



# Saboteurs

An exclusive excerpt from Andrew Nikiforuk's soon-to-be-released book on Wiebo Ludwig's war against Big Oil

In 1985, Reverend Wiebo Ludwig moved to Alberta's Peace River region, about 500 kilometres northwest of Edmonton, to insulate his alternative Christian community from the madness of modern life. But in 1990, civilization, in the form of several oil and gas companies, came calling. For six years, Ludwig peacefully raised disturbing questions about property rights, the environment and the toxic nature of sour gas. About a third of all natural gas in BC and Alberta is sour and contains dangerous concentrations of hydrogen sulfide, a cyanide-like poison.

After two sour gas leaks resulted in a score of animal deaths and the miscarriages of two women, Ludwig had had enough. When the Alberta Energy Co. Ltd. (AEC) proposed to do seismic testing near his aquifers in 1996, he warned the firm (the natural gas giant reported revenue of \$6 billion last year) not to proceed. When another company, Norcen Energy Resources Ltd., started to drill a new well north of his farm, the family barricaded the road, just as aboriginal bands are now blocking access to oil and gas properties in northeastern BC. They, too, are asking the same questions Ludwig asked.

Andrew Nikiforuk's highly anticipated new book, *Saboteurs* (Macfarlane Walter & Ross, \$35), to be published in late October, documents Ludwig's war against development. Even before the explosion of several bombs and the shooting of a 16-year-old girl, the sabotage campaign cost the oil patch more than \$10 million, probably the largest case of industrial monkey-wrenching in North America.

In this compelling pre-publication excerpt, exclusive to *Canadian Business*, Robert Bilodeau of the RCMP discovers that Ludwig's war is no ordinary dispute:

Bosnia changed Corporal Robert Bilodeau the way wars change all men. He went to the former Yugoslavia in the spring of 1993 as an idealistic 45-year-old volunteer who had served in the RCMP for 20 years. He was assigned to Srebrenica as that city's first full-time UN civilian police station commander. His job was to keep peace in a demilitarized zone packed with 40,000 Muslim refugees. 'The Serbs controlled everything outside the zone while Muslims struggled to stay alive inside it. Meanwhile, the UN stood around, says Bilodeau, "with its thumb up its ass.' In this so-called safe zone, Corporal Bilodeau recorded as many as 2,000 ceasefire violations a day.

In the chaos of Bosnia, Bilodeau's superiors forgot about him. He was abandoned for 115 days in the war zone. Here the affable, fast-talking farm boy supped with a school principal who calmly executed former students and negotiated with a warlord who drove a Mercedes, strutted about like a peacock, and killed with equanimity. He learned that extreme situations can drive people to do things they wouldn't normally do. At night, just before the fighters came out like bats, he drank brandy with men who are now buried in shallow graves.

Rather than defend the enclave, the UN finally let the Serbs overrun it. Within days, the Serbs massacred 7,000 Muslim men and boys. Bilodeau still has nightmares about the men and women he couldn't save. "If you really want to know what Srebrenica was about, imagine a Serb and a Croat raping a Muslim woman with the UN holding a flashlight, '

Bilodeau's tour of duty left him with a common Yugoslavian souvenir: post traumatic stress disorder. PTSD doesn't diminish a man's power of judgment; it just recycles the pain and trauma until he feels stuck in time, hypervigilant and anxious. After Srebrenica, Bilodeau told friends, he didn't have much of a fantasy life.

In 1996, he was posted to the RCMP's Beaverlodge detachment as a sergeant. The small understaffed unit was responsible for upholding law and order in an industrial frontier nearly as big as Bosnia. Bilodeau had worked in the Peace country two decades earlier, and knew that Beaverlodge, with its landscape painters and good schools, was a cultural and artsy sort of place – "a jewel of the Peace."

He reckoned it would be a quiet place to end his RCMP career. His wife, Donna, liked the area too, and looked forward to settling down after years of roving as a cop's wife. The couple even designed a "dream house" in town overlooking the Beaverlodge valley. They planned on staying forever.

