

X UK diplomat gunned down in Athens by terror group

BY PAUL WOOD
in Athens

BRITAIN'S SENIOR military attaché to Greece was shot and killed yesterday in an audacious attack that police believe was the work of the elusive far-left November 17 terrorist group.

Brigadier Stephen Saunders was driving along a busy suburban road that was his usual route to work when two people on a motorcycle drew up alongside his car, firing repeatedly through the passenger window.

Witnesses said the brigadier staggered bleeding from the vehicle before collapsing on the pavement near by. He was taken to hospital but died shortly afterwards from four gunshot wounds.

Police said the killers had used the same Colt .45 hand gun that has been the organisation's calling card in 25 years of politically inspired assassinations. There was no obvious motive for the attack beyond the organisation's virulent anti-Nato creed. United States diplomats have been prime targets in the past, but the extraordinary security measures now in place in American embassies have left British diplomats vulnerable.

The last security review at the British embassy in Athens was as recent as March. The building is already well fortified but the assassination provoked calls for an immediate securi-



Stephen Saunders, who was ambushed in Athens

ty review Last night, November 17 had not claimed responsibility for the attack, but ballistics tests convinced the Greek police that the group was behind the killing.

Tony Blair, after briefing the Cabinet on events yesterday morning, described the attack as "an act of terrorism that was as contemptible as it was senseless and will be condemned by all right-minded people".

November 17 has been responsible for a number of attacks on Western diplomats in Greece, most notoriously the murder of the Central Intelligence Agency station chief in Athens in 1975. The group is named after the day in 1973 when Greek students rose up against the military junta. It is a Marxist-Leninist organisation, although its statements to



As a traffic jam builds up around them, police and photographers surround the blood-stained car in which the British military attaché was killed.

the press have grown increasingly nationalistic in tone. But until yesterday it had not attacked British diplomats; officials in the military attaché's office did not believe they were at risk.

Accordingly Brigadier Saunders was taking few security precautions beyond driving a car with ordinary Greek licence plates rather than diplomatic plates. He was aged 52 and married with two teenage daughters. Embassy staff were in tears as the ambassador, David Madden, gathered them together in his official residence to brief them on the shooting. "There is complete

shock and horror at this attack," Mr Madden said.

The Liberal Democrat Foreign Affairs spokesman, Menzies Campbell, said the killing should send "shock waves" through the Foreign Office. November 17 has proved its ability to mount daring attacks. In 1998 the US embassy was hit by an anti-tank missile. In May last year, a rocket attack launched on the residence of the German ambassador failed to detonate.

In a telephone call to Mr Blair, the Greek Prime Minister, Costas Simitis, promised that every effort would be made to catch those responsible for the murder. "The Greek gov-

ernment will do its duty and defend with all means... citizens' safety," he said in a statement.

Nato's secretary general, George Robertson, interrupted a meeting of defence ministers to announce the death and Geoff Hoon, Britain's Secretary of State for Defence, demanded that Greece spare no effort to track down the killers.

But in more than 25 years no member of November 17 has been brought to trial. Last month the US State Department issued a report saying that in 1999 Greece was second only to Colombia in the number of attacks against American targets. Privately, US officials are

scathing about Greek "incompetence" in dealing with terrorism, saying promises of strong action after attacks on US diplomats have come to little.

Concern about Greece's anti-terrorism record led the International Olympic Committee to warn that poor security could jeopardise the chances of Athens hosting the 2004 Olympics. But November 17 has never attacked tourists and Western officials here say the authorities will be anxious to use the investigation into the murder of Brigadier Saunders to allay fears.

Murder of a diplomat.

at has killed 22 people since 1975

Brigadier was involved in talks about tank deal

BY KATHERINE BUTLER

BRIGADIER STEPHEN Saunders, 53, was a career soldier who was decorated for his services in Northern Ireland. Yesterday, as his widow Heather was being comforted in an Athens hospital, Tony Blair described his murder as "a tragic reminder of the risks many British military personnel face in many places around the world".

There are more dangerous places to be a diplomat than Athens, but as the British embassy's military attaché in Greece, where anti-Nato sentiment runs higher than in any other European state, Brigadier Saunders was significantly more vulnerable than many of his colleagues.

His last official assignment reflected the nature of his role in Greece, and sheds light on why he is may have been targeted by November 17, the extreme left-wing terrorist group suspected of his killing.

