

Legend of the Squamish Five

Jonathan Slyk

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At precisely 1:30 a.m. on the morning of May 31, 1982, four shunt reactors at the B.C. Hydro Cheekeye-Dunsmuir power transmission substation near Qualicum Beach on Vancouver Island exploded with such a thunder that it woke area residents up for ten miles around. The transmission line had been controversial from the start, igniting opposition from people living along its construction swath, as well as from environmental organizations across the province. Since the 1950s, resource extraction and energy construction mega-projects and had been springing up all over, leaving many to question both the safety and the need for such colossal development programs. The Government's official line was that cheap, plentiful power was needed to meet demand, but it was no secret pulp and paper mills would benefit most, and any surplus would be sold to the US. Few remained impressed with the long legacy of mutilated landscapes. At the time the sabotage occurred, it received fairly broad support. The action was carried off without a hitch: there were no clues, no leads and no one wanted to help police—despite a reward that reached \$125,000. Using 350 lbs. of stolen dynamite, the saboteurs actually helped turn more people against the transmission line's construction. The blast halted work for over two months and cost B.C. Hydro 4.5 million dollars.

Five months later, on the night of October 14, 1982, a van loaded with 550 lbs. of more stolen dynamite was parked against the wall of building no. 402 at the Litton Systems plant in Toronto. The facility manufactured guidance system components for the US cruise missile and had been the target of a long term campaign of leafleting workers, driveway blockades, graffiti and CD demonstrations. A phone call alerted security guards to the van, warning them to evacuate the building and clear the immediate area. At first, the security guards didn't fully understand the instructions, but checked out the van anyway. It wasn't the first time the plant had received threats. On this cool, drizzly night, security guards shortly realized the gravity of the phone call. Within minutes, a violent explosion tore off the side of the building, creating a crater where the van had been. For some reason, the dynamite had detonated early. Ten people were injured, some severely.

Before Glasnost and Perestroika, before the wall came down and even before ABBA broke up, peace marches and anti-nuclear protests were reaching their zenith in a world engulfed in a dark fear of nuclear vaporization. In the late 1970s and early 1980s, punk, squatting and other forms of rebellion offered the only coping strategies for disaffected youth holding their own against an icy nihilism. On the surface, everything seemed fine. The cold war was raging, but why let that spoil a fun day shopping? For many it seemed easier to forget social change. Hippies became entrepreneurs. The '60s were over, man. As comedian George Carlin put it: "We went from 'All You Need Is Love' to 'The One Who Dies With the Most Toys Wins.'" Beneath the surface, the political lava was cooling. Most of the more militant activists in North America were either in prison or dead. In Canada, unemployment was as high as the kids with spiked hair and metal nipple rings. Facing a bleak, prepackaged future, five well-scrubbed, middle class college dropouts decided they'd had enough. When their paths eventually crossed, each one would bring their own unique experience and expertise to a political

collective destined to become the most renowned anti-authoritarian armed struggle group in Canadian history.

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Ann Hansen and Brent Taylor in the documentary Trial by Media. Photos courtesy of Video Out and Cornelia Wyngaarden.

Ann Hansen had spent six months in France and Germany where, in 1979, she studied underground activist groups ostensibly for a college research paper on radical activism. In Paris, she met up with activists associated with the Red Army Fraction. She distributed leaflets, helped fugitives, attended trials and did other support work for the Marxist group. Ann's thirst for political adventure became almost an obsession, and running in the streets with hordes of protesters became so exhilarating, she didn't feel like ever coming back to a backward country like Canada. Slowly growing uneasy with the Marxist RAF and its tactics of kidnapping and assassinations, she began hobnobbing with some autonomists and black-clad anarchists whose lives and activist philosophy seemed to impress her more. Still flushed with the excitement of underground activism, Ann reluctantly returned home to Toronto determined to find other like-minded people able and willing to form a group of their own. She abandoned her studies at the University of Waterloo to pursue a more rewarding career as an urban guerrilla. In time Ann Hansen would become adept at both shoplifting and stealing cars.

