

Veterans

Battle Ends for VFW Post 5888

■ BOB JOHNSON S-30-85 EX

Last week, the Veterans of Foreign Wars and Santa Cruz Post 5888 agreed to a compromise settlement that ends their six-month-old beef over the Post's public protests against intervention in Central America.

More than a year ago, Post 5888 adopted a resolution critical of the Reagan Administration's policy in Central America and calling for non-intervention in that region. That resolution became most controversial last December when 5888 member Bill Watkins delivered a copy to Nicaraguan President Daniel Ortega.

The VFW reacted by suspending the 5888's charter for taking a public position contrary to national VFW support of United States primacy in Central America. Post 5888 filed suit against the national in order to regain its charter.

The Post regained its charter through last week's settlement but had to agree to not take public positions contrary to policies of the national VFW. Members of the 5888 did not agree on whether the settlement was a victory but a large majority voted at a Wednesday night closed door session to ratify it.

On Memorial Day four years ago, Bill Motto and his friend, Bobby Lee Shippen, spent the morning scoring armloads of bouquets from local florists. Both of them had served as medics in Vietnam and both had seen too many people die too young. They would spend that Memorial Day going up and down the Pacific Garden Mall handing out flowers for the living.

Bill Motto died of a heart attack at the age of 31 while fishing from the cliffs near Natural Bridges Beach in the Summer of '81. He had received two purple hearts and three bronze stars while still a

teenager. He was most proud, however, of his medic's pin. And Motto, among the first handful of Vietnam vets to come out of the closet at the turn of the decade, could not stop talking about the only question that really matters: life and death.

While the popcorn vendors prepared themselves for the huge crowds at amusement parks and traditional commemorative major league doubleheaders throughout the country, many of Bill Motto's friends approached Memorial Day 1985 still struggling to remember him by trying to make a difference in whether some people in Central America continue to live.

Bill's mom, Betty Payne, who works as a foster parent for terminally ill children in Southern California, claimed his death was combat-related. His heart was poor even before entering the service. He had applied for medical benefits from the Veterans' Administration and received his rejection in the mail two days before his death.

Betty Payne continued the claim that Bill's death was service-related, spending well over two years pressing the case through the Veterans' bureaucracy, and was awarded a settlement this January. She told San Jose *Mercury News* reporter Jack Foley at that time: "He went over to Vietnam and did what he was told, and then they turned their back on him."

In the middle of her journey through the bureaucracy, Betty Payne came to Santa Cruz for the founding of the VFW post that bears her son's name. At that first meeting in December of 1983, the post barely had the 50 member minimum.

That small circle of friends has since received the attention of all three major television networks. The San Jose *Mercury* has given extensive coverage to the group. The San Francisco *Chronicle* picked up the story. Even the New York

Times made the trip West to cover Bill Motto Post 5888.

That flurry of attention came after Foley wrote the story of Watkins' trip to Nicaragua to deliver the 5888's resolution to Ortega and to let the Sandinista leader know that not all United States veterans support continued intervention in Central America.

The resolution — passed unanimously by the post — concludes: "Bill Motto VFW Post 5888 supports a policy of self-determination and non-intervention in Central America; and sees current administration policy as escalating, rather than resolving, such conflicts."

Since word of the resolution got out, the post has grown rapidly and is headed toward the 200-member level, including veterans from all wars in this century. And the post has received hundreds of letters of support from activists in veterans groups from around the country.

A 72-year-old New Jersey woman, Florence Haitich, for example, wrote: "I have been a member of the local American Legion Auxiliary for over 50 years. I have been Poppy Chairlady for years, and still run a vigorous poppy fund drive." She wrote to let Post 5888 know, "I am behind your action."

National VFW Commander Billy Ray Cameron, however, was not at all pleased by the publicity of 5888's call for non-intervention in Central America. The national convention of the VFW has passed a resolution calling for "American primacy" in Central America. And the group has established a "Humanitarian-Truth Fund for Nicaraguan Freedom Fighters," which sends money to the *Contras* through the Virginia-based American Security Council Foundation.

When 5888 went public with its opposition to national VFW policy, Cameron suspended the post's charter. The post, in turn, filed suit to retain its charter and the right to speak out.

Last week's compromise ending that suit says, "the charter of the post [5888] has been fully reinstated and any disciplinary actions taken against the post have been withdrawn." The agreement, however, also says, "Post 5888 agrees to refrain from stating positions as a post contrary to the National Convention of the Veterans of Foreign

Wars of the United States. Post members are still entitled to publicly express opinions on important issues."

In addition, the settlement places 5888 members on the national bylaws and resolutions committees. It also calls for a promise of retraction of uncomplimentary remarks made by the national and state VFW publications and by Santa Cruz VFW Post 7263 on 7th Avenue.

Bill Motto Post members are deeply divided on whether the settlement was a victory. Post Commander Richard Anderson, who helped negotiate the agreement, believes it is a good one. "It

was significantly less than a total victory," Anderson says. But, he adds, "It enhances our position to deal with the Central America issue because we are working within the belly of the whale."

Post 5888 member Dean Metcalf, who was the main author of the controversial resolution, believes the compromise was a defeat. "We won a lot of little things," Metcalf says, "but lost the only thing that really mattered: the right of the post to speak publicly in opposition to national VFW policy."

Post Chaplain Ruben Gomez was out of town and unavailable for comment: ■

Hard News