

After witnessing the environmental devastation of burning oil fields in the Arabian desert, returning Gulf War veteran Liam Gudersen leads a motley group of protesters to face down frackers in the shale gas fields of Pennsylvania.

A LEGACY OF RESISTANCE

By Sondra Wolferman

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A LEGACY



RESISTANCE

SONDRA WOLFERMAN

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ONE

A long, low rumble echoed through the chasm between two steep ridges where a fleet of tanker trucks labored up the flank of Limekiln Mountain, shortly after sunrise on a cold, clear morning at the end of March. The rumble deepened into a roar that shook the ground as the first of the tankers loomed at the crest of a rise just short of a gravel turnoff that angled to the right, pitching sharply upward to the broad flat summit of the mountain, where a 150-foot derrick marked the site of their destination.

Sadly for the unsuspecting truckers, they were met at the turnoff by a gaggle of frantic protesters bundled in heavy parkas and ski masks against the bitter wind gusts that blew unobstructed over the expanse of scrub oak above the tree line. A row of seated protesters, bound together at the waist by a length of heavy gage cable anchored at both ends to wooden barrels filled with hardened concrete, blocked the access road, forcing the truckers to an untimely halt less than a quarter mile from their destination.

The wind blew diesel exhaust in their faces, and the snow-covered ground under their outstretched legs vibrated in tune with the idling trucks, but the protesters met the truckers' angry stares with a stoic determination that belied their bedraggled appearance. A dozen or more tanker trucks, each carrying up to 4,000 gallons of fresh water pumped from the North Branch of the Susquehanna River—destined for the fracking fields at the top of the ridge—lined up behind the lead truck, their undercarriages splattered with orange mud churned up by their massive tires.

Alongside the forestry road ran a shallow stream—a tributary to Limekiln Creek—still frozen solid, even though it was late March. The crisp air rankled with the smells of diesel

fuel and overheated rotors. The thwarted truckers, wearing dark knit caps, glared down at the protesters from the cab of the lead truck looming in front of them. The man in the passenger seat was young, dark, and sported a mustache that gave him a foreign appearance. He regarded the protesters with a contemptuous sneer, as if the roadblock were nothing more than an entertaining spectacle. The driver of the truck was a man of about sixty, sallow and grim-faced, with his arms folded over the top of the steering wheel and a jaded expression that suggested he had been through this kind of scenario before, perhaps many times, given the growing opposition to fracking that was spreading across the Commonwealth in a slow-rising wave of opposition.

The defiant protesters endured the scowls with equanimity, knowing this disruption would cost the drillers and their subcontractors dearly in time and money. There were no alternate heavy-haul routes this side of the mountain capable of supporting the continual parade of water trucks making dozens of trips back and forth between water sources in the valley and the well pads situated on huge clearings at the top of the mountain, leaving the truckers no option but to wait, wasting time and fuel, until the intersection could be legally cleared of the activists.

The truckers could expect little sympathy from local authorities, to whom the non-stop truck traffic associated with fracking was a constant source of aggravation, tearing up rural roads, leaving potholes big enough to swallow pickup trucks, causing motorists to suffer tire blowouts on their daily commutes, and spawning a barrage of angry calls to the Department of Transportation from citizens demanding compensation for the road conditions that were driving their communities into the poorhouse. For towns and villages near gas drilling sites, the reality of the fracking boom was a far cry

from the promises that had lured the townies into rolling out the welcome mat to gassers at the beginning of the drilling frenzy a few years back.

The driver of the lead truck was yakking into a mobile phone, presumably talking to a supervisor who might be halfway across the continent in Kansas or Oklahoma, where the company was based, or, he might be talking to the Pennsylvania State Police, requesting assistance in removing the protesters so the truckers could access their work site. Either way, it was clear from the scowl on the driver's face and the way his gaze darted anxiously over the crowd of protesters, that he was not engaged in casual conversation. The man in the passenger seat grinned down at the shivering protesters as if mocking their pathetic attempt to hinder an industry with enough money and power to buy and sell every legislator, congressperson, politician, and regulatory agency in the state, while the truckers sat warm and comfortable in the heated cab of their idling truck.

