

Shipping's danger man

Survivor of assassination attempts, investigator of marine fraud and tracker of stolen yachts, times-two Captain *Ed Geary* has been touched by international intrigue, espionage, riots and revolution. He tells all (really?-Ed) to *Fairplay*

Ed Geary's would-be assassin was a lousy shot. Geary can count himself a fortunate man because otherwise he'd now be dead. The sniper attack was the second attempt on Geary's life in as many days.

"Shots rang out, hitting the pavement in front of me," Geary wrote in his forthcoming book, *The Venezuelan Conspiracy*. He turned and sprinted for the nearest cover – a solitary car in a parking lot.

Geary, a long-time marine surveyor, maritime fraud investigator and criminologist, had met 'Carlos', a Venezuelan intelligence agent, a few days before on Margarita Island off Venezuela's coast.

Carlos was motivated by money and was ready to begin a most dangerous, but lucrative, gamble. He wanted to become an informer to the US authorities on the activities of locally based, but internationally operating, drug gangs.

The informer was playing a risky game. He had already taken a 'retainer', in conflict with his duties as an agent of the security services, to supply government information to drug traffickers. Now he was talking about double-crossing the same black hats.

The traffickers, Carlos told Geary, were funneling laundered drug money to Middle Eastern terrorists. Corruption in the area was rife, with the Venezuelan Guardia Nacional, drug traffickers, terrorist fund raisers and US intelligence authorities all involved in a complex web of payments and 'protection,' Carlos explained.

Narcotics – mostly high-grade cocaine – were being transshipped via Margarita into the US, Carlos told Geary, in loads of 2,000-3,000kg aboard coastal freighters.

Smaller loads often went concealed behind false ceiling barriers in 40-foot boxes. A method was devised to bust open containers under seal, insert drugs, then reclose the box without leaving a trace of tampering (see *Sea Sentinel*, 'Box Security Flaw Exposed', 8 March).

For European shipments, containers were stuffed with narcotics and the still-sealed boxes were shipped to Dakar in Senegal, West Africa.

They were then transported overland to Tangiers, Morocco, thence across the Strait of Gibraltar to Algeciras in southern Spain. From there, they presumably were dispersed all over Europe via inland routes. Carlos revealed that other shipments made their way into Europe by being smuggled in small trucks from Tangiers to Tarifa, Spain.

Two days after his meeting with Carlos, Geary returned to Caracas, where the first attempt to kill him unfolded. Geary – unusually, a captain in both the US Coast Guard Auxiliary and in the Coastguard Command of Venezuela's navy – had been scheduled to

meet the Venezuelan force's chief of operations.

A junior officer was sent to pick Geary up in a dark-green, two-door Mitsubishi Trooper. As the officer made good time on the highway from Caracas to Maracay, Geary fumbled about on the back seat looking for his pipe – then spotted a large, dark sedan gaining fast on their car.

Tyres had been tied to the right-hand side of the sedan, which drew level and slammed into Geary's car to force it off the road and into a deep ditch running alongside.

"The large, dark sedan kept moving to and fro as its driver slammed into the side of our Mitsubishi. No more than maybe 300 feet ahead was a slip road to our right leading to a gasoline station," wrote Geary in *The Venezuelan Conspiracy*.

"We entered the forecourt of the gas station at maybe 70mph, barely missing one of the pumps before bouncing over a kerb and coming to a stop. With the two tyres still hanging along its passenger side, the dark sedan sped away and continued down the highway."

Local police were alerted but were of little help.

Shaken, Geary returned to Caracas. The following day, he had a near-fatal rendezvous with a sniper's bullet.

It was quite the devious set-up. Geary received a handwritten message when he returned to Caracas from a man who was a known contact. The note, which had been pushed under the door of his hotel room, had invited Geary to dinner and told him to wait in the lobby at 7:30pm the next evening, where he would be picked up.

About noon the next day, Geary received a note printed on the hotel's notepaper instructing him to meet his contact at 7:45pm at a place called Las Mercedes a short walk away.

Despite the earlier attempted 'highway hit', Geary strolled down the road to this meeting when the shots rang out. He scrambled for cover, then scuttled back in the relative safety of his hotel, where he confronted his contact.

Message had been deadly trap

"I didn't leave you a second message," came the reply. "I only left you one message. I never asked you to walk to Las Mercedes."

Again, police were summoned but showed little interest.

"The two incidents had been disturbing," Geary wrote, "but that's maybe a wrong choice of words. It scared the hell out of me."

Fairplay caught up with Geary for an update earlier this year. Our meeting took place, mercifully minus snipers and homicidal drivers, in Gibraltar.

