

**C**ARMELO FELIX MATTÀ, squatter/hero of Vieques island off the east coast of Puerto Rico, smiled wearily as he reflected on the U.S. Navy's failure to extricate him from his shack overlooking Camp García naval base. "The navy came here to fight me. I'm just one man. And the most powerful country in the world challenged me to fight with them."

Mattà knows that he is at once a symbol of the U.S. military's domination of Vieques as well as part of the lore of Puerto Rico's struggle for self-determination. The navy has used Vieques bases as an annex to Roosevelt Roads, the largest U.S. naval base outside the 48 states, which is located on the main island. The primary use of the Vieques land is as a gunnery range and munitions warehouse—the island was the site of practice maneuvers for the Grenada invasion. The issue of the military's presence will surface once more this June, when proposals for a Puerto Rico status plebiscite are introduced in Congress.

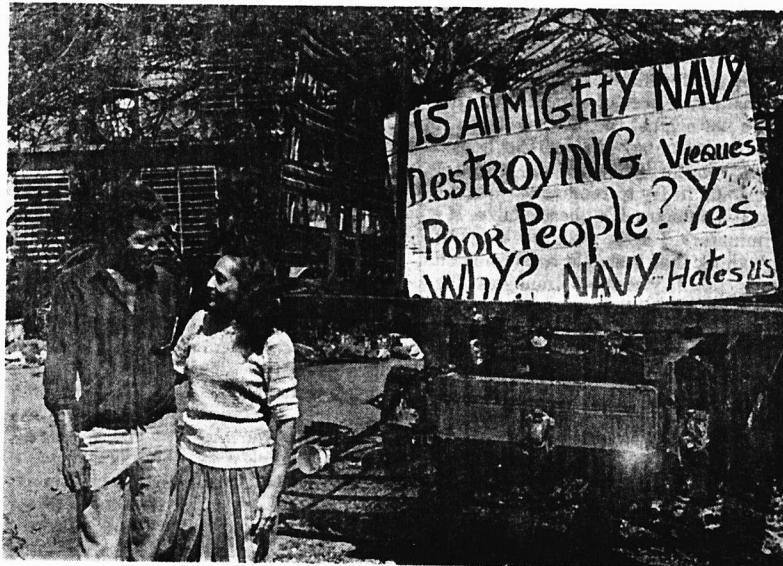
On April 14, a squad of U.S. deputy marshals asked unarmed navy personnel to load the Mattà family's belongings into a navy delivery truck. They were confronted by more than 100 of Mattà's supporters and a horde of bees released from Mattà's nearby apiary. In the resulting confusion, a fire broke out in the panel truck after a protester allegedly threw gasoline into the back of the vehicle.

After calling in more marshals—who arrived wearing bulletproof vests and brandishing automatic rifles, sawed-off shotguns, and Uzi submachine guns—chief U.S. marshal Herman Wirshing declared that all was under control and Mattà had been evicted. The fire blazed through the next afternoon, but by Saturday, April 15, Mattà had moved back in with the support of 15 to 20 Vieques

# Under the Guns

## Navy Threatens Puerto Rican Squatter

BY ED MORALES



Squatting targets: Carmelo Mattà and his wife Maria

families, as well as local and main island groups.

Just who owns the shrub-brush terrain that Mattà and the navy are fighting over is a question that reflects the ambiguity of Puerto Rico's status as a "free associated state." The navy, a U.S. district court, and the mayor of Vieques claim that it is within the territorial limits of Camp García, which is defined by what the navy calls "an imaginary line." Mattà, and his supporters say that the Monte

Carmelo hut is half a kilometer from an existing fence that is the true boundary. According to Charlie Connelly, editor/publisher of *The Vieques Times*, the navy claims that this fence was erected to avoid indemnification to a local cattleman's association in the case of shell-shocked cattle.

I was escorted to the fence by three students from the University of Puerto Rico who are members of a theater group called Barrunto. Group member Jose

García explained that a *barrunto* is the warning that a peasant farmer infers from the gathering darkness that a rain-storm is about to erupt. From the clearing where the fence stood, the only immediate evidence of military presence was discarded C-ration packages, but off in the distance, a navy carrier could be seen, as well as puffs of smoke and the sounds of explosions.

The Mattà incident is just the latest episode in a 48-year history of strained relations between the U.S. Navy and the islanders. The islanders are confined to a narrow strip in the middle of the island, surrounded by naval and marine bases to the east and the west. In the 1940s, the navy expropriated about 70 per cent of the island for wartime use. As a result of what Connelly calls "constant hassling from the '50s on," the agricultural and clothing industries of Vieques have eroded, and the population has decreased from 20,000 to about 8000. Now, unemployment stands at 50 per cent.

In 1977, fishermen protested the constant bombardment of the coral reef because it was scaring off their catch—and pounding into powder a reef that took centuries to grow. The growing fear of long-term ecological disaster inspired the "Slingshot War," in which fishermen actively disrupted naval amphibious warfare exercises by confronting them with slingshots.

Although Mattà claims to be merely antinavy and not a member of any movement, the plight of the island has been used by independence activists for the last 15 years as an example of Puerto Rico's need to disengage from its subordinate colonial relationship to the U.S. Now that the governing party of the island has scheduled a plebiscite on Puerto Rico's status for 1991, there is a renewed focus on Vieques.

CONTINUED ON NEXT PAGE

23

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### MORALES

CONTINUED FROM LAST PAGE

"There is a great deal of latent support and vicarious pride for someone who has had the will to do something against the authorities," noted Ronald Fernandez, author of *Los Macheteros*, a book about a militant group of Puerto Rican *independentistas*. A university-based group called *Caminantes por la Paz* led a march in Vieques to support Mattà last Saturday.

Meanwhile, Mattà awaits an uncertain fate, armed only with a sense of justice. The U.S. district court has refused to comment on the case, and the navy has left further action up to the court's direction. "They go around with their long-range artillery and bombard the islands and beaches and the coasts without pity," Carmelo mourns. "I don't know how long the American nation will allow this to go on." On the ferry on its way back to Puerto Rico, the members of Barrunto sing the refrain of a Ruben Blades song: "*Suenen las campanas, el mundo va a cambiar.*" The bells are ringing, the world is changing.