

BRANCH
DAVIDIANS

A NEW PROPHET RISES FROM THE ASHES OF WACO

Charles Pace is the leader of the Branch Davidians, the religious sect in Texas that became infamous when a 51-day standoff with the FBI resulted in more than 80 deaths. Twenty years later, he is preparing his flock for conflict on a different scale. By **Alex Hannaford**

PHOTOGRAPHY BY JEZ COULSON





MAN WITH A MESSAGE
Pace, seated amid the rubble of the old Mount Carmel compound, believes that Texas will secede from the Union and America will face civil war within three years

When the sun sets, there's a certain peacefulness, beauty, even, about this sparse 77-acre plot of land, 12 miles northeast of

Waco. But the past couple of summers have seen the searing Texas heat dry up the two small lakes, and in winter the lack of trees due south makes the wind blow hard and cold, and it feels bleak and foreboding. It's not the sort of place you'd imagine hundreds of people descending upon, setting up tents, bringing motorhomes, or building cabins. Yet Charles Pace, the burly trustee of the property and pastor of the wooden church here, is convinced they will — and soon.

A couple of years ago, Pace hired diggers to clear some of the gumtrees and thorny mesquite that sprout like weeds from the dry soil down by the lakes; the large catering kitchen that he has built on to the church in the centre of the ranch is finished; and the old dairy, a ramshackle brick construction at the back of the property, now houses all the ephemera Pace has collected for his experiments in aquaponics: he has been raising fish and running the fertilised water through gravel beds to use as organic plant food, but this year he intends to do it on a much larger scale.

Chickens roam free, pecking at the ground, and Pace plans to grow fruit and vegetables this spring. "We are reclaiming the Earth for God," he says. "Creating a garden of Eden." Pace believes that hundreds, if not thousands, of people will come here; that something extraordinary is about to happen in Waco. It wouldn't be the first time.

Mount Carmel, as the ranch is known, is named after a mountain in northern Israel and has seen a few prophets in its time, none more notorious than Vernon Howell, a preacher who went by the name David Koresh. On February 28, 1993, he led the Branch Davidian religious sect into a 51-day armed standoff with agents of the Bureau of Alcohol, Tobacco and Firearms (ATF), who were investigating allegations of illegal weapons-hoarding.

Those agents pumped tear gas into the sprawling wooden complex that the Davidians called home on April 19. Shortly afterwards, a fire started in the building and utterly destroyed it, the tragic scenes playing out on television screens across the world. More than 80 church members died that day, either in the blaze or from gunfire; we don't know the exact number because some bodies were never recovered from the ashes. The dead included at least 17 children.

To this day, the cause of the fire is disputed. The official investigation concluded that,



I WAS STRUCK BY THE STARK REMINDERS: A TABLE LAMP, A DRESS, A SHOE

although federal agents didn't start it, an FBI officer fired three flammable "ferret" tear-gas rounds near the living quarters of the compound. One of the main critics in the wake of the report was the former attorney-general Ramsey Clark, who called the assault on the compound "the greatest domestic law-enforcement tragedy in the history of the United States".

The history of the Branch Davidians is complex. The movement began in the 1930s, when a Bulgarian immigrant called Victor Houteff split from the Seventh-Day Adventist church, which he joined in 1919 while living in Illinois, and eventually moved to Waco to establish a new church. The group believes its current president must be endowed with the gift of prophecy. After Houteff's death, Benjamin Roden stepped into his shoes,

leading the Davidians for more than 20 years. Roden's wife, Lois, then insisted she had a message of her own: that the Holy Spirit was feminine. This polarised the congregation: some stayed, some left. After her husband died in 1978, Lois remained head of the church but her leadership was challenged first by her son, George; then, in 1983, by Koresh, who succeeded in taking over.

I first visited Mount Carmel in 2003 on the 10th anniversary of the siege. I was struck by how many stark reminders still existed of what happened. Picking my way through the bushes at the edge of the property, I found the charred remains of a table lamp; a dress; a shoe. The huge swimming pool, in which children once swam, was full of stagnant water, a disturbing reminder of the fact that, regardless of what Koresh did, there were innocent people here who laughed and played.

In 2003, Clive Doyle was the de facto leader of the group. A follower of Koresh, he survived the fire but his 18-year-old daughter, Shari, perished. Those Davidians who hadn't been deported or imprisoned (some were British, sent home after serving lengthy jail sentences) began attending Doyle's services each Sabbath.