One of Bilodeau's first assignments in Beaverlodge seemed a minor affair - a string of vandalism incidents on a country road being used by Norcen Energy Resources Ltd. (now Anadarko Petroleum Corp.). Another firm, the Alberta Energy Co., had hired private security to protect its seismic crews. The contested road had been blocked with parked vehicles and spiked with sharpened rebar and roofing nails. Hythe Motors Tire Shop couldn't keep up with the repairs that fall. Even the detachment's GMC Suburban picked up a couple of flats while on patrol.

The name Wiebo Ludwig came up. Bilodeau asked members of his new detachment what they knew about the man. The constables couldn't offer much other than hearsay. Ludwig was "crazy" and "ran some kind of cult", they reported, and had started his own church and didn't like the oil and gas industry.

To Bilodeau, these stories sounded much too convenient. He set about filling in his intelligence vacuum. An Interpol search on Ludwig pulled up nothing more than the man's birth date - Dec. 19, 1941 - and there was nothing on CPIC, the national police computer system. Bilodeau sent two constables out to interview neighbors and decided he would save the Reverend for himself. He called up Ludwig's farm and said he wanted to come over for a visit and hear their side of the story. Ludwig invited "the tin soldier," as he liked to call cops, down.

The next morning, Bilodeau arrived at Trickle Creek for coffee. It was the first and only time anyone from the RCMP heard Ludwig out in civil surroundings. Bilodeau brought Constable Jackie Wheeler along. One of Ludwig's first comments was that Bilodeau "needed a woman to protect him." Bilodeau replied that some women make extremely good warriors, and added, "I just want another witness."

The whole family sat around in the living room and observed the conversation the way other families watch TV. Ludwig's son Ben sat on his father's right and his wife, Mamie, on his left. "It was like the Last Supper. Everyone seemed to be sitting in descending order of power and importance."

It didn't take long for Bilodeau to figure out that Ludwig wasn't the kind of guy who rolls over and plays dead. Ludwig cataloged, with repeated Biblical references, the fumigations, the dead animals, and the two miscarriages.

"Ben buried a child," said Ludwig.

"You mean you lost a child?" Bilodeau asked in disbelief. "How old?"

Ludwig explained that his daughter-in-law Kara had miscarried three months after being gassed by a flaring well. Bilodeau said "Oh."

Ludwig added that no one in authority seemed to take human miscarriages in sour gas fields very seriously.

The RCMP officer then made his own points. "As police we have to work in a neutral position and on a compliance basis with people. I'm a Peace Officer and I'll do whatever I can to keep the peace, but there are rules to follow and Norcen is not doing anything illegal by drilling its well."

Ludwig said it was criminal and illegal for oil companies to murder children and destroy aquifers. He said he wasn't going to kiss the ass of a corrupt system and that Bilodeau should realize "there was trouble brewing here and the legality, as such, could not embrace it."

Bilodeau said that he was basically powerless, and that maybe Ludwig should put pressure on Alberta's Energy and Utilities Board (EUB), the provincial regulator, or form some kind of citizens' alliance. Ludwig said they had had enough of such merry-go-rounds and asked Bilodeau to let the authorities know "that this situation demanded more than present laws are able to deliver."

Bilodeau, who had worked in the oil patch as a young man, agreed that the industry wasn't angelic. "The industry really rapes the land," he said. "They don't have a lot of friends; they are business at its worst. Raping and pillaging the land is what they do best, but they are generating a lot of money, and the government gives them lot of slack because of it." He added that the EUB worked liked every other bureaucracy. "It's part of their nature to give you the runaround." The residents of Trickle Creek had never heard a "tin soldier" talk so candidly.

Bilodeau then talked about the things he had heard and seen in Bosnia. He told Ludwig that he had worked in a place where people lost sight of things and took the law into their own hands. He said it "wasn't the fat cats that suffer but the women and children." In essence, Bilodeau gave Ludwig the Gospel according to Bob: peace, love, and sue the bastard's ass off.

At the end of the meeting, Ludwig appealed to the sergeant "to be human, since we share in humanity" and to remember his real and only master, God.

The family agreed to take apart the road block, and perhaps seek a court injunction against Norcen.

Bilodeau left a worried man. He pegged the family not as a cult but, as a sincerely religious, highly disciplined group. He had seen the beards and head scarves before in Hutterite or Mennonite communities.

The children were well-fed and healthy. Mamie looked downtrodden but then women, thought Bilodeau, always got "the shit sandwich" in evangelical communities.

