

Shot envoy brought home with military honour

Picture: KIERAN DOHERTY



Draped with the Union flag and his cap, the coffin of Brig Stephen Saunders, is flown home with full military honours, six days after his assassination in Athens. Members of his regiment, the Royal Gloucestershire, Berkshire and Wiltshire, formed a bearer party Page 6

NEWS

Police chief 'tried to blame fans for the Hillsborough disaster'

By Paul Stokes

THE police officer in charge of operations during the Hillsborough disaster attempted to deflect blame from himself by placing it on spectators, a court heard yesterday.

Chief Supt David Duckenfield gave the order to open an exit gate, allowing fans to flood on to the terraces, but misled senior Football Association officials at the game into believing that it had been forced open by supporters, the jury was told.

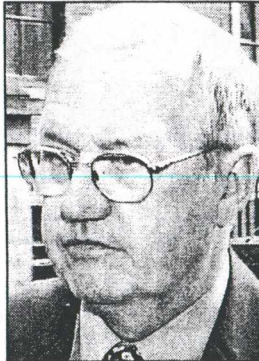
Leeds Crown Court heard that for a further half-hour he also failed to tell his own assistant chief constable that the exit gate had been opened on his orders eight minutes before kick-off.

Ninety-six Liverpool fans were killed in a "hideous crush" which ensued at the Leppings Lane end terraces of the Hillsborough stadium in Sheffield on April 15, 1989.

Duckenfield, 55, was being assisted by Supt Bernard Murray, 58, who had responsibility for the police control box at the FA Cup semi-final between Liverpool and Nottingham Forest.

Both officers have been charged in a private prosecution brought by the Hillsborough Family Support Group, which represents most of the victims' relatives.

Duckenfield and Murray deny the manslaughter of John



David Duckenfield



Fans attempt to escape the crush on the terraces

Alfred Anderson and James Gary Aspinall. They have also pleaded not guilty to wilfully neglecting to carry out a public duty. The names of Mr Anderson, 62, and Mr Aspinall, 18, were selected to represent those who died.

Duckenfield, of Bourne-mouth, Dorset, and Murray, from Pontefract, West Yorks, have both retired from the South Yorkshire police force.

Alun Jones, QC, prosecuting, described the case as "unusual" because it was being tried more than 11 years after the event.

He said: "Our case is that these defendants ordered exit gates to be opened at the west end of the ground at about 2.52pm and failed to take the

obvious step of blocking off the narrow tunnel leading to the almost full terraces, causing fatal crushing in two of those terraces."

Mr Jones claimed things started to go wrong at about 2.30pm on a "wonderful sunny, spring day" when crowds started to build up at the west end turnstiles.

He said: "Between 2.30 and 2.45pm the crowd outside the turnstiles grew and grew more quickly than the turnstiles could admit spectators. A press was caused by the increasing numbers funnelling into the turnstile area, anxious to get into the ground for the 3pm kick-off." The police approach inside the ground had been to "let them find

their own level". Inside the ground two pens in favoured spots behind the goals, numbered three and four, had become uncomfortably full.

Mr Jones said: "Eight minutes before kick-off, hundreds of people gained admission to the ground, not through the turnstiles, but through the wide exit gates, through which people normally leave at the end of the game."

He said the only obvious route to the terraces was through a tunnel and police had not bothered to block off the entrance. "The entry of dozens of spectators into a tunnel, with a slope down to the terraces, over a period of eight minutes, forced hundreds of people down the terrace in the pens into a

hideous crush. Others continued to enter the tunnel from the turnstiles between 3 and 3.06pm as the game kicked off and proceeded. By 3.06pm when the game was stopped, all 96 were dead or already serious injured."

Graham Kelly, then secretary of the Football Association, and Glen Kirton, the FA's head of external affairs, went to the police control box for explanations. Mr Jones said: "Mr Duckenfield gave them to understand that a gate had been forced and there had been an 'in-rush' of supporters."

