

Godfather of Arizona's Militiamen : Oklahoma City Bombing Puts Jack Oliphant, an Ex-Con and Survivalist, Back in Limelight

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KINGMAN, Ariz. — Jack Maxwell Oliphant, who hates people of color, Israel, politicians of any party, informers, the Federal Reserve Board, the federal government, the court and monetary systems, and agents of the FBI, IRS, and ATF, swerves his truck on a rutted road leading to his mountain hideaway to miss a rattlesnake.

Oliphant, a survivalist and spiritual godfather of the Arizona militia movement, likes rattlesnakes.

He points out to a visitor who has ventured to his tiny compound in the desert outback 50 miles from Kingman that the slow-moving snake is a female, probably waiting to unload a litter of baby rattlesnakes judging from the bulge in its belly.

He admires rattlers because they eat rats. He will only kill them if they slither too close to the living space he shares with his wife and assorted animals, including a pit bull named Eric the Awful and a redheaded parrot named Pete, who knows several abusive phrases.

These are heady times for Oliphant, 70, a man of intense passions and odious social views, who once served time for plotting to blow up federal buildings, dams and synagogues with homemade bombs. The Oklahoma City tragedy has brought him at least a momentary reprise of the notoriety he once enjoyed as one of this tempestuous state's leading anti-government firebrands.

If nothing else, it is an eerie coincidence that accused terrorist Timothy J. McVeigh, free to roam the entire country, spent the months before the Oklahoma City bombing living in this remote part of America, not all that far from the enigmatic Oliphant.

Oliphant is, by turns, outrageous and gracious, laughing the laugh of the old codger, then saying something ominous about how easy it is to make bombs much deadlier than the one that pulverized the Alfred P. Murrah Federal Building. He likes to be called colonel.

"Oh, I see you've come to see the most dangerous man in America," he laughs, showing off the tiny gold post that substitutes for a front tooth. "I'm a real badass."

Twice since the Oklahoma blast, FBI agents have summoned Oliphant to question him about his provocative statements and about what, if anything, he may know of McVeigh. He has gone willingly, although he admits to playing a cat-and-mouse game with the hated feds, sometimes refusing to tell all, sometimes hinting that he knows more than he does.

"We've talked to you so many times, you should have us out to your ranch for a barbecue," cracked an FBI agent when Oliphant arrived Thursday at the National Guard Armory in Kingman to talk to an FBI agent from the domestic terrorism unit.

The federal government says Oliphant was a key member of the Arizona Patriots, the group that was supported by former television star Ty Hardin (of the Western series "Bronco"). The Arizona Patriots were a forerunner to similar local militias that are now coming under scrutiny nationwide in light of the Oklahoma City bombing and the anti-

government views held by McVeigh and co-defendant Terry L. Nichols, both of whom found succor for their views while on the fringes of the Michigan Militia.

Oliphant was once one of the most vitriolic members of the "patriot movement," roaming the country preaching that Americans should be prepared to take up arms against their own government to preserve their liberty, peppering his speeches with his own apocalyptic interpretation of the Bible and the inevitability of a race war.

Then he went to federal prison in 1986 as the leader of a ragtag band of so-called Arizona Patriots who allegedly conspired to rob a Brink's truck loaded with cash from the casinos at Laughlin, Nev.

The government, after an 18-month undercover operation, claimed that Oliphant and the others planned to use the expected \$10-million booty to set up a training ground on Oliphant's remote property for recruits from the white supremacist group Identity Movement and then begin a full-scale assault on the U.S. government.

The group was caught on videotape talking about making bombs and blowing up federal buildings and other structures in California, Arizona and Utah.

Oliphant maintains that he was entrapped by an FBI agent-provocateur in a government attempt to silence his political views. He said he pleaded guilty to keep the government from slapping a charge on his wife.

After nearly four years in prison, Oliphant was paroled in late 1989 and returned to his Hephzibah Ranch near what, ironically enough, is called Penitentiary Mountain. Hephzibah comes from Isaiah 61:4: "Thou shalt no more be termed Forsaken; neither shall thy land any more be termed Desolate; but thou shalt be called Hephzibah . . . for the Lord delighted in thee."

He and his wife, Margo, 63, survive on Social Security checks and disability payments from Oliphant's service in the Army during World War II.

