

A very African coup

By Fred Bridgland
sundayherald.com | August 29, 2004

Mark Thatcher, son of former British prime minister Margaret Thatcher, sits under house arrest this weekend in his luxury Cape Town home, overlooking a magnificent bay where southern right whales and their newborn calves swim free, and staffed by 12 servants and a number of rifle-toting bodyguards. He has until at least November 25 to enjoy the comforts of his Dutch Cape-style home, whose two hectares include a swimming pool and tennis court behind 10ft-high walls which currently keep out squads of encamped British newspaper reporters as effectively as they do the Cape's many part-time and full-time violent robbers.

On that date Thatcher, who has been bailed for a record £165,000, must report to Cape Town's Wynberg Regional Court to answer various charges, the most serious of which is that he provided the key plane in a mercenary plot to overthrow the dictator of oil-rich Equatorial Guinea.

As he prepares for what could be a prolonged trial, there will be little time or scope for 51-year-old Thatcher to dine, dance and play tennis with the international rich and famous in Constantia, Cape Town's most opulent suburb. They include Earl Spencer, brother of the late Princess Diana, and Marc Rich, the international oil trader pardoned by President Bill Clinton on fraud and tax evasion charges as he left office.

Other neighbours include two Italian mafia godfathers wanted for trial in the US and Italy and two Nobel Peace Prize winners, Nelson Mandela and retired Anglican archbishop Desmond Tutu. The attractions of Constantia include the sheer beauty of its oak-shrouded terrain on the slopes of Table Mountain, its languid climate, the nearby presence of South Africa's oldest vineyard, Groot Constantia, easy access to wonderful beaches and a variety of game reserves, and the reasonable price of property that would cost tens of millions of pounds elsewhere.

Thatcher bought his slice of paradise, which had four cars parked in the drive yesterday, for the rand equivalent of £500,000 in 1995 and had advertised it for sale at a minimum asking price of £2m when the Scorpions, South Africa's crack anti-fraud unit, asked him to surrender his passport and his air ticket for a flight to Texas, which will depart tomorrow without him.

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The allegation by the Scorpions is that an obscure Thatcher company trading as Triple A Aviation from the remote Free State town of Bethlehem, put a twin-engined King Air turboprop plane at the disposal of dissident Equatorial Guinea politician Severo Moto, exiled in Spain.

Triple A's King Air flew Moto from Spain to the West African country of Mali last March on the eve of the planned coup, allegedly masterminded by former Scots Guards and SAS officer Simon Mann and London-based multi-millionaire oil tycoon Ely Calil, among others.

The plan, according to the Scorpions and the government of Equatorial Guinea, was for Moto to be flown onwards from Mali to be landed in Malabo, the Equatorial Guinea capital, and be installed as the new president within 30 minutes of Mann and his team of 84 mercenaries launching the coup d'état.

The alleged rewards for Mann, Thatcher, Calil and others would have been big shares in oil enterprises in Equatorial Guinea – dubbed the Kuwait of Africa following the discovery of vast offshore reserves – after President Teodoro Obiang Nguema had been deposed or killed.

The whole elaborate plot went horribly wrong from day one. It was on March 7 this year that Mann – son of former England cricket captain and MCC president George Mann – and 69 former South African and Angolan special forces soldiers left South Africa's small Wonderboom airport, ostensibly bound for the Democratic Republic of the Congo.

They were aboard an ageing Boeing 727 that Mann, according to Scorpions sources, had bought from a Kansas company before spending £250,000 to convert it for military purposes. The Boeing first touched down in darkness at Harare International Airport and taxied to a remote corner of the airfield to await the arrival of Mann, who had flown into the Zimbabwe capital a few days earlier to take delivery of a £100,000 arms cache from Zimbabwe Defence Industries, the weapons trading company of President Robert Mugabe's government. Mann's inventory included 20 light machine guns and 61 AK-47 assault rifles plus 75,000 rounds of ammunition, 100 RPG-7 anti-tank rockets, 80 60mm mortar shells and 150 hand grenades.

The plan called for the plane, with the weapons and Mann now aboard, to take off for Malabo airport in Equatorial Guinea, where the mercenaries would be met by the economic affairs minister in President Obiang's government, Antonio Javier, who was scheduled to guide them to the sleeping dictator. He would then have been taken to the airport and removed from Equatorial Guinea as Moto arrived aboard Thatcher's King Air plane.

If the plan had worked, there would quite probably have been widespread rejoicing in

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Equatorial Guinea, a tiny country with a population less than that of Edinburgh [450,000], consisting of the volcanic island of Bioko, once better known as Fernando Po, and a square of territory called Rio Muni, sandwiched between Cameroon and Gabon in the armpit of West Africa.

For years after it became independent from Spain in 1968, Equatorial Guinea was one of the poorest nations on Earth, ruled by the stunningly oppressive extended Nguema family. The tyranny of the first president, Macias Nguema, reached such grotesque proportions that one of the few outside investigators who penetrated the country described it as no better than a 'concentration camp', a land of fear and devastation. Countless thousands were tortured and executed or perished in overcrowded, fetid, rat-infested jails. One-third of the population fled to Cameroon and Gabon. No normal system of government existed: there was no education nor medical services and, towards the end of Macias's 11-year reign, not even a currency. In the words of one international agency report, Equatorial Guinea slowly 'dropped out of the world'.

The country entered a state of primitive brutality. Macias Nguema had a pathological hatred of 'intellectuals' and, relying heavily on the army and police to enforce his control, he ruthlessly suppressed all opposition and wreaked vengeance on the pre-independence intelligentsia. Within a few years, all senior civil servants and two-thirds of the national assembly had been murdered, imprisoned or driven into exile. Ten of the 12 ministers in the first government were executed.