What worried him was Ludwig himself, a man at the end of his rope. He had met fearless and cornered men like Ludwig before in Srebrenica. Such men calmly drew lines in the sand that even blood couldn't erase. Ludwig had set his course and Bilodeau recognized it wasn't keeping the peace. He felt he had met a Muslim in the boreal forest surrounded by an industrial tribe bent on ethnic cleansing.

On Dec. 1, 1996, three of Ludwig's sons walked out to the Norcen site and got into a shouting match with a dozen workers from Big Valley Construction in Hythe. The Hythites were madder than hell about getting flat tires in their vehicles, and accused the boys of booby-trapping the road. One worker told the boys: "We are just following the laws of the land and if you don't like the laws of the land, you should get the hell out of here." Another said if the Ludwigs wanted to mine the road "they should go down to Waco, Texas."

When Josh Ludwig, one of Wiebo's sons, tried to say something about the law of God, one worker replied, "Well, we're not God-loving people! The Ludwig family diary, a voluminous document, recalls this comment as "very crass indeed."

That night the Ludwigs brought out a mug of coffee to a cold security guard watching the access road. The guard was grateful for the warmth and chatted a bit. He thought the nails that oil workers had found on the road were a pretty wild idea. "Ten to one its a bunch of kids, pulling pranks."

While the security guard was being entertained, a sour gas well southeast of Trickle Creek was sabotaged. Someone poured acid on the remote-control operation valve, causing a chemical meltdown and setting off the sour gas alarm at the Alberta Energy Co.'s Hythe-Brainard plant. An AEC emergency response crew later found boot prints in the snow that led down the road toward Trickle Creek.

When RCMP Corporal Cal Mosher arrived on the scene, he reported a pickup truck not far from the well with a bunch of Ludwigs milling about. The next day, two AEC employees replaced the damaged valve, then left for an hour to locate another part. During that time, someone stole their new \$6,000 valve.

Before Bilodeau could question Ludwig about the mayhem, "Dad and Mom," as the family's diary put it, stormed into his office in Beaverlodge. Ludwig wasn't in a good mood and told Bilodeau why. A neighbor, recovering from heart surgery, had told Ludwig that two constables had questioned him in hospital. They had wanted to know about his family's habits, the number of children, their interest in guns, and many other things. Ludwig thought the police had acted wickedly and accused them of trying to create "another Waco situation." He was particularly incensed that the police would want to know if his children were fed well.

After getting "beat up with the Bible," Bilodeau calmly told Ludwig that three wells had been vandalized close to Trickle Creek and that their lives could be in danger. "You don't mess with sour gas," said the policeman. Bilodeau had worked as a

roughneck as a young man and had seen men go down under a cloud of hydrogen sulfide faster than a dropped hat. He said a criminal investigation was underway.

“There are a lot of angry people around,” Ludwig told him. “I’m not surprised that these kinds of things are happening. Time is running out for the police and all the other organizations who refuse to put a stop to these lethal sour gas wells so close to people’s homes.” Before leaving, Ludwig told Bilodeau that he was going to seek a court injunction, as he recommended. The policeman encouraged this route: “The judge is the one with the power to stop the well;” added Bilodeau. Bilodeau felt he was in Srebrenica all over again.

Ludwig drove to Grande Prairie and walked into the Court of Queen’s Bench and gave a clerk at the front desk his documents. When she told him that he would need a lawyer to get an injunction, Ludwig said he didn’t have time for that nonsense. All the judge had to do was read the papers and make a decision, said Ludwig. When she suggested that he go upstairs to the legal library, Ludwig said he was out of time. This is an emergency, he said. Finally a superintendent arrived and explained that an administrative office of Queen’s Bench couldn’t do anything. Ludwig dumped his papers on the table, his attempt to defend his property rights in the courts at an end.

On the drive back to Trickle Creek, Ludwig decided to check out the wells that Bilodeau mentioned. He found them damaged and, to his surprise, still unsecured. Even after thousands of dollars’ worth of sabotage, no one had bothered to lock them up. He phoned Bilodeau and bawled out the sergeant again. “Get those sites secured before somebody does more damage and puts my family in further danger.” The saboteurs visited all three wells again that month.