The Rock, being a UK colony, retains a strong British influence. So both Geary and your correspondent feasted on a heavy English-style breakfast: sausage (fried), bacon (fried), eggs (fried) and coffee (fried). Geary came to Fairplay's attention with the publication of his latest book: *Gotcha: International Marine Insurance Fraud and Conspiracy*. It's a collection of anecdotes and stories from a man who has been on the front line of maritime crime for at least three decades.

"I successfully found one yacht that had been stolen and was worth over a quarter million dollars," he wrote. "Underwriters were preparing to pay for a theft, a theft which was ordered by the CIA. The CIA was involved in drug trafficking and stealing yachts to give to Colombian higher-ups.

"We're talking millions of dollars. This is the government in action," Geary declared with disgust.

He would later have a much closer run-in with the US Central Intelligence Agency's machinery in Venezuela, he revealed to Fairplay.

Ed Geary started his working life in the exciting, glamorous and dangerous world of, er, accountancy. After graduating from high school in San Jose, California he studied accounting at a state college.

Upon entering the world of work, he came to a sudden, and rather sad, realisation. "I looked around and saw guys in their 40s and 50s that were miserable and had no goals in life other than coming in and going home," Geary told Fairplay.

"I thought that this was not what I wanted to be in forty years," so he enlisted in the US Army Reserve for military police training, specialising in criminal work.

Geary eventually most definitely found something more interesting than accountancy, which he details in his forthcoming book.

"I'm working aggressively to finish the book as its very timely now with Chavez and Castro," he declared.

Fairplay asked for a sneak disclosure of the central revelations. "It's the whole enchilada!" Geary exclaimed.

It was a beautiful day in Gibraltar – sky and sea were the deepest blue with both the Moroccan and Andalusian mountains light blue in the distance. Inside an airy dining room, in a hotel perched on an outcrop of the Rock of Gibraltar, a dark tale unfolded. The year was 1991. Geary said he was a lieutenant with the Coast Guard Auxiliary at that time. He was in Venezuela to investigate a wrecked catamaran on behalf of underwriters. Then he was approached by a representative of the Venezuelan military and asked to set up a search and rescue programme in the country.

"Within two months everyone was anxious to receive the training and I'm there and back, training Coastguard regulars and auxiliaries," remembered Geary.

So the programme really took off, manpower rose 40% and the Venezuelan coastguard started recruiting women. Because of the country's macho attitude wasn't popular, but now began attracting the attention from a range of Venezuelan naval and military figures.

Geary was slowly integrated into their social circles, with many of the top brass becoming close friends. His son Jason got to know all their sons and daughters.

Geary added that, in March 1992, he was offered a commission as a captain in the Venezuelan guard and the CIA assured him of promotion to Commodore by the US Coast Guard.

US citizens are not normally allowed to take commissions from armed forces of foreign powers, he explained, so he found it odd that the US authorities had raised no objections. But then he found out that Washington even approved of the move, Geary told Fairplay, so he accepted.

Even better news was soon to follow: Geary would be made a captain in the USCG Auxiliary. "All of a sudden I've gone from lieutenant to captain. It's a three-grade jump. It came so quickly but confirmed my belief that success should be viewed as a journey, not a destination," he told Fairplay.

"And this journey was truly underway. We were getting a lot of media, recreational boating and commercial shipping attention.

We went from strength to strength," Geary added.

So everything in Geary's life was in, excuse the pun, high gear: career going great, the Venezuela programme attracting attention, his son lined up both for a quality naval

education and career following his appointment to the US Coast Guard Academy. "Being able to meet and mingle with VIPs as a senior officer with the rank of Captain was great," Geary quipped. But as Geary's star rose, Venezuela's destiny was to change violently. The incumbent president, Carlos Perez, was an avowed critic of liberalisation and free trade. Venezuela's economy had been relatively stable because of earnings from its oil sector.

Swallowing IMF medicine

But world production rose, causing oil prices to slump. Venezuela's economy tanked. Perez was forced to swallow International Monetary Fund medicine: liberalisation, privatisation and so on.

Venezuela's poor saw all that as a terrible betrayal and began rioting in 1989. More than 400 people are reported to have been killed.

It was against this background of unrest and violence that several army officers formed MBR-200 (the Bolivarian Revolutionary Movement). The organisation vowed a coup. It was led by Hugo Chavez. By 1992 MBR-200 was ready and moved. Although successful in parts of the country, MBR-200 failed in Caracas. Chavez gave himself up. He was later sent to prison.

This political situation was to hit Geary in a very personal way in 1993. Geary told Fairplay that, during a meeting in Caracas, he noticed an oddity. "You notice some guys don't fit and there was this guy lurking there," Geary commented.

The man, supposedly a commercial attaché, approached Geary and revealed himself to be a CIA agent. Geary claimed the agent told him that, because the country was an important supplier of oil to the US, Washington was concerned about Venezuela's political instability.

