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Tom Van Dyke — Mercury News

Protesters rip apart railroad tracks Saturday outside Concord Naval Weapons Station

# Munitions train propels tiny movement

## Mutilation brings national attention — in unwanted way

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Squinting from under his trademark St. Louis Cardinals baseball cap, S. Brian Willson gazed at the 30-plus peace activists who had come to regard him as their inspirational leader in the fight to stop American involvement in Central America.

At the gates of the Concord Naval Weapons Station, the burly, bearded Vietnam veteran delivered his message with quiet force.

### Willson's words

"We can speak our hearts with our bodies and with our legs between these rails," Willson told his colleagues and a handful of reporters as they stood near the tracks leading into the station.

A little more than an hour later, Brian Willson lay mangled and bleeding on those same tracks, struck by a munitions train that witnesses say never slowed down.

A small, non-violent protest intended to promote peace suddenly had become one of the ugliest confrontations yet in the fledgling movement that opposes America's role in Central America.

And for the peace activists who had been gathering outside the weapons station routinely since June, the drama last Tuesday brought their cause the national attention they wanted so badly — in a way they had never imagined or hardly welcomed.

Duncan Murphy, a 67-year-old peace activist from Arkansas, had spent the night at Willson's home in San Rafael. The two men met years earlier in New York and Murphy came to California to join the Concord protest.

Willson lived with his bride of 11 days, Holley Rauhen, 34, a midwife, and her 14-year-old son, Gabriel.

Tuesday morning, Murphy rode with the Willson family on the 45-minute drive from San Rafael to Concord.

Along the way, they discussed the importance of the upcoming demonstration.

### 'Real opportunity'

"We felt that this was a real opportunity, an escalation of consciousness," said Murphy, who, like Willson, had begun a 40-day fast.

Shortly before 10:30 a.m., Willson, Rauhen and Murphy arrived at the protest site — one of the spots where the railroad tracks parallel the Port Chicago Highway on land that belongs to Contra Costa County.

Moments later, Scott Rutherford, a 53-year-old Santa Cruz resident, joined them in the prayer circle.

"We did singing, mainly," said Rutherford, who had retired as a midlevel administrator with the U.S. Department of Commerce in Washington, D.C., before moving to California in January.

Participants said their mood on this warm Northern California morning was like the weather itself: filled with promise.

"Brian was full of expectations," Rutherford said. "He is rather charismatic to most of us. He was the one to whom we were responding. His mood rubbed off on other people. We had all been working together for some time."

Months of planning had gone into Tuesday's demonstration. Protesters had sent several letters to base officials weeks in advance, telling of their plan to block the tracks.

Ten to 15 minutes before the yellow diesel locomotive was scheduled to leave the naval station, a similar note was hand-delivered to base officials.

Even so, the protesters knew their plan was risky. "We were always prepared for being hurt," said Murphy.

But, said Rutherford, "there was no expectation that anything could go wrong. We had every expectation the train would stop."

About 11 a.m., standing on the tracks in front of an

unfurled banner that read "Nuremberg Actions," Willson spoke of the importance of blocking the munitions train.

Gerry Condon, a 40-year-old former Green Beret medic from San Mateo, remembers Willson saying, "If this train gets past me, it is going to kill somebody else" in Central America.

Once the sparsely attended press conference had broken up, the demonstrators milled about the tracks. They were waiting, they believed, for the train to nudge forward and stop.

Then, they thought, the Contra Costa County Sher-

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iff's Department or the Navy would remove them from the tracks and — possibly — arrest them.

Their point would be made. And no one would get hurt.

Indeed, the train idled just inside the station gates as a second prayer circle formed near the tracks. It was now about 11:30 a.m.

Ten minutes later, Willson, Murphy and protester David Duncombe, the campus minister at the University of California at San Francisco, took up their positions on the track.

Its air horn blasting and its huge diesel motor revving, the locomotive began to lumber out of the base.

"Here it comes!" one of the protesters shouted.

Willson sat on the track. Rauen stood to the side, holding a sign that read, "Just Say No." It showed a missile with a line drawn through it.

## 'Not expecting a crisis'

"Some of us were so lackadaisical, we were not expecting a crisis," said Condon, who was talking to Scott Rutherford when the train started to move. "We had gone off into little groups talking about things to organize."

