

Bailed plane spotters fly home after late hitch

By SEAN O'NEILL
IN NAFPLION

A DOZEN British plane spotters detained as suspected spies in Greece for 37 days were finally freed yesterday after a day of almost comical bureaucratic bungling.

They will fly home this morning, but at one point it appeared that nine of them would be kept in the high-security jail at Nafplion because the Greek authorities would not recognise a banker's draft issued by Grindleys Bank on behalf of the Government.

The money, £81,000 lodged by the prisoners' friends and families, was finally accepted after Jack Straw, the Foreign Secretary, spoke to his Greek counterpart, and the British ambassador in Athens contacted the Greek economic minister.

A court clerk on a bicycle delivered authorisation papers to the prison, enabling four of the 14, who included two Dutch aviation enthusiasts, to be released.

The group had been told they would be freed together at 10.30am. Instead they emerged in dribs and drabs to be shuttled from the prison to the local police station where they had to complete further paperwork. The last man was not released until 4.30pm.

Peter Norris, 52, said he was "hugely relieved" to be free. "We've been waiting and waiting and waiting. Today has been a very slow day and the whole experience has been long and agonising."

Donald Holder, the British

consul, who spent the day negotiating with the prison authorities, said the group's release had come after "a hell of a lot" of phoning and faxing.

Richard Howitt, the Labour MEP who campaigned for their release, said: "The higgledy-piggledy, lethargic approach of the Greeks almost kept them in jail. It is just the latest ghastly episode in what has been a terrible disaster."

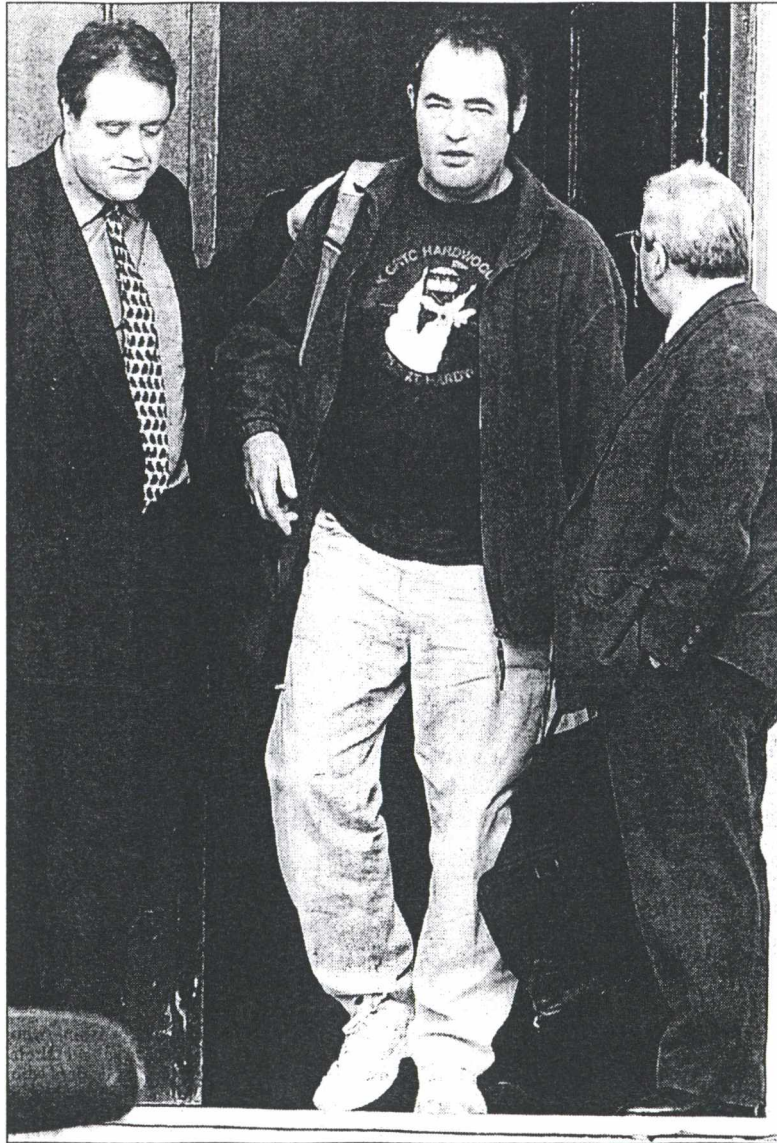
The plane spotters were arrested on Nov 8 at a military display at Kalamata airbase at a time of heightened security in the wake of the September 11 atrocities.