It wasn't to last. Pace, a Davidian who chose not to follow Koresh and who was living in Alabama at the time of the siege, returned



PERSONALITY CULT

David Koresh, charismatic leader of the Branch Davidians, who died during the Mount Carmel siege and fire (far left). Below: Pace and his wife, Alexa, share the sacrament

happened,” he says as we sit in his office. “Tom called me that night and told me to put CNN on. I thought, ‘Oh my God.’”

Pace believes what happened in 1993 was foretelling something far bigger. “According to our prophetic writings, there would come a leader within the Advent movement who claims to be God in the flesh,” he says. “The elders of the church would follow this man into apostasy. If he asked for their wives and daughters, they’d give them to him [Koresh was accused of child molestation]. He started making a God out of himself. He was acting the part of the antichrist.

“But we believe Koresh was a prophet, just like Christ was a prophet,” Pace says. “When he [Koresh] is raised from the dead, he will have a testimony for the whole world to hear.”

Pace describes the siege 20 years ago as a “wake-up call” — the bloody aftermath was a microcosm of what will happen on Earth. He is convinced that hundreds, maybe thousands of people will come to Mount Carmel over the next couple of years to await the Rapture.

Since I was last at Mount Carmel, Caldwell had gone back to his native California after Pace fell out with his wife, Linda. All Pace will say is that Caldwell is “supposed to be here” and that he “didn’t prepare [his wife] for life at Mount Carmel. I’m just going to let the spirit move him.”

Only six people live on the property: Pace, Alexa and their two sons, Ben, 18, and Michael, 21 (their daughter Angie, 26, lives in the nearby town of Killeen with her husband, who is in the military); Ofelia Santoyo is the only survivor of the siege and a former follower of Koresh, who has accepted Pace’s message. She lost her daughter and five grandchildren in the fire.

Then there’s Simeon Laville, a former Seventh-Day Adventist who heard Pace’s message from a friend and came here three years ago to find out more. Another man, Rolando Saenz, has attended Pace’s services every weekend for a number of years, but doesn’t live on the property. A sculptor by trade, Saenz is responsible for the stone plaques that memorialise each victim of the fire — everyone, that is, except Koresh. Pace destroyed his headstone, saying it could be used for idolatry.

Pace’s vision is for Mount Carmel to be entirely self-sufficient, “off the grid”; but ➤➤➤

documentary film crew, and I got to know Pace well. He refers to himself as Joshua ben David — another name for Jesus of Nazareth — but he cuts an unlikely figure as God’s prophet on Earth: he lost an eye to a childhood disease, and a tractor accident about 15 years ago pulverised his heel so severely that his leg was amputated at the knee.

A Canadian by birth, Pace has been a Davidian since 1973, and initially lived at Mount Carmel under the leadership of Ben Roden. In 1984 Pace heard Koresh give a sermon in which he claimed to be the Lamb of God from the Book of Revelation. Pace claims he got up afterwards, in front of the entire congregation of about 150 people, pointed his finger at Koresh and essentially predicted what would happen in 1993. “I told him he would bring about a Luciferian movement within the church,” Pace says. “I said he would receive the Ezekiel 9 slaughter, which is the slaughter of men, women, maids and little children.”

Afterwards, according to Pace, Koresh put his arm around him and said: “This brother’s speaking truth.” It’s an incredible anecdote, if it’s true; Doyle, who was in the congregation that day, doesn’t recall it. But Tom Caldwell, a fellow Branch Davidian who Pace once described as his second-in-command, and who was living at Mount Carmel in 2011, says it happened just the way Pace tells it. Either way, Pace chose not to follow Koresh. After leaving Waco, he married Alexa in 1986 and a year later they moved to Gadsden, Alabama, where he ran a company teaching people to invest in gold and preached at a local church at weekends.

“I was giving a sermon at Immanuel Lutheran Church when the raid

shortly afterwards with his wife, Alexa, and their three children, moving into a mobile home at the back of the property. A few years after my first visit, there was a jostle for leadership and Pace emerged victorious — with a new message.

It’s bright but chilly when I pull up outside the mobile home near the entrance to Mount Carmel, which Pace uses as his office, one afternoon in January. I haven’t seen him for more than a year and he stands on his porch, wearing a V-neck sleeveless jumper, green shirt and jeans, and greets me with a hug. Alexa and his daughter, Angie, are about to drive into town, but they’ve waited to say hello.

