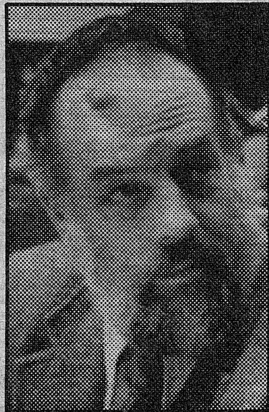


Concord confrontation

Officer hoped to spark trouble, panel learns



S. Brian Willson
... Maimed

By Bart Greenwald
Mercury News Washington Bureau

WASHINGTON — A security officer who wanted to provoke a confrontation allowed a munitions train to speed down the tracks, leading to the maiming of peace protester S. Brian Willson, a Navy investigator told a House panel Wednesday.

But the investigator, Capt. Stanley J. Pryzby, said no Navy personnel intended to harm Willson, and that a series of

"mistakes and miscalculations," greatly contributed to the Sept. 1 incident.

Willson, 46, a San Rafael resident, lost both legs below the knee after he was run over by the train outside the Concord Naval Weapons Station. Willson, a Vietnam veteran, was sitting on the tracks to protest alleged U.S. arms shipments to Central America.

Willson attended the hearing by the investigations committee of the House
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Willson says he wasn't hit by accident

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Armed Services Committee. He walked with the help of two canes to the witness chair, and in an hour of questioning, said he did not believe he was hit by mistake.

"I am led to believe there was in some sense an attitude (by some Navy staff) that there was going to be a confrontation," Willson said.

The Navy report on the incident included acknowledgment by John Banta, the weapons station's civilian security manager, that he told the train's crew to proceed toward Willson and two other protesters seated on the track.

"You might as well let them go ahead, we are going to have a confrontation sooner or later," the 300-page report quoted Banta as saying.

Additionally, Pryzby testified that the train, which was not equipped with a speedometer, was traveling 10 to 16 mph — despite a Navy regulation that the trains must move at 5 mph whenever protesters were nearby.

Pryzby said training of key personnel, including the train crew, about the 5 mph limit was deficient, and said communication among personnel was fragmented.

But he said a series of incorrect assumptions by the base commander, train crew, local law enforcement officials and protesters led to the incident.

"It was the convergence of such reasonable but erroneous assumptions which, together with the demonstrators' foolhardy and illegal acts of trespass, ultimately resulted in the accident," Pryzby said.

The base commander, Capt. Lonnie Cagle, and the base's public works officer, Cmdr. Clayton Ching, received disciplinary letters from the Navy last month for failing to take actions that would have averted the incident.

Both Willson and Pryzby testified that Willson sent a letter months in advance, warning Cagle that protesters would maintain a presence at the weapons station.

The Navy investigation confirmed that on Sept. 1, about an hour before Willson sat on the track, a copy of a letter was delivered to the base, noting that protesters would attempt to block the



Associated Press

S. Brian Willson with wife, Holley Rauén

munitions train.

According to the report, Banta then called the Contra Costa County Sheriff's Department to notify it of the protesters' intentions. But before sheriff's deputies arrived, Banta gave permission for the train to proceed.

Banta told Navy investigators that he thought the train would be able to stop if protesters were on the tracks.

Willson told the committee that, based on advance warnings to the base, he and other protesters, "had every reason to believe that the train would stop."

During questioning of Willson, Rep. Larry Hopkins, R-Ky., said he found it hard to "comprehend the sanity" of Willson's decision to sit on the tracks. Hopkins was interrupted by a woman who later was escorted out of the room.

"This is insulting . . . shameful," shouted Andrea Primdahl of Washington, who said she met Willson when he was fasting on the Capitol steps last year.

Rep. Barbara Boxer, D-San Rafael, pointed out several discrepancies between the final report and recommendations Pryzby made to

the Navy after his investigation.

Among the original recommendations, Pryzby said that Cagle should be relieved of command. Pryzby also had recommended that Banta be suspended without pay for one to four months, according to Rep. Ron Dellums, D-Oakland. Banta has not been disciplined by the Navy.

An earlier investigation by the Contra Costa County district attorney's office resulted in no charges being filed against either base personnel or protesters. District Attorney Gary Yancey declined to comment on the Navy report.

Sydney Vilen, spokeswoman for the protesters, called the Navy's report a "whitewash."

Dan Tikalsky, base spokesman, said he had no comment on the report.

Willson's attorney, Doron Weinberg, is scheduled to hold a news conference this morning in San Francisco. Weinberg has said that Willson may file a civil suit against the Navy.

Mercury News Staff Writers Elias Castillo and Kristin Huckshorn contributed to this report.