

# 'Cat and mouse' game at Concord weapons site

San Jose Mercury News, Wednesday morning, September 16, 1987

Section **F**

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Just west of tiny Clyde (population 450), on a barren, wind-buffed flat, another small scene in the theater of American political protest is unfolding.

Four men, arms linked, stand on the tracks, blocking the path of a train attempting to enter the Concord Naval Weapons Station.

"All right, you guys, come on," says Sgt. Al Earle of the Contra Costa County Sheriff's Department, gently tugging the elbow of the nearest man. "Remember your code of non-violence. Go along with the program."

The foursome piles quietly into a squad car to be booked for trespassing.

## So civil

Civil disobedience has rarely seemed so civil.

### Witness:

Two weeks ago, after a Navy train mutilated S. Brian Willson as he sat in its path, a mob of demonstrators tore up the tracks in angry retaliation. Today the small band of demonstrators that remains sleeps in a large tent — donated and erected by their adversaries, the Marines guarding the station.

The same Marines have stepped in to protect the demonstrators when hecklers hurl insults. And the protesters, most of them members of the Nuremberg Actions Committee, a group committed to non-violence, have offered to shield the Marines if they're attacked by more radical foes.

The military and peace protesters, it seems, have found a common ground: the resolve to avoid another clash like the one that cost Vietnam veteran Willson both legs in his crusade to halt alleged arms shipments to Central America. Marine Maj. Michael Warren, the base security director, has even promised to alert his adversaries when the Navy plans to move trains to or from the station, a shipping point for bombs and munitions.

"We will not allow another tragedy to

happen," he declares bluntly.

A burly, affable man, Warren appears to have learned well that public relations can be mightier than military muscle. The day the Marines provided the tent, he made a point of telling local television viewers that he just wanted to guarantee the protesters' safety.

But if the dance of demonstration has lost its explosiveness, the Marines have been known to improvise, throwing their protesting partners out of step.

At times, Maj. Warren and his men appear to be playing something akin to a street hustler's shell game, with munitions shipments replacing the elusive pea.

He warns the protesters that a train will be moving, causing them to rush to the tracks.

Then, as a human corridor of young Marines rushes into position, a weapons-laden truck convoy drives through their ranks — as the demonstrators helplessly watch.

At other times, Warren has called a conference of protest leaders just before trucks move — again throwing the opposition off guard.

"There's a game of cat and mouse going on here," said the Rev. David Duncombe, 59, one of several veterans fasting in protest of arms shipments, which they say are used against civilians in Nicaragua and El Salvador.

Duncombe recalled that when Warren came to offer the tent and water Wednesday afternoon, two munitions trucks rolled out of the base, because demonstrators' "blockers" were distracted.

"Well, you're certainly a foxy guy," the minister told Warren.

"He smiled and said, 'Yes,'" Duncombe recounted.

Despite such mischievous moments, a day on the front lines is moored in hours of monotony.

The protesters — veterans, a day-care center operator, an environmentalist, a

college drama student — stand watches beside the track. About 10 of them stay overnight in the tent, now festooned with banners declaring "We Shall Overcome," and swap life stories over flickering candles.

Romantic it isn't.

"It's kind of boring and cold," said Steve Kutchko, 18, an oceanography student at Diablo Valley College in Pleasant Hill.

But the boredom can dissipate quickly during the daily contest of wits over arms entering and leaving the station.

#### 'Decoy trick'

That was the case at 7 a.m. Friday. Warren dutifully warned protesters that a train pulling empty boxcars would enter the base to "test" new tracks. When he refused to let them ensure that the cars were empty, the protesters began preparing a blockade.

But as they stationed themselves on the tracks, 100 Marines sprinted out of the

base and formed a corridor. A caravan of about 20 trucks laden with munitions rolled through.

"He did it again!" Duncombe shouted as the protesters watched helplessly. "The old decoy trick. How can we be so stupid?"

Moments later they rushed back to the tracks as an engine pulling 10 boxcars approached.

"Protesters who do not wish to participate in any form of civil disobedience please step on the other side of the police cars," Warren warned politely. "Those who are committed to the blocking, please have a seat on the tracks."

As deputies moved in to arrest eight demonstrators, a woman gently chided the human wall of fresh-faced Marines who stood at attention, shielding the train.

"Think of that child being mutilated (in Central America)," said Helen Zink, 44, a day-care center operator from Pleasant Hill. "That could possibly be your child."

Some Marines stared ahead, stony-faced. But a few, without moving their heads, shifted their eyes sideways to glimpse their soft-spoken adversary.

#### New strategies

In 20 minutes, the Marines had pulled back, the deputies had driven their prisoners off in a police wagon, and protesters were plotting new strategies to counter Warren's tactics.

Still, the demonstrators insisted that they feel no personal resentment toward their opponents. Indeed, they spoke of a growing "mutual respect."

"We have a job to do; they have a job to do," said protester John Beranek, 38, who was a paratrooper in Vietnam. "If we treat them with respect, we know they're going to treat us with respect. Then you can talk with people."

Warren, for his part, denied he had purposely deceived the protesters.

But, with a slight grin, he added, "We haven't told them that we'd warn them (before moving) trucks."