

Interview With ELF Founder, John Clark Hanna

ELF: The original eco-guerrilla defense force

Sept. 5, 2001

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ORIGINAL ELF LOGO BY AWEST, SANTA CRUZ, CA

The radical environmental cadre known as ELF was founded forty-eight years ago in Santa Cruz, California. The original ELF (Environmental Life Force), disbanded in 1978 After ELF founder, John Clark Hanna, was sentenced to a five year prison sentence. But the ELF name and its guerrilla tactics resurfaced in the early 1990's. The acronym ELF was then applied to the newly minted Earth Liberation Front. Their web page can be viewed by clicking here: [Earth Liberation Front](#) .

The judge modified Hanna's five year prison sentence and he was given an early release. He then launched a 28-year career as a certified structural steel/welding inspector. Upon retirement, he invented several wave and tidal energy conversion systems. Two patents were granted and eventually they were sold to marine renewable energy com-

panies in the UK and U.S. For an update on ELF founder John Clark Hanna's current projects, click [HERE](#).

According to the FBI, the latest version of ELF devolved into a domestic terrorist group. This Original ELF web site gives an overview of ELF's origins and lessons learned. To paraphrase a common saying: "Those who fail to understand past mistakes are bound to repeat them". Regrettably, the convictions and lengthy prison sentences meted out this new generation of ELF activists, demonstrates that the individuals placed in custody did not learn or benefit from mistakes made by the original ELF over four decades ago. The ELF members that were sentenced to lengthy prison terms have issued statements that they regret their actions and have come to realize that violence is completely counterproductive to their cause.



Photo by: Jennifer Teeter

Above, original ELF founder John Clark Hanna and Carla Susan Olander, circa 1978, Watsonville, California

The original ELF initiated its first action on March 16, 1977 in Watsonville, Santa Cruz County, California. Subsequent guerrilla attacks in northern California and Ore-

gon were mounted that year by the May Day Ecommando Unit and the Rachel Carson Ecommando Unit. On November 22, 1977, John Hanna, the founder of ELF, was arrested at his home in Santa Cruz by the local sheriff's SWAT team and federal agents of the Bureau of Alcohol, Tobacco and Firearms. A trial in federal court resulted in a five year sentence which was later modified to time served and probation. Following the 1977 arrest, a period of self-criticism and introspection ensued. A dialogue with other activists led to a consensus that terrorist actions were clearly counter-productive to the environmental movement — regardless of the perceived righteousness of a given cause. The public will always reject violence and destructive actions. Although the original ELF's attacks were later described as being "symbolic" and "guerrilla theater" the public's reaction was overwhelmingly negative. Since ELF had strived to inform and inspire the people, this negative response served to end its activities. The original ELF disbanded in 1978, having failed to achieve its objective. One year later, Earth First! was founded. In the mid 1980's, there were written communications between ELF founder, John Hanna, and Earth First! founder, Dave Foreman (see: Archives page). At the time, the internet did not exist, so information about the 1977 ELF guerrilla actions circulated slowly within the Earth First! membership. The current version of ELF (Earth Liberation Front) was launched in the UK in the early 1990's by a radical EF! member who was a long-time acquaintance of John Hanna. The two had met in Glasgow, Scotland in 1962 and had kept in contact over the years. The Earth Liberation Front's philosophies and tactics generally mirror those expressed by the original ELF founder, John Hanna. Unfortunately, a U.S. iteration of the Earth Liberation Front in the early 2000's, made no attempt to "inform and inspire the people". The new ELF's actions in the U.S. were violent, intimidating and counter-productive to the environmental movement. It does not matter that throughout its history, none of the ELF's direct actions have ever physically harmed a single person. The lessons of the past were not learned by this reinvented ELF cadre in the states. In the early 2000's, the FBI's "Operation Backfire" was the net result of not learning from the past. Today's mainstream environmentalists choose to distance themselves from violence perpetrated in the name of environmental direct action. For the same reasons given forty-eight years ago, mainstream environmentalists and the majority of all the world's people fully reject those who attempt to advance their environmental cause "by any means necessary". There is no tolerance for terrorism in the environmental movement — never has been and never will be. A terrorist and environmentalist cannot live within the same skin.

The following interview took place in Greeley, Colorado just five days before the September 11, 2001 terrorist attacks led by 15 Saudi Arabian psychopaths and camel humpers Osama bin Laden...

