

British envoy shot dead by terror group in Athens

By John Carr
in Athens
and Michael Evans
Defence Editor

THREE Scotland Yard Anti-Terrorist Branch officers have flown to Athens to help to investigate the murder of the British defence attaché.

Scotland Yard and the FBI responded after the Greek Government appealed for help to find two gunmen on a motorbike who opened fire on Brigadier Stephen Saunders as he was caught in a traffic jam on his way to work yesterday.

The shells from the Colt .45 calibre pistol used in the shooting came from a weapon that has been used in previous killings by the extreme Marxist terrorist organisation 17 November. The group was formed 25 years ago and none of its members has yet been caught.

The 7.30am killing of 52-year-old Brigadier Saunders outraged the diplomatic community and was condemned by Tony Blair as "a contemptible act of terrorism".

Witnesses said that as the helmeted gunmen sped away, Brigadier Saunders staggered out of his cream Rover 820 calling for help, only to collapse in a pool of blood and glass fragments. By the time he reached Erythros Stavros Hospital, two miles away, his internal bleeding had become critical. Two of the four bullets had pierced vital chest and abdominal blood vessels. Despite massive blood transfusions, he was pronounced dead three hours after the shooting. His wife, Heather, was at his side.



Brigadier Saunders: shot four times

Greek security police said the pistol used to kill the brigadier had been in the hands of 17 November for at least twenty years and yesterday was the sixth time it had been used.

The brigadier, who had been posted to Athens last year, was travelling in a car with Greek numberplates and without any diplomatic insignia. It had come to a halt on Kifisias Avenue in the northern suburb of Halandri, known as the "Devil's Triangle" — a district in which the 17 November group has carried out at least three killings.

Only two days ago the United States Congress condemned Greece for its poor record in fighting domestic terrorism, and last month the American State Department

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DEATH OF A DIPLOMAT

The assassins

Sinister killers who strike with impunity

From John Carr in Athens

THE news reports in Greece yesterday morning were grimly familiar: shots are fired through a car window in a morning traffic jam, the victim is either killed or critically hurt, and the attackers — always a pair of helmeted men on a high-powered motorbike — vanish.

Greece's 17 November terrorist group has now apparently claimed its twenty-third victim in 25 years of shootings, bombings and grenade attacks on wealthy targets.

Three American diplomats, two retired Greek police officers and half a dozen Greek businessmen have met their end in precisely this way since the shadowy group emerged just before Christmas 1975 and

said that it had shot dead Richard Welch, the CIA's senior man in Athens.

If, as the Greek police expect, 17 November admits killing Brigadier Stephen Saunders, he will be the first British victim. After each attack, 17 November usually issues rambling anti-capitalist proclamations, compounded by angry Marxist-Leninist dialectic in the guise of radical economic theory.

The 17 November group takes its name from the day in 1973 when Greece's military-backed dictatorship crushed a student uprising in Athens, killing 34 students and injuring up to 800 — an event still commemorated annually by the Left.

Its members have incredibly eluded all efforts at detection. Large rewards for infor-

mation have led nowhere and Greek police have failed to capture, kill or injure a single member.

Security police officials believe the group to be master-minded by a radical academic who since the 1970s has recruited younger members to do the dirty work. Alleged links with the more extreme elements of the ruling Panhellenic Socialist Movement (Pasok) dating back to the anti-junta struggle have been vigorously denied by the present party leadership.

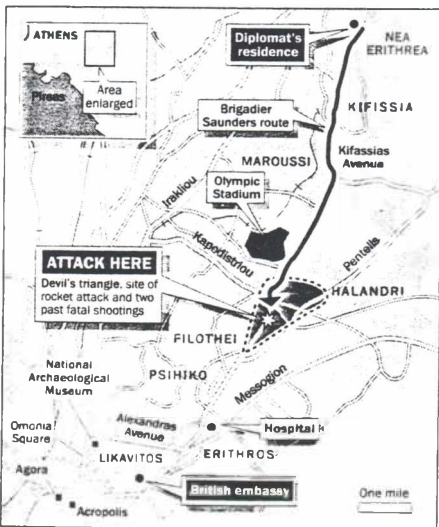
Security experts believe that the group is self-taught and has never compromised its security by availing itself of the expertise of either the IRA or Middle East guerrillas.