After a few minutes, the driver ended his phone chat and shut off the truck's ignition, as if settling in for a long wait. Most likely, he had been told by his supervisor, or the police, to avoid interaction with the protesters and wait for law enforcement to arrive, which was the industry's standard protocol for dealing with protests.

His partner in the passenger seat lit a cigarette and rolled down his window to discard the match. One of the protesters took advantage of the open window to shout up at the truckers. "Yo! Did you leave any water for the fish?"

The mustachioed man in the passenger seat smirked at them, while the driver rolled down his own window and yelled at the protesters, "Any of you frog-kissers ever held a job?" He had a southern accent, which came as no surprise since the gas companies, despite their promises of high-paying jobs,

rarely hired locals, mostly bringing in their own workers from the oil-rich regions of Louisiana, Oklahoma, and the Texas Panhandle.

The younger man opened the passenger door, jumped to the ground, and spat on the ground in a gesture of contempt for the protesters. He wore a greasy watch cap and a faded orange jumpsuit that protected him from the fuels and fluids he handled every day while pumping water from the rivers and ponds, to deliver to the wells for hydraulic fracturing.

“How do you people support your families?” he growled at the protesters. “You all on welfare or something?” He, too, had an accent, only his was an Irish brogue.

The protesters ignored him, to no effect, for the trucker continued to heckle the protesters, with his gloved hands thrust into the pockets of his coveralls as if to signal that he was not a physical threat to anybody. “Ever had to work for a living?” he snapped. “How is it you got time to hang out in the woods like a bunch of hippies while real men are trying to earn a living?”

A mild-mannered protester named Hiram, with glasses and an acne-scarred chin, who looked more like a Talmudic scholar than an environmental activist said, “It’s too bad you have to drive all the way up here and tear up our land to make a living.”

“Just because we move a little dirt around and cut down a few trees doesn’t mean we’re *tearing up the land*,” the heckler responded, waving his arms in the air to signify the hysterical over-reaction of the protesters to the fracking operations.

“*A few trees!*” Hiram snorted. “You people took down 26 acres of prime forest on public land for a single gas well at the top of this hill.”

“You drive a car?” queried the heckler, by way of response.

“Yeah, I drive a car. So what?”

“You heat your home in the winter? Take hot showers? Where do you think the energy comes from?”

“We’ve got plenty of energy up here without fracking.” replied Hiram. “We don’t need this.” He turned away glumly from this futile discussion.

Another protester, a disheveled youth with glassy eyes who looked like he might be high on crystal meth or prescription painkillers, came forward and addressed the Irishman. “Where did you come from?” he asked. “Don’t they have jobs for you over there?”

“I don’t see how that concerns you.” replied the Irishman, finishing his cigarette in a few long drags, after which he stomped out the remains with the toe of his blackened work boot and climbed back into the truck.

Despite the verbal sparring between the truckers and the protesters, the mood was rather congenial, with no overt displays of aggression on either side. Both sides had been warned by their respective authorities against provoking any violent confrontations.

A few dozen yards to the west of the blocked intersection, in a gravel clearing that served as seasonal parking for hunters, a husky young man wearing an olive drab parka, loose-fitting cargo pants and a frayed pair of combat boots, stood apart from the main body of protesters, barking orders into a radio communication device he held in his hand. Despite his unimpressive stature, there was something in the way this fellow distanced himself from the other protesters, and the air of authority with which he handled the radio device, that suggested he was a “person-in-charge” at the demonstration.

Meanwhile half a dozen protesters unfurled a banner that read NO WATER FOR FRACKING! painted in huge red letters on a white background, which they stretched across the

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intersection directly in front of the truckers. For the second time that morning, the exasperated driver rolled down his window to respond to the challenge. “Kiss my ass, Punks!”

