

Eccentric pastime that proved impossible to explain

By SEAN O'NEILL IN KALAMATA

AT the Haikos Hotel, where the British planespotters stayed during their trial, the talk the other night was of a spotter who had collected the numbers of 990 Lockheed Starfighters. There was great speculation about how he might

make it to 1,000, given that the Starfighter is now a rare aircraft.

Such conversations are mysterious to the vast majority of Britons, as are the recreational activities of this group who came to Greece for a holiday and visited an aircraft scrapyard but not the Acropolis. To the Greeks

planespotting is unfathomable. This was never more clear than on Thursday night when Panagiotis Poullos, the prosecutor, asked Paul Coppin: "Can you describe the object of planespotting?"

Mr Coppin, a spotter for 34 years, replied: "Many people pursue different versions, my personal

version is keeping records of aircraft I have seen to build a history of an aircraft from birth to death."

Mr Poullos: "So anyone can describe it the way they want?"

Mr Coppin: "Yes."

Mr Poullos: "Are there any rules?"

Mr Coppin: "There are no rules." He explained that he had 500 spotting notebooks at home in Suffolk and that on his arrival at Athens last Monday he had not been able to stop himself jotting down numbers at the airport.

Mr Poullos was expressionless as he listened.

cover the distribution of Biggles and probably the Old Testament as well".

Since the planespotters were arrested in Greece, the warrant would not have applied had it been in force. But if a similar misdemean-

our is committed in future by a holidaymaker, there would be nothing to prevent the Greek authorities having them arrested in Britain and extradited.

Under current extradition arrangements, it is unlikely

that the planespotters would have been sent to Greece if they had decided not to return to face trial.

Although espionage is an extraditable offence, the courts here would probably have concluded that the evi-

dence that they had been spying was not strong enough. But once the arrest warrant is introduced, there would be no such safeguard.

Tony Blair signed up to the warrant before Christmas. Ministers dismissed criticism

of the way foreign courts operate by saying that since they had all signed the European Convention on Human Rights, fair and equal treatment would be available.

But habeas corpus, the mainstay of British liberties,

does not apply in many EU countries. When the planespotters were first arrested last year, they were kept without charge for far longer than would be permitted in Britain.

Editorial Comment: Page 23

The 13 men and one woman on trial

Paul Coppin, 46, of Mildenhall, Suffolk, is the director of Touchdown Tours, which organised the ill-fated week-long trip to Greek airfields. Known for taking risks in his quest for military aircraft serial numbers, it was his activities that aroused the Greek authorities' suspicions. He has visited Turkey at the request of the air force and was detained last year in Romania after getting too close to an airbase.

Lesley Copplin, 53, a grandmother and the only woman in the group, had gone to Greece with her husband of only 11 months for what she thought would be a belated honeymoon. She does not share his passion for planespotting, and was completing a crossword in the party's minibus when she was arrested. She was said to have suffered weight loss and asthma attacks while detained separately in a women's prison for six weeks.

Steven Rush, 38, a golf

course green keeper from Caterham, Surrey, captured the headlines last December when he was reunited with his three-year-old daughter, Isla, and girlfriend, Jennifer Childs. While in prison for pursuing a "safe hobby", Mr Rush said he was able to keep track of his other love, Chelsea Football Club, thanks to English newspapers delivered to the group in jail. A lighter moment for him was watching a Chelsea match in a cell with an Albanian man who was serving 16 years for murdering someone with a Kalashnikov.

Antoni Adamiak, 37, a divorced bank computer expert from London, also said it was his love for Chelsea Football Club that boosted his spirits in prison. Yesterday, he said the only consolation was that he would now be able to see Chelsea play Arsenal in the FA Cup final next weekend. **Peter Norris**, 52, of Uxbridge, west London, works for an air freight

company. An avid planespotter since he was a child, he is married and has three sons, two daughters and eight grandchildren. Despite the ordeal, he has no plans to give up his hobby. **Michael Bursell**, 47, a British Telecom manager from Hull, is married with two daughters. A former employee of the aeronautics company BAe, he has written a number of aviation pamphlets and a book about crashed aircraft in Europe.

Andrew Jenkins, 32, is a factory worker from York; **Michael Keane**, 57, of Dartford is a retired printer; **Christopher Wilson**, 47, a British Telecom manager from Horsham, Sussex; **Graham Arnold**, 38, a computer expert from Ottershaw, Surrey; **Gary Fagan**, 28, a lorry driver from Kegworth, Leics; **Wayne Groves**, 38, a railway manager from Tamworth, Staffs. Dutch plane spotters: **Frank Mink**, 28, from Den Helder; **Patrick Dirksen**, 27, from Eindhoven.

The group's eight-day tour of Greek airfields costing £650 has now turned into a six-month legal ordeal costing each planespotter £16,000 in bail and legal costs.

Barry Wheeler, the editor of the plane enthusiasts' magazine, *Air Pictorial*, criticised the tour organisers.

He said: "The group is a bit gung-ho. They advertise these trips 'with a difference' and I think they should think twice about that in the future.

"The Greeks are used to planespotters, but it is one thing snapping commercial aircraft and another going to military bases."

Downing Street said last night: "The Prime Minister continues to follow this case closely. He has previously raised it with the Greek prime minister.

"The Government has always believed that the response to this case has been disproportionate and will continue to give the defendants and their families as much help as it can."

The Foreign Office said that Jack Straw, the Foreign Secretary, was "relieved" that the planespotters were returning home. It added that he had repeatedly made representations on their behalf.

Richard Howitt, MEP, who has campaigned for the group, said there had been "an outrageous miscarriage of justice".

He said: "I am absolutely stunned. I can only conclude that the judges must have made up their minds long before the trial began."

The case could have serious diplomatic repercussions for Greece. The Greek government is a signatory to the 1990 Conventional Forces in Europe, which requires it to disclose the types, numbers and whereabouts of all its military aircraft to other signatories.

The 30 states which have signed the treaty include Britain, Russia and Greece's arch-rival, Turkey.