If the night now belonged to saboteurs, the day stiffed Ludwig’s caustic tongue and psychological terror tactics. At one often - sabotaged AEC well site just southeast of his farm, Ludwig showed up unexpectedly and chewed out the entire four-man crew. He delivered another angry sermon about sour gas, animal deaths, and miscarriages. “Are you Reverend Ludwig?” a frightened worker asked. Ludwig said the vandalism was nothing to be complacent about and warned that industrial- terrorists were getting testy. He declared that this well site could become a target and that these terrorists weren’t averse to blowing up homes belonging to AEC personnel. He also put the fear of God into AEC field operator Keith Gerlack. “For 364 days of the year I’m sane and then one day a year I go crazy,” said Ludwig. “I know where you live.” (Ludwig says he never said any such things.)

The sabotage campaign so unnerved Gerlack that he moved five times that year and had an alarm installed in his house.

After weathering this evangelical blast, the crew suggested the oil patch could be good neighbors and that everything was “perfectly safe.”

Ludwig heard none of this and ended his jeremiad by saying he was going to discuss things only with “the chairman of the AEC until I discover that he’s an asshole, too. Then I won’t bother with him either.”

By now, most of AEC’s employees in the area considered Ludwig “the rudest asshole they ever met.” Landowners in the Peace could be contentious, even trigger happy, but no one had ever encountered one as adamant as Ludwig. “He wasn’t your run-of-the-mill upset landowner,” noted one worker. “He was justifying all the vandalism saying God told him to do it. How do you deal with a man like that?”

To deal with the man who feared only God, AEC West, a division of AEC, hired Shel Kelly. The former RCMP superintendent had once commanded 2,500 men and now worked as a consultant with Security Management Consulting Inc. in Calgary. When the oil patch has a big security problem and wants it solved quietly, it hires SMC.

Kelly, a lean, hard, old-school cop who loved bull riding, became Ludwig’s shadow. He arrived at work with a trench coat, notebook, and no misconceptions. For the next two months, he talked with Bilodeau nearly every day.

On Dec. 18, Ludwig called up Bilodeau and asked if he wanted to attend a meeting with AEC personnel. Bilodeau agreed, and met with Ludwig’s family for coffee at the Golden Inn the next morning. Along with Mamie, Ben, and a couple of the other boys, Ludwig tramped into the corporation’s Grande Prairie office with a solemn grimace. There they met Ken Woldum, vice-president of AEC West and Mike Weeks, the new plant supervisor for the Hythe Brainard and Sexsmith gas plants. Shel Kelly sat in the background, watching like a lynx.

Ludwig did most of the talking. He launched an angry barrage of accusations at Woldum. Known to his colleagues as “Teddy Bear” because of his genial disposition, Woldum said he couldn’t answer most of the questions because he wasn’t in charge of day-to-day field operations. Ludwig accused him of sitting “in an ivory tower” and then came to the point of his visit: “We have deep concerns. Coexistence is not possible.”

Woldum said that if AEC wanted to put a seismic line up a public road, it would damn well do so.

Ludwig demanded that AEC buy the family out for \$750,000 or change its practices. "I'm here to say that if the wells won't be removed, therefore you must pay to have us removed."

Woldurn, angrier by the moment, repeated that AEC was doing everything legally.

"I'm saying the war is on," said Ludwig. "You'll either pay now or pay down the pipe"

After Ludwig's war declaration, Bob Bilodeau took statements from Woldum, Weeks and Kelly. He thought there might be grounds for an extortion charge and consulted Al Munro, a popular and erudite Crown prosecutor in Grande Prairie. Munro said there was nothing there. "It's just a case of Japanese negotiation tactics in a David-and-Goliath struggle against the oil and gas industry," said Munro. "Any charge would get punted out of court."

Ludwig left the meeting thinking he had made his position as plain as split wood: buy me out or it's war. He felt the same calm he had experienced while serving on HMCS Iroquois in 1960 when he experienced his spiritual awakening. Ludwig had joined the Canadian navy at the age of 17 to see the world, training as a frogman and mine expert. One night, the warship entered a storm in the Bermuda Triangle. That tempest tore off most of the life rafts and nearly capsized the ship. Ludwig, on the midnight watch, stood on the upper deck through it all. As the salt wind blasted his face to the point of tears, he felt an awe and joy beyond words. The next day, he couldn't explain to his officers why he had felt so calm and exhilarated.

