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Waco firefighters recall scene at Mount Carmel 25 years after fire

By KRISTIN HOPPA khoppa@wacotrib.com Apr 18, 2018





Twenty-five years ago, a Waco Fire Department truck stopped at a checkpoint almost seven miles from the Mount Carmel compound near Elk, where Branch Davidians had been locked in [a 51-day standoff](#) with law enforcement officials after a failed federal raid that resulted in deaths on both sides.

From the truck, firefighter John Linda could see [the enormous fire](#) he had just glimpsed on the small screen at Fire Station No. 1.

He knew all hope of rescue was lost.

“I remember the big cloud of smoke, and when we were stopped, we kept saying, ‘Let’s go. Let’s go. We want to get in there,’” Linda said.

As 15 minutes ticked by, the feeling of frustration mounted, Linda recalls.

“Just being held back but wanting to hurry up to see what you can do to help, it just seemed like it was forever,” he said.

For the first time since that day, April 19, 1993, Linda, now a 61-year-old lieutenant, spoke in detail with retired colleagues, Waco fire Lt. Gary Davis, 66, and training officers Erbie Lewis, 81, and Charlie Wilson, 76, about the company’s response to the rural compound 17 minutes away from Station 1.

Along with former acting Station 3 Officer Pat Germany, now 74, the group remembered how flames spread through the two-story compound of the heavily-armed religious sect.

“From when we pulled out of the station, smoke was visible,” Davis said. “We were all geared up to go, but you can imagine what was going through our minds, because we already knew that with the wind and conditions of the building ... we knew there wasn’t going to be much left.”

> 1993: Tragedy burned into firefighters’ memories — Those who battled blaze say it was doomed from the start



Retired Waco Fire Station Officer Pat Germany (left) and training Officer Charlie Wilson talk about their response to the Branch Davidian compound fire 25 years ago. Wilson said he found nine bodies, all with gunshot wounds to their heads on the day of the fire.

Staff photo — Rod Aydelotte

Watching, waiting

The Waco fire crews were called to the compound at 12:15 p.m., when [three separate fires](#) started to spread through the compound. But law enforcement would not let them anywhere near the fire because of the danger of [exploding ammunition](#).

So the firefighters could do nothing but watch the inferno rage and the smoke billow from the property where as many as 96 people, including the group's proclaimed leader, David Koresh, died.

"It sounded like popcorn going off, but for hours," Linda said. "The fire heated hundreds, if not millions, of stored ammunition [that exploded](#), hitting our engines, helmets and jackets. It was like a war zone."

Memories of the day remain vivid for many of the local first responders. Throughout the standoff and the fire that brought it to a close after 51 days, [media attention](#) on the compound was constant.

"When we came in that morning, we were told the FBI [were putting tear gas](#) into the compound and it of course was on TV," Linda said. "I always carried my camera with me, so I went ahead and stuck it in the engine, just in case."

After finishing lunch at the station, Davis and Linda saw the flames shoot out of the compound on TV. Davis picked up the phone and called dispatch.

"All he said was that he was going to call me back," Davis said. "Well, he called me back, but musically — with the (emergency) tone."

Davis said the smoke was easily visible from the station in East Waco.

"When we saw that smoke, it just compounded everything. We knew what the results were going to be," Davis said. "If anyone was lucky enough to get out of that building alive, they were very fortunate."



Gary Davis (right) and Erbie Lewis look at a TV showing photos taken the day a fire consumed the Branch Davidian compound 25 years ago.

Staff photo — Rod Aydelotte

Waco fire Engine 1 and Engine 3 reached a checkpoint attended by Texas Department of Public Safety troopers. The crew was told the scene was not safe and they had to wait while those who escaped the fire were being held at gunpoint in front of the firefighters.

“When we pulled into Double EE Ranch Road, about halfway down between there and the compound, there were about six to eight people laying there, face down, in handcuffs with people pointing rifles at them,” Davis said.

After getting the all clear about 15 minutes later, most of the compound was reduced to ash and [crumbled remains](#). As they started their work, they could see the full magnitude of the incident.

“You go to a fire to put it out and save lives, but you wind up dodging shell casings and everything else,” Germany said. “Everyone was running around you with guns. It was not a comfortable situation. You never think you’re going to be in that situation.”



Pat Germany (from left), Charlie Wilson, Gary Davis, Erbie Lewis, John Linda, stand in the entryway of Waco Fire Station 1 while remembering the fire that consumed the Branch Davidian compound 25 years ago.

Staff photo — Rod Aydelotte

Searching the rubble

Federal agents worked alongside the Waco firefighters, who were asked to help cool down [hot spots in the charred debris](#) as searches were ongoing for the women and children believed to be in the structure.

“We were just trying to cool things off, because they were looking for that bus that was buried underground, thinking that the women and kids would be in there,” Linda said. “Of course, they weren’t.”

Wilson said piles of debris were scattered around the property, causing them to step over charred remnants of unrecognizable items.

“In the ashes, I discovered nine bodies with bullet holes right here and exit holes right here,” Wilson said, pointing to the front, then back of his head. “And then, right in the very front, there was a guy sitting in a folding chair, picked up like he was holding an automatic rifle in his hands, dead. He was burnt up. Everything was burnt off of him, everything was gone, but he was just sitting there, just holding that weapon.”



Fire at Davidian compound: Where were you on April 19, 1993?



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Firefighters made their way to [the concrete bunker](#) where ammunition was stored. Davis and Germany cooled the area off with water when ammunition was no longer exploding around them.

“We were the first ones to go in there, and in the back, you could see about four or five burnt skeletons, people’s skulls, but that’s all you could see,” Germany said. “Everything else was just slush. At the time, we didn’t know we were stepping through bodies of the women and kids that were in there.”

The firefighters estimated millions of rounds of ammunition were being stored at the compound and hundreds of automatic weapons were found in the debris. Photographs taken during the search and firefighting efforts uncovered human

skeletons, housewares and personal mementos from sect members, putting the scale of the siege into perspective.

“I can say this and I feel certain,” Wilson said. “That situation ended the way it was intended. They set that fire in the building themselves and that’s the way. They were going to do it whether it was day one or day 51. Whenever the time came, that was the way it was going to end.”

[> 25 years later: Original coverage from 1993](#)

Kristin Hoppa

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