"If the United States is to protect its oil interests, and in case we need to neutralise the military, the CIA needs to obtain detailed and specific information about the admirals and generals, their wives, girlfriends, overseas bank accounts and kids," Geary quoted the agent as saying.

Owing to his new-found status within the Venezuelan naval/military apparatus, the CIA thought that Geary was the person best placed to provide that information, he alleged. The agent unfolded further details of the plan, as noted in Geary's book: "Washington is firmly convinced that the next coup d'état will be led by a junta made up of the admirals of the Venezuelan navy and generals of the Air Force, and that the outcome may not be favourable to US interests.

Objective: 'Create chaos'

"Before this happens we need to ... destabilise the present government, neutralise the opposing military and create chaos," Geary quoted the agent as concluding.

The CIA wanted to install a man who was controllable, a president who was greedy and a leader who could be bought, Geary recalled. The sleuths thought that man was Hugo Chavez.

"It's been arranged that Chavez will be released from prison in March 1994 and, one way or another, we will put him in the Miraflores Palace," Geary said the agent declared.

The payoff for Geary's co-operation was a payment, routed via an offshore account. And the mystery of Washington accepting Geary's dual-captaincy status was solved, too. The CIA had engineered the US side of it to butter up Geary for the later approach, he alleged.

Outraged at the thought of being asked to spy on his friends and horrified at being “bribed” with what he called “an illegal slush fund”, Geary turned down the agent’s offer. The agent reacted angrily, Geary told Fairplay over the baked breakfast back in Gibraltar, and said ‘you’re making a big mistake’. “Within ten days I was dishonourably discharged.”

Chavez was indeed released from prison and pardoned by President Rafael Caldera in 1994. Chavez then formed a populist political movement and, in 1998, was elected president. The rest is, as they say, history.

Of course, it hasn’t all been international politics and espionage for Geary, it has also been a life of investigating crime and fraud.

His most memorable story in that line involved tracking down a stolen yacht and ‘stealing it back’ from under the noses of a Colombian mob. Geary recruited a bunch of roving, free-wheeling mercenaries to give him a hand.

A high-speed, bullet-zinging, yacht chase across the Caribbean followed. “It was just amazing. If anything screwed up we would have been in the deep shit,” he told Fairplay. Still, Fairplay asked Geary of what is he most proud, considering everything that’s happened in his crazy life. He had no hesitation in answering:

“Having a son that turned out to be an excellent young man who graduated from college and who is doing so well. His mother left when he was three months [old] and I raised him.” Jason’s doing great and now following his chosen career path

Geary is today resident in Europe and has his company based in Gibraltar after a move from US-controlled Puerto Rico last August. He offers ship surveying and expert-witness court testimony, amongst other maritime services, to clients worldwide.

And he spends part of his time writing books. Geary moved from the Caribbean to be closer to clients in the Med, but there was a political reason, too, he told Fairplay.

Where ‘to bomb next’

“I wanted a break away from Bush. It’s more relaxed here. You’re not worried about crime – or your government and who they’re going to bomb next,” Geary explained.

“The quality of life in Europe is so much better than in the US. It’s important to sit down with a cup of tea or a glass of wine and watch the sunset.”

We broke off to enjoy that peace. It was very much early morning, not sunset, but the sense of calm was soothing.

“It’s conducive to creativity,” Geary commented, whipping out a pen to dedicate a copy of his last book ‘*Gotcha*’. “Creative skills are always at the peak of excellence under a blue sky and a calm sea,” he wrote and passed the volume over the table.

With a smile, Geary headed off to Gibraltar Main Street to meet his contacts. Your correspondent headed to the top of the Rock, where his mobile phone was stolen by a monkey.

But that’s quite another, extraordinary, story.

Quotable ED Geary

‘The large dark sedan kept moving to and fro as its driver slammed into the side of our Mitsubishi’ ‘We entered the forecourt of the gas station at maybe 70mph, barely missing one of the pumps before bouncing over a curb and coming to a stop’ ‘The two incidents

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CV

Name: Ed Geary

Occupation: Ship surveyor, marine fraud and theft investigator, writer, criminologist, inventor of marine equipment.

Age: "Over 50, under 100," Geary quipped, before adding that he was born on "8 March: Pisces/fish = creative, warm, caring for others, etc, etc".

Geary conveniently neglected to mention his year of birth.

Professional memberships: Royal Institute of Naval Architects, American Society of Appraisers and many others. No longer a member of the US Coast Guard Auxiliary.

Nationality: US but now resident in Europe.

Hobbies: Writing. "And I'd like to play a little more tennis."

Family: "I'm a very private person"

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