter soars over the convoy and passes a beige two-story wooden structure with white shutters. Inside the building, the man they're all coming for stands at one of the windows, watching as they approach. He is in his thirties, has few-days-old stubble, and wears aviator-style prescription glasses. His long brown hair touches the collar of his Western shirt. "They're coming for me," he says. Then he opens the door where he's confronted by a battalion of agents from the Bureau of Alcohol, Tobacco, and Firearms (ATF), pointing their weapons in his direction. "Calm down," he shouts. "There are women and children in here." A gunshot rings out and the opening credits roll.

Clive Doyle, in his mid-seventies, watches the drama unfold on a small computer screen in his living room. He sits on an old sofa near the window wearing a red sweater and black slacks. He shifts in his seat.

"Mount Carmel looks pretty accurate," Doyle says. "There were stairs that went up from the foyer, but not like that. Not there. And who's the bald guy? Who's the big guy with the beard?" he asks, pointing in as two people wielding guns on the screen. "We didn't have anybody like that." Additionally, the fence at the front of the property was a picket fence, he says, and there were no crosses on the wall. "The cross wasn't something we would exonerate," he says. "It was a means of killing."

But Doyle pauses his rapid-fire dismissal of the details he believes the filmmakers got wrong when he hears Taylor Kitsch, playing the charismatic Davidian leader David Koresh, speak. "He doesn't look like David, but he's trying to get his voice. His voice is pretty good. It's convincing," he allows.

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Doyle has agreed to watch two episodes of *Waco*, a six-part TV drama on the Paramount Network that debuted on January 24. The series details the story of an unsuccessful ATF raid investigating weapons violations that led to a seven-week standoff between the Branch Davidians and the FBI. In all, four federal agents and 82 members of the Branch Davidians—including two dozen children—died in the 51-day siege 25 years ago.

Banks of outside broadcast vans ensured that the 1993 siege in Spring was beamed to television screens around the world, and that Waco would become forever synonymous with the Branch Davidian sect and what happened to its members. It's a story so sensational, so rich in drama and heartbreak, that it was inevitable that it would be retold on such a key anniversary.

And for Doyle, the story is personal.

Originally from Australia, Doyle came to Mount Carmel, the 77-acre ranch outside Waco where the Branch Davidians lived, with his family in the sixties to join the church. They would live there under subsequent leaders until Koresh, born Vernon Howell, turned up in the eighties and assumed control. Doyle lost his eighteen-year-old daughter, Shari, during the fire that ultimately ended the siege. He escaped with burns that would require skin grafts on his hands.

I first met Doyle in 2003, on the tenth anniversary of the siege. He was living in a double-wide trailer up at Mount Carmel, next to a tiny Branch Davidian visitor's center (since shuttered) that he'd open on request. Back then, at the edges of the property, you could still see the tank tracks in the mud and the

remains of clothing and footwear scattered about. A dispute between various Branch Davidian factions over who owned the property led Doyle to leave shortly after and rent an apartment in Waco proper. Over the years he'd return to Mount Carmel only for anniversaries. Today, he lives in the same small apartment with his roommate Ron Goins, a well-wisher who first arrived at Mount Carmel a few years after the siege and has been friends with Doyle ever since.

Doyle says production staff came to Waco to interview him some time ago, but ultimately said they were basing the series on the memoir *A Place Called Waco*, written by another former Davidian, David Thibodeau, instead. "And I never heard from them again," Doyle says. In the drama, Thibodeau is played by Rory Culkin, youngest brother of Macaulay; Clive by New Mexico-based actor and director Tim Aydelott ("although I didn't have a beard," he says).

As we continue to watch the first episode on Clive's computer screen, the story backtracks in time. It jumps from showing the Davidians and their lives in Waco—Koresh giving a sermon, going jogging with his son—to Koresh as a wannabe rock star, recruiting Thibodeau at a bar in Waco to be the drummer in his band. "This didn't happen," Clive interrupts. "They met in California. He had never been to Waco before. And he was a lot bigger than that guy."

And quickly, the story grows darker. In the first episode, Koresh reveals that God has told him to take every woman at Mount Carmel as his wife—including those already married. His lieutenant Steve Schneider then confronts his wife when he discovers she's pregnant with Koresh's baby. "Your wife has a chance to marry the lamb of God—who am I to hold her back?" Schneider tells her.

Clive doesn't say anything. I ask him if this is accurate. "He called it a new light," he says, indicating that I pause the show. "It came over a period of time. It didn't happen overnight. It started with the men—David said they were supposed to be celibate ... I'd say it was a shock to the married men, but David gave various Bible studies."

I asked Doyle to clarify: if the diktat was celibacy for the men in the church,

how was it polygamy for Koresh? Doyle responds that prophets don't necessarily bring messages we want to hear—they test you. “If you go back to the Old Testament, all these individuals God selects to be his messengers or representatives were asked to do weird stuff,” he says. “But it was done for a reason ... God doesn't send a prophet unless his people have already backslid, and it's because God is not happy with what they're doing.”

At the end of episode one, Koresh's suspicions have been aroused by new neighbors in the shack across the Davidian property. (We later discover they are federal agents.)

Doyle asks if he can skip straight to episode three, which dramatizes the February 28, 1993, ATF raid that preceded the siege. The third episode begins at the same place as the first—with the vehicles driving down the farm road toward Mount Carmel. Doyle shifts forward slightly on the sofa as the gunshot rings out. We watch Koresh take a bullet to the stomach, collapsing inside the front door of the property. “He wasn't shot in the stomach at the door,” Doyle says, still staring at the screen. “He was shot in the hand. He was shot in the side later, after he'd gone upstairs.”

Two acolytes pull Koresh up the hallway as gunfire continues, both from agents outside of the compound and Davidians firing out of windows upstairs. In reality, Doyle says, the sound was much louder than it seemed on screen.

“When I first heard the shots at the front door I headed out of my room and started to go down the hallway to check what was happening,” he remembers. “Perry Jones, David's father-in-law, was crawling on his hands and knees up the hallway, screaming that he and David had been shot. I helped Perry put David in a bed in the men's dormitory.”

On screen, Wayne Martin dials 911 and tells the operator that 75 ATF agents are shooting at them and begs them to call them off. There are the screams of children as panicked mothers pull mattresses off bunks to use as cover. A helicopter circles overhead. As an ATF agent is dragged by his colleagues away from the building, presumably dead, I look over to see that Doyle is in

away from the building, presumably dead, I look over to see that Doyle is in tears. I close the laptop. Goins, his roommate, puts an arm on Doyle shoulder and asks if he's okay. Goins tells me he's never seen him react to anything like that in the fifteen years he's known him.

We decide to head out to lunch and eat largely in silence. Doyle comments that he's cold, and on the journey back he's violently sick. He doubts it's anything to do with his reaction to seeing a dramatization of what happened in 1993, but he can't be sure. Either way, he doesn't want to watch any more today.

When I first met him fifteen years ago, Doyle told me the reason he stayed in Waco after that spring—after the raid, the siege, the subsequent blaze in which his own daughter died—was because he felt a duty to explain what happened to people. He's written a book about it, read numerous others, and seen the various documentaries that purport to tell the real story. "I still believe in David," he told me then. "I lost a daughter and a lot of friends." Doyle will continue to speak up for those who died and tell the truth, as he sees it, about what happened. But for today, he's done. Today, it's still too raw.