

SEPT 4, 1987 SAN JOSE MERCURY NEWS

# From soldier to protester

## Friend's self-immolation transformed Willson into crusader

By Pierre Blais

ON Nov. 2, 1965, Norm Morrison — an American whose name has long since been forgotten in the United States — doused himself with gas and set himself on fire on the steps of the Pentagon to protest U.S. involvement in the Vietnam War.

It was Morrison's image that came to mind when I learned my friend Brian Willson had been struck by an ammunition train during demonstrations at the Concord Naval Weapons Station Sept. 2. Morrison was the beginning of Brian's transformation from kill warrior to peace warrior — from Air Force intelligence officer monitoring aerial barrages in Vietnam to Vietnam vet trying to block the shipment of U.S. weapons to Central America.

Several years ago, Brian had shared the story with a group of Vietnam vets who were meeting to discuss how to translate our revulsion at seeing the U.S. repeat another Vietnam in Central America.

Brian recalled how 20 years earlier he had been returning home from his studies at American University law school when he heard a radio broadcast that would change his life. The news announced that at 5 o'clock that afternoon a certain Norm Morrison had burned himself alive three stories below the office of then-Defense Secretary Robert McNamara.

The news was momentarily startling. Willson had known Norm Morrison; they had grown up together in the town of Ashville, in the Finger Lakes region of upstate New York, and had attended the same high school. Norm was a little older than Brian and had been a very bright student. He had left the town a few years earlier. This November afternoon was the first time Brian had heard of Norm since then.

But it wasn't going to be the last. At the time, Brian said he dismissed Norm Morrison's action as irrational. Three years later, Willson occupied the post of intelligence and security officer at the Binh Thuy air command bunker in the Mekong

Delta of South Vietnam. Binh Thuy coordinated Air Force strikes throughout Southeast Asia and for this reason was buttressed to survive even nuclear attacks.

Willson's job was to gather intelligence in order to ferret out reports of planned attacks against the facility. He would visit the base library often and read everything he could about the nature and history of the Vietnam War. This was part of his duty, but he also had some doubts. His assignment required him to visit the sites of U.S. aerial bombardments and assess the damage.

On one occasion, Brian recalled encountering an old man walking out in a daze from his village which lay in smoking flames and ruins. The terror in that man's eyes never left him, Brian said.

Then one day Brian found a note the base librarian, a Vietnamese woman, had slipped in his books inviting him to dinner at her home in nearby Can Tho. During the visit, she introduced Brian to her father, a man who had been turned into a human crab while imprisoned for opposing then-President Ngo Din Diem.

After dinner, the young woman took out a harp and sang Vietnamese folk songs. One song was about a young American Quaker and father of three who had done what Buddhist monks in Vietnam were then doing to protest the slaughter of their compatriots. It was titled "An Ode To Norm Morrison." When she translated the song, Brian wept.

The years that followed gave no real hint that Brian Willson's professional life would one day parallel Norm Morrison's. Careerwise Brian scored, leaving the Air Force in 1970 with the rank of captain, and starting his legal practice in Washington in 1972. But beneath the professional successes was a growing undertow pushing him to do something above and beyond his career.

In 1974 Willson founded the National Moratorium on Prison Construction, which he ran for the next four years. Then he bought a dairy farm in upstate New York

where he was elected his town's tax assessor.

In 1982, he was appointed vice president of marketing for the New England Country Dairy. Later, he served as an aide to Massachusetts state Sen. Jack Backman on issues of prison reform and veterans' affairs.

From 1984-85, he ran a Vietnam veterans' outreach center in Greenfield, Mass., counseling vets suffering from drug problems, alcoholism, joblessness, homelessness and suicidal depression as a result of their war experiences.

For his work with vets and his advocacy of veteran rights, Brian received a commendation for exemplary service from Massachusetts Governor Mike Dukakis.

Last year, following a trip through Nicaragua's war zones, Brian and another Vietnam vet went on a hunger strike for 26 days on the steps of the Capitol to bring public attention to the human suffering U.S. policies were creating in Central America.

Moments before the Navy train severed his leg, Brian told friends sometimes the trains try to play "chicken," and once a train had stopped only 18 inches away from his face. Brian expected the train to stop again, but he also said he was prepared to give his life waging peace, to stop the bombing of people in Central America.

Norm Morrison became a Vietnamese hero. There's a monument to him in Hanoi, and city streets bear his name. Brian Willson is known and loved in Nicaragua, from government officials in Managua to campesinos in Jinotega.

One example shaped another. Norm Morrison turned out to be not only a hero to his own ideals but a prophet in what he understood about America and its foreign policies. Twenty years separate Brian Willson from Norm Morrison. Whose lives now will Brian's example change?

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