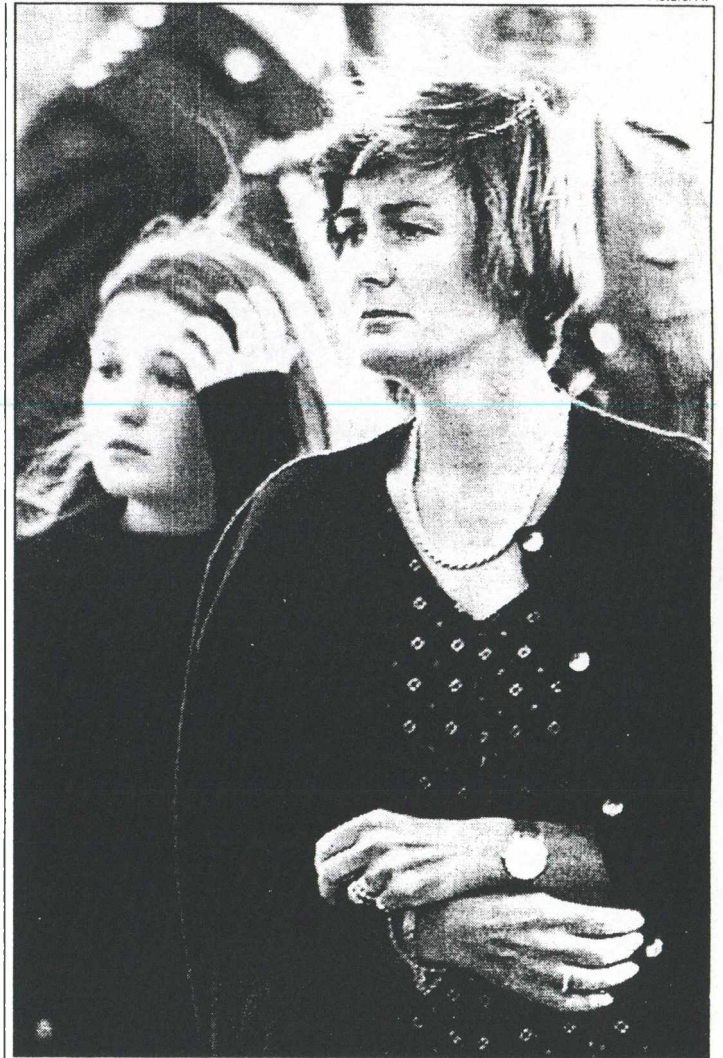
He had, Mr Jones said, "deceitfully and dishonestly concealed from those men that he had himself ordered the exit gates to be opened because the crush at the turnstiles became so severe"

He said Duckenfield later gave an explanation for his comments to the two men in which he asserted he feared crowd disorder if he had not given the order to open the gates.

Mr Jones said: "Even if those in the pens had known that the exit gates had been opened, no more than a few could have escaped."

"Most of them, men, women and children, had surrendered responsibility for their personal safety to the controlling police officers as completely as we do to a pilot and his co-pilot when we board a plane."

The hearing continues.



Heather Saunders and her daughter Catherine at Gatwick last night

Picture: AP

Full honours for 'gentle soldier' shot in Athens

By David Graves

UNDER a grey Gatwick sky, the body of Brig Stephen Saunders, his coffin draped with the Union flag and his cap, was flown back to Britain with full military honours, six days after his assassination in Athens.

His widow, Heather, who accompanied the body yesterday, described her husband as a "very kind and gentle soldier".

She condemned his killers as "evil, wicked and cowardly men" who had ripped the heart from their family.

Carried shoulder-high by a bearer party of six from his regiment, the Royal Gloucestershire, Berkshire and Wiltshire, the brigadier's coffin was taken from a British Airways Boeing 737 in a corner of the airport to a hearse in a quiet ceremony.

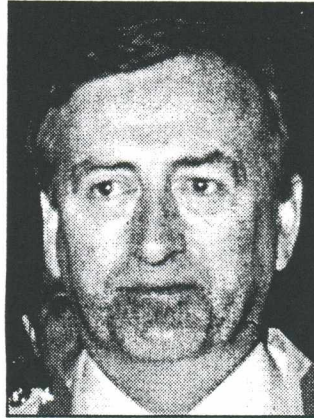
As Brig Saunders's body was brought home, Greece doubled to nearly £2 million its reward for information leading to the conviction of his killers.

Mrs Saunders was joined on the flight by their daughters, Nicola, 15, and Catherine, 13, and other close family members who flew to Athens last week after her husband was murdered while driving to work at the British embassy.

The ceremony was watched by Gen Sir Michael Walker, Chief of the General Staff, and Lady Symons, the minister for defence procurement, who was visiting Athens when the brigadier was murdered. She comforted Mrs Saunders at Gatwick.

The brigadier's funeral will be at Salisbury Cathedral on June 20, a service delayed because of legal requirements for a second post-mortem examination in Britain.

With her brother, Stephen Kell, beside her, Mrs



Brig Saunders: murdered

Saunders, described as a "shaft of golden light" by Lady Symons, said the November 17 terrorists who killed her husband achieved only condemnation. She fought back tears and said: "I don't blame the Greek people for what happened, but I appeal to them again to take the opportunity to ensure that no one else has to suffer the way we are today."

Before the coffin left Greece it was given full military honours by Greek armed forces at Athens airport.

Brig Saunders, 52, who had been military attaché at the British embassy in Athens for a year, died when two terrorists pulled alongside his Rover in a traffic jam and fired four shots.

The murder provoked international condemnation of Greece's anti-terrorism record. November 17 has murdered 23 people in 25 years, but no members have been arrested.

The group said it murdered Brig Saunders, due to retire in three years, because of his role in Nato's bombing of Yugoslavia last year. At the time he was serving with the United Nations in Kuwait.