



Peter Norris, left, is released on bail Artis Messinis/AP

Britons are freed after ordeal in Greek jail

THE BRITISH plane spotters freed from prison in Greece after a five week "spying" ordeal spoke last night of their "ridiculous" arrests and their relief that the threat of a 20-year jail sentence had been lifted from them.

After negotiating a mountain of red tape before their release and a media scrum as they walked out into the sunshine, the 11 men and one woman were whisked to Athens on a bus commandeered by a British national newspaper in preparation for a return to their families today.

All the spotters remained on £9,000 bail after having their felony spying charges reduced to misdemeanours and they had been advised to keep their comments guarded. But they still spoke of being angry and astonished that they had even been arrested in the first place.

Peter Norris, of Uxbridge, west London, described the party's disbelief when they were first arrested at an airfield in Kalamata on 8 November. Speaking from the *Daily Mail's* bus, Mr Norris said: "It's fantastic to be out. I just can't wait

BY STEVE BOGGAN AND PAUL WOOD in Athens

to get home for Christmas. But we should never have been in that situation in the first place. Our arrest at Kalamata airfield was simply ridiculous. That was the third one we had been to that day, and we had permission to visit them all."

The prisoners' release was as surreal as their imprisonment, with each having to fill in 12 or more forms. The men had been due to emerge from Nafplion prison at 8am local time, but it was not until 1pm that the first two, Paul Coppin and Wayne Groves, were freed. Then, as it appeared the situation could become no more farcical, the prison staff stopped work between 2pm and 3.30pm for a siesta.

As Mr Norris put it: "There were times when I wondered when this day was coming and what a long day it has been. It has been an unbelievable few weeks and I still cannot believe we were arrested. The whole thing has been ridiculous. Now all I want to do is get home and



Paul Coppin, centre, surrounded by journalists outside the police station in Nafplion, Greece yesterday

Vangelis Bougiotis/AP

get back to my family." By 4pm British time the 12 Britons and two Dutch spotters had been freed from prison.

The Britons are: Paul Coppin, 57, and his wife Lesley, 51, of Mildenhall, Suffolk; Peter Norris, 52, of Uxbridge, west London; Antoni Adamiak, 37, of London; Andrew Jenkins, 32, of York; Wayne Groves, 38, of Tamworth; Michael Bursell, 47, of Swanland, near Hull; Michael Keane, 57, of Dartford, Kent; Steven Rush, 38, from Caterham, Surrey; Christopher Wilson, 46, who lives close to Gatwick Airport; Graham Arnold, 38, from Ottershaw, Surrey; and Garry Fagan, 30, from Kegworth, Leicestershire.

Mr Coppin, who organised the trip with his wife, was understood to have been contracted to speak to the *Daily*

Mail, but he said: "It's quite interesting to see a different side of Greece than a prison cell. We are all very happy to be out."

Mr Groves said: "I'm pleased to be out of course but overall we're not very happy because we've got to come back here. In the end we will get justice."

Describing the moments before their arrest, Mr Norris added: "At each airfield we visited that day... we were told not to take any pictures, so we left our cameras in the van. We didn't take any pictures at all. At about 4.50pm, we were walking out and a guy stopped us and said 'You're under arrest.' We asked what for, and he said, 'For taking pictures of aircraft'."

"We thought he was crazy - our cameras were in the van. But they led us away and it began to get very strange."

Mr Norris, who works for a freight forwarding company, said his worst moment was at the first court appearance when the judge told them they would be charged with espionage. "None of us imagined it would ever get that far," he said. "The judge would see the evidence and let us go. We imagined being back home the next day. Then he told us he was looking at a serious form of spying and my heart just sank. Suddenly we were going back to prison."

"In jail we were not singled out for any special favours but the other inmates were fine and we had no problems from them. It was just the thought of being in jail and not knowing what was going to happen from one day to the next. There was never any good news from the courts.

We were worried whether we would get bail because we did not have a Greece address. I had never been in prison before and I can tell you, they look a lot better from the outside."

Mr Norris's wife, Perdita, said she and their five grown-up children had begun to fear the worst. "Peter and I really thought he might be jailed as a spy," she said. "Everything had seemed so ridiculous that we reached the position where we thought anything was possible."

"We're all just delighted he's coming home. Now we can look forward to Christmas." The planespotters still face misdemeanour charges of spying, which carry a maximum sentence of five years. But by abandoning the felony prosecution the Greek court recognise that they were not spies but holi-

daymakers pursuing a hobby, albeit one completely unknown in Greece.

Defence lawyers are confident that once the case comes to court, the evidence against them will melt away.

The original allegation that the 12 had taken illegal photographs was shown to be untrue when their film was developed and was shown to have nothing more secret on it than pictures of the Athens military museum.

The case against the planespotters now rests on notebooks seized from some members of the group in which are written down military aircraft tail numbers. The planespotters say these are available in aircraft publications sold quite openly in Greece and throughout Europe.