I spent several weeks here during the summer of 2010 and spring of 2011 with a



this is where Davidian theology meets a disturbing ideology that has been gaining traction in America. According to a report by the human-rights group Southern Poverty Law Center, since Barack Obama's first election win in 2008, there has been a revival of the rabidly anti-government, so-called "patriot" movement of the 1990s: civilian militias, tax defiers, Second Amendment "righters", united in their determination to oppose a "socialist" president.

Mount Carmel became a rallying point for anti-government conspiracy theorists. Timothy McVeigh came here in 1993, two years before he blew up the Alfred P Murrah federal building in Oklahoma City, killing 168 people. McVeigh would later claim it was done partly in retaliation for what happened in Waco.

Some of these militantly anti-government forces think an elite group is plotting to take over the world and create a new world order. The theory also attracts radical end-times fundamentalist Christians, who say that at the head of this group is the devil himself.

Pace's conspiracy theory is difficult to articulate, but it goes something like this: Roman Catholicism and Islam are one and the same ("The Jesuits wrote the Koran"); the Federal Reserve is run by the Vatican; and the four beasts of Revelation are Bill Clinton, George Bush Sr, George Bush Jr, and Obama — with the latter intent on imposing sharia after he's destroyed the constitution.

"But," Pace says, "I believe God will intervene. Our side wins. And this will all happen within the next three years. People are being dislocated from their homes, they're moving out of states where they can't worship the God they want. Texas is going to secede from the Union. They're going to take your guns, land, life and religion."

"Do you really believe that?" I ask.

"Yes. American gun-owners are getting ramped up for civil war. If you count all the

hunters that have several guns, there's an army right there. Six or seven million."

I ask him whether there are any guns up at Mount Carmel, particularly as this was the reason ATF agents attempted to execute a search warrant in 1993. "We have them to protect ourselves," Pace says. "And to kill rabid dogs and to hunt. But we're not stockpiling or selling them, or anything like that."

Six years after the siege, the Texas-based libertarian radio presenter Alex Jones — who recently had a much-publicised spat over gun control with Piers Morgan on CNN, and counts among his supporters militia groups and anti-government conspiracy theorists — asked his listeners to help rebuild the Davidians' church at Mount Carmel. The building that stands here today, on the site of the original compound, is the result of that appeal.

Jones was a student when the Congressional hearings into the events here took place in 1995. "I watched, glued to the television," he says from his office in Austin. "And I had a bad feeling about the whole thing: tanks, mushroom fireballs, shooting people. Most of what we were told was a lie. Koresh had gone into town every week, jogging off the property every morning, but the ATF didn't approach him then."

Jones would later interview siege survivors, witnesses and ATF agents on his show. "I'm not saying the Davidians were perfect. I don't agree with a lot of their spiritual views," he says, "but I thought if the government can get away with doing that, they can get away with something bigger. Little kids were involved, newborn babies. When we dug up the footings for the church, we found flammable tear-gas rounds all over the place. They shot hundreds of them and there was an incredible amount of proof.

"Even if Koresh himself was on a delusional power trip, there was no reason to kill all these people. It was a trophy hunt."

I ask Jones why there is such a meeting of minds between the Davidians and his listeners. "A lot of militia people and constitutionalists who recognise the danger of too big a

government resonate with the Branch Davidians," he says. "Army manuals train for gun confiscation... the federal government knows gun culture and what happened in 1776. They're trying to start civil war in this country. "If the Davidians think the end of the world is next month, so be it. I don't think that's the case. But I'm going to resist tyranny. No one can



see what's going on and not say it's tyranny. My government is invading five or six countries and calling it 'peace operations'. It's immoral."

Watching television coverage of the fire at Mount Carmel two decades on is still profoundly disturbing. It was a beautiful day with a vibrant blue sky when TV cameras captured the first flickers of flames and we watched, horrified, as they engulfed the entire complex. Amid the rubble, agents laid out body bags on the ground, and the camera zoomed in as an official held a charred baby bottle in his outstretched hand.

Clive Doyle spent most of the 51-day siege hunkered down in the chapel, on the ground floor at the back of the compound. On April 18, the day before the fire, he had been sick and that night hadn't slept, whiling away the hours transcribing one of Koresh's sermons. He still believes Koresh was a prophet and awaits his "resurrection". By 6am, it was still dark. Doyle says he heard the voice of an FBI negotiator over the loudspeaker, saying: "If you don't come out now, we're going to pump gas into the building."