On Wednesday night, he went to Athens airport to meet Baroness Symons, the Minister for Defence Procurement, who was there to discuss Britain's attempts to sell Challenger 2E tanks to Greece. He later went to an embassy dinner attended by Lady Symons and Greece's deputy defence minister.

Baroness Symons said yesterday: "The Brigadier was an enormously valued member of the ambassador's staff. I had talks with him yesterday evening, he was nice enough to meet me from the plane... and I have, of course, been with his wife this morning.

"It is a tragedy that such a good man has had his life cut short and that a woman has lost a much loved husband, as have his children. We are all deeply, deeply sorry about what has happened," she said.

Born into a military family in Farnborough, Hampshire, he joined the Army aged 18 in 1965, graduating from Sandhurst two years later. He was commissioned into the Duke of Edinburgh's Royal Regiment and joined his battalion in Ger-



Heather Saunders on her way to hospital yesterday

many. While he was a serving officer, he took a degree in geography and economics at Bristol University.

His first staff appointment was in Northern Ireland, followed by a spell with the UN in Cyprus. He was promoted to Lieutenant Colonel in 1986, returning to Northern Ireland where he commanded his regiment and was awarded the Queen's Commendation for Valuable Service.

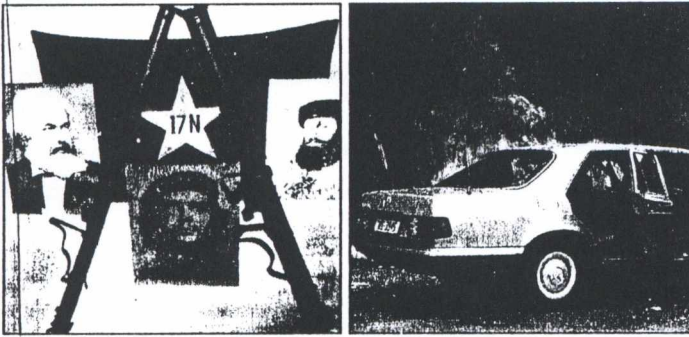
Following the Gulf War, he was posted to Kuwait where he spent a year as a military assistant to the UN Iraq-Kuwait Force Commander. During this time he travelled throughout Iraq and frequently held discussions with President Saddam Hussein's regime.

From 1993 to 1996, Mr Saunders was military attaché to the British Defence Liaison Team in Australia and a defence adviser in Papua New Guinea. Last year he was promoted to the rank of Brigadier and appointed defence attaché to the British Embassy in Athens.

He is survived by his wife Heather and daughters Nicola, 15, and Catherine, 14.

The Prime Minister paid tribute to him as a "consummate professional". The British Ambassador to Greece, David Maddens said: "My initial reaction was one of shock, horror and disbelief. Stephen was such a valued and lively member of the embassy."

GREEK KILLING Drive-by shooting bears all the hallmarks of November 17, an anti-Western terrorist group th



Left, the emblem of November 17, whose strikes have included the rocket attack, right, on the car of former minister Yiannis Paleokrassas in Athens in 1992

Marxists blamed for murder of British diplomat

IT WAS the latest variation on a leady Greek theme which has been running, without great hindrance by anyone in authority, for the best part of a quarter of a century.

Brigadier Stephen Saunders, 52, was driving in his wife Rover along Kifissias Avenue in the northern suburbs of Athens around 7.45 am, on his way to another day's work as a British military attaché at the embassy in Ploutarchou Street.

As the rush hour traffic thickened and slowed, two men on a motorcycle appeared at the passenger-side window, and fired four shots, fatally wounding Brigadier Saunders in the chest, abdomen and head, before disappearing into the sea orars. Thus, almost certainly, did Europe's least known and most elusive terrorist group claim its twenty third victim.

Nobody knows who belongs to the organisation that calls itself November 17. But for a long while now, nobody has doubted its skill, its meticulous planning and its ruthless efficiency. Like most security conscious diplomats in Athens, the brigadier's car had ordinary number plates; and the Foreign Office had carried out a thorough review of embassy security as recently as March.

But yesterday's strike had been clearly plotted for weeks. And although no one had pinned responsibility last night, everything about it - from its sheer effrontery and clinical execution, to the very weapon employed - points to November 17. The question that lingers is, why?