Some deny that there is such a thing as an ideological 17 November, claiming that the far-left rhetoric is a front for a professional hit team employed by political or business interests to silence those who could get in the way of their plans. The diversity of the victims — bankers, magnates, publishers and diplomats — argues for such an interpretation, they say.

In the 1990s the organisation appeared to have slowed down its rate of murderous attacks, limiting itself mainly to midnight bombings without fatalities. The last known attack was in May last year, when a rocket was fired at the German Ambassador's home.

Earlier this week the Greek Government met American criticism by boasting of "better security than in many other countries of the world". Now, as Athens prepares for the 2004 Olympic Games, the Government may have a hard job ensuring that the event can proceed safely.

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The blood-spattered car in which Brigadier Stephen Saunders died. He may be 17 November's first British victim

The victim

'He was not a chap to worry about security'

By Michael Evans
Defence Editor,
John Carr and Michael
Theodoulou

BRIGADIER Stephen Saunders always had a pragmatic attitude towards his security and was aware of the threat that he faced as the British defence attaché.

Much of his 35-year Army career was spent in Northern Ireland where he was awarded a Mention in Despatches and the Queen's Commendation for Valuable Service after his posting as Deputy Commander of 8th Infantry Brigade in Londonderry.

He was promoted to Brigadier and appointed defence attaché to Athens last year. He was viewed as an ideal candidate because of his warm personality, perceptive intelligence and sense of humour.

He was also a family man. He leaves a wife, Heather, and daughters Nicola, 15, and Catherine, 14. They live near Dorchester.

His talents as a diplomat came into their own during the Kosovo crisis when the Greek Government was under pressure to prohibit the use of ports for deploying troops. Brigadier Saunders, 53, ensured that Greece continued to support Nato's campaign.

One British Army Sergeant disembarked with his unit in the port of Salonika, mistread the road signs and instead of driving north went south. He travelled 300 miles to Athens. Among the first to reassure the bemused man at a Piraeus police station in the small hours was Brigadier Saunders. He also impressed colleagues with his military knowledge, fluent Greek and infectious enthusiasm.

Colonel Chrichton Wakelin, British defence adviser in Cyprus who served with Brigadier Saunders in Northern Ireland and Germany, said yesterday: "He'd never be a chap to worry about security. You'd be sensible to take sensible precautions but if you're up against people like this, you don't stand a chance. He had a very pragmatic approach to life — a good military approach." Colonel Wakelin added: "He was a thoroughly decent guy, one of the world's gentlemen."

Born in Hampshire, the son of an Army officer, Brigadier Saunders joined the Army at 18, and graduated from Sandhurst two years later in 1967.

He then studied geography at Bristol University and took part in an expedition sponsored by the Royal Geographic Society (RGS) to Afghanistan. He maintained an interest in geography and was made a fellow of the RGS.

He was commissioned into the Duke of Edinburgh's Royal Regiment (Berkshire and Wiltshire) and served in Berlin, Cyprus, Northern Ireland and Germany. He also served in Hong Kong, Malaysia, South Korea and Zimbabwe.

After his appointment as Deputy Commander of 8th Infantry Brigade in Londonderry he joined the military attaché circuit and was posted to Australia and Papua New Guinea from 1993 to 1996. The next year he was posted to Kuwait where he spent a year as Military Assistant to the Commander of the United Nations Iraq Kuwait Observer Mission.

LINKS

www.british-embassy.gr The British Embassy in Athens
www.kyvernis.gr/english.html The Greek Government

The terror haven

Greek Government is accused of collusion

By Richard Beeston
Diplomatic Editor

GREECE yesterday stood accused of years of complacency, bordering on collusion, in its failure to stamp out terrorism, which has turned Athens into one of the most notorious capitals in Europe.

Despite repeated warnings from Western intelligence and public condemnation from the US, Greece remains a haven for domestic terrorists who have been actively killing and bombing for a quarter of a century with impunity.