"People have always asked me, even now, why we didn't come out during the standoff," Doyle says. "But we were told nobody was to come out unless they were negotiated out by the FBI." And after 51 days, he says, they were too scared to leave.

Everyone began scrambling for their gas masks, but Doyle didn't have time to read the



**SET IN STONE**

The entrance to the rebuilt Mount Carmel Center outside Waco. Below: Davidians discuss the town's location – at the same latitude as Jerusalem

have been brief periods of reconciliation, today the two men are further apart than ever.

"I've known Charlie for almost 40 years. [When I lived on the property] I really tried to give it a shot, to try to find out whether what he was saying was of God. Charlie wants as many survivors as he can get to give him legitimacy," Doyle says. "But the Waco survivors are getting fewer and fewer."

The sun is going down on a bright winter's day over Mount Carmel. Pace has given me a tour of the kitchen, but it's chilly and he closes the door to the church, to stop the wind blowing in.

Meanwhile, a slim man in a grandad cap, silhouetted against the dying sun, is in the field beyond with a shovel in hand. Simeon Laville, one of the Pace faithful, is busy digging a trench that will slice through the acreage from east to west, and in the next month or so he'll lay pipes to bring water to the property. "Mount Carmel is where it started," Laville tells me. "It's where He placed His name. The Bible said God will raise up his son, Joshua. I've known Pastor Pace for three years. I'd heard about his prophesies: Charles Pace. The man of Peace."

On April 19, Doyle and a handful of well-wishers will mark the 20th anniversary of the fire with a morning of prayer and speeches at a hotel in downtown Waco. Meanwhile, Pace hopes Mount Carmel will once again become a rallying point, this time for those who accept his message. "We are ramping up to see a lot of people who are following God's voice, and they are coming to a place of refuge," he says. "People in Texas say, 'Remember the Alamo'. I say, 'Remember Waco'. Martyrs are ready to die."

Even Caldwell, Pace's former lieutenant who moved to California last summer, won't rule out going back. "I absolutely think it will still happen," he told me by phone when I asked him about Pace's prophecy. "I have no idea what my role will be. My history with that place goes back 34 years and there have been so many emotional battles. But if I'm called to go back, I'll go back." ■

instructions on his, and because he didn't peel off a small tab covering the filter, it lasted only 30 minutes before becoming clogged. He says people were in tears from the CS gas and it began to burn his skin like battery acid: "I started putting clothes on so the gas wouldn't burn, but there was still bare skin on my face."

The building started to collapse. Doyle's daughter, Shari, had spent most of the siege with him in the chapel, but now he didn't know where she'd gone. "At some point, maybe 12pm, a voice yelled: 'The building's on fire,'" he says. He made his way to the back of the building, into a small room off the chapel. Suddenly, smoke blew down the hallway. Doyle remembers seeing the bookcase, the armchair, an upright piano, before slipping behind a partition wall to escape the smoke. Then everything went black.

"All of a sudden there was a tremendous wave of heat," he says. It forced him to the floor, but he still couldn't see any flames. "I'm rolling around with my hands under my armpits, screaming, 'God, if you're going to perform a miracle, you'd better do it quick, 'cos it's getting hot in here.' There were 10 guys packed into a narrow partition and I heard screaming from behind, which galvanised me into jumping up."

Doyle scrambled through rubble and jumped through a hole in the wall. "Skin was rolling off my hands, my jacket was smoking and melting. The side of my neck was burnt. My left ankle was in excruciating pain and my hand was

'I SAY, 'REMEMBER WACO'. MARTYRS ARE READY TO DIE'

burnt to the bone. I looked back at the hole I'd come out of and it was a mass of flames."

He remembers running into a razor-wire fence at the edge of the property, seeing four other people walking up the driveway with their hands in the air, and realising that he wasn't the only one who had made it out alive; the morphine being injected into his arm; and the helicopter that took him to Parkland Memorial Hospital in Dallas, 100 miles away.

Doctors had to graft skin from his leg onto his hands. He stayed in hospital for three weeks before he was given a jumpsuit and booked into the McLennan County jail, where he spent six months awaiting trial, charged with various counts including conspiracy to murder federal agents. He was acquitted the following year.

Aside from the period in jail, Doyle lived at Mount Carmel for 40 years, from 1966 until 2006, when he moved into his Waco apartment after falling out with Pace. Although there



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