

**General Manuel Noriega languishes in a Miami jail, convicted of drug trafficking. Now he is demanding a new trial, claiming that he was set up by the American government and a Colombian drugs cartel. Christine Toomey was granted an exclusive audience with prisoner No 38699079, the former dictator of Panama, in his prison cell. Photograph by Nigel Parry**

# Doing time with Panama's demon general

At night the roar of tigers filters through the trees of the forest separating Miami's prison from the nearby zoo. As the wild animals lumber impatiently behind the bars of their distant compound, General Manuel Antonio Noriega paces the confines of a special enclosure within the prison and contemplates his uncertain fate.

Only after dusk falls and the other inmates are locked away in their cells does Panama's deposed dictator feel safe enough to stroll around a lake at the heart of the prison, on the edge of the Florida Everglades. Noriega was badly shaken when first incarcerated, by the jeers and threats of other inmates — some of whom he helped place behind bars during the course of his trial. Since then he has been escorted everywhere by armed guards.

After serving three years of a 40-year prison sentence for drug-trafficking and racketeering, however, Noriega is no longer regarded by prison authorities as a top security threat. They do not believe armed guards or solitary confinement are necessary, either for his own protection or to prevent his escape. Panama's former military strongman is being relegated, slowly, to the ranks of a common criminal at Miami's Federal Correctional Institute. Prison authorities want to move him from his custom-built three-room "dictator's suite" — with its own television, telephone, exercise area and patio — to a small cell in the prison's medium-security main block. Specially installed anti-helicopter wires remain cobwebbed above the sprawling prison, but fears that the rump of the once dreaded Panamanian Defence Force, Noriega's personal army, might storm the facility to free their "Maximum Leader" have long since faded.

With little hope of freedom through a paramilitary offensive, Noriega has been focusing his Machiavellian talents on a legal strategy to secure his release. He has filed a motion for a new trial. This master of intrigue, betrayal and double-cross is alleging that new evidence shows that the United States government indulged in

some of his former practices to put him behind bars. His lawyers claim to have unearthed evidence they allege points to a secret deal, involving a bribe of \$1.25m to one key witness, struck between the US government and the drug barons of the Colombian Cali cartel.

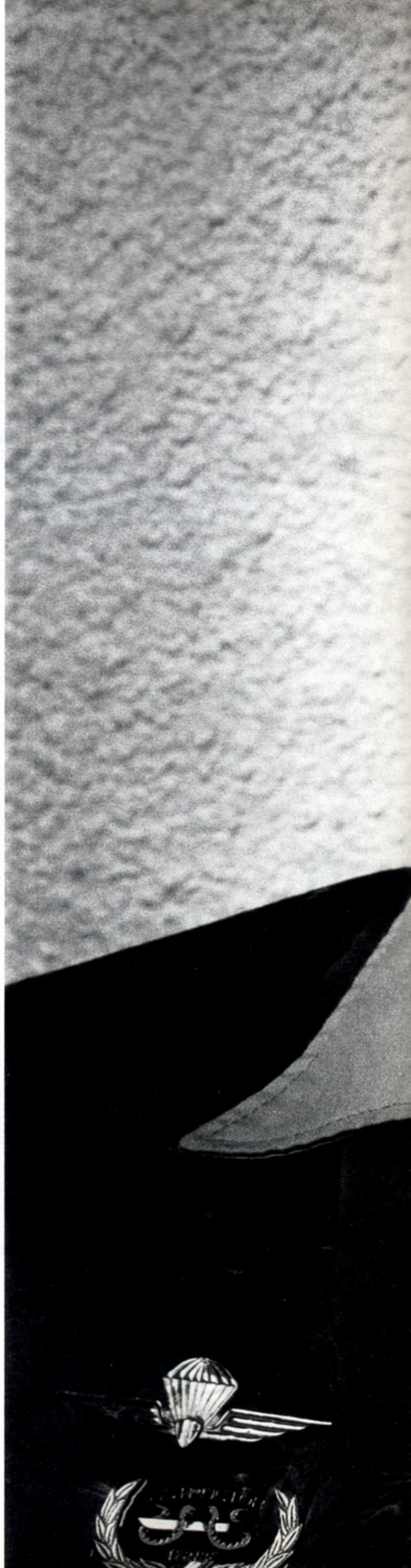
General Noriega continues to sweat over trying to outmanoeuvre the captors who toppled his regime and flew him to Florida in chains after the invasion of Panama four years ago, reflecting bitterly on the downturn his fortunes have taken.