They were granted bail on Wednesday after a judicial panel dropped espionage charges and substituted a misdemeanour offence of collecting military information without information.

Although the charge carries a maximum five-year prison sentence, misdemeanours are usually dealt with by a fine or a suspended sentence. It is unclear whether the plane spotters can be compelled to return to Greece for trial next year because they do not face criminal charges.

Paul Coppin, the director of Touchdown Tours, which organised the group's two-week trip to Greek airfields, said that he wanted to return to face the charge. Mr Coppin, 42, of Mildenhall, Suffolk, the first of the party to be escorted from prison, said: "I am happy to come back. I want to clear my name."

More than anyone else, it



Walking on air: plane spotter Paul Coppin is released from jail in Greece yesterday

had been his activities — he has visited Turkey at the request of the air force and previously been arrested at a Romanian air base — that aroused the suspicions of the Greek authorities.

His wife Lesley, 51, the only woman in the party, who was in the group's minibus mind-ing possessions when she was arrested, was freed from a

women's prison near Piraeus. The couple were reunited in Athens.

Mr Holder said he was "absolutely delighted", but Mr Howitt said: "They remain very angry that they face any charges at all. We remain confident that they are totally innocent and that when this comes to trial the case will collapse."

Picture: GEOFF PUGH

'I won't give it up, but I won't return to Greece'

By SEAN O'NEILL

ALTHOUGH the hobby he has pursued since childhood has cost him more than a month in a grim Greek prison, Peter Norris said last night that he would not be giving up plane spotting.

Mr Norris, a slim, articulate 52-year-old, is perhaps the member of the party of aviation fanatics who least fits the image of an "anorak" plane spotter.

Many of the others are single; some still live with their mothers and one cites his only other interest in life as real ale.

Mr Norris, in contrast, has been happily married for almost 33 years and has three sons, two daughters and eight grandchildren. His family is tolerant, even understanding, of his obsession.

"It's unlikely I will be giving up plane spotting," he said. "But I can assure you I will not be doing it again in Greece."

His wife, Perdita, 57, a nursery nurse, said she had no intention of trying to make her husband give it up.

"Peter has been a plane spotter since he was a child," she said. "He won't give up because it is too much of a passion for him."

"I have been with him to all the British air shows and to air bases as far away as the Outer Hebrides. I am quite interested, but I wouldn't call myself a spotter."

His sons were taken, as children, to air bases and air displays, but today show only a mild interest in "Dad and his aeroplanes".

Mr Norris had been on two short trips with Paul Coppin's Touchdown Tours before going on the two-week trip to Greece.

The prison experience has been chastening. Nafplion jail is an austere place, its walls ringed with razor wire and guards stationed in watchtowers. The inmates are not segregated, as in British jails, and the spotters found themselves locked up with murderers, rapists and thieves.

"There was zero in the way of luxuries," Mr Norris said. "The only thing to look forward to each day was a single cup of hot coffee."

"For the first 10 days we were all sleeping



All smiles: two of the freed British spotters

on the floor. Then we were moved into four cells in three groups of three and one of four. We stuck together then and looked out for one another."

Mr Norris said that despite his fears of being jailed for many years as a spy, he had tried to remain cheerful.

"My attitude was, 'Don't let the buggers grind you down.' I am mightily relieved that the whole fiasco is coming to an end."

The Daily Telegraph
15/12/01 p. 11