TWO

Notwithstanding the relative calm that reigned over the scene for the time being, Liam Gudersen, founder and CEO of Pennsylvania's most radical environmental group, NUREPA—an acronym for *No Unconventional Resource Extraction in Pennsylvania*—was ever mindful that each one of those ornery truckers had at his or her command the power of thirty thousand pounds of steel which, at the flip of a switch, could be set into motion, crushing every living thing in its path. The fact that the truckers had shut off their engines was of some comfort to Liam, but who knew what substances might be coursing through the truckers' bloodstreams, or what their psychological profiles might be? A brake failure, an accidental slip of the foot, a sudden bout of road rage, could turn a peaceable, non-violent event into a massacre. While such an event was highly unlikely, the power of the oil and gas industries in Pennsylvania was such that, if it were to occur, the truckers would probably walk away with little or no penalties.

The responsibility for ensuring that such a catastrophe did *not* occur rested squarely on Liam's shoulders and, while he displayed little emotion, he was in a state of high alert for the safety of the forty activists gathered here today, especially those who were locked on to the blockade line that stretched across the intersection directly in the path of the stalled trucks. Second only to his worry for the safety of the protesters was Liam's concern for the outcome of this pivotal event that, if successful, would put Pennsylvania's anti-fracking movement on the map as a viable force in defeating the gas industry's attempts to take over the Commonwealth.

Liam had organized the blockade on Limekiln Mountain to protest hydraulic fracturing in this region of extraordinary

natural beauty and biological diversity on public land belonging to the people of the Commonwealth of Pennsylvania and, despite his self-imposed isolation from the other activists, he was fully in command of the activities that unfolded around him.

Based on physical appearance, Liam was not your typical environmental activist, or, as some liked to call them these days, “extremist”. He was slightly under the average height for an adult American male, a tad flabby around the mid-section—though by no means fat—with prematurely thinning hair, and a slight waddle to his walk. At 27 years old, he could pass for forty. The faded camouflage parka and cargo pants he had picked up at the army-surplus store in Williamsport were worn smooth at the elbows and knees, and the boots on his feet were *not* the fashionable sort bearing the logo of a famous designer, but the kind that came from the self-service shoe department in the basement of a discount department store. A thermal fleece balaclava mask and neck warmer were his only concessions to the frigid mountain air, at least what was visible to the naked eye.

Meeting Liam for the first time, some people might be fooled into thinking he was some sort of eccentric loner posing as a rebel, but those people would be wrong. Liam might be labeled “socially awkward” by the educated elite, among whom he was clearly out of his element, but what he lacked in physical stature, he made up for with his determination and passion for the cause.

As a veteran of the Persian Gulf War, Liam excelled at survival skills, and it was these skills he had drawn upon to set up his activist training camp deep in the woods of Pennsylvania’s Endless Mountains, and it was these skills he strived to impart to his followers, many of whom were former latchkey kids raised on television cartoons and video games,

with no particular love of the outdoors. Most of his younger followers, in fact, were clueless as to the impacts of corporate greed on the American landscape, having joined Liam's movement for reasons of their own that had little to do with any deep commitment to Nature.

He came from humble origins. Born in Morgantown, West Virginia, he was raised by a divorced single mother of Norwegian descent and had barely known his father. He had an older sister, married to a pineapple grower and living in Hawaii. Other than that, little was known about the background of this stranger who had somehow ended up in north-central Pennsylvania surrounded by the shrinking forests that had once covered the deepest and richest vein of fossil fuel minerals since the discovery of oil deposits in the desert of Saudi Arabia. Yet somehow, Liam had managed to gather around himself a collection of misfits and loners from all over the region, in much the same way a planet draws asteroids—by sheer gravitational pull. The membership of NUREPA included men and women ranging in age from late adolescence to people in their mid-sixties, teenagers from broken families and foster homes, college dropouts, ex-cons and homeless people he'd scraped off the streets of Pittsburgh and Reading, most of them unemployed and unemployable. For those without homes, Liam had bought a decaying Queen Anne style rooming house at a foreclosure sale on the outskirts of Williamsport—a newly bustling boom town swollen with gassers and their work force some 60 miles south of the Marcellus Shale gas drilling region—where they lived a communal lifestyle sharing food, shelter, companionship, and a measure of dignity that was for many of them the closest they'd ever come to self-respect. In return, they were expected to stay out of trouble and do their share of work in and around