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Sitting hunched in a stained anorak in a cramped and airless visiting room tucked away in a corner of the Miami prison, Noriega smarts at the daily indignity of life without the trappings of power. Gone are the fawning minions who surrounded him in his marble residences in Panama City and around the world. Instead he shares his existence with indifferent prison guards and dreadlocked drug dealers, who eye him with scorn and menace as he struts past them in his built-up shoes, straining to appear taller than his 5ft 5in.

Without the added height and authority of his peaked cap, he appears strangely squat and naked. His dark eyes display little emotion, but his jerky hand movements and stiff posture hint at immense efforts to rein in the violent passions of a man who held an iron grip on power through thuggery, fear and intimidation. Now 62, his badly pockmarked complexion, which earned him the epithet *cara de piña* or Pineapple Face, appears to have worsened. During Noriega's dictatorship his touchiness at references to his ugliness was such that he made it a crime, punishable with two years' imprisonment, to make offensive remarks about public officials.

His vanity has clearly suffered few compromises in prison. "I have not changed one bit. I have not changed my philosophy, my concept of government. I have not changed my ideals, my patriotism, my nationalism, ➤➤➤









my concept of the US," he boasts. "I am not changed. I regret nothing."

In a strained attempt to appear philosophical, he tries to argue that the only significant change prison has made to his life is the speed at which it is lived: "My life has changed from the fast track of an express train," he says. Along that "track" he was accused, during the eight years of his dictatorship, of rape, torture, devil worship and murder. "My life in prison has taken on the pace of a slow-moving car," he says, with a forced smile. "I have a lot of time to think, to observe. I have become stronger because of that. There are many people who are prisoners of illness or addiction, but because I am free in my mind I am a prisoner to nobody."

His pride has suffered some compromises, however. In a display of bravado, he had declared war on the United States prior to its invasion of Panama and he has fought hard to be recognised as a legitimate prisoner of war after being taken captive. Since he was taken prisoner as a result of an international armed conflict, he was able to argue, successfully, that prisoner-of-war status should be conferred on him in jail. It was decided that Noriega should be held under similar circumstances to those under which the US would wish an American general to be held captive by an enemy. He has regular visits from a representative of the Red Cross and, as America's only prisoner of war, Panama's deposed dictator is permitted his general's four stars tacked to the sleeves of his prison uniform. Few other privileges remain, however, for prisoner No 38699079. The gradual erosion of his status within the prison hierarchy cuts to the quick of a man who clawed his way out of Panama's slums.

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Manuel Noriega was the illegitimate son of his father's maid and was either abandoned or rejected at an early age. One story has it that he was put in a foster home at the age of five, another that he was brought up by school-teachers. Even the citizens of Panama knew little of the man who ruled their lives. There is some consensus on the date of his birth — around 1934 — but not on the place. Some say it was the southeastern wilderness of Darién near the Colombian border, others that it was in the market district in the old quarter of Panama City.

"Like many children, I suppose, I wanted to be a doctor at first," he says, shifting uneasily in his seat at the mere mention of his childhood. "But economics and the conditions in my country did not permit it. So I became a military engineer. I was given the opportunity to study at a military academy in Peru and returned to Panama to begin my career in the army."

Noriega quickly gained a reputation for brutality after entering Panama's National Guard as an enlisted man in 1962. According to US intelligence documents, he was relieved of his duties early on in his career for drunk and disorderly conduct and for mistreating prisoners in his care. Exiled Panamanians claim Noriega was an "enthusiastic torturer" and he was the accused in two particularly brutal rape cases; he denies both claims. He quickly



became a protégé of General Omar Torrijos, the dictator who ruled Panama. As head of the country's G2 military intelligence, Noriega came onto the payroll of the CIA.

