

Outpouring of sympathy for critically hurt protester

CONCORD, Calif. (UPI) — A Vietnam veteran who lost both legs when struck by a Navy weapons train while protesting U.S. arms shipments to Central America was praised by the president of Nicaragua, who said his sacrifice "speaks loudly of the nobility of the American people."

Friends said Brian Willson was suffering "total amnesia" about being hit by the train Tuesday while on the tracks at the Concord Naval Weapons Station. His condition was upgraded Wednesday from critical to serious but stable.

The incident drew an outraged 2½-hour demonstration by hundreds of chanting protesters who marched through the streets of Berkeley Wednesday night, breaking two windows at the University of California campus and spray-painting slogans on buildings. There were no arrests.

"They are angry at what was done," a spokeswoman at the Mount Diablo Peace Center in Concord said.

The train, consisting of an engine and two freight cars carrying explosives, severed Willson's right leg and mangled his left leg so badly it had to be amputated during eight hours of surgery at John Muir Hospital in Walnut Creek.

"He has no memory whatever of the train hitting him or of even being there," said Michael Kroil, a longtime friend who was just behind him during the protest. "There was a crack in his skull that you could see."

The hospital said it received an outpouring of letters, telegrams and telephone calls from as far away as Australia expressing sympathy for Willson.

The Navy and the Contra

Costa County Sheriff's Department were both still investigating the speed of the train and whether the civilian at its controls applied the brakes when Willson and another protester knelt on the tracks.

Lt. Tulford Terry of the Contra Costa County Sheriff's Department said the investigation was in its early stages. "Hopefully," he said, "we'll put a package together for the district attorney's office by Friday."

About 50 protesters returned to the blood-stained tracks Wednesday to decry Willson's maiming. His wife of just over a week, Holly Rauen of San Rafael, told reporters that Willson told her: "I'm really a peace agitator. I did this for Gabriel (her 14-year-old son). I want everybody around the country to stop these death trains ... to close down this station."

She said her husband "was prepared to give his life waging peace."

Willson, 46, a lawyer and an Air Force captain in the Vietnam War, has been lecturing to groups about what he says are mistakes in U.S. policy toward Central America.

Nicaragua Wednesday broadcast reports of the incident, and officials released a letter President Daniel Ortega sent to Willson saying: "Dear brother, your sacrifice speaks loudly of the nobility of the American people, who in their majority oppose the use of violence. You are showing your love for peace and justice is stronger than any adversary."

"The Nicaraguan people are moved. Your body, mutilated by those who want war, is part of our pain, but also our hopes for a future of peace."

Willson, Duncan Murphy, 67, and 45 other protesters were at the weapons facility to protest shipment of U.S. weapons to Central America. They planned to fast for 40 days after the demonstration.