One day in 1980, Ann met Brent Taylor through mutual friends while spray-painting graffiti. Taylor had come out east on a visit from Vancouver to protest the construction of a nearby nuclear power plant before heading down to New Hampshire. Months later, Ann would find herself on a train with a German friend heading west to Vancouver to connect with other prison abolitionists. She looked up her former spray-painting

acquaintance and discovered they had similar ambitions. Brent Taylor was fun-loving and outgoing, with a quick, mischievous smile. The overachieving son of college professor parents from atony neighborhood in Victoria, B.C., Brent, like Ann, had spent time in another country absorbing political ideas and experiences. Having set provincial high school track records, he was too much of a human dynamo to sit still in a lecture hall. So early in 1977, after one semester at the University of Victoria, Taylor left to roam the US west coast where he learned about the people, politics and history of underground groups like the Symbionese Liberation Army, New World Liberation Front, Prairie Fire and the George Jackson Brigade. Sometime after returning home, this time across the Georgia Strait to Vancouver, he attained his first bit of notoriety by pieing Conservative Party leader Joe Clark. Around this time he briefly enlisted in the Seaforth Highlander army regiment of the Canadian Armed Forces in order to gain experience handling weapons. Brent was a jack-of-all-trades, but his main predilection was obtaining and collecting valuable information like industrial blueprints or vital statistics necessary for false I.D. At one point, he probably had the city's largest collection of leftist and anarchist pamphlets, clippings, files and documents. He plunged himself into various activities, including volunteer stints at *Open Road* and Spartacus Books (then both in the same building). He lived, breathed, ate and slept politics.

Brent shared an apartment with Doug Stewart, who had just dropped out of UBC where he majored in both Math and Physics. Doug was shy and reclusive, one of those repressed geniuses with "a beautiful mind." He had always been passionate about the environment, particularly in terms of what technology and the military-industrial-complex were doing to it. Starting out as a pacifist, he had joined the Pacific Life Community, a Quaker disarmament group known for its CD events against the Trident nuclear submarine base at Bangor, Washington. Stewart quickly grew impatient with Gandhian strategies and began seeking more radical expressions for his concerns. Before committing to join Brent Taylor and Ann Hansen, he had helped organize Vancouver's first anti-nuclear rally, from which other, larger ones followed. Doug was a hardware guy, the electronics expert who designed the fuses and timing devices the group would later use.

Vancouver's punk rock scene spawned many a wild party in the late 1970s. At one such soiree in the suburb of Port Moody, Brent met Gerry Hannah, the bass player for the punk band the Subhumans. Along with their civic cousins D.O.A. and California's Dead Kennedys, the Subhumans were one of a handful of overtly political groups playing the west coast. The Subhumans were considered by many to be the best of the bunch musically. In keeping with the trend set by the likes of Johnny Rotten and Sid Vicious (Sex Pistols) and Joey Shithead (D.O.A.), Gerry nicknamed himself Gerry Useless, symbolizing his despair. Hannah wrote some of the band's more popular songs including: "Fuck You," "Slave to my Dick," "Oh Canaduh," and "We're Alive." Gerry remembers that first encounter: "Brent showed up at this party wearing military fatigues, really short hair, wire-rim glasses and a big mustache. I thought for sure he was a cop." After some reassurances from his close friend (and *Open Road* collective

member) Dave Spanner, Gerry and Brent seemed to hit it off together. Spanner, an ex-Yippie from the US, would soon become the Subhumans' manager. Brent and Gerry set about organizing a huge outdoor concert in Vanier Park billed as "Rock Against Radiation." There, Brent introduced Gerry to Ann Hansen. Of course, Gerry wasn't actually useless; he had a knack for procuring the necessary tools and equipment the group would need for its missions.



*Julie Belmas and Doug Stewart in the documentary Trial by Media.
Photos courtesy of Video Out and Cornelia Wyngaarden.*

Gerry's girlfriend was Julie Belmas, an art student and well-known habitue of the punk rock party circuit. Young, beautiful and impetuous, Julie was devoted to political work around US imperialism in El Salvador, as well as prisoner support for A.I.M. member Dino Butler and his cousin Gary. The Butlers had both been falsely arrested in Vancouver for the murder of an RCMP officer. Gerry and Julie worked on various projects together and planned to someday settle down and build a cabin in the B.C. wilderness. Julie was a master of disguise, a handy talent for casing public places and getting inside sensitive areas. She also helped the others transform their appearances when needed. What Julie lacked in hard-core political experience, she made up for with enthusiasm.

