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Section

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Jim Trotter

## Protester now symbol of cause

CONCORD

**L**ABOR DAY 1987: Three dozen people gather at the dusty rail line outside the Naval Weapons Station, sitting there among the wilting flowers and hand-drawn placards, conversing in hushed tones. Some are reliving the events of Sept. 1, walking along the track, pointing down to where the train started out. And right there is where it ran down a man named S. Brian Willson.

Under pleasant sun and light breeze, there is a drowsy quality to the afternoon. Someone is strumming a guitar; two women are breast-feeding their infants. The gathering draws mixed reviews from cars speeding by on the highway. Some people blow their horns and wave. A smaller number flip their middle fingers and shout epithets.

The group is cheered by the friendly responses. "The people driving by have been overwhelmingly supportive," said Dorothy Grenada, a nurse from Santa Cruz.

This vigil at the Naval Weapons Station began in June as a protest against the shipment of American arms to Central America. Until last Tuesday, it had gone largely unnoticed.

Some people are sitting in the tracks, leaning back against the rails, in the exact spot where Willson lost his legs to the locomotive, but, in a seeming miracle, escaped with his life. A crudely printed sign there says, "Brian Willson — patriot. Gave his limbs so our nation be whole."

Regardless of what you think about the war in Nicaragua or the protest at the weapons station, I think there are several things to say about what happened to Brian Willson. One, if the man was breaking the law, he should have been arrested and given his day in court. Two, we've skipped several important steps in that process if we allow a train crew to be judge, jury and executioner.

**I**SAY that because I believe the train crew saw Willson sitting on the track. It would have been impossible for them not to have seen him. It is a clear, unobstructed line of sight from the guard's gate, where the train was stopped, to the site where Willson was struck. The Navy also has acknowledged it had been notified that protesters intended to block the train.

I don't think the train crew set out to kill Willson. They thought he would jump out of the way. It was a brutal and arrogant miscalculation that they had no right to make. After all, they were the ones controlling the 12½-ton locomotive.

"They were looking at us, and we were looking at them," said the Rev. David Duncombe, one of two men on the tracks with Willson. Duncombe, who works at a campus ministry at the University of California at San Francisco, jumped clear, while Duncan Murphy, the other man on the track, saved himself by clutching a rail on the front of the train. "That stuff about them not seeing us or us jumping in front of the train is just poppycock," said Duncombe.

OK, so why didn't Willson jump?

"Several people who have questioned me have tried to get me to say Brian was suicidal," said Duncombe, 59. "That's just ridiculous. Brian is full of life. He has a great future. He just got married. But I, too, have given a lot of thought to why Duncan and I jumped and Brian didn't.

**'T**HE LAST thing I said to Brian before he was hit, I asked him, 'How you doing, Brian?' His response to me was, 'I'm feeling a little nervous.' I thought it was kind of a funny thing for him to say. I wasn't feeling nervous about it at all. But now I realize I knew in my heart that I was prepared to jump. That's why I wasn't nervous.

"I think he was nervous because he knew a moment of decision was coming. I think he hadn't even admitted to himself what his decision was going to be. But when the moment came, it was his level of commitment both in mind and heart that made him not jump. In that moment, he was willing to pay the price.

"I don't think Brian thought the train would run over us. But when it came down to it, I was prepared to jump; he wasn't."

I think the third thing to say about Brian Willson is that he was willing to give himself up for something he believed in. That sure seems unusual, but it isn't insane. Whatever else might be said, he has become a powerful symbol for his cause.

Labor Day 1987. The news tonight says Brian Willson is being fitted for artificial limbs that will allow him to walk again. Demonstrators say they'll maintain the vigil at the Naval Weapons Station until the trains stop rolling. Neither the Navy, the Contra Costa County Sheriff's Department nor the district attorney's office have said much about who is responsible for the train that ran over Brian Willson.

However, if simple justice is to prevail, I think they will. I think they must.

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