Colonel Terry Taylor, deputy director of the International Institute for Strategic Studies based in London, said: "Basically, they are an anachronism, one of several Marxist groups which are hang-overs from the end of the Cold War."

If so, why is it that November 17 has not only survived but flourished while its closest ideological counterparts in Europe, the Red Brigades in Italy and the Red Army Faction in Germany, are both today in apparently terminal decline?

In fact, however, the organ-

BY RUPERT CORNWELL

isation fits a peculiarly Greek left-radical agenda of anti-capitalism, nationalism and anti-Americanism, fuelled by enduring resentment of Washington's backing for the loathed regime of the colonels, its perceived sympathy for Greece's arch enemy Turkey, and, most lately, the Nato attack on Greece's traditional ally Serbia. The very name November 17 commemorates the day that the tanks moved to crush student protests at the Athens Polytechnic in 1973. And some of its causes achieved public respectability in the fiery anti-Western oratory of Andreas Papandreu, leader of the Panhellenic Socialist Movement (Pasok) and prime minister for 11 of the years between 1981 and 1996.

Thus the pervasive suspicion that the terrorists have powerful protectors, perhaps on the radical far-left of Pasok, which is still in office, perhaps in renegade elements of the intelligence and security services.

Wayne Merry, a former United States diplomat who served in Athens in the Eighties wrote recently: "Greece does not have the world's worst terrorism problem, far from it. But it does have the world's worst counter-terrorism problem."

"We spend more dollars to protect our embassy staff in Athens than in Beirut, Bogota or Algiers. Yet the response by Greek police, then and now, is nothing short of deliberate negligence. The Greek authorities do not want to find and prosecute the terrorists."

Since November 17's debut on 23 December 1975, when Richard Welch, the Central Intelligence Agency station chief, was shot dead outside his home in Athens, the group has killed 22 people, and carried out some 40 other major attacks. Its victims include four American military and intelligence officers, a Turkish diplomat, Greek industrialists and businessmen, magistrates and police officers, as well as a notorious police torturer dur-

ing the 1967-74 dictatorship, all invariably demonised as agents of foreign powers.

Most of the attacks have been by day, in front of eyewitnesses. Rough identikit pictures of suspects have been issued. But no one has ever been officially identified or arrested, let alone charged and convicted. Rather, November 17 has spawned imitators, such as Epaurastatiki Pirines - or "Revolutionary Nuclei" - which claims eight attacks of its own since 1996, including the bombing of the Intercontinental Hotel in Athens in April last year to mark the 50th anniversary of Nato, in which a woman died.

The durability is astonishing. The three young men who gunned down the shipping magnate Constantinos Peratikos in Piraeus in 1997 can hardly have been born when the CIA station chief Jack Welch was assassinated in 1975.

Western specialists reckon that November 17 is tiny, perhaps seven or eight planners and 20 odd "soldiers", who as often as not use the same 45 calibre weapon for their attacks. The organisation's political tracts - all written with the same typewriter over the past 25 years - are shamelessly reproduced in the Greek left-wing press. Not only the torch of terror but its very weapon is passed from generation to generation - further evidence that its motives, if not its methods, none the less strike some chord in the collective Greek psyche.

If this is not so, why else is it that for all the complaints to Greek ministers visiting Washington, for all the co-operation agreements between the Greek police and their American and British opposite numbers, for all the vows of the Greek politicians of both right and left, November 17 remains unscathed?

Now the pressure will be immense from London as well. Mr Peralikos may have had British as well as Greek citizenship, but Brigadier Saunders is a official representative of the British Government, killed going about his official business. And, just



Brigadier Stephen Saunders, killed on his way to work at the British Embassy in Athens

possibly, results might finally come.

The Socialist government of Costas Similis and his Foreign Minister, George Papandreu, is anchoring Greece more firmly than ever in the international mainstream. The country is soon to join the euro; the ancestral rift with Turkey is slowly being healed; and, most important of all, Athens is host of the 2004 Olympics. Greeks are proud as few other nations, and nothing would deal that pride a harder blow than a Games turned into fiasco by terrorism.

"The moment they start to fear for the Olympics, is when you'll see some progress," said one Western security specialist long convinced that November 17's charmed life is no coincidence. "Then it'll take just an hour to round up the lot of them."

'November 17 killed my brother, and the authorities did nothing'

BY RUPERT CORNWELL

FEW PEOPLE yesterday heard the news of the murder of Brigadier Stephen Saunders with as much dismay, shared grief and sheer frustration as Nicos Peraticos, whose brother was assassinated by November 17 terrorists on a Piraeus street just over three years ago.