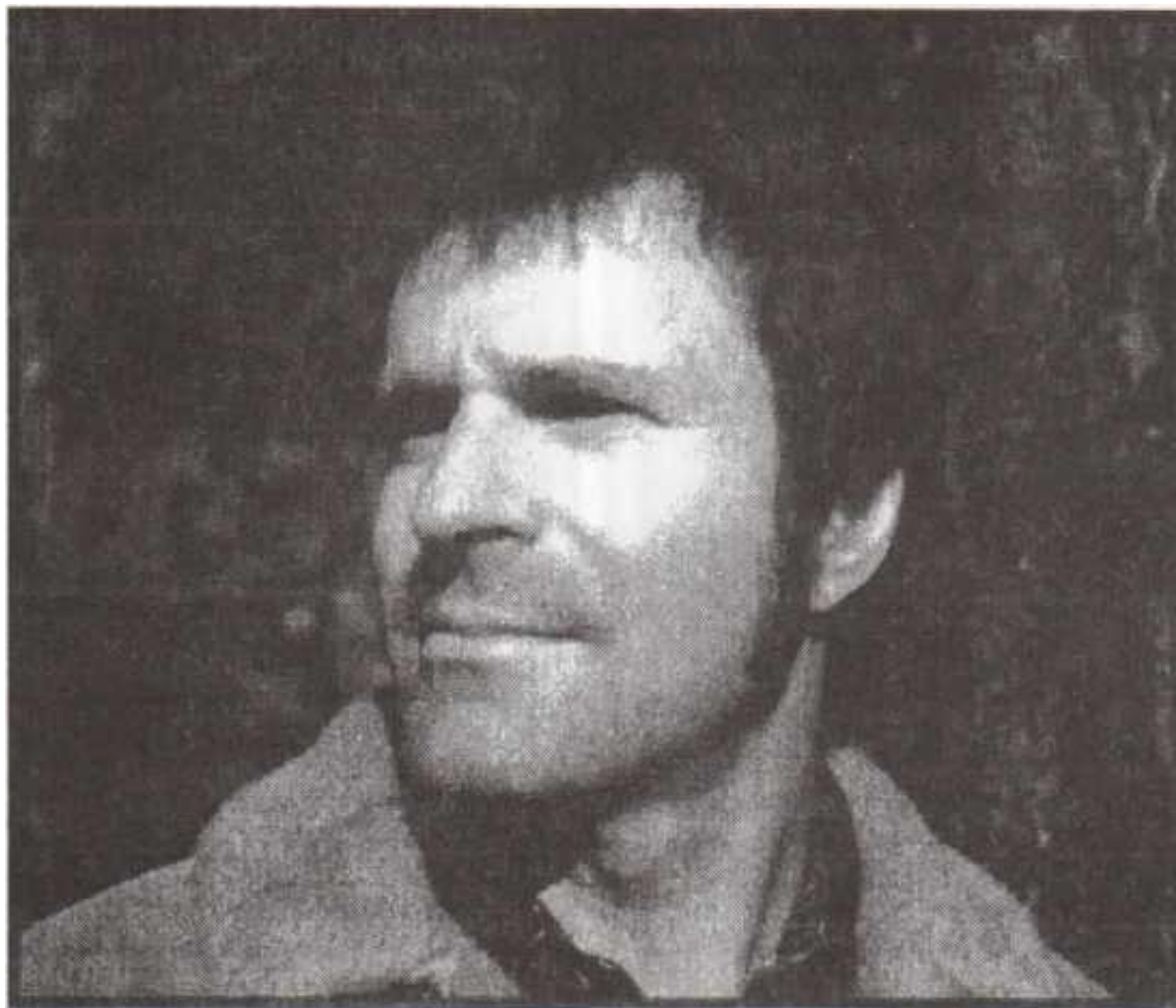
While hoping to recruit more members, one of the group's first decisions was to bring attention to the AMAX molybdenum mine in Northern B.C. Toxic mine tailings were being dumped into local waters near Alice Arm where the pollution was destroying the food fishery of the native Nishga people. Brent, Ann and Julie headed to the Ministry of Environment office in Victoria to send the government a message. They broke into the office at night, setting off flares, pouring red paint over the carpets, spray-painting graffiti and smashing windows. Besides being a buzz, the low-level caper also proved they could work well together.