Matters improved, but not much, when Macias was deposed in 1979 by his nephew, the current president, who had his uncle executed by his personal Moroccan security guards. This Moroccan elite of President Obiang, who has ruled for the past 25 years, has been known to execute by firing squad up to 150 dissidents at a time in the national football stadium while a military band played *Those Were The Days, My Friend*.

Guineans are rounded up and disappear almost as routinely under the nephew as under the uncle. A foreign oil engineer recently recounted what happened when he handed over to police in Malabo a man he caught siphoning petrol from his car: 'He was made to brace himself up against the counter in the police station with his hands forward. He probably thought they were just going to beat him. One of them smashed his rifle butt down on the man's hand so hard that it basically exploded and disappeared. The police then climbed in with sticks and beat him to death.'

President Obiang's semi-literate brother, General Armengol Ondo Nguema, is director of national security and chief of police. According to Amnesty International and the US State Department, he is a torturer whose men slice off the ears of victims with razor blades, throw buckets of urine over them and rub oil into their bodies to attract vicious soldier ants.

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Obiang's exiled opponents have also accused him of being a cannibal who eats the genitals and brains of executed rivals, hoping his spirit absorbs their strengths.

The fatal flaw in the plans of Mann and his alleged co-conspirators, such as Thatcher and Calil, was that the South African mercenaries they recruited could not resist hinting the plot to their fellow 'dogs of war' who hang out in particular bars, clubs and brothels in Cape Town and Johannesburg. The plan was also hatched at a time when South Africa's ANC government, sickened by the havoc mercenaries have spread across Africa, was framing legislation to outlaw mercenary recruitment and make it an offence for South Africans to serve abroad as soldiers of fortune.

South Africa's tough, hardline communist Intelligence Minister, Ronnie Kasrils, has admitted publicly that a sting was put into operation. Mann and his men were allowed to fly out of South Africa to begin their mission, but presidents Mugabe and Obiang were tipped off beforehand. Effectively, the mercenaries were delivered into the hands of two of the most corrupt and uncertain justice systems in the world, a decision that is being heavily questioned in South Africa.

Mann and his men were imprisoned in chains and shackles in Harare's notorious Chikurubi prison. Mann was charged with contravening Zimbabwe's arms and immigration laws. He was found guilty last Friday and the prosecution is asking that he be imprisoned for up to 10 years.

Had Mann's Wild Geese successfully reached Malabo, the Scorpions allege the plane would have been met by an advance party of seven South Africans, one German and six Armenian mercenaries, supported by four senior Equatorial Guinea officials, under the command of Nick du Toit. Du Toit was once an officer in South Africa's former special forces 32 Battalion, a crack foreign legion outfit whose foot soldiers came from various black African states, but mainly Angola. Five of the men detained with du Toit are former 32 Battalion soldiers, Angolans who now have South African citizenship.

Du Toit had established a fishing company, named Triple Options [remarkably similar in name to Thatcher's Triple A Aviation], in Equatorial Guinea in partnership with Economics Minister Antonio Javier some months ahead of the planned coup date. Two days after Mann's arrest, du Toit and his men were arrested in Malabo, cast into the city's foul Black Beach prison within the presidential compound, and charged with plotting the overthrow of Obiang by preparing the way for Mann's assault group. The German, Gerhard Eugen Nershz, died within days in shackles in Black Beach. Amnesty International said Nershz was tortured to death. The Equatorial Guinea government said he died of cerebral malaria.

Du Toit is now on trial for his life. The prosecution has called for the death penalty by firing squad. It has also requested Simon Mann's extradition from Zimbabwe and is seeking

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permission from the South African government to question Mark Thatcher.

The Scorpions decided to swoop on Thatcher's home at 7am last Wednesday after they were tipped off that he was planning to flee the country tomorrow. Scorpion detectives had long known of Thatcher's alleged involvement in the Equatorial Guinea coup plot after they intercepted a desperately scribbled letter by Simon Mann to his wife Amanda, which had been smuggled out from Chikurubi prison. Mann's third wife, lives just around the corner from the Thatcher's house at Number 10 Dawn Street [drawl it in upper-class English and it sounds like Downing Street] where the Thatchers, including the ailing Iron Lady, dined with the Manns last Christmas .

The letter referred to a contact called Scratcher, who the Scorpions say is Mark Thatcher, known as Scratcher at Harrow because of his acne. Written on two sheets of paper and a torn magazine page, Mann's letter to Amanda said: 'Our situation is not good and very URGENT.

'They [Mann's lawyers] get no reply from Smelly and Scratcher, who asked them to ring back after the Grand Prix was over! This is not going well. I must say once again: what will get us out is MAJOR CLOUT. Once we get into a real trial scenario we are fucked.?'

The Scorpions believe they have identified 'Smelly' as Calil, a multimillionaire Lebanese oil trader of Nigerian origin who lives in a £20m house in Chelsea, London, and who is accused by the Equatorial Guinea government of being at the heart of the plot. Calil is a friend of Severo Moto and is also believed to be close to recently-jailed author Lord Jeffrey Archer, who is alleged to have contributed to coup funding.

Mann also pleaded for the 'heavy influence' of Old Etonian millionaire David Hart, once a close adviser to Prime Minister Margaret Thatcher and her chief enforcer during the 1984 British coal miners' strike. He has recently worked as a middleman for various defence contractors.

In South Africa, Mann's letter has been dubbed the Wonga List – a reference to English public school slang for money used in the letter. The Wonga List has also been used to describe an alleged list of financial contributors to the plot, kept by a 24-year-old accountant, James Kershaw, who is now a witness for the prosecution in South Africa. The list, which is said to be in the possession of the police, could be the crucial evidence that turns Mark Thatcher's African paradise into his worst nightmare.

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