Witnesses said the engine appeared to pick up speed as it approached the three demonstrators on the tracks. Two civilian employees — a brakeman and a conductor — stood on the cow catcher of the Navy locomotive as spotters.

As the train rounded a curve, about 50 to 60 feet from where Willson, Murphy and Duncombe were positioned, it was clear to bystanders it could not stop in time.

"It was moving toward these people at a rate that was fast enough to be immediately alarming," said

**'I got furious when it dawned on me that this had to be intentional, this game of chicken.'**

— Robert Spitzer, Stanford psychiatrist who videotaped tragedy

Condon. "Then to watch it, with my mouth open, instead of slow down seem to gain speed, I said, 'My God! Isn't it going fast?'"

Rauen raised her hand and began to shout at the train.

"Please stop. Please stop," she cried. "They're not going to get off (the track)."

Navy spokesman Dan Tikalsky said the engineer was told to stop if there was anyone on the tracks. And Navy officials have since told Rep. Barbara Boxer, D-Greenbrae, that the engineer and three others on the train never saw the protesters on the tracks, according to Boxer.

As the train neared, Duncombe lunged from the tracks. Murphy grabbed the cow catcher and clung to it as the train rolled on.

Brian Willson was hit.

As the train moved on, he was dragged like a rag doll under the locomotive and two box cars.

"I saw Brian take the full force of the train and tumbling underneath the train," said Ken Butigan, an organizer with the Pledge of Resistance, a national civil disobedience training organization.

"He seemed to lunge a little bit," said Sydney Vilen of San Bruno, a limousine driver who showed up for the protest. "But instead of giving in to that instinct to leave — and this is only my impression — I think because he had been through it in his mind so many times, I saw him center right into himself, and hunch

down."

Said Duncombe: "All I heard was a thump when Duncan (Murphy) hit the train and a muffled yell.

"I was lying on the ground and I saw Brian just being tossed about underneath the train. I wasn't aware who it was then; he was crumpled up. I just thought, 'My God! My God!'"

"It was just mayhem. People were hysterical and angry. I grabbed some of the Marines (who had been standing near the gate) and brought them over and said, 'Look at this! I want you to remember this as long as you live.'"

Murphy, who suffered a leg cut that required stitches, said he jumped off the train when he heard the screams that Willson had been hurt. "He was struggling to stand up on his severed legs," Murphy said. "I put my arms around his head and laid him down."

Willson's head had been gashed, exposing his brain above his right eye. His right foot had been severed at the ankle. The train's wheels had "chopped him like a meat grinder," said Pierre Blais, a protester from San Jose. "I started sobbing like a madman."

Willson remained conscious as his wife pressed her skirt against his right leg to stop the bleeding, while Condon applied pressure to the mangled left leg.

"I'm holding your leg, honey. I'm holding the bleeding," Rauen told her husband.

"If it hadn't been for Holley, Brian would have been

gone," said Murphy, whose T-shirt was smeared in blood.

Others stood around, dazed, sickened, disbelieving and grief stricken.

"You killed my father!" screamed Gabriel Rauen, Willson's stepson.

"Bring Gabriel here to see that Brian is alive," said Rauen, who had managed to stay more composed than many others at the scene. "He's not dead, Gabriel."

Another protester said, "We love you Brian. You just hang in there, babe."

## Scene of hysteria

It was now about noon. The demonstrators formed a circle around the tracks as Rauen, Murphy and Condon administered aid. Contra Costa County sheriff's deputies and officers from other law enforcement agencies arrived to find a scene of hysteria and confusion.

As more police and rescue workers arrived, grief began to give way to anger.

"I got furious when it dawned on me that this had to be intentional, this game of chicken," said Robert Spitzer, a 60-year-old Stanford psychiatrist whose videotape of the incident has become a central piece of evidence in the investigation.

Ten days earlier, Spitzer had shot the videotape of Rauen and Willson's wedding.

After 15 minutes, a U.S. Navy ambulance arrived to take Willson to John Muir Hospital in Walnut Creek. Hospital records show that he arrived at 12:30 p.m.

As she prepared to leave for the hospital, Rauen told a friend, "Look for his Vietnam belt buckle.

"It means a lot to him."

Mercury News Staff Writers Alan Gathright and Denis Collins contributed to this report.