

# Missed flight delays plane-spotters' return

From Ben Macintyre in Athens and John Carr in Nafplion

THE British plane-spotters accused of spying on Greek military installations finally left their prison cells yesterday, after more than a month in custody in a case that has soured relations between Britain and Greece.

The organiser of the plane-spotting trip, Paul Coppin, 57, and Wayne Groves, 38, were the first of the Britons to be released by the Greek authorities, but not before another series of last-minute bureaucratic complications, baffling legal hiccups and a pause while the Greek officials had lunch. The delays ensured that the group would not be flying home until today at the earliest.

The 12 British and two Dutch plane-spotters were arrested on November 8, during an air show at the air force base in the southern port town of Kalamata, and accused of espionage. Three judges in Kalamata dropped those criminal charges this week, setting bail of £9,000 each, but the accused will have to return to Greece next year to face misdemeanor charges of gathering secret information.

"We're glad to be out," Peter Norris said. "It's been long and tortuous. We got used to prison life. 'I want to shave



Paul Coppin after being released yesterday

this off," he said, rubbing his prison stubble.

Patrick Dirksen, who is Dutch, said: "It's nothing I want to do ever again."

Mr Coppin, who runs a plane-spotting tour company in Mildenhall, Suffolk, was led out of the prison doors into bright, but cold sunshine. "Great, great!" he said, as he was bundled into a police car and whisked off to the local police station to retrieve his passport. He only had time for a huge grin and a brief wave to reporters before being ushered into a police bus for the drive to Athens.

Prospects for the remaining ten, however, remained vague through much of the day with British Consul officials forced

to overcome banking red tape involving the transfer of about £108,000 in bail money for the entire group.

Because of the delay, the group would have to spend another day in Greece because at least some of them would not be released in time make a scheduled flight home last night.

All the prisoners had expected to be freed at first light yesterday, but after releasing the two Dutchmen and the first two Britons, the prison governor, Christos Lambadas, conceded that "bureaucratic problems" were hampering the release of the others. "We are working to get them out today," he said.

During the five-week captivi-

ty, fears rose for the health of Mr Coppin's wife Lesley, 51, who was being held in the women's wing of a jail outside Athens. She was freed last night.

The plane-spotters insisted that they were merely pursuing a hobby which remains entirely unknown in Greece and is therefore viewed with intense suspicion, particularly after the terrorist attacks of September 11.

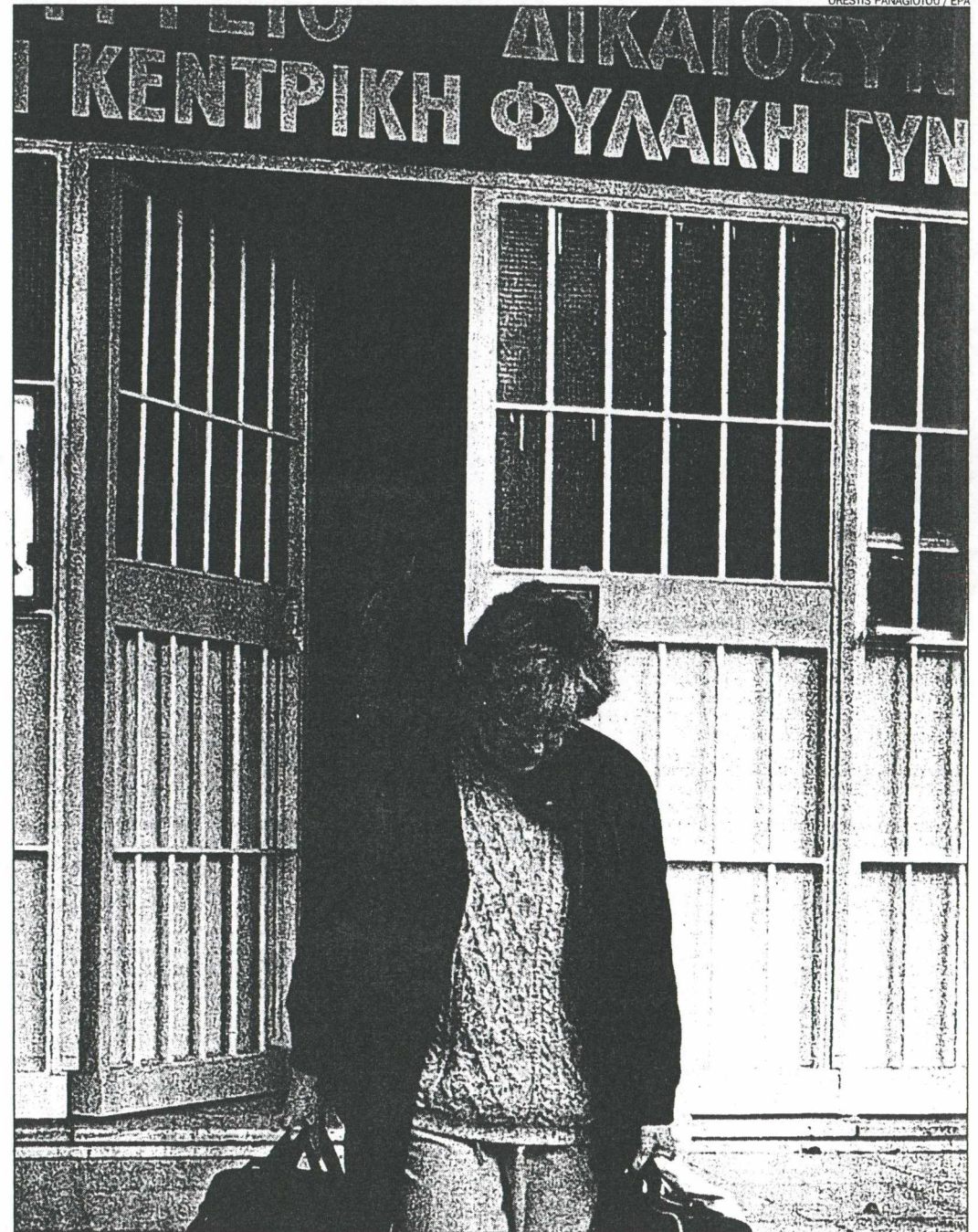
Greek official suspicions were heightened when it became known that Mr Coppin had also toured airbases in Turkey, with which Greece has long-standing tension, as a guest of the Turkish military this year.

The families of the British detainees had raised the money within 24 hours of Wednesday's court decision, but it took far longer to get it through the sluggish Greek legal system.

The two Dutchmen were lent the bail money by their government, but Jack Straw, the Foreign Secretary, while applauding the release of the "Kalamata 12", said that he would not use taxpayers' money to post bail.

After the court ruling the group spent two additional days in prison while the full bail amount was slowly gathered and deposited with a court cashier in Kalamata.

After the British plane-spotters had left the prison, in the southern port town of Nafplion, they were taken to the police station near by before being formally released. All 11 Britons were then expected to drive to Athens to be reunited with Mrs Coppin, before flying home on an Easyjet plane. A spokesman for Easyjet said that the company would not fly back to London until this morning at the earliest.



Lesley Coppin, wife of the plane-spotting trip's organiser, leaving the women's wing of a prison near Athens