After Torrijos died in a mysterious plane crash in 1981, Noriega took over as military commander. He never matched his predecessor's popularity and charisma, however, which became a source of great frustration for him. He held on to power by sheer brute force and fear, rigging elections and allegedly ordering the torture-murder of one of Panama's leading dissidents, Hugo Spadafora, whose headless body was found dumped in a mailbag in Costa Rica in 1985, and using his position to amass great personal wealth, estimated at around \$600m.

In addition to a \$4.5m villa in Panama City, Noriega bought a string of properties abroad including homes in Israel and Japan, a chateau in the south of France and ranches in Colombia. He stocked his houses with fine art and antiques, acquired a fleet of BMWs and private aircraft and had three yachts — Macho I, Macho II and Macho III — all equipped with rocket launchers and mirrored bedrooms. He owned a vast array of businesses, and bought the allegiance of many of his army officers by giving them shares in the enterprises.

Noriega attempts to explain the existence of such a vast fortune through his work for the CIA. "We are straying into dangerous territory there," he mumbles. "The details are contained in sealed documents." Payments by the CIA are understood to have been no more than an estimated \$200,000 a year — more, at the time, than the salary of the US president, but nowhere near enough to explain his personal wealth.

Rumours about Noriega's personal life are plentiful, though the facts are few. Married to Felicidad, with whom he has three daughters, he was frequently seen in public with his longtime mistress, Vicki Amado, who helped run his business affairs. Opponents claim that in addition to other, younger mistresses, Noriega had a penchant for transvestites and male ballet dancers. He also used his business interests in brothels in the US-run Canal Zone to attempt to bribe US officials. Bedrooms

were said to have been bugged and equipped with hidden cameras. It is said that attempts to entrap US officials extended on one occasion to a US colonel being summoned to Noriega's house in Panama City for "important discussions". The colonel arrived in full military dress to find Noriega naked with a girl sitting on his lap. Senior members of Panama's military were said to have been lying around their leader like actors in a Roman orgy. "I want to show you what I really am, colonel, so there is complete trust between us," Noriega reportedly said. The colonel left.

When American troops eventually stormed Noriega's headquarters in Panama City in December 1989, they found phallic objects, pornography, a framed picture of Adolf Hitler, and vats of blood and entrails in what seemed to be the scene of animal sacrifices. Near a decorated Christmas tree a stash of \$120,000 in cash was found with what was reported to be 110lb of cocaine. There was speculation that the scene had been doctored by American troops, however, in preparation for their declaration, after Noriega was captured, that he was nothing more than a "corrupt and debauched thug". The cocaine, for instance, turned out to be crushed maize.

While the seedy details of Noriega's private life and business dealings were well known to the Americans, they still defended him for years as a valuable ally, believing he would protect their interests in the Panama Canal and claiming he was helping them fight the war against drugs. As long as he was a tinpot dictator terrorising only his own people he was left in peace by the Americans and was paid by the CIA as a valuable intelligence source. For nearly two decades, during his ascent to power in Panama, Noriega played each side against the other, profiting wherever and however he could from his liaisons with Fidel Castro and other political leaders throughout Latin America.

He relishes quoting from letters he received from US intelligence and the Drug Enforcement Agency, praising his work for them during this period. One such letter, from Jack Lawn, head of the DEA, dated May 8, 1986,



**General Noriega with his wife, Felicidad, in better days. She tarnished the family name still further after she was arrested for stealing buttons in a department store**



# Does the evidence in General Noriega's trial result from the rivalry between competing Colombian cocaine cartels?

with witnesses at his trial are shared by some of the sharpest legal minds in the US. "Crimes are not committed before choirboys. The veil of silence surrounding certain crimes has to be broken somehow... financial deals with witnesses are not uncommon," says Paul Rothstein of Georgetown University Law Center in Washington, who has followed General Noriega's case closely for three years. "But it is very significant if these deals are not disclosed to the jury."

