

VFW dissidents off hook

Willson rally won't bring front-office penalty

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Mercury News Staff Writers

The state office for the Veterans of Foreign Wars backed down Wednesday on a threat to penalize a Santa Cruz VFW chapter for wearing VFW uniforms and displaying the VFW flag at a rally for the Vietnam veteran hit by a Navy train.

Joseph I. Romano, state commander of the organization, said he would not suspend or reprimand members of Bill Motto Post 5888, even though they wore VFW hats and carried the organization's flag Saturday at a rally at the Concord Naval Weapons Station.

Post members joined more than 5,000 demonstrators protesting the maiming of S. Brian Willson, who lost his legs when he was run over Sept. 1 by a Navy train as he sat on the tracks outside Concord Naval Weapons Station. He and others were protesting what they believe are U.S. weapons shipments to Central America from Concord.

"I'm a mean sergeant but I'm not that mean," said Romano, adding that it was his understanding that post members attended the rally but "weren't intermingling with the protesters."

Romano had warned Post 5888 not to represent the organization at the rally by wearing VFW uniforms or carrying the VFW national flag. The post signed an agreement with the national VFW in 1985 that stated it would not adopt positions contrary to national VFW policy and would not break VFW rules.

The VFW supports U.S. aid to anti-communist forces in Central America, Romano said last week.

Romano said Wednesday that he hadn't talked to Steve Brooks, commander of Post 5888. "But unless he gives me reason, I wouldn't take any action," Romano said.

Protests continued Wednesday at the base. About 20 demonstrators attempted to block Navy trucks but were held back by Marines, sheriff's deputies and California Highway Patrol officers, protesters and a Sheriff's Department spokesman said.

Lynn Scarper, one of the demonstrators, said Marines in fatigues formed a human corridor between the base and its port-access road about 500 feet away. Scarper said six convoy-sized trucks, bearing the words "Explosives — A", were escorted through.

The Navy declined to comment on the incident.

Ten protesters were arrested by the Sheriff's Department outside the base Tuesday after they sat in front of Navy trucks as the trucks drove toward the port road.

Willson, meanwhile, remained in good condition Wednesday at John Muir Hospital in Walnut Creek. He was to be moved to the hospital's rehabilitation unit today or Friday, said Sandra Ryan, a hospital spokeswoman.

Willson was expected to make his first public appearance, since the incident, on Friday at the hospital.

Also Wednesday, the Contra Costa County Sheriff's Department said its report on the incident would not be sent to the district attorney's office until next week.