INTERVIEW WITH ELF FOUNDER, John Clark Hanna

Q: You've been out of the spotlight for a number of years. Why did you decide to give this interview?

A: I started hearing about attacks and vandalism claimed by an environmental group called E.L.F. Years ago, I founded the ELF. Of course this is a whole new entity but similar in its purpose. I felt it might be useful to make a statement at this time.

Q: On November 22, 1977, agents of the Alcohol, Tobacco and Firearms arrested you at your home in Santa Cruz, California. Can you describe the circumstances leading to your arrest?

A: I was charged with violation of federal statutes. Specifically, I was accused of placing incendiary devices on seven crop dusters at the airport in Salinas, California on May 1, 1977. There were other charges as well relating to my underground activities.

Q: What prompted you to take that course of action?

A: At the time, I was frustrated. I chose to go underground and employ guerrilla tactics in defense of the earth. I felt conventional methods of civil disobedience were ineffective. I was upset because pesticide use and cancer rates were increasing in spite of the best efforts of the concerned scientific community to point out the hazards and alternatives to pesticides.

Q: To whom are you referring?

A: Two people influenced me: One was Rachel Carson and her book *Silent Spring*. The other was Robert Van Den Bosch, professor of entomology at U.C. Berkeley. He wrote a book titled *The Pesticide Conspiracy*. He died shortly after the book was published.

I believed that the warning signals were loud and clear but no one seemed to be taking heed. Here were respectable scientists with PhD's. They were working within the system but it seemed to me at the time not to be working. So I decided to take the struggle to the streets — use a bigger stick so to speak.

Q: And that was 24 years ago. Did your bigger stick work?

A: No. Our food is still being sprayed. But it seemed the way to go back then. I founded the E.L.F., which was an acronym for Environmental Life Force. With today's incarnation, E.L.F. stands for Earth Liberation Front. I've also heard it called the Environmental Liberation Front. We're comparing apples and oranges here. An ELF is an ELF — the aims and tactics are the same — defense of the earth by means of direct guerrilla action.

Q: In other words, violence. Isn't that a contradiction when you claim to be an environmentalist?

A: Yes. In truth it's not possible to wear both hats. By definition, an environmentalist cherishes all life — including greedy, thoughtless people. Turns out, I was one of those thoughtless people too.

Q: Why did you resort to violence?

A: I justified my behavior by claiming “self defense” In reality, I was a pissed off frustrated sociopath. I see that now. An incident pushed me over the edge of rational behavior. Back then, I lived in an agricultural area. Lots of artichoke and strawberry fields. One day, I was driving into town (Watsonville) and I got sprayed with Parathion. A crop duster zoomed by me from behind. His wingtips were no more than fifteen feet from my car. Before I had time to roll up my windows and close up my vent, I drove into a toxic cloud. I went directly to the agricultural commissioner’s office and reported the incident. Nothing ever came of it. For several hours I felt like I was going to jump out of my skin. Parathion is an organophosphate poison that was developed by German scientists in WW II as a nerve gas. After the war, they started using it to kill insect pests. The incident served as a catalyst. The ELF was born.

Q: But the first ELF action had nothing to do with pesticides or the environment, did it?

A: In March of '77, ELF claimed responsibility for shooting the windows of U.S. Senator Dianne Feinstein’s vacation home in Watsonville with an air-powered pistol. It was a target of opportunity and no one was home at the time. Ms. Feinstein was then a San Francisco county supervisor. The action was in retaliation for the jail house death of Larry Williams, a young black inmate. He went into diabetic shock and died for lack of an insulin shot. ELF demanded that a medical screening program be initiated for all new prisoners. The rationale: the inmate was one of earth’s creatures and he died of neglect.

Q: I still see this contradiction. On the one hand you feign concern for this unfortunate inmate, yet ELF places homemade napalm bombs on seven crop dusters. Am I missing something here? Couldn’t a pilot or a firefighter have been killed?

A: ELF took extraordinary measures to avoid loss of life or injury. The devices were designed so only the low-yield detonators would fire. The napalm mix had been allowed to solidify so it could not catch fire. The fuses were timed to ignite at 2:00 am. I waited nearby until all the detonators exploded. If someone would have happened by, I was prepared to warn him or her off, even at the risk of capture. Later in the day, a communique was dropped at the local newspaper. ELF listed viable alternatives to the excessive and inappropriate use of pesticides on our food.