A series of small-scale robberies, vandalism, car thefts, and office trashings ensued. The group felt ready to go underground. To test how they would react to life in social isolation, Brent, Ann and Doug moved away to Calgary, Alberta, where they were not known and where they could have time to think, plan and get to know each other better. Julie and Gerry remained behind to work on other political activities. Brent and Doug brought some ammunition and all three moved into an apartment. One day while trying to come up with a name for the group, Brent remembered reading about a guerrilla group in France called Action Directe, responsible for several bombings there. The name seemed to click, and they decided to use it in their first communique. After only a few weeks in Calgary, they started feeling the effects of isolation and ended up aborting the experiment when the friends and relationships they left in Vancouver began tugging at their ideals. The three returned to the west coast humbled, yet resolved to make their first major strike. Free and breezy days soon gave way to a grinding intensity.

Before the first action was set for the Cheekeye-Dunsmuir power station, Ann and some other activist friends managed to loot a cache of weapons from a gun collector's home. They made off with a .357 Magnum, a 12-gauge Remington pump-action shotgun, a P-08 9 millimeter pistol, an M-1 carbine rifle and a Colt .45, among many more. To gain proficiency with the weapons, they would often drive up to a remote mountainous region north of Squamish (a small logging town north of Vancouver) for target practice. By now they were full-fledged guerrillas, arms in hand and living more or less underground. They were almost completely self-sufficient, shoplifting and dumpster diving for food and supplies. Frustrated with the music business, Gerry quit the Subhumans in 1981 and moved into a rented house with Julie, Brent and Ann. Doug lived separately. There was more planning, more target practice, more shoplifting and more vehicles to steal. When Ann and Doug carried out the Cheekeye-Dunsmuir bombing, a certain nervousness permeated the whole group. Gerry and Julie were not told about the action for two weeks. The personal dynamics had also changed as Brent and Ann were now lovers. Relief over not being caught replaced paranoia, and as they settled into their roles as revolutionaries, they became more confident while simultaneously becoming more lonely. Above-ground support was proving to be capricious. If they couldn't incite a cavalcade of deconstruction, then, well, they'd bring it all down themselves. Of those stalwart days in mid-career, Ann would write:

The tension of our lives had been relentless. We never took a break, never went to the beach for a day of doing nothing, never took a casual walk in Stanley Park, never slept in or hung about the house lazily reading a book on a rainy day. Our group was on a mission, and we lived each day with the zeal and fervor of people who believed that their every action was so important that the survival of the planet depended on them. If we did go for a walk in Stanley Park, it was to discuss the merits of bombing CF-18s at Cold Lake Canadian Forces Base versus blowing up a bridge in the

infrastructure of the Northeast Coal Project. When we went swimming, it was for exercise, not leisure. If we stayed home to read a book, it would be a provincial government report on megaprojects in Northeastern British Columbia. If we slept in, it would be because we had been up until three o'clock the night before practicing stealing cars for a future robbery. Urban guerrillas do not take vacations (Hansen 2001, p.8).



Gerry Hannah.

After the Litton bombing, the five members became the object of intensive surveillance when a reporter, working for Toronto's *Globe and Mail* newspaper, happened to notice that the style of writing in the Litton communique was similar to that in the Vancouver newsletter *Resistance* put out by the group Friends of Durruti (not

unlike the scenario that unfolded around a certain other famous bomber from Montana). The police quickly obtained the name of the person renting the post office box number listed for *Resistance*, and by following that person, were eventually led to one of the members of Direct Action. There were times when Julie or Ann thought they were being followed, but dismissed themselves as paranoid. It was too late anyway; there was no turning back. They had set their controls for the heart of the sun. Rather than ending up in prison, all were fully prepared to shoot it out with police should such circumstances arise. Although the group was essentially living underground, they never completely shut the door to family and friends, a factor that would loom large in their ultimate fate. Doug Stewart, who always lived separately, continued seeing certain friends at his residence.