Yesterday Costas Simitis, the Greek Prime Minister, vowed that the country would not allow the assassination of Brigadier Stephen Saunders, the second British diplomat killed in Athens in the past two decades, to "blacken the image of a modern, peaceful and democratic Greece".

However, the country's Western allies are increasingly angry and frustrated that little has been done on the ground to tackle the main terrorist group, 17 November. The group has stepped up its operations over the past year, coinciding with a wave of anti-Western feeling in Greece over



The 17 November logo

Nato's military action in Kosovo. Yesterday, James Woolsey, the former CIA Director, issued a damning indictment of the Greek authorities.

"I believe there are some people in the Greek Government who know certain members of the 17 November (group)," he said, in an interview published in *Pontiki*, a Greek weekly magazine.

"Nothing has been done, this is an extremely important affair for the US, and it constitutes a continuous irritation and affects our relationships with Greece."

The suspicion of collusion dates back to the 1970s, when it is believed that future members of 17 November and leading figures in the ruling Pasok party, were united in opposi-

tion to the rule of the military junta. The risk of further attacks now threatens to undermine Greece's plans to host the 1994 Olympic Games, and its hopes to become the regional hub for the Balkans and the Middle East.

Even before yesterday's killing, a Foreign Office security review three months ago concluded that Athens was the most dangerous capital in Western Europe. The British mission is classified as "high risk", where diplomats face a "significant" chance of attack.

"Given his military background in Northern Ireland, Brigadier Saunders probably knew more about security than anyone else in the (British) Embassy," a British diplomat said.

"No matter how many precautions you take, you will always be vulnerable to this sort of attack."

Only this week the National Commission on Terrorism, an organisation which reports to the US Congress, repeated earlier American charges of Athens being "disturbingly passive" in responding to terrorist threats, and accusing 17 November of 146 attacks against US targets since 1975.

Yard and FBI men fly to Athens

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accused Greece of being "one of the weakest links in Europe's efforts against terrorism".

George Papandreou, the Greek Foreign Minister, went straight to the hospital when told of the shooting and declared: "I absolutely condemn this terrorist act." He said he would not allow such acts to tarnish the country's image.

Brigadier Saunders, who had been decorated twice during his 35-year military career, lived near Dorchester in Dorset, with his wife and two teenage daughters. He had had dinner on Wednesday with Baroness Symons of Vernham Dean, the Defence Procurement Minister, who was in Athens to discuss the possible sale of Challenger tanks to the Greek Army. Yesterday Baron-

ess Symons was comforting Mrs Saunders.

David Madden, the British Ambassador in Athens, said: "My initial reaction was one of shock, horror and disbelief. Stephen was such a valued member of the Embassy."

Yesterday's killing was the first since a shipowner was shot dead in 1997. The 17 November terrorist organisation has been linked to more than 20 killings, including that of Ri-

chard Welch, the CIA's station chief in Athens in 1975.

The group, named after the day in 1973 when the military junta crushed a rebellion by Athens students, is anti-Western, and, in particular, anti-Nato. During the Kosovo crisis, there was a strong anti-Nato feeling among many Greeks who protested at the arrival of US Marines at Greek ports en route to Macedonia. Six years ago, 17 November

terrorists plotted to attack the Royal Navy aircraft carrier, *HMS Ark Royal*. Two rockets were found in a warehouse in Piraeus harbour near where the carrier was moored.

The Greek Government will now be under intense pressure to take firm action. Geoffrey Hoon, the Defence Secretary, said that his Greek counterpart had assured him that "no effort would be spared to arrest the gunmen".

The most dangerous British missions

1. **Freetown**. High Commissioner protected by team of Royal Military Police against rebel threat.
2. **Bogota**. Some members of British Embassy trained and licensed to carry firearms against danger of kidnapping.
3. **Johannesburg**. Consulate general staff at risk from wave of criminal violence.
4. **Lagos**. Diplomats threatened by criminal gangs.
5. **Beirut**. Ambassador protected by British and local

6. **Algiers**. Embassy protected against threat from Islamic militant guerrillas.
7. **Athens**. Terrorist threat against embassy staff — the most dangerous capital in the European Union.
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