Q: What about the crop dusters?

A: They suffered some blistered paint. It had rained that night. All the planes were spraying crops just hours after the incident. But it was a successful media event. Guerrilla theater, if you will. The listing of alternatives was important. You rarely hear of bombers and activists offering alternatives to their grievances. Usually, they just rant.

Q: Were there other issues ELF focused on?

A: There was an action in Oregon. A pipe bomb was placed at the headquarters of Publishers’ Paper Company in Oregon City on August 1st, 1977. (Footnote: The facility operated by Publishers’ Paper was purchased by Blue Heron Paper Company). This

was another retaliatory action. Fairly serious stuff because it involved the transport of explosives across state lines.

Q: What were the circumstances?

A: Publishers' Paper owned land in Rose Lodge, Oregon. They cultivated fast growing trees to provide pulp for their paper mills. They routinely sprayed herbicides to kill off competing plant species. Eventually the chemicals found their way into streams. The spawning habitat for steelhead and salmon were at risk. In protest, some local folks had chained themselves to trees on Publishers' land. They were ordered off the property and when they didn't go, a helicopter sprayed them all with the herbicide Tordon. The pipe bomb was set off at Publishers' corporate offices. ELF demanded that the company provide life-long health care and medical monitoring for the spray victims.

Q: Did anyone get hurt when the pipe bomb went off?

A: No. It was designed to be a low-yield device. The lesson learned at the Salinas airport action was: it was not necessary to do any real damage to create a media event. I think a window was blown out. Publishers' never provided the medical care; that would have been an admission of guilt. Interestingly, Publishers' Paper was owned by the Los Angeles Times News Agency. When I went to trial, all charges were dropped that related to the Publishers' action. I think pressure from the L.A. Times may have influenced the decision to drop the charges. Just a guess. I had taken full responsibility for the incident so there was no reason for the federal prosecutor to let me skate on that one. (Footnote: Reportedly, several of the Rose Lodge protestors have experienced health problems which they attribute to being sprayed with the herbicide.) *THE LOS ANGELES TIMES NEEDS TO DO THE RIGHT THING AND PROVIDE MEDICAL HELP FOR THESE PEOPLE!!!*

Q: What came after Oregon?

A: Nothing, really. I got arrested and went to jail.

Q: How did you get caught?

A: Good old-fashioned investigative techniques and advanced technology. ELF was issuing a lot of communiques. To avoid getting into a predictable pattern, different copy machines were used each time. We learned at my trial that the ATF had a complete record showing the time and address where every ELF communique had been printed in both California and Oregon. But I made the mistake of using a copier where my girlfriend, Carla Susan Olander worked. The ATF traced the communique to that machine and started asking the management questions: was anyone aware of an employee who had expressed anti-pesticide opinions? They learned that my girlfriend was under a doctor's care and was drawing disability payments due to an exposure to pesticides while working in a cannery. They kept the two of us under surveillance for a couple of months. On November 22, 1977 the ATF and Santa Cruz SWAT came through my front door while I was sleeping. Scared the hell out of me. In the spirit of civil disobedience, I made a full confession and prepared myself for some serious prison time.

Q: Were there other arrests?

A: No, my girlfriend Carla Olander was a participant in the ELF's actions. She cooperated with the ATF so she wasn't charged with anything.

Q: Now that the statute of limitations have expired, can you tell if others were involved with ELF at the time?

A: I'm not sure there is a statute of limitations for terrorist acts. I told the authorities that I acted alone. They accepted that and I think their investigation bore that out. For the record, I acted alone. That's my story and I'm sticking to it.

Q: Thank you, Bart Simpson.

A: No, it's true. There was no more original ELF actions after I was busted.

Q: Until now. The Earth Liberation Front is active.

A: Right. I have no knowledge of the latest incarnation of ELF. But the new ELF iteration was started up by a long-time friend in the UK. When I met him, I was freshly discharged from the Navy in 1962. I had saved some money and a week after my discharge, I flew to the UK to purchase a BSA motorcycle from the factory in Birmingham. I rode it through northern Europe up to Sweden. When I flew from the States, I landed in Glasgow, Scotland. I met some bikers at a pub in the Gorbals district and one of them had a BSA 650. We met up again in London. We stayed in touch over the years. After my arrest in '77, he founded the new Earth Liberation Front in the early nineties. I gave him the nickname of 'Vambo' after the superhero that the Alex Harvey band did a song about. Alex Harvey and my friend were both from the Gorbals in Glasgow. My friend idolized him. Then I heard one of the talking heads on the nightly news mention ELF a few months back. I thought, Oh boy, they'll be charging through my front door again.