During the time Direct Action was under surveillance, Julie and Ann helped another group called the Wimmin's Fire Brigade firebomb three Red Hot Video stores. Feminists and various women's groups throughout B.C. had been attempting to shut down the nefarious, American-owned chain for over two years. Apart from the usual mainstream porn, Red Hot Video also trafficked in unusually violent videos featuring gang rapes, torture and kiddie porn— many obviously made in Third World countries. The coalition of women's groups seemed divided, however, between those opposed only to the offending films, and those simply against all pornography. Though uncomfortable with porn in general, the women of Direct Action were of the former view, wishing to help prevent the dissemination of the most odious material. At the store she torched, Ann ended up badly burning her face. "I looked like an old black woman," she recounted. Alternating between hospital care and herbal remedies, her skin healed miraculously well.

The next plan, after the Red Hot Video firebombings, was to acquire enough money to pay for even larger campaigns. It was decided they would hold up a Brink's Armored Truck, and they proceeded to spend the next several weeks in preparation. By this time, the RCMP had amassed enough surveillance evidence to make its move. On January 20th, 1983, on one of their many target practice excursions into the mountains, and four days before the planned robbery, all five members were traveling in a truck around a blind curve when they were overtaken by a SWAT team disguised as a highway maintenance crew. There would be no shoot-out. Each one had a gun pressed against their head before they could even react. Ann wanted to run and be shot, but went numb and couldn't get her legs to move. Doug and Brent, riding in the back, likewise froze in fear. Consumed by terror, Julie peed herself. For Gerry, time stood still. "I was hoping this was just about the [stolen] guns. But when I looked over at Brent, I realized they [the cops] knew everything." It was a carefully staged, politically theatrical ending to an equally dramatic career. Henceforth, the media proclaimed them "The Squamish Five." Local supporters replied with the more accurate name "The Vancouver Five" to de-emphasize that infamous moment.

Ann Hansen received a life sentence. In her statement to the court, Ann reviewed the reasons for the actions she was charged with and concluded by asking, "How do

we, who have no armies, weapons, power or money stop these criminals before they destroy the earth?” Upon finishing her speech, she promptly threw a tomato at the judge. Brent Taylor was sentenced to twenty-two years, Doug Stewart got six, Gerry Hannah was given ten years, and Julie Belmas received an unduly merciless time of twenty years, which was later appealed down to fifteen. At her appeal hearing, Julie intimated that she had been acting under duress and wanted to leave the group but feared for her life if she did. This sudden turn naturally bewildered and outraged the others, especially Gerry, who was madly in love with Julie. It also sent shockwaves throughout the local prisoner support network. Everyone felt betrayed.

All five knew from the beginning that the most they could hope for was to act as a catalyst for emboldening others. No single act of sabotage would by itself bring a radical change in political consciousness. They had taken pains to select targets that could be integrated within a pre-existing, wider opposition. Still, the high-octane feats divided as often as they galvanized the radical milieu. The group was, after all, still operating within the confines of the old anarcho-left, which had given it some conditional support. Yet because of its critique of production, and above all its explosive tactics, many did not quite know what to make of these antiindustrial anarchists. Distinctions marking classical workplace and institutionally-based revolution from other lines of critique and attack were only just emerging. There was much debate in *Open Road*, one of the few publications to fully endorse the group. Extensive coverage of the Direct Action’s exploits and subsequent trials occupied several issues. One exasperated leftist finally fired off this letter:

Your support for the antics of Direct Action is just about the last straw. (It’s about on the same level as your ridiculous anti-work poster.) If a bunch of over-grown adolescents want to play urban guerrilla to fill some void in their lives that’s their problem. Your article on “Litton and the Left” was on the same puerile ‘I dare you to step across this line’ level. I don’t know about you but I’m 34 years old and that kind of shit doesn’t work on *me* or *my friends*. In short *don’t* send any more copies of your paper to me! (*Open Road*, #17, 1984, p.15)

Direct Action employed basically the same methods and strategies as most other armed resistance groups: bombings, sabotage and communiqués. Like the Jackson Brigade, they were small in size, which has the advantage of being less detectable and less prone to the personal vagaries that often result in fission. Larger groups, like the SDS Weathermen, had splintered along ideological lines and developed hierarchical structures. The disadvantage of being small, however, is the limited reach and scope of activities, not to mention the extreme social isolation. Finally, like every other guerrilla group in the US and Canada, Direct Action failed spectacularly in creating anything remotely resembling a revolution, let alone its more modest goal of arousing others to action. Their kairos had come and gone.