Brigadier Saunders was on his way to the office when he was cut down, while Costis Peraticos was leaving his office when he died. But the similarities outweigh the differences. Both were killed by four bullets, probably from the very same .45 pistol. Both were British citizens. Both were victims of audacious attacks in broad daylight. And, almost certainly, the same group was responsible for both attacks.

Nicos Peraticos will never forget the events of May 28, 1997. "When the three men killed my brother, the getaway plan went wrong. They had wired up a Mitsubishi van so that it would start by pressing the accelerator pedal, without the aid of a key, but the engine wouldn't take."

"So they just walked off down the busy street, with everyone shouting, 'What's going on? What's going on?' And what they did was work the crowd,



Costis Peraticos was assassinated three years ago

telling some of them, 'Shut up or we'll shoot,' while telling other people that nothing was going on. Then they hijacked a cab, yanked out the driver and passenger, and drove off."

"These people are well trained. Their operations are very well planned and they're very audacious. They're cool and they don't panic. And they're good at the follow-up too. Somehow, they've man-

aged to convince many Greeks that there's something in what they say."

The family shipping company Pegasus is based in London and Bermuda. The 42-year old Costis was the 21st victim of November 17, apparently killed because he had taken over the state-owned and chronically loss-making Elefsis shipyard in 1992. The group's statement claiming the attack blamed

him for contributing to the "de-industrialisation" of Greece, arguing that any businessman buying a state enterprise without paying its previous debts would be considered a criminal.

The Peraticos family has never stopped trying to secure justice for Costis, constantly raising the matter with the British, Greek and US authorities. "But ultimately what can you do?" says Nico, now Pegasus' chairman and who, unlike his brother, holds only British citizenship. "On the Greek side, nothing has been done. The irony is that Greece has one of the best crime-solving records of any country, except in this one glaring area."

An especially chilling aspect of the case is that November 17 seems to have waited five years since the Elefsis takeover to inflict its punishment on Mr Peraticos, until the security detail around him was removed two years before the murder. The Athens government said this was at his request, a claim denied by the Peraticos family.

Its hope is now that the need to reassure foreigners before the 2004 Olympics, which Greece is hosting, coupled with fierce new pressure from Britain, may now at last produce the action hitherto so conspicuously absent.

A Greece has a duty to protect its diplomatic community

THE ASSASSINATION in broad daylight yesterday of the British military attaché in Athens is horrific. Brigadier Stephen Saunders, a 52-year-old father of two teenage daughters, was gunned down while driving to work. The murder, by two men on a motorcycle, bore all the hallmarks of the November 17 terrorist group, which has claimed responsibility for a series of assassinations in recent years.

This is not, however, an isolated incident; it is the latest in a long line of terrorist killings in Greece in the past 25 years. Not one person has been brought to trial. In the circumstances, it is hardly surprising that some have speculated that the group has enjoyed protection within a section of the establishment. Certainly, the untouchability of the November 17 group means that difficult questions must be asked.

For Greece, the implications of this constant failure to protect lives are important. Greece is due to host the Olympics in 2004. It is too late for the event to be relocated; Athens would need to be another Sarajevo for that to happen. But – as the documentary *One Day in September* reminds us – high-profile events such as the Olympics are perfect stalking-grounds for

terrorist groups. No country wishes its star athletes to compete in a country where they face a real risk of being murdered.

Even before yesterday's murder, Greek ministers had begun to acknowledge that the fight against terrorism must be "the government's top priority". Anti-Americanism and anti-Western feeling have for many years been a strong undercurrent in Greece – not least because of the shameless backing by the US of the military junta that ruled Greece for seven years until 1974. The name of the November 17 movement comes from the day when the regime killed dozens of student protesters in 1973. There was considerable opposition to the Nato bombing of Kosovo – partly because Greece is proud to be Serbia's most loyal friend in the region, partly because of what is perceived as Anglo-American arrogance.

Costas Simitis, the Greek prime minister, who, on hearing of the assassination, expressed "disgust at the barbaric act", is a powerful force for compromise. He has declared his determination to get a grip on the problems of terrorism. But there can be little hope of a sudden change. The bitter truth is that Brigadier Saunders' death is unlikely to be the last.