the property. Liam did not tolerate drugs or hard liquor on the premises. Wine and beer were for special occasions only.

Liam had two years of higher education under his belt, though it was not clear whether he had dropped out of college or flunked out. During his two years at the University of West Virginia he had wandered from one liberal arts major to the next—history, sociology, political science—with no apparent direction to his academic life until, halfway through his sophomore year he was lured by an over-zealous academic counselor into majoring in “bio-engineering”, with promises of limitless job opportunities and some of the highest salaries available to newcomers. Flattered that the counselor thought him bright enough for this learned scientific field, Liam accepted the challenge, turning away from the Liberal Arts into the Applied Sciences.

Big mistake. As it turned out, nothing could have been more repugnant to a country boy turned amateur naturalist than the study of ways to thwart Nature through genetically modified plants and animals (and, it was rumored, even human beings), stronger and more lethal pesticides, and whatever else it took to exert humanity’s dominance over the natural world, even if it meant dooming every other living organism on the planet to extinction. One morning on his way to the biology lab, where a professor had recruited some students to work on a project to create a strain of wheat capable of withstanding the assault of a powerful anti-fungal herbicide without destroying the digestive systems of any living thing unfortunate enough to consume the resulting product, Liam had suddenly felt compelled to turn around and go back to his dorm room, where he packed his belongings, loaded them into his Plymouth Duster, and drove through the wrought iron gates of the historic campus for the last time.

After drifting aimlessly for a few months, Liam responded to the lure of a recruitment center and joined the army. Some might wonder why he did not simply change his major (again) instead of quitting school and joining the military. Chances are, Liam himself could not answer that question, but, it was a decision he would not regret, for his military service taught him the self-discipline, self-sacrifice, and survival skills which, combined with his love of the natural world, enabled him to head up one of the most effective organizations the mid-Atlantic region had seen since the launching of the environmental movement in the 1970s.

Upon his honorable discharge after two years of service that included deployment overseas in the Persian Gulf, Liam pondered the idea of going into forestry, but that conflicted with his revulsion for anything that smacked of exploitation of natural resources, such as timber harvesting from virgin and old-growth forests, for corporate profits. Subsequently he entertained the notion of seeking employment with the Environmental Protection Agency, but that clashed with his distaste for government bureaucracy which, he had convinced himself, was working *in tandem* with industrial and mining interests to exploit the natural resources it was supposed to protect.

And so it was almost by default that Liam gravitated toward the environmental resistance movement, whereupon he bought a used camper and for several months after his discharge camped alone in the woods where, like a newly emergent planet, he drew the flotsam, loners, idealists, radicals, and misfits that would become his supporters. Liam taught—and in some cases *was taught by*—his devotees to hunt, fish, hike, climb, canoe, and forage like a bunch of overgrown Boy Scouts of America. Liam had a talent not only for sharing survival skills with his pupils, but also for

communicating to them his passion for the natural world and his contempt for those who would foul it for any reason. To Liam's surprise, his entourage included almost as many women as men, some of whom were simply pulled along by their mates, while others drifted in for reasons of their own.

Once he was certain he had a group of dedicated followers he could count on for support, Liam applied for permits and set up his training camp, dubbed the *Fracking Resistance Boot Camp*, alongside a pristine tributary of Limekiln Creek, on state land that spread across the bottom of a narrow valley between two steep ridges, in a tract of wilderness barely touched by civilization since the mining and logging operations of the early twentieth century that had stripped the ridges and ravines of all minerals and vegetation that could be harvested for profit, leaving its swamps and streams tainted with silt, sediments, and tannin from tanning operations where countless wild animals were sacrificed to clothe the masses of newcomers pushing their way relentlessly into the interior of the North American continent.