In what he says has been an attempt to drive the FBI crazy, Oliphant has more or less shunned public view since his parole, made few provocative statements, and says he has taken no role in the militia movement.

But when it turned out that McVeigh lived in Kingman, and that McVeigh and Oliphant both had boxes at the Mail Room mail drop, federal eyes again were scanning for Oliphant. He was one of the first people interviewed when the FBI brought several dozen agents to Kingman.

"I'll tell you just what I told the FBI," the raspy-voiced Oliphant said in an interview. "I didn't know McVeigh, and if I had, and if I had known what he was planning, I'd have stopped him.

"The bastard has put the patriot movement back 30 years by blowing up a building with people inside. If he'd blown up a federal building at night, he'd be a hero, but not this way."

On Thursday the FBI again summoned Oliphant to its command post in Kingman for an interview, via a note left for him at the Mail Room. Oliphant said agents were disturbed by some comments he made about being willing to start shooting rather than ever submit to another arrest, comments he does not disavow.

Advanced age and renewed scrutiny by the FBI have done nothing to convince Oliphant to muffle his opinions. He is a virtual mother lode of bigotry and bizarre theories, including this one: The government implanted a mind-controlling computer chip in McVeigh's rump that caused him, like a latter-day "Manchurian candidate," to blow up the Murrah building to discredit the patriot movement.

"Don't get me wrong," said Oliphant, who broke his back in World War II and then accidentally blew off his right arm in the mid-1980s when he reached for a shotgun in a skirmish over a gold mine. "I love my country and have shed many a tear for it many times. It's just the government I hate, and there are 30 million Americans just like me."

Arizona proved to be fertile ground for Oliphant's incendiary views when he and Margo moved here from Florida in 1976 and began publishing the Hephzibah Newsletter. This is a state where a spirit of antagonism toward the federal government is as unforgiving as the summer sun.

"This country is like America was once: free and open," Oliphant said. "I feel safe here. If they [federal agents] ever come to get me again, they'll get me, but I'll take several of them out in the process."

A former Arizona police officer has a talk show on shortwave radio in the eastern region of the state five nights a week to spread the patriot movement alarms. Former Gov. Evan Mecham, ousted from office in scandal, is frequently a guest.

James (Bo) Gritz, the former Army officer who is building an Idaho compound for "Christian patriots," remains a popular figure here. Rumors that paramilitary groups are training secretly in remote canyons and desert hideaways are as plentiful as cactus flowers in the spring.

Only last week, two men from Snowflake, Ariz., were arrested after allegedly selling two dozen hand grenades and some booby-trap tripwires to an undercover agent from the Bureau of Alcohol, Tobacco and Firearms. The two allegedly told the agent that the grenades were part of a cache being manufactured by the Arizona Patriots.

"Radical, anti-government talk is a part of Arizona, always has been," said one law enforcement official. "Oliphant is a patron saint to people who feel that way. We think he's harmless these days, but who knows?"

The Oliphants, married for 27 years, live in a tiny trailer without a telephone or most other modern conveniences, but with a family of eagles nesting high atop a nearby tree and a live-and-let-live cougar not far away. They read political tracts and keep a full collection of Louis L'Amour novels.

As an ex-felon, Oliphant is prohibited from owning a firearm. Not so his wife. "I'm not an ex-felon," said Margo, "and I know how to use a shotgun."

When Oliphant first moved to Arizona, he ran a Christian-oriented camp near Wickenburg for teen-agers with drug and behavior problems. There was a controversy over whether Oliphant was exploiting the teen-agers by putting them to work, and the camp closed.

The couple owns 320 acres north of Highway 93. A trip to the trailer is an hourlong, 20-mile trek along unmarked, gravel-strewn roads, past four gates, past wandering range cattle, up and down red-clay gullies, over several streams--a spine-jarring journey even in a four-wheel drive vehicle.

Oliphant is hard to pin down on just what he knows about the current boom in the nationwide militia movement. He said he has nothing to do anymore with the Arizona militia or the patriot movement.

"McVeigh wasn't really a part of any militia or I would have known about it," he said.

Oliphant is asked whether that statement contradicts his early insistence that he has divorced himself from his previous compatriots in the movement?

He just smiled, that gold post showing again.