

American Veteran: Brian Willson Pays a Price for Peace, July 4

Brian Willson was born on July 4, 1941. His story begins in a small rural town in Chautauqua County, in western New York, where he grew up as a “Commie-hating, baseball-loving Baptist.” His experiences in Viet Nam transformed him into a nonviolent pacifist and activist. In recounting his story, Willson tells of the nonviolent actions he and others engaged in during the mid-80s to educate the public and effect political change: tax refusal, fasting, and tactics of obstruction.



During his tour in Viet Nam, Willson was assigned to examine and report on the effectiveness of bombing missions in the Viet-Cong dominated villages. Arriving at the first village, Willson saw the remnants left behind by the bombing—dead bodies of women and children scattered in every direction. To this day, the image of a young woman clutching her baby, eyes fixed on each other remains with him. In that brief moment, Willson underwent a conversion, realizing that this young woman was a member of his own family, that, in fact, all humans are members of the same family. “That’s quite a startling conclusion to come to after 27 years of heavy conditioning in the American ideological system. But it was very clear to me that these people and I were the same. I became very antiwar, while I was there, which simply meant I was speaking out against the war to my superiors.”¹ Willson was discharged in 1969 because of his antiwar views.

While still in the military, his eyes turned to Central America and against the Contra War that was being funded by the U.S. government. Willson and two other veterans announced their plan to initiate a 40-day water-only “Veterans Fast for Life.” Efforts to get Congress to suspend U.S. military aid were unsuccessful, and Willson and his brother veterans decided to travel to the Naval Weapons Station in Concord, California (25 miles east of San Francisco), the site where weapons were dispatched to Central American countries for use against peaceful citizens. “I watched the trains move all summer, delivering flatbed cars full of crates of white phosphorus rockets, 500-pound bombs, mortars, and millions of rounds of ammunition to Central America,” recalled Willson.²

Prior to their planned nonviolent action, Willson and the two other protesters shared their plans with the authorities. On September 1, they started their 40-day water-only fast. They sat down on the tracks to stop the movement of a U.S. government munitions train delivering weapons to Central America. Willson recalled seeing a big sign next to the track site that said, “Penalty for blocking federal munitions trains is a year in prison and a \$5,000 fine.” He accepted the consequences of his actions and expected to be removed from the tracks and arrested.



Willson remembered seeing the train approach, but that's all that he remembered. The train did not stop. On that fateful day, the world watched in disbelief as Willson was run over by a U.S. government munitions train during a nonviolent blocking action. Willson suffered a fractured skull, 19 broken bones, and lost both of his legs. "I woke up in a hospital, four days later. I have no memory of what happened...I had 40 friends there who were witnessing it. The other two veterans just barely got out of the way. The train was speeding. The FBI, in looking at the one video, said the train was accelerating to more than three times its five-mile-an-hour speed limit at the point of impact. We found out later that the train crew that day had been ordered not to stop the train, which was an unprecedented—basically an illegal order. Why? Because they said I was going to hijack the train...there were 350 armed Marines to protect the base."³

On the day that Willson awakened, an estimated 9,000 people showed up and occupied the tracks. For twenty-eight consecutive months, day and night, 24-hours a day, there was a permanent occupation, sometimes 200 people at a time. People lived in tents and blocked every train. An estimated twenty-one hundred people were arrested and three had their arms broken by the police.

Willson has documented U.S. policy in nearly two dozen countries. Since 1986, he has studied on-site policies in Central and South America and the Middle East. He has recorded and made public the pattern of policies that he says "violate U.S. Constitutional and international laws prohibiting aggression and war crimes."⁴ He became a prisoner rights aide to Massachusetts State Senator Jack Backman, served on Massachusetts Governor Michael Dukakis's homeless veterans and Agent Orange task forces, and worked with Massachusetts Lt. Governor John Kerry on Agent Orange and other veterans' issues.

"I regret that I lost my legs,
but I don't regret
that I was there.
I did what I said
I was going to do."
- S. Brian Willson

Unbeknownst to Willson, he was listed as a domestic terrorist by the FBI under President Reagan's anti-terrorist task force. He continues his nonviolent activism against illegal American wars and other covert military actions against peaceful sovereign states and peaceful citizens internationally.

Endnotes

- 1 Brian's First Book: On Third World Legs - <http://bit.ly/1MEZvm4>
- 2 "Blood on the Tracks" - <http://bit.ly/1KZmpGJ>
3. *Democracy Now* - <http://bit.ly/1S1BHMf>
- 4 Brian Willson: Wikipedia - <http://bit.ly/1FGXVLR>



BACKGROUND

REFLECTION QUESTIONS

1. In the Beatitudes, Jesus declared that peacemakers will be called the children of God. Why does Jesus bless peacemakers with as authentic heirs to the Father? What does this tell us about peacemaking and the people who commit to it? Has peacemaking been as important to Christians as it is to Jesus?
2. Why was Brian Willson converted to peacemaking: what was his personal point of conversion? All soldiers who see death close-up are not converted to peacemaking: what does it take to really see the result of violence and understand the implications of the destruction witnessed?
3. Brian gave up a great deal to be a peacemaker, but he believes it was worth the cost. What does it cost the average person of faith to become a peacemaker? What would change in your world if you focused on becoming a peacemaker?
4. Unlike Brian, many Americans were not aware of the violence the U.S. was supporting with weapons and aid to dictators in Latin and South America in the 1970s and 1980s. What is the role of what our U.S. Catholic bishops call “faithful citizenship” in terms of our government’s actions related to conflict, violence, weapons of war? How do we responsibly fulfill our role as faithful Christians as well as faithful citizens regarding war and peace issues.
5. Brian Willson was led to believe that the Vietnamese were the enemy of the American people, his enemies. He believed this to be true until he became friends with the people. Today, we are told that members of ISIS and Al Qaeda are our enemies. Do you agree? Why or why not? How does labeling others as enemies heighten violence?

PRAYER FOR BRIAN WILLSON

Help us lay down our weapons, O Prince of Peace,
And “study war no more,”
As the song proclaims, as our faith proclaims.

Help us look to those who have had
The courage to speak out against the weapons of war
And model for us the difficult but sacred path to
peace.

Let us recognize the links between fear and violence,
And the links between creating chemicals, guns,
and bombs--and a mother in a foreign land trying to
protect her infant.

Let us become the peacemakers you spoke about:
“Blessed are peacemakers,
For they shall be called the children of God. Amen.

**BE A VOICE
NOT AN ECHO!**

FAITH IN ACTION

- View the trailer for the upcoming documentary, “Paying The Price For Peace,” which features Brian Willson: <http://bit.ly/1BSuFjt>
- Learn more about Brian Willson’s work: <http://www.brianwillson.com/>
- Call or write your member of Congress asking him/her to advocate for peaceful solutions to current conflicts.
 - Capitol switchboard: (202) 224-3121
 - www.congress.gov
- Write a letter to Brian Willson. <http://www.brianwillson.com>



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