Q: But that hasn't happened, has it?

A: No. I think the feds have ruled me out. (Knock on wood). My life is an open book. I have a career as a structural steel welding inspector. That takes up all of my time and I'm constantly traveling. I'm retired from that ELF stuff. I enjoy my freedom too much to revisit that nightmare I went through a quarter of a century ago. My philosophy on militant environmentalism has changed over time. It's counter-productive to the movement. After my stint at Lompoc federal prison, I was released on probation. The judge had given me five years but he later modified the sentence to five years' supervised probation. After I was out, I contacted Richard Armentrout, one of the Rose Lodge spray victims for the first time. He told me that the ELF bombing had embarrassed them and alienated them from their former supporters. Just the simple perception that they may in some way be associated with a terrorist group was all it took to destroy their credibility in their community of peers. That really bothered me. I apologized but it was too late. the harm was done.

Q: So you no longer advocate militancy?

A: Not if it manifests itself in violence. Civil disobedience can be militant in practice or perception. But violence is NEVER civil. Thoreau and Gandhi landed in jail but they never could have accomplished their goals had they resorted to violence. They



Thanks to Richard Biffle

maintained the high moral ground and inspired support. They showed they were better than their adversaries.

Q: Do you consider your past actions to be a failure?

A: Yes. Both morally and strategically. After my arrest, I opted for another approach. I founded a not-for-profit organization to assist commercial growers to develop strategies for cutting back on their use of pesticides. This was a program developed, in part, by Dr. Van Den Bosch. I was fortunate to gain his support before he died. The strategy is called Integrated Pest Management or IPM. It was a fairly new concept in the late 70's. It's widely practiced these days.

Q: Are you still active in the IPM field?

A: No. I recruited a board of directors with college degrees in entomology and plant pathology. I wrote the initial seed-funding proposal and received a generous grant from the David and Lucile Packard Foundation. Then I reluctantly stepped down. The board of directors felt my pending trial could be problematic. And, of course, I had no professional credentials. Basically I was a confessed bomber awaiting trial. Not the greatest public relations asset if you're trying to influence commercial growers. The academicians took over the corporate helm but they failed to secure additional funding and the enterprise faded away. The good news is that similar businesses have flourished. So I'm reassured that my instincts were sound. Perhaps we were ahead of our time. With hindsight, I see that IPM has accomplished more than those seven firebombs ever did.

Q: What would you like to say to the ELF today?

A: If I transport myself back to when I was Underground, I don't think I would have listened to an old fart like me. Most likely a lot of the people who make up today's ELF weren't even born when ELF was founded. So I'm not too optimistic that the current cadre will listen. But here's my request: Stop the violence. It's only a matter of time before someone gets injured or killed. Arson can get out of hand very quickly. Who would want an innocent firefighter to get killed doing his or her job? I'm so thankful no one was hurt during my activities. I couldn't live with myself had that happened.

Q: What's your opinion of the new ELF?

A: My opinion doesn't matter. I can certainly empathize with their frustration and their desire to defend the environment. But their means and methods will lead nowhere. Maybe prison. Some of the actions attributed to the ELF are so dumb it boggles the mind. Torching a used car lot or a luxury home? What the hell is that? That's the kind of crap you would expect from somebody trying to run an insurance scam or a provocateur hoping to discredit the movement. On the other hand, you have people like the Rose Lodge protestors or the young woman that lived up in that old-growth tree for months on end. She really accomplished something positive. Even the loggers had to respect her tenacity and courage. Now that's what I'm talking about. That's the true spirit of civil disobedience. The movement needs more people like them. We don't need more unbombers and idiots like my former ELF persona, running around

trying to change the world by coercion and intimidation. That just doesn't get things done.

END

The Ted K Archive

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Part 1 & Part 2

John Clark Hanna was the first person to serve prison time for using direct action defending Earth against pesticides. In the interview, he discusses ELF's origins, tactics and the consequences of direct action.

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