

WATCHING video images of the two British girls being questioned by Peruvian customs officials after £1.5million worth of cocaine was found in their luggage,

Terry Daniels was catapulted back to the nightmarish day she was also accused of drug smuggling.

Seeing the look of terror and disorientation on the faces of 19-year-old Melissa Reid and 20-year-old Michaela McCollum Connolly, Terry was forced to relive her own interrogation by Spanish border police.

"There was white powder on the floor, on the walls...everywhere. They were screaming and shouting at me, dipping their fingers into this white powder and yelling: 'What's this?'"

"The next thing I knew they put a gun to my head and threw me on the floor. I've never been so frightened in my entire life," Terry, now 40, recalls.

For, like Michealla and Melissa, who are presently languishing in a high-security South American prison cell, Terry was also arrested and incarcerated in a foreign country after 4kg of cocaine was found in her travel companion's suitcase.

Terry, of Wingrave, Buckinghamshire, says: "My stomach turned over when I heard the news this week. It was like looking at a mirror image of the horror and fear I felt the day I was arrested. This is just the beginning of a very long and traumatic journey for them both."

Terry's own "traumatic journey", which was to last 12 years, began on June 12, 1997, when she was 23. Like Michealla and Melissa, who were working on the Spanish party island of Ibiza, Terry had also left her home in the UK to "live the dream" in Tenerife, the largest of the seven Canary Islands.

Like nightclub hostess Michealla, Terry also got a job in one of the local nightclubs as a promoter. "Working as a PR for the clubs was terrible money," Terry recalls. "If you didn't get anyone in the club, you didn't get paid."

So when her boss, 40-year-old Antonio Benavides, offered her a job as his new manager and a free holiday to Brazil, Terry jumped at the chance.

Terry, who admits to having been "young and naïve" at the time, trusted the well-known businessman and viewed him as a fatherly figure. "He said he had bought two seats for the price of one and that his wife couldn't go because she was working."

The trip of a lifetime turned out to be just that but for altogether different reasons.

Terry says: "I was glad when our week in Salvador Behar was up. The place was a dump, full of child prostitutes and beggars. Antonio was always out, so I spent most of my time on my own in the hotel room."

"The day before we were due to fly back, Antonio came back with two new suitcases. I didn't think much of it because his own suitcase was falling to bits."

When they landed back in Gran Canaria, however, Antonio (and his suitcases) were taken to a back room. "The next thing I knew customs officials were dragging me into the same room and putting a gun to my head," Terry recalls. "I could hear Antonio saying: 'She hasn't got a clue, just let her go'. I was petrified."

The Spanish customs police had found 4kg of cocaine, worth a total of £1million, stashed in

When Spanish police discovered my boss's cocaine, they put a gun to my head and ruined my life

When Terry Daniels heard the news about the two British girls arrested on drug smuggling charges, she knew only too well the horrors they were experiencing, as she tells
AMANDA REVELL WALTON

Picture: MARK KEHOE



TRAUMA: Terry Daniels pictured last week

secret compartments in Antonio's luggage. I was in shock. I couldn't believe Antonio had done something like that. It didn't hit home what had happened until I got put in a disgusting and dirty police cell. Then I couldn't stop crying."

The next day, following a 10-minute court hearing, Terry was allowed to ring her parents, Pat and Brendan, for the first time. "I didn't know what was coming out of my mouth I was so upset," she says. She spent the next five days in prison until her parents were able to wire the necessary £2,500 for her bail.

ONCE ON bail disaster struck for the second time, only now it was Terry's life, not her freedom, which was seriously threatened. "I'd had a headache all week but I put it down to stress," Terry recalls. "Mum had flown out to see me and I remember saying: 'Oh, my head!', before collapsing on the floor."

Terry suffered an aneurysm, a brain haemorrhage, which doctors believe was triggered by the stress of her arrest. She was in a coma for 12 hours, and in and out of consciousness for the next three weeks.

Two more operations followed, then, in March 1998, she was back in court.

"It was a farce from beginning to end," Terry says. "Antonio admitted everything and stressed that I'd had nothing to do with it. I wasn't even given a translator, so I had no idea what was being said."

"My solicitor said: 'I can't see anything coming of this', but he was wrong." Terry was sentenced to 10 years in prison. Her lawyer appealed the decision and she was given "conditional liberty" providing she didn't leave

Tenerife. Over the next two years Terry worked as a waitress, before starting up her own small cleaning business.

Meanwhile, back in England her parents wrote to their MP for Buckinghamshire, John Bercow. He immediately threw his weight behind the family's campaign to clear Terry's name and bring her back to the UK.

The Tory MP and the future Speaker of the House of Commons worked tirelessly to try to clarify Teresa's legal status through Spain's ambassador in London and at the beginning of 2000 he received a letter stating that Terry had been "released on June 17, 1997, without further admission". It would appear that the case against Terry had been dropped and she finally came home in February 2000. Little did she realise that her life would be turned upside down again just two years later.

At the end of 2002 Terry applied for a job as a carer for elderly cerebral palsy sufferers and a police check revealed that she was still wanted in Spain. She had been prosecuted in her absence and her sentence was still outstanding. In June 2003, three police officers from Scotland Yard arrived at her home to arrest her on an international extradition warrant.

Flown back to Spain and imprisoned in one of the country's toughest mixed jails, Topas prison, near Salamanca in northwest Spain, Terry says: "It was just totally surreal. I'd thought my nightmare was over but it was actually just beginning."

"I quickly learned physical violence was used openly by both the prison officers and the police. When I was being transferred from the holding cell to the main prison, there was a girl on the bus with me who obviously had a serious mental problem and wasn't being co-operative. As soon as we stopped, the



FUN IN THE SUN: Terry went to Tenerife to "live the dream" but it soon turned into a nightmare

guards took her around the back and beat her with a baton. I was horrified.

"I did my best to avoid any kind of physical confrontation, which wasn't easy. There were three girls with schizophrenia and if they didn't take their medication they just lost it."

DURING her 19 months of hell, Terry concentrated on "trying to survive and avoid trouble". Each day was spent walking, reading or writing. She was only allowed five 15-minute phone calls a week and visits from family and friends were few and far between.

Supported throughout by her "guardian angel" MP John Bercow, plus MEP James Elles, Fair Trials International, Prisoners Abroad and her family, her extradition to Spain has become a landmark case resulting in changes to the law regarding interpretation, translation and access to documents. Their combined efforts meant that in May 2007 Terry was transferred, on medical grounds, to complete her sentence in Britain. Then, 18 months later she was finally granted a Royal Pardon from the king of Spain and released from prison.

Terry, who now undertakes charity work on behalf of Fair Trials International and Prisoners Abroad, says her word of advice to Michaela and Michelle would be to "keep a cool head and get a good lawyer. I had very dark days when I thought: 'I just can't deal with this anymore but you do because you have to. It's a case of sink or swim.'"

● *Passport To Hell* by Terry Daniels (£6.74; Summerdale) is available on Amazon

'I thought I can't deal with this but it's a case of sink or swim'



SAVIOUR: Terry, with John Bercow, who was her parents' local MP and helped her case

Bravo!

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