

JIM WILEMAN / APEX PHOTO AGENCY



How The Times reported the killing in June 2000

Gun clue aids hunt for Greek terrorists

By Daniel McGrory, Dominic Kennedy and John Carr in Athens

A GUN found beside a man who accidentally blew himself up is the most precious clue in the 27-year hunt for a terror group whose victims include a British defence envoy and a CIA station chief.

The .38-calibre pistol, found in a bag near the badly wounded man in the port of Piraeus at the weekend, was stolen by terrorists as a trophy from a Greek policeman they murdered in 1984. Police have sealed off an entire floor of an Athens hospital, waiting at the bedside of the failed bomber, who is expected to survive despite losing three fingers and possibly his sight.

Detectives are convinced the owner of this "smoking gun" must know the secrets of

the elusive 17 November terrorist group, none of whose members has ever been captured.

The Greek policeman was killed with another gun, still missing, which became one of the "signature weapons" of the extreme left-wing organisation. The most recent victim of that weapon, used in seven attacks, is Costis Peraticos, a shipowner and British citizen, assassinated in 1997.

Scotland Yard has been helping the Greek police hunt for 17 November since the murder of a British defence attaché, Brigadier Stephen Saunders, in 2000. He was killed with the terrorists' other signature weapon, a Colt .45 automatic pistol used to murder the CIA station chief, Richard Welch, in the first attack in 1975.

The hunt for 17 November — named after a student uprising against the Greek military junta in 1973 — was reported to be close to fruition at the weekend.

The unlikely bomber, a painter of Greek Orthodox icons, blew himself up with a timebomb near the ticket office for the Hellas Flying Dolphins, Greece's biggest passenger ferry company, which became notorious as the operator of an old ferry which sank off the isle of Paros in 2000, killing 80.

As the bomber, Savvas Xiros, 40, lay unconscious at the dockside on Saturday, police found and defused his second time-bomb. They also found a bag that contained two hand



Savvas Xiros: police are



Heather Saunders, whose husband was the murdered British defence attaché in Athens, has become a symbol of defiance to the 17 November group

Mr Xiros, the ninth of ten children of a priest from the northern port of Salonika, was described by friends and neighbours yesterday as a classic "good boy". Yet, say police, he and his girlfriend, Alicia Romero Cortes, a Spanish make-up artist, have been under surveillance for some time.

Mr Xiros is suspected of having anarchist sympathies. His bombs resembled those of the Revolutionary Cells movement, allies of 17 November and responsible for bombing the Intercontinental Hotel in Athens in April 1999, killing one person. Mr Xiros and his girlfriend lived in a caravan on the outskirts of Athens and

to Spain and Sudan. The girlfriend has been released after questioning.

Scotland Yard officers arrived in Greece as soon as Brigadier Saunders was killed in Athens on June 8, 2000, by helmeted gunmen who shot four bullets as their motorcycle drew alongside his car.

A 17 November statement later accused Brigadier Saunders of planning Nato's "barbaric" air raids on Serbia. "He is one of those who participated in the Nazi-type raids and mass murder of innocent, unarmed civilians," it said.

A team of five or six British police has been based at the Greek anti-terrorist police's building. British detectives in

Athens are now said to have passed to Greek anti-terrorist chiefs the identities of suspected leaders of 17 November.

The organisation, similar to Germany's Baader-Meinhof Gang or Italy's Red Brigades, has been blamed for 23 murders of Greeks and foreigners.

Greek police officers were reported at the weekend to be on the brink of their first arrests, including a 65-year-old Trotskyite intellectual suspected of being the group's leader.

The discovery of the "smoking gun" has added to the expectant mood in Greece. Television programmes were interrupted for an announcement about the pistol by Fotis Nasiakos, the chief of police.

Same weapon for 7 attacks

November 11, 1983: Two policemen attacked in Athens, no casualties

December 24, 1984: Policeman Christos Matis killed in terrorist attack. His police-issue weapon, pictured right, was found beside Savvas Xeros, the failed bomber, in Piraeus

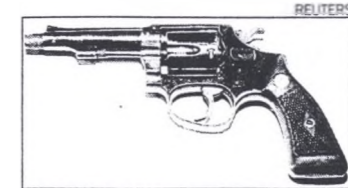
July 13, 1988: Raid on a post office savings bank

January 10, 1989: Shooting of investigating magistrate Constantine Androulidakis, who died of his wounds later

January 18, 1989: Attempted murder of magistrate Panayotis Tarasouleas, who escaped

November 20, 1991: Shoot-out with police in the working-class district of Sepolia, Athens

May 28, 1997: Shooting with four bullets of British shipowner Costis Peraticos in Piraeus as he left his office



Saunders widow calls for action

By Dominic Kennedy and Daniel McGrory

THE widow of Stephen Saunders, the murdered British defence attaché, promised yesterday that she would press Greece to exploit its apparent breakthrough in the hunt for her husband's killers.

Heather Saunders described as "very exciting" the discovery of the gun stolen from a policeman killed by the 17 November group or its allies. "They have to act," she said. "I won't let them ignore it. My fight for justice is not going to go away until it's satisfied. They have always said they have got to get evidence. If the gun was there, that's proof."

Mrs Saunders, born in Belfast, has become a symbol of the fight against 17 November. Last month she was joined by relatives of other victims for a memorial service at St Paul's Anglican Church in Athens. 17 November has killed four US officers and diplomats and two Turkish diplomats in about 50 bombings and rocket attacks, and many shootings.

Nobody has ever been caught, leading to speculation that the group has sympathisers in the Pasok socialist party which has often ruled Greece. In the days of the US-backed military junta, the extreme Left and democratic socialists are suspected of having made common cause. The Greek establishment is said to be terrified that links will be exposed between some of its leaders and 17 November.

Western security chiefs have long suspected that 17 November also has sympathisers in the police and military who have alerted the group to suspected raids. British detectives stationed in Athens to hunt the Brigadier Saunders's killers complained about the lack of co-operation and "obstruction" they met. Privately, they expressed frustration at the reluctance of Greek officers to arrest and question suspects the Yard helped to identify.

Public sympathy was long believed to be on 17 November's side, until the killing of the British envoy led to distressing television images of his wife and children in tears.

Nicos Peraticos, the brother of Costis Peraticos, a British citizen and shipowner shot dead in 1997, welcomed the new leads. "I feel reasonably encouraged that these people are not such an amazing group. They make mistakes."