"While everyone seemed to be either scared to death or vomiting or both, I felt entirely at peace and entertained."

Soon after the meeting with AEC, Ludwig wrote a short letter to the EUB in Calgary, warning of the storm ahead. He strongly advised the agencies "bureaucratic terrorists" to "get your asses in gear and deal with the situation. Cut the bureaucratic crap, since you are ill-prepared for the worst. Murder has been committed here and our patience with you has ended."

Noreen got a similar letter.

Throughout the Christmas season, saboteurs decorated more AEC well sites with damaged solar panels, cut cables, and busted-up heaters. There was even one attempt to blow up a sour gas well with two propane tanks, a candle and a firearm. It didn't work. On New Year's Eve, a grader operator with the county of Grande Prairie found a barricade of snow three feet high and six feet deep on the east-west road running north of the Ludwig property. Water had been poured on the snow, turning into a giant ice bump.

Finally, on New Year's Day, Bilodeau got his first break. He'd been inspecting vandalized well sites until early in the morning. He'd arrived home cold and tired. Then the phone rang. It was Sergeant Charlie Brown in Grande Prairie. An hour later, two constables showed up at the house. They met downstairs, and Donna can remember hearing excited phrases like "no kidding" and "holy mackerel." Before Bilodeau left again, Donna asked, "What the hell is going on?" Bilodeau said, "We have something on film. We know what we're facing."

On New Year's Eve an AEC surveillance camera had caught a bearded figure entering a well site that was jointly owned by Highridge Exploration Ltd. and Rigel Oil and Gas Ltd. The saboteur broke the light bulb illuminating the hut, then removed the batteries powering the light. He loosened the fitting to the gas heater, which caused a fire which tripped a safety alarm at the Hythe-Brainard plant an hour later. Police found tracks in the snow leading back toward the Ludwig property.

After viewing the video, no one at the Beaverlodge detachment could identify the bearded saboteur. Everyone complained that "the Ludwig boys all look alike." But Bob Bilodeau recognized him: Ludwig's oldest son, Ben. The one who sat to Ludwig's right.

In 1997, Ben Ludwig was convicted of mischief arising from his actions in the New Year's Eve AEG incident and placed on three years probation and ordered to pay Highridge Exploration and Rigel Oil and Gas \$890 in damages. Three years later, Wiebo Ludwig was convicted on five counts of vandalism, including mischief and possession of fake dynamite, and sentenced to 28 months in prison. These convictions related to three separate incidents: encasing a Norcen well site in a tonne of cement, counseling a police informant to possess dynamite, and the bombing of a Suncor Energy Inc. battery near Hinton, Alberta. None of Wiebo Ludwig's convictions involved acts of sabotage described in this excerpt. In fact, no one has been charged in connection with these events.

People either regard Ludwig as a hero or as a dangerous religious fanatic. The shooting of 16-year-old Karman Willis on his farm remains unsolved and the source of great bitterness in northern Alberta.

When Sergeant Bilodeau requested a full-scale investigation of the sabotage in 1997, his superiors accused him of sending "bizarre messages" and relieved him of his command. He spent three years trying to clear his name and accused the RCMP of acting irresponsibly. Bilodeau finally settled out of court with the RCMP and now drives a truck part-time in Edmonton.

Ludwig's campaign against toxic sour gas developments has since been taken up by aboriginal peoples and landowners across the province. Industry now faces more than two dozen lawsuits from landowners.

Every month, sour gas projects are routinely delayed by public protests or lengthy public hearings. Most landowners don't support violence, but all agree that Ludwig's unorthodox crusade brought national attention to a serious pollution and human rights problem that industry and government have ignored for 40 years.

In response to unrelenting criticism, the industry's regulator, Alberta's Energy and Utilities Board, has doubled its field inspections and set up an alternative dispute mechanism for landowners and oil companies. It also commissioned a report on sour gas and public safety that recently recommended better health studies, smarter enforcement of existing laws and greater neutrality "when dealing with the public." The EUB says it will implement all 87 recommendations. Ottawa and four provincial governments have now begun a multimillion-dollar study on the effects of sour gas on human and animal health.

Ludwig is scheduled to be released from prison in November.

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