

Maverick VFW post in limbo when commander forced to cancel

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SANTA CRUZ — VFW Commander-in-Chief Billy Ray Cameron — the man who holds the fate of local VFW Post 5888 in his hands — never made it here Wednesday afternoon.

As uniformed veterans of two local VFW posts and news reporters waited for his scheduled arrival, it was announced he had interrupted his tour of California to return to North Carolina where his father died Tuesday night.

Cameron is the one man in the VFW who will decide if a revocation order issued against Santa Cruz Post 5888 (the Bill Motto Post), will go into effect March 17.

While Cameron never made it, he did send two national officers, VFW Council Representative George Bellon and national Public Relations Officer Wade LaDue, along with California VFW Cmdr. Jim Martin.

All three said they were not empowered to speak for the national commander, nor second guess his decision on the revocation.

Later that evening, Bellon held out an olive branch, saying, "I'm sure we can come to an amicable decision that will satisfy everybody. I'm sure we can come

to a mutual agreement."

The revocation was ordered in January when the Bill Motto Post was put on 60-day suspension for "willfully promulgating" its maverick stand in support of a U.S. policy of non-intervention in Central America.

The official stand of the two-million-member national VFW supports President Reagan's active opposition to the Sandinista government in Nicaragua and the rebels in El Salvador.

The national headquarters also punished the Bill Motto Post for having one of its members hand-deliver its non-intervention resolution to Nicaraguan President Daniel Ortega's office in Managua, and while there, issuing press releases to Nicaraguan newspapers.

Local and national VFW officials say that if the Bill Motto Post is drummed out, it will be the first time that a local post lost a charter for taking a stand that opposes national VFW policy.

Cameron was scheduled to arrive at Post 7263, the Tres Pueblos post headquartered on Seventh Avenue, for ceremonial greetings and then to present American flags to local school districts. He was to attend a dinner at the Live Oak post that night.

One of those waiting to talk to him was

Cmdr. Richard Anderson of the suspended Bill Motto post.

Anderson and his 50-member post (about 40 are Vietnam vets) are fighting the suspension and revocation, saying the national orders violate their constitutional right of free speech.

In their letter of appeal to Cameron they said, "Does the VFW have the power and authority to enact laws inconsistent with the rights of other American citizens. We think not... we are committed to our right and duty to dissent."

They also said the U.S. is taking "a cruel and utterly stupid path" in Central America and warn the situation there has been worsen by Reagan's policies and threatens to become another Vietnam.

"The U.S. has invaded and suppressed governments and peoples not to our liking in that region many times. The result is always the same. The people will rise up and fight for the respect and freedom and sovereignty which is their God-given right.

"Socialism becomes very attractive indeed when compared to our record and history in Central America."

Anderson says the post's stand does not mean they support the Sandinista government, just oppose U.S. intervention in domestic affairs in Central America.



Bill Lovejoy/Sentinel

National officers Bellon, left, LaDue, center, meet Bill Motto Post Cmdr. Anderson.

During the afternoon, Anderson met with Bellon, LaDue and Martin.

He talked about the meeting later at the Veterans Memorial Hall where the Bill

Motto Post was having a potluck dinner in the basement prior to its meeting. The potluck was held at the same time the Tres Pueblos Post was hosting the na-

tional and state officers at dinner in Live Oak.

Anderson said, "In discussions with Bellon, LaDue and Martin, they said the issue could be resolved without revocation, and we take that to mean there's going to be some kind of compromise."

Out in Live Oak at the Tres Pueblos Post, LaDue disclaimed guaranteeing a compromise. "In no way can I, or George, take the power away from the commander-in-chief. He can go either way on this. Cameron is an eminently fair guy, and he hasn't even had a chance to read their appeal."

He said of the meeting with Anderson, "We only explained the system of bylaws, resolutions and freedom to speak as individuals. The three of us cannot take sides on this."

LaDue said he's hopeful Cameron can get to Santa Cruz before the revocation date.

On the other side of the dining room, Bellon was slightly more hopeful.

"Once we get to talk to them again, I'm sure we can come to a mutual agreement," he said.

Should the Bill Motto Post lose its charter, it would mean its funds would be confiscated and it could no longer act as an official VFW group.