

Local residents rally behind troops

War foes keep a low profile

By LANE WALLACE
STAFF REPORTER

Chanting "USA" frequently, some 500 people marched from Callaghan Park to Watsonville's City Plaza yesterday for a "Support the Troops" rally.

Waving American flags of all sizes, the people sang patriotic songs and cheered speakers who talked about everything from the importance of sending mail to troops in the Persian Gulf area to supporting medical benefits for veterans.

Chico Castro, a Watsonville hair stylist who helped organize the event, reminded the marchers as they started that the rally's emphasis was on supporting the troops.

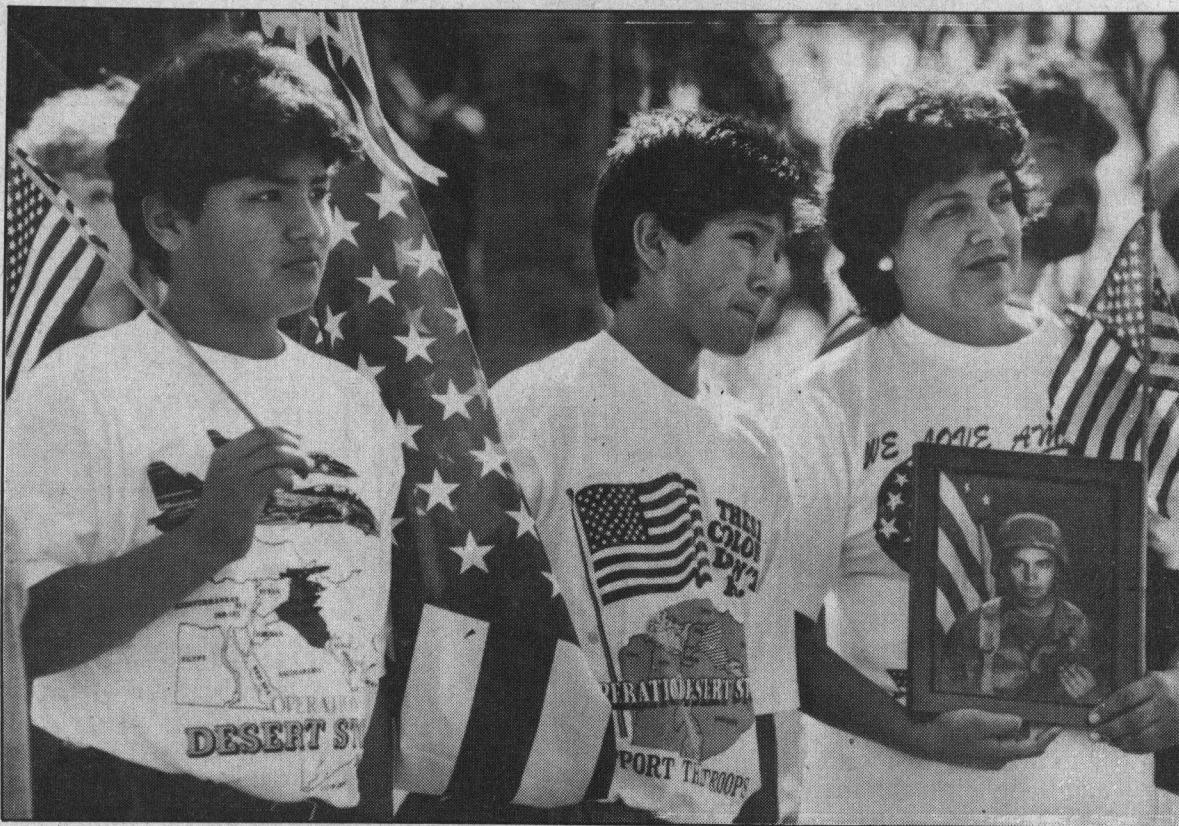
"It doesn't mean we're supporting the war," said Castro, who served as a Green Beret in Vietnam during the Vietnam war.

"If you don't like what you hear, don't listen to it," Castro said.

Castro's admonition was hardly needed — there were no problems.

There was a contingent from the Bill Motto Veterans of Foreign Wars Post, whose members have frequently criticized administration policies. The group was not there for confrontation.

"Our main emphasis is to support the troops," said the group's flag-carrier, Chris Matthews, former a Pajaro Valley



Paula Hernandez of Watsonville, right, holds a picture of her oldest son, Felipe, who is serving on the front lines in Saudia Arabia. She attended the rally with her other sons — Angel, left, and Robert.

representative on the Santa Cruz County Board of Supervisors. "I just hope the people also support peace and negotiations."

Save for the Bill Motto veterans and a man who distributed fliers about a conscientious objector in San Francisco, the anti-war groups stayed away from this event.

Ray Belgard, the current county supervisor for the Pajaro Valley, said he had a certain amount of "snugness" that the rally was being held in South County.

"It's a little different than some of the street blockages that went on in the north part of the county" after the war broke out, said Belgard.

Efforts to negotiate with Iraq didn't work, said Belgard in support of the U.S. administration.

"Saddam Hussein didn't budge an inch," Belgard said.

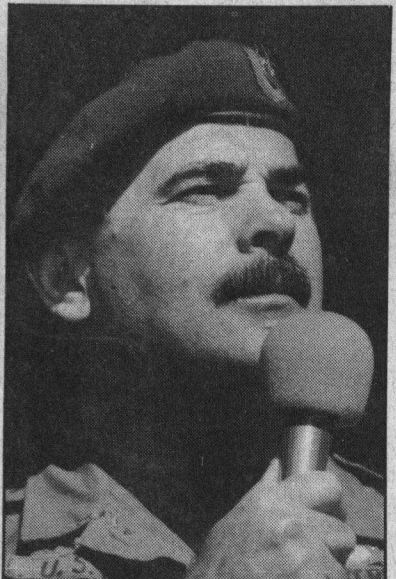
At the Plaza, one member of the Freedom Chapter of the Vietnam Veterans Motorcycle Club held a black flag honoring prisoners of war and those missing in action.

"I'm here to support the troops and give them the support we (Vietnam veterans)



Photos by Kurt Ellison

Richard Benavidez and his five-year-old son Michael listened to the speakers Sunday afternoon at Callaghan Park.



Chico Castro

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didn't get," said the man, who identified himself by the "road name" of "Onewire."

Castro, who wore his green beret and acted as master of ceremonies for the rally, said the United States "tried vainly" to negotiate with Iraq.

"Let us remember this is not another Vietnam ... We don't have no pencil-neck in the White House who is only authorizing two air strikes a week," he said in reference to U.S. policies during the Vietnam war.

Castro also urged the crowd to "show respect for Americans of Arab descent."

Mike Castelan, who helped organize the rally with Castro and Chris Gallagher, read the names of 41 people from the Pajaro

Valley who are serving in the Persian Gulf.

Near the stage, Paula Hernandez, whose son Felipe is serving in Saudi Arabia, held a framed picture of her son in uniform while one of her younger sons held a large American flag.

There were plenty of men with hats denoting their membership in the Veterans of Foreign Wars or American Legion, and several veterans wore their fatigues. The crowd ran the gamut from small children to World War II veterans in their 60s and 70s.

Nearly all of those who marched stayed for the rally, which lasted a little more than an hour. Another former Santa Cruz County supervisor, Marilyn Liddicoat, led the crowd in singing "God Bless America" near the end of the rally.