Only a few kilometers from camp, ancient hemlocks and white pines covered the slopes of a steep-sided ravine where the rapids of Limekiln Creek raged through a narrow gorge walled in by cliffs of limestone and shale.

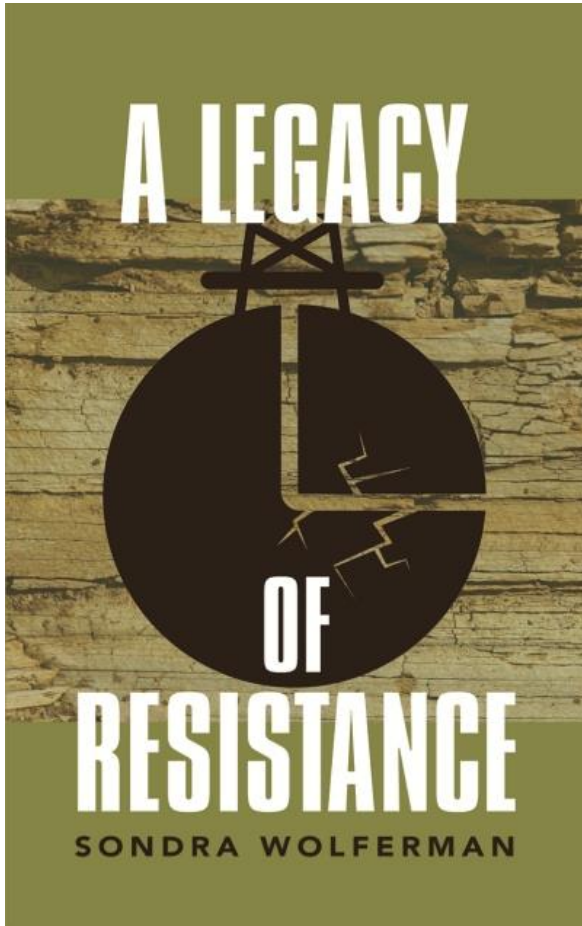
Sadly, other creeks that had once flashed crystalline in the sunlight were now tainted with acid mine drainage left over from the state's dark history of unregulated mining for coal, slate, bluestone, and copper. To make matters worse, rapacious logging had left thousands of acres bare of anything except tree stumps, invasive weeds, and waters polluted with nitrogen and fertilizer from hardscrabble farming operations.

Liam's camp was surrounded by forest that had come back to life as second growth forest of red oak, black gum, and spruce trees that grew up around the stumps and, left

undisturbed for decades, had the feel of an old-growth forest. Lately, however, more and more streams in the watershed were becoming murky with sediment from soil erosion caused by the clearing of thousands of trees upstream for gas wells, access roads, and pipelines. Traces of bentonite clay used in the “slick water” fracking fluid, whose purpose was to reduce friction so higher volumes of fluid could be pumped down the bore-hole to fracture the shale rock below the surface, were turning up in wetlands.

A glacial lake on the opposite side of the tributary stream was slowly reverting to swampland as part of the state forestry plan to leave the recovering land in its natural state as a designated natural area. What would become of those plans once the gas industry had exhausted its resources at the top of the ridge was anybody’s guess. It was rumored that Anaconda Petroleum—the company currently extracting natural gas at the top of the northern ridge that loomed over the campground—also owned the mineral rights at the base of the mountain where the campground was situated.

Liam had no intention of vacating the land without a fight should Anaconda Petroleum stake a claim there any time soon. For now, though, the camp was safe, and if things went according to Liam’s plan, fracking would be permanently banned in Pennsylvania before Anaconda ever got the chance to despoil this beautiful valley.



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