

Concord protesters are an unlikely group

By Joanne Grant and Jack Fischer
Mercury News Staff Writers

They seem a disparate group: an 84-year-old retired chiropractor, a mother in her 20s, a Vietnam vet, a retired kindergarten teacher and a 47-year-old grandmother.

For the past three months, they have gathered frequently outside the Concord Naval Weapons Station, on most days but a handful strong. They stand just beyond the yellow lines their government has painted to keep people off the 13,000-acre property, a shipping point for munitions and bombs. For three months, until a train struck and maimed S. Brian Willson on Tuesday as he sat on the tracks, few noticed their quiet vigil against what they say are arms shipments to Central America.

Even Friday, their numbers had swelled to no more than 10. Still, they came.

"Peace is a way of life," explained Abraham Zwickel, the 84-year-old retired chiropractor, who was jailed for protesting during World War II. "It isn't just somebody

telling someone to stop killing each other." Like Zwickel, many of those who have taken part in the rail-yard demonstration share a philosophy and training that makes them political and spiritual heirs to Martin Luther King and Mahatma Gandhi.

"The idea is to empower people to do something directly instead of just feeling bad about something, like the war in Central America," said Phil McManus, a longtime staff member at the Resource Center for Non-Violence in Santa Cruz, which trains activists to prepare for their protests. "Our whole purpose is to promote non-violence to effect social change."

On Friday, the protesters tried to work that change on the guards standing before them, just outside the Naval Weapons Station gates, in combat camouflage fatigues.

Zwickel, who has taken the bus from his home in Pittsburg to the Concord facility almost every day since a concentrated protest began there in June, steadily beat a worn Japanese drum he got during a 300-mile peace walk in that nation.

"It perhaps will quiet the drums of war," he suggested, his "Peace with Justice in Central America" T-shirt half-hidden beneath several layers of clothes.

With him stood Jean Bakewell, a 47-year-old grandmother from Orinda. She carried a sign with the words of Mahatma Gandhi: "One Planet. One Species. One Family."

A couple of hundred yards away, a half-dozen other protesters gathered on or beside the railroad tracks where Willson was struck by a train. A bright blue banner proclaiming "Nuremberg Actions" was stretched across the tracks.

One of the group was Laura Ryder, 25, of Concord, who has been coming to the tracks since June "because I think what we're doing is wrong."

Her 4-year-old daughter, Katherine, stood nearby.

Muriel Cordier, an "over-65" retired kindergarten teacher from Benicia long involved in the peace movement, spoke of the "need for self-determination in South

America" — and of her 23-year-old son. "I don't want him to go settle something Reagan started in Central America," she said.

As they stood their vigil, the protesters all expressed regret at what they called the apathy and indifference of society.

But most expressed a measure of hope. They said more people have started coming to demonstrate at night, after work.

Friday morning, however, just one demonstrator was there for the first time — catalyzed by Willson's maiming.

Lloyd Churgin, 50, of Berkeley, said he organizes workshops on mental health and drug and alcohol abuse at the University of California at Berkeley.

He was carrying a sign by the tracks "for the same reason I do that kind of work — dealing with the ills of our society."

"This," he said, "is one of the most clear and outrageous ones."

Weapons station is largest of its kind on West Coast

By Steve Johnson
Mercury News Staff Writer

Each month, thousands of tons of bullets, rockets, bombs, depth charges and just about anything else that goes bang makes its way through a tightly guarded military base near Concord called the Naval Weapons Station.

It is the biggest ordnance transshipment point on the West Coast, funneling explosive supplies not just to the Navy and Marines, but to the Army and Air Force as well as to other countries that arrange to buy munitions from the United States.

In 1985, two researchers published a book titled "Nuclear Battlefields," that said Concord was one of a number of military sites in the country where nuclear weapons are stored.

though they also can be sent elsewhere.

The station, which is slightly less than 13,000 acres, handles roughly 80,000 to 120,000 tons of ordnance every year, Tikalsky said Friday. That includes "ammunition, missiles, bombs and rockets . . . the general shopping list" of military ordnance. "We don't send anything out of here normally that is not explosive in nature."

Most of that comes into the station on commercial trucks or trains, such as the one that ran over protester S. Brian Willson on Tuesday. The Navy has declined to talk specifically about what was on the train that struck Willson as he sat on the tracks just outside base property. Trucks from the station use public roads, and that occasionally can cause problems.

In April last year, for example, a truck hauling 60mm mortar shells from the Sierra Army Depot near Susanville to the Concord station overturned on Interstate 5 south of Sacramento, spilling some of the shells. None exploded.

When ordnance reaches the station, Naval officials there usually try to have a ship waiting for it so that it does not have to be stored for more than a few days, Tikalsky said.

The material generally leaves the station by commercial vessels or by naval ammunition ships for delivery to military bases overseas or to Naval warships. Sometimes smaller warships, such as frigates, will pick up their own ammunition directly at the base, Tikalsky said.