



NEWS

Salvation

Former Davidian Tells Survivor's Story

BY ROBERT BRYCE, FRI., NOV. 12, 1999



David Thibodeau (Photo By John Anderson)

David Thibodeau knows about salvation. On April 19, 1993, it came to him in the form of a small hole that suddenly appeared in the side of the Mt. Carmel compound in Waco after it was hit by a tank. As smoke filled the building and fire raced through the crowded chapel where he was huddled with several others, Thibodeau had a decision to make. "It was either burn to death or get a bullet in the head," Thibodeau recalls. Assuming he would be shot by federal agents as soon as he exited the building, Thibodeau clambered through the hole and into a different maelstrom, a maelstrom created by a massive police/military operation that has become perhaps the

most controversial episode in the history of American law enforcement. For reasons that Thibodeau can't explain -- maybe it's just dumb luck -- he was one of only nine people to escape from the burning ruins of the Mt. Carmel compound in Waco. Nearly 80 others died that day. Thibodeau's new book, *A Place Called Waco: A Survivor's Story*, published by Public Affairs, details the two years that he spent studying the Bible, living and working with David Koresh. It's an intriguing book about Thibodeau's journey from underemployed drummer in Los Angeles to a world-weary survivor of the 1993 disaster that is now known simply as "Waco."

Thibodeau's book is one of many new developments in the Branch Davidian story to come out in recent months. Indeed, the timing for the book could scarcely be better, as over the last few months there has been a deluge of developments in the Waco affair. Last week, Michael McNulty's new film, *Waco: A New Revelation*, was shown for the first time in Washington, D.C. (see p.30). The film alleges that soldiers from the Army's elite Delta Force were working in a tactical role at Waco, and that infra-red videotape shot by the FBI shows federal authorities shooting at occupants of the Mt. Carmel compound as it burned. If true, the allegations may explain why the vast majority of the Davidians did not come out of the building after the fire started.

Over the next few months, more information about the Waco matter will emerge. In May, the civil lawsuit brought against the FBI by the survivors of several Davidians is scheduled to go to trial in Waco in the court of U.S. District Judge Walter S. Smith Jr. On Nov. 12, the White House is scheduled to complete its review of Waco-related documents that it considers classified. Meanwhile, former U.S. Sen. John Danforth's investigation of the Waco affair will continue. In September, Danforth was appointed by U.S. Attorney General Janet Reno to perform an independent investigation of Waco.

All of the recent events have increased the attention on Thibodeau's book and on Thibodeau himself. It would be difficult to imagine a more unlikely celebrity. An endearing, slightly goofy man of average size with sharp blue eyes and floppy brown hair, Thibodeau is engaging and intense. He's also a bit nervous and rather insecure about himself and his place in the world. Now living in Austin, he works as an account executive for a direct marketing firm that caters to high-tech companies. Thibodeau has spent the last few months in the public eye. He's been on the *Today* show, *C-Span*, *Hardball With Chris Matthews*, and numerous other TV shows. He's done dozens of radio interviews, and given a spate of lectures around the country.

But the exposure has not gone to his head. To the contrary, Thibodeau seems slightly divorced from his experience with Koresh, and more than a little haunted by it. During a recent interview at a downtown coffeehouse, Thibodeau slugged down coffee and chain-smoked Marlboro Lights while citing scripture, providing details about the siege, and all the while weaving in snippets of his life in the orbit of Koresh. And because Thibodeau is one of the few outsiders, and non-Seventh Day Adventists, who became part of Koresh's circle at Mt. Carmel, his version of the story is particularly interesting.

For more than half of his life, Thibodeau has wanted nothing so much as to be a rock & roll drummer. In a flash, he can tell you the year -- 1976 -- and the exact song -- "I Want You to Want Me" by Cheap Trick -- that made him pick up drumsticks. But as one of the few survivors of the fiery conclusion to the siege at Waco, he finds himself working as a polemicist, not a musician. And while he appears to like the attention of the media, he's also quick to add, "Part of me hates it. I do it because it needs to be said. I'd much rather be onstage making people feel good. Instead I'm in a situation where I'm making people feel suspicious and doubt their government."

From Drummer to Believer

Thibodeau's decision to follow David Koresh wasn't difficult. Thibodeau was living in Hollywood, trying to make ends meet as a drummer. "I was in a good band. But they didn't want to get serious. They just wanted to get high," he said. Meanwhile, his day job was driving him crazy. "I was working at Mann's Chinese Theatre in the gift shop, wearing a red smock," Thibodeau explains as he lights another cigarette. The way he says the word "smock" leaves no doubt that Thibodeau was desperate.

Describing himself as a "believer" who had never had the right kind of spiritual guidance, Thibodeau recounts meeting Koresh and Steve Schneider, Koresh's chief lieutenant, in a Los Angeles music store. He tells how he was initially turned off by their idea of a Christian rock band, but began warming to the idea after he jammed with Koresh (a guitarist) and other Davidians. He was impressed by Koresh's musical abilities. "I thought David was a really talented player. And Steve Schneider was really serious about succeeding in the music business." Thinking that Koresh and Schneider could help jump-start his languishing musical dream, he agreed to go to Waco for Passover in 1991. He stayed.

Soon he was working at Mt. Carmel doing menial labor and hating it. He longed for excitement, sex, and alcohol, all of which were in short supply. But Thibodeau was also attracted to the rigorous learning and the discipline at Mt. Carmel, two elements that had been lacking in his own upbringing. "It was refreshing to see a group of people who lived it and wanted to live their lives according to scripture. To me that was an honorable thing," he says. "The way they came off as people who really wanted to know impressed me."

