

B  
C

Section

San Jose Mercury News, Thursday morning, September 3, 1987



Pat Dillon

## Train tragedy reopens wounds

**A**DD BRIAN WILLSON'S name to the growing list of more than 368,000 American casualties of the Vietnam War.

A 46-year-old attorney, Air Force veteran and peace activist, he knelt on the train tracks at the Concord Naval Weapons Center on Tuesday in protest of U.S. arms shipments to Central America and was mangled by a 250,000-pound locomotive pulling two boxcars full of explosives.

The Navy said the train crew did not see Willson and that there was simply too much momentum to stop, anyway.

Is there a more bitter, more disgusting metaphor for this tragedy?

And how in the hell can someone call this an accident? It was premeditated.

Was the Navy and the civilian train crew trying to prove a point?

Everyone knew who Brian Willson was.

Was his an act of enormous courage or of foolish self-indulgence? Or was it blind faith that the train would stop?

There are some awful ironies fastened to the questions that need to be asked if the investigation isn't going to be a whitewash.

Brian Willson survived two tours in Vietnam, one trip to El Salvador and four to Nicaragua's combat zones. A year ago, he survived a 47-day protest fast in Washington, D.C. He has become an idol of the rekindled peace movement.

**I**N MARCH, he led nine Americans on a seven-day, 73-mile walk through the combat zone in northern Nicaragua.

Among the group were two other Vietnam veterans, a doctor from Santa Cruz and a woman Willson was to marry.

The doctor was John Isherwood, who returned to Santa Cruz, reported his observations of the conditions in war-torn villages and inspired columns I wrote.

In July, I accompanied Isherwood and several other Santa Cruz residents on a return trip to northern Nicaragua, where we delivered baseball equipment to kids Isherwood and Willson had met earlier.

We also visited a clinic in the village of El Cedro that had been erected by Willson and other members of the Veterans of Foreign Wars Post 5888 in Santa Cruz.

This is the renegade VFW post that started in 1983 as a sanctuary for bitter, "never-again" Vietnam vets and was drummed out of the VFW's 9,800-member national organization. The Santa Cruz vets went to court and were reinstated.

But they keep protesting U.S. policies in Central America. They keep sending delegations to Nicaragua to build clinics. They helped me collect baseball equipment.

Brian Willson represented these guys. And I share a certain kinship with them because we are all vets.

I was visiting early last month when Steve Brooks, the 42-year-old post commander, and half a dozen other vets were planning the Concord protest.

Willson wasn't there, but he had given them a written plan. In it, he said he wanted to fast for 40 days to re-examine his resolve to protest U.S. military policies. He also told the other vets he thought he was prepared to die for his convictions. But he wasn't sure. It was time for a gut check.

Last week, I returned to drink beer and shoot the bull while watching the 49ers and Chargers on TV. The Concord protest hardly came up.

**I**T FELT more like a group therapy session. There was posturing and anger and frustration, the opening of wounds many of Vietnam's casualties still carry.

"A lot of us still need each other," said Brooks. "We're learning to . . . redress our grievances through support groups and through activism. And even though the national organization doesn't like it, we feel it is our patriotic duty to speak up against certain policies.

"That's why we send teams to Central America to show that not all veterans support the Reagan administration. That's why we march on Fort Ord and protest at Concord," he said. "We have put our lives on the line for our country. We should have credibility."

Most people thought credibility would protect Brian Willson when he knelt on the train tracks in front of his new wife and 14-year-old stepson Tuesday. He had survived so many confrontations before.

So it came down to a test of wills.

Is there any question about Willson's commitment? He lies in critical condition in a Walnut Creek hospital.

But there is a question of the Navy's commitment. Why wasn't the train held up until sheriff's deputies dragged Willson and his fellow protesters off the tracks? No one saw the protesters? Come on.

That has a sickening ring. *Plausible deniability*. Remember that term? It was invented for Ronald Reagan. But others have been resorting to it for decades.

Who's responsible for the 58,132 U.S. combat deaths in Vietnam and the 40,000 civilian deaths in Nicaragua and El Salvador? Who's responsible for Brian Willson's terrible wounds?

Don't tell me no one saw him or that it was just a case of too much momentum.