What distinguished Direct Action from other more well-known groups, was both its reserved approach to violence and its anti-authoritarian sensibility. Unlike most urban guerrillas, its political charter did not call for assassinations, kidnapping or indiscriminate terror against “bourgeois pigs.” Group members were genuinely mortified by the injuries caused in the Litton bombing. Ann Hansen was so distraught, for a moment she considered suicide. However, this sentiment was somewhat belied by the fact that their next plan was to rob a Brink’s guard at gunpoint. Inasmuch as they were willing to kill people, it was not the point of their campaigns. Their rage was focused on specific destructive technologies within the broader political context of modernity itself. They were not interested in redistributing food or proceeds from bank robberies, or organizing community education centers— these were already being done by other established groups. Nor were they simply trying to overthrow the government. Direct Action’s overarching project was nothing short of the total removal of civilization and a re-wilding of the earth. In this sense it possibly resembled MOVE more than any other of its contemporaries. And while some guerrilla groups were certainly less authoritarian than others, Direct Action was self-consciously anarchist. Decisions were by consensus with no one cajoled into going along with the others. Doug and Gerry felt the Litton bombing was too heavy, for example, and thus declined to join the trip to Toronto (though one of Doug’s eccentricities was a fear of traveling outside of B.C.).

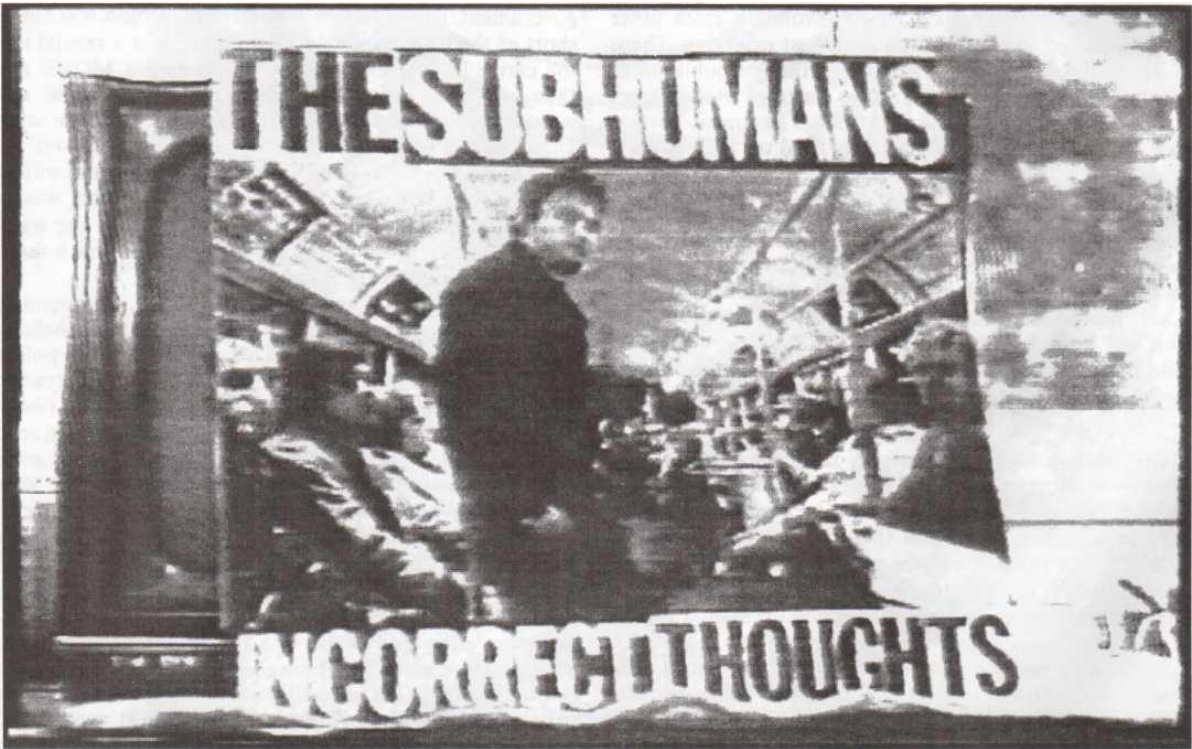
It was its particular amalgam of aboriginal, environmental and anarchist perspectives, that gave the group its hallmark anti-civilization orientation. Through its young political antennas, it joined Foucault in seeing power everywhere. Detroit’s *Fifth Estate* and Frederick Turner’s *Beyond Geography* provided important touchstones, in addition to practical tips from *Soldier of Fortune* and *Guns and Ammo*, among other such material lying around the rented house. Work, division of labor, technology, patriarchy and the war machine made up the elements of its refusal. Two notable prison writings, “Patriarchal Conquest and Industrial Civilization” by Brent Taylor and Gerry Hannah’s “The Work Ethic and the Western Dream,” display a deepening analysis before few, if any, were using the P-word. Ann Hansen, recalling memories of a bucolic childhood growing up in an idyllic rural setting outside Toronto, has recently remarked, “I’ve always been a primitivist.” But Taylor’s essay probably best captured the group’s philosophical mood at the time:

