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Crowd tears up tracks

Rally for veteran ends in violence

By Kristin Huckshorn
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CONCORD — A rally called to demonstrate peaceful support for the Vietnam veteran hit by a Navy train ended in anger Saturday when protesters tore apart the railroad track outside the Concord Naval Weapons Station.

About 75 protesters dismantled 300 feet of railroad ties and girders. They ignored pleas for non-violence from Holley Rauen, whose husband, S. Brian Willson, lost both legs Tuesday when he was run over while sitting on the same track to protest alleged U.S. weapons shipments to Central America.

Less than two hours earlier, Rauen's 14-year-old son, Gabriel, had reminded the crowd of 5,000 that his

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stepfather believed in non-violent civil disobedience. "I am proud of my father," Gabriel said, "because he was willing to give the ultimate sacrifice."

The Rev. Jesse Jackson, who followed Gabriel on the stage, told the crowd, "when that train rolled over Brian, it rolled over all of us."

Holley Rauen, her voice shaking with emotion, said, "There's no excuse, no excuse. I hold the military responsible, and I hold the commander of this base responsible for what has happened to my husband."

Later, Rauen's request for non-violence went unheeded. More than 150 law enforcement officers from the Contra Costa County Sheriff's Department and Concord Police Department formed lines inside the base's barbed-wired entrance roads and watched the tracks torn apart but did not interfere.

Five people were detained by the Sheriff's Department, but not arrested, when they tried to cross the barbed wire, a spokesman for the department said Saturday.

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The spokesman said, "It was a command decision not to interfere, to allow them to lift rails and ties."

The lone section of track left intact by the protesters was the spot where Willson was hit. That section and its adornments — carnations, signs and an abalone shell — were left untouched.

Willson, 46, remained in fair condition Saturday at John Muir Hospital in Walnut Creek. He was visited Saturday morning by Rosario Murillo, the wife of President Daniel Ortega of Nicaragua. Murillo later toured the site where Willson was hit but skipped the rally, which was held at a dusty park adjacent to the track.

Gabriel Rauen's short speech provided the rally's most emotional moments. Gabriel was at the track Tuesday when his stepfather was hit, and Holley Rauen said, "it was difficult for him to come back here today."

Holley Rauen played a tape of a message Willson recorded Saturday morning. Willson, speaking with difficulty because of an oxygen tube, said, "I'm going to be OK. They tell me that I'm going to be walking."

Jackson arrived just after 1:30

‘This is not our way.’

— *Duncan Murphy,*
friend of victim

p.m. and spoke for about 15 minutes. An impassioned orator, Jackson called Willson "a martyr" and alluded to the Holocaust, sermonizing, "if someone had laid down on a railroad track in West Germany, 6 million might not have died."

He later walked 100 feet to the spot where Willson was hit, knelt on the track with Gabriel and his own son, Jesse Jr., and prayed.

The rally was supposed to end with people sitting peacefully along Port Chicago Road, which the track crosses when it leaves the base. But some protesters immediately produced crowbars, tools and oil cans and began tearing apart the track.

Two of Willson's friends, Duncan Murphy and George Mizo, who both fasted with Willson last year on the U.S. Capitol steps, walked among the protesters asking them to disband.

Murphy, who was on the track

with Willson on Tuesday, said the rally organizers were disassociating themselves from the action. "This is not our way," he said.

Robert Wright, a spokesman for the organizing group, said group leaders had assured the Sheriff's Department that they would try to keep the rally non-violent. "They are a little embarrassed by this," he said.

An investigation by the Sheriff's Department into Willson's maiming is supposed to conclude Tuesday. The Navy and the Federal Railroad Administration are conducting separate investigations.

The Sheriff's Department on Saturday confirmed the names of the three crew members who were operating the train when it hit Willson. They were engineer David Humiston of Antioch, conductor Ralph E. Dawson of Vallejo and brakeman Robert Mayfield of Vacaville.

Bob LaSalle, a spokesman for the protesters, said that members of his group, including himself and Murphy, were expected to meet Tuesday with base officials to discuss future protests.

Mercury News wire services contributed to this report.