Sex by the Book

While much of Thibodeau's book focuses on the positive aspects of Koresh and his teachings, he doesn't flinch while discussing the less savory aspects. He is particularly open about discussing Koresh's sexual practices. "By April 1993, David had had sexual relations with a total of 15 women -- and had fathered 17 children with 11 of them." (Eight of the women and 12 of the children died in the final assault on Mt. Carmel.) Koresh's sexual proclivities were supposedly inspired by God. Thibodeau writes that during his stay at Mt. Carmel, Koresh would "fling taunts at the men in the community. 'I got all the women, aren't you jealous?' We'd chuckle awkwardly and David would sigh and say, 'We're all God's guinea pigs here. My lot is to procreate, yours is to tolerate. I'd swap with you any day.' I came close to believing him."

But Thibodeau also points out that Koresh was only interested in certain types of women. "I did notice, though, that most of David's women were sexually appealing, so maybe his choices weren't entirely spiritual." And Thibodeau tells how Koresh decided to begin sleeping with Michele Jones, the younger sister of his first wife, Rachel Jones. Koresh, writes Thibodeau, had a vision while he was in Israel and the vision commanded him to have a child with Michele. The news of the vision shook the community at Mt. Carmel, but Rachel finally agreed to the plan after she had a dream that convinced her David might die if he refused to follow his vision.

"In early 1987," writes Thibodeau, "twelve-year-old Michele became David's lover. Their daughter, Serenity, was born two years later." A short time after Thibodeau joined Mt. Carmel, Koresh asked him to become Michele's "husband." Initially he refused. But Koresh pressured him, saying, "I need you to do this for me." Thibodeau relented, and without so much as a ceremony, he became Michele's husband. She took on some of Thibodeau's "wifely" duties, including mending his clothes and even writing warm letters to his mother.

Thibodeau writes that he was puzzled by Koresh's decision to "cross a line that would inevitably lead him into conflict with the civil authorities. Of all the charges leveled against him in the media and by government officials -- including child abuse and gun stockpiling -- the only case in which he grossly violated the law was the crime of statutory rape." Thibodeau goes on to ask, "Why did David deliberately violate the law, knowing he was setting foot down a path that would inevitably provoke the authorities, especially in a place like Waco?" Indeed, federal authorities later used the child abuse issue as one of their justifications for their raid on the compound.

As he sips his coffee with cream, it's clear that Thibodeau still wrestles with the complexities of his sex life and of the sex that was occurring at Mt. Carmel. Although he has legally married a woman here in Austin and has a young daughter with her, he is also still confused by the weirdness of having lost his first "wife," a woman he was supposedly married to, as well as the three children that, although they were fathered by Koresh, were supposed to be Thibodeau's. In the book, he writes, "Whatever David's reasons were in marrying me to Michele, it was a shrewd move. Somehow, being a husband, even in name only, settled me."

Now, six years after losing Michele and the kids in the fire, Thibodeau still defends Koresh and his sexual predilections. "David wasn't a deviant," says Thibodeau. "He wanted to have children." The past few weeks have been particularly active for Thibodeau. He has met with investigators working for Danforth and given them his version of the last day at Mt. Carmel. He is certain that federal authorities fired on the Mt. Carmel compound from helicopters (see "[What Did Ann Know?](#)"). He is equally certain that he never saw anyone inside the compound light any fires on April 19. Instead, he says, "Who was helped by destroying the evidence? It was the government." He also stridently denies there is any chance that the Davidians committed suicide by setting themselves aflame. Doing so, he says, would contradict all of the Christian learning they had gone through. "What greater insult can you give God than to take your own life?" he asks.

Thibodeau is just one of dozens of people who will give their version of events to Danforth and his investigators. But the fact that the investigation is happening at all is fairly amazing. Just two years ago, the idea of a federal official who had broad powers to subpoena witnesses and convene a grand jury on the Waco affair would have been unthinkable. But the recent allegations by McNulty and Michael Caddell, the Houston lawyer who is representing the Davidians in their civil lawsuit against the FBI, have forced federal officials to admit that another investigation is needed. Danforth's job, he admits, is daunting. It is, he says, to "answer the dark questions about Waco." And he quickly lists them. "The first question is: Was there a cover-up?" Danforth told reporters shortly after his appointment. "And the second question is: Did federal officials kill people?"

There are, of course, dozens of other questions about the disaster at Waco. And despite Danforth's best efforts, many of them will never be answered. All of which leaves Thibodeau with little satisfaction. As he drains the last bit of coffee from his cup, Thibodeau says he wants two things: The first is to see the release of seven Davidians who are still in prison. Secondly, he wants to "see these people held accountable." A few seconds pass before he makes clear who "those people" are. "The meek and the humble died at Mt. Carmel," he says. "And the strong and the arrogant -- the FBI and the ATF -- lived."

It's one of the few times during our three-hour talk that Thibodeau's temper pierces his calm demeanor. The hole in the wall at Mt. Carmel that saved Thibodeau's life has become his curse. For all of his charm and chattiness, Thibodeau is one of the walking wounded. He seems more like a shell-shocked war veteran than a fundamentalist Christian who believes that the end of the world is imminent. And it all goes back to his -- and for that matter, our -- most basic beliefs. Between Feb. 28 and April 19, 1993, Thibodeau's belief in God and man was shaken to its roots. And now he appears to be wandering, looking for another chance at faith, another chance at salvation. "I'd love to believe in my government, so I could trust law enforcement people again," he said. "I don't have that belief any more." ■

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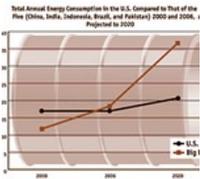
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