To survive this crisis of extermination, it is simply not enough to isolate nuclear war, large-scale pollution or relentless profiteering as the only parts that should be done away with. To do that would mean that we still embraced most of the industrial way of life created in the image of the patriarchal mentality. It would mean that we still adhered to the culture of patriarchal conquest. It is essential we realize that it has been, and will continue to be, our basic adherence to the patriarchal mentality that is the real threat to life. Inevitably, if we are to survive and create a better world without warfare and the possibilities of extinction, a complete

abandonment of the culture of patriarchal conquest must occur. Such an abandonment must certainly include industrial civilization in its entirety (Taylor, 1983).

North American urban guerrilla groups were themselves nearly extinct by 1983. Government overhunting, imprisonment and habitat destruction had reduced their numbers to below reproductive levels. Direct Action represented the last hurrah of armed resistance for the cold war generation. They were urban, suburban—even rural—guerrillas. They were early (primitive?) primitivists, among the first Earth Firsters, and at least a decade in front of the E.L.F. They were brave, smart, reckless, foolish, passionate, naive and idealistic. The Canuck quintet became legendary outlaws inspiring a terrible CBC TV movie, a much better (and often hilarious) video compilation of television news clips called *Trial by Media*, and a recent short documentary on Gerry Hannah by Glen Sanford titled *Useless*. Direct Action, Vancouver Five or Squamish Five—take your pick—their names are still spoken in hushed tones in Canada, their reputation as a group still shrouded in awe and mystique.

By 1992, the last member of the quintet (Brent Taylor) had been released from prison. As of this writing, Ann Hansen and Gerry Hannah are the only former members choosing to speak publicly about the events of the past. Ann's memoir, *Direct Action*, is gaining attention and has sparked renewed interest in the fab five from a new generation of anarchists. Still as radical as ever, she continues to dream of a future primitive. Meanwhile, Ann lives out her other childhood dream of riding horses with the wind blowing through her hair on a farm in Ontario. She is currently pondering her next writing project. Brent Taylor also lives in Ontario but remains private about his urban guerrilla days. Like Hansen, he hasn't given up his belief in the need for a dissolution of Progress. Not much is known about Taylor beyond this as he refuses to even talk with even the radical media. Gerry Hannah did eventually build his dream cabin in the Chilcotin region of central B.C. Subhumans records have become a much sought-after collector's item in the years since their musical break-up. Hannah remains politically defiant, though he characterizes his current views as "more complex and less black and white." Doug Stewart also resides in B.C. but resumed his customary reclusive life after prison, changing his name and avoiding any discussion about his participation in the former group. Julie Belmas renounced her entire past and disavowed all oppositional politics. The prison experience—where she took to hiding under her cell blankets in a fetal position—completely broke her. She became a born-again Christian and is now a filmmaker living in B.C. where she has had little contact with the others since her release.



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