

THE INDEPENDENT

Chance and friendship led to discovery of Iraqi supergun

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It was pure chance that brought Paul Grecian, the head of Ordtech, a munitions company with close ties to the Iraqis, into contact with the intelligence services in 1989.

Mr Grecian had known Detective Constable Steven Wilkinson for 10 years - they met through a local rugby club. In 1986, when DC Wilkinson joined Scotland Yard's Anti-Terrorist Branch (SO13), his friend, an international arms dealer, kept him informed about matters he thought would be of interest.

When DC Wilkinson moved to Special Branch, the relationship continued. Mr Grecian would regularly meet DC Wilkinson, whom he knew committed their conversations to paper and passed them on to senior Special Branch officers, who, in turn, sent them to MI5 and MI6. Mr Grecian was insistent that his identity would not be revealed.

In September 1989, Mr Grecian contacted DC Wilkinson with some startling information: the Iraqi government had recently undertaken a top-secret project known as Operation Babylon. In essence, the plan was to build an artillery piece with a range of 600 miles, thus surpassing all other standard artillery weapons currently on the market.

The weapon was being built in the north of Iraq under the utmost secrecy. Mr Grecian told DC Wilkinson that the weapon would be housed in a crater with a retractable roof in the Kurdistan region of Iraq. This new, huge, "supergun" would need a charge weighing 16 tonnes.

Mr Grecian further believed that the gassing of the Kurds in northern Iraq had been designed to clear the area for the installation of the new weapon, which would be powerful enough to bring neighbouring capitals, Tehran, Damascus and Tel Aviv, within easy range.

A month later, and Mr Grecian and DC Wilkinson met again. The project was being co-ordinated by Dr Gerald Bull, the owner of a company called Space Research Corporation and an international expert in ballistic systems. Twenty people had been hired by Dr Bull to work on Babylon.

At this point, Mr Grecian's identity was disclosed by DC Wilkinson, and that he was born on 12 April 1955 in Newcastle. His home and business addresses were supplied, along with a resume of his career.

Mr Grecian was an arms dealer, involved in large-scale projects normally of no interest to the police. But, given the nature of the arms business, he met other, less reputable dealers and found out what they were doing. Israeli and US intelligence agencies had approached him to work for them.

Clearly, MI5 had its appetite whetted by DC Wilkinson's stunningly accurate line of information. In October 1989, Mr Grecian was invited to an informal meeting with DC Wilkinson, his boss, Detective Inspector Berry, and a representative from MI5, the security

service. The MI5 man did not beat out about the bush, and asked him to help with the security service's efforts to penetrate the Iraqi arms procurement effort.

Mr Grecian agreed and DC Wilkinson began to ask him specific questions, supplied, he believed, by the security services. They included requests for details of Iraq's financing arrangements and SRC's attempts to acquire technical information concerning ballistics, missiles, chemical weapons and biological weapons.

Mr Grecian gave the answers, including the names, addresses and telephone numbers of some of the Iraqis' suppliers.

In December 1989, he told how a party from Iraq's Al Fao arms procurement organisation had travelled to northern Iraq to witness the testing of another Project, code-named Bird. This was the launching by Iraq of a military satellite built by Dr Bull.

Mr Grecian gave full details of Al Fao, the location of its offices - the top floor of the building opposite the monument to the "Martyrs of the Revolution" - and how it was protected by a road block and armed troops. As well as Al Fao, the building housed a group involved in the development of "top-secret projects" and a team from the Iraqi security police.

By the end of 1989, MI5 and MI6 had had enough - they wanted Mr Grecian to answer directly to them. At a safe house, the Ordtech chief came face to face with officers from MI5 and MI6. He said he was visiting Iraq in January 1990 and would provide any information he was able to gather, with one proviso, that he would not compromise himself or the interests of his company.

Three months later, and events took a dramatic turn: Dr Bull was shot dead on his doorstep in Brussels. In April 1990, with DC Wilkinson present, Mr Grecian again met his handlers in the security services. Despite the shooting of Dr Bull, he agreed to continue to keep them informed.

The meetings continued. Then, in August 1990, a newly promoted Detective Sergeant Wilkinson was telephoned by Mr Grecian. Things had gone badly wrong: his factory had been visited by the Customs and Excise Investigation Branch looking into claims that he had unlawfully shipped goods to Iraq.

Mr Grecian said he was not looking for any special treatment from Special Branch, but felt he at least deserved forewarning, especially as it was his information that first broke the news of the Iraqi supergun.