The man left to wrestle with Noriega's legal wranglings is William Hoeveler, the soft-mannered judge in South Florida who presided over the original indictments against Noriega *in absentia* and over his trial. Hoeveler rubs his hands gently at the prospect of a new trial: "It will be an interesting development if it turns out that evidence in General Noriega's trial resulted from rivalry between competing Colombian cocaine cartels," he says.

Hoeveler points out what was once a bathroom and toilet, now converted into an enormous thick-walled safe to house the thousands of secret CIA documents he was required to read during the course of Noriega's trial.

"It was all tremendous fun," he says. In reality the strain of presiding over such a highly publicised trial almost proved too much for the 69-year-old judge, who was forced to adjourn proceedings halfway through to undergo triple heart bypass surgery.

Judge Hoeveler is adamant that a new trial will only be granted if Noriega's defence can provide a "very heavy showing" that the outcome of Noriega's trial might have been different without the bribing of some witnesses. Yet he clearly harbours a sneaking admiration for the diminutive general who strutted into his courtroom day after day. "I quite saw why he was a successful dictator," Hoeveler reflects. "He had a commanding presence."

But Hoeveler might well feel some personal reluctance to see Noriega freed. When American GIs sifted through the debris of Noriega's personal life they found among other occult paraphernalia a piece of paper with Hoeveler's name on it lying near a voodoo altar.

Stripped of the theatrical backdrop of the ornate federal courtroom in Miami, however, in prison Noriega seems to possess more low cunning than charisma or keen intelligence. He articulates weakly and haltingly, constantly stopping himself short in an apparent attempt to conceal his real feelings and opinions.

Some believe it was more than just coincidental, for instance, that during the course of the trial presided over by

Hoeveler — dubbed the "biblical judge" because of his strong religious convictions — Noriega underwent a dramatic religious conversion to the Baptist faith. It clearly made an impression on Hoeveler. The judge takes the trouble of pointing out the exact spot in the palm-fringed courtyard of the courthouse building where a large water tank was installed so that Noriega could undergo a full-immersion baptism in a brief ceremony during the course of the trial. "I think it was very nice of him to do that," Hoeveler remarks now. "Very nice indeed."

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With the prospect of a new trial uncertain, however, Noriega might well appeal to a higher authority in search of redemption. "My faith is very important to me," he says. "It gives me great strength."

He is visited regularly by his daughters, but his wife Felicidad comes less frequently. It is uncertain whether acrimony still exists between Panama's former first couple after she tarnished the family name still further during the course of Noriega's last trial when she was arrested by a store detective for snipping 27 buttons off designer jackets at a department store in a Miami shopping mall.

Noriega says he remains in constant telephone contact with friends and political allies in Panama, although he refuses to speculate on what his future might be if he were freed. While the political party that backed Noriega, the Democratic Revolutionary Party (PRD), holds the reins of power in Panama again, president Ernesto Perez Balladares has denounced Noriega and insists the party has reformed.

"I have a personal philosophy of not thinking about tomorrow because only God knows what tomorrow will bring," Noriega says wistfully. "The Bible says concern yourself with today and tomorrow will take care of itself."

He may be right not to dwell too closely on his tomorrow. If the prison authorities have their way, Noriega could soon have to queue to watch television in the bleak corridors of the main cell block instead of being able to watch his favourite Spanish soap operas at will. He may have to queue for meals in the canteen instead of having them carried to him by prison guards so that he can eat alone. "I don't choose to have contact with other prisoners," he bristles. "I am not one of them."

But he soon might be. He may even have to reduce the amount of time he spends penning his memoirs. The extravagant former "Lider Maximo de Panama" could find himself sewing sheets with other inmates in the prison workshop to help pay for his daily keep ■

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"SUMMERTIME, WE'D COME HOME WITH OUR SHOES IN OUR

HANDS AND OUR REPORT CARDS. WE DIDN'T PUT OUR SHOES ON

AGAIN 'TIL FALL." Veronica Cantler looks around the landscape she

was born in. When she speaks you can almost see the barefoot girl

who used to run free here, all those years ago. "As kids we were up

at 4.30 to catch blue crabs and sold them to the restaurant men.

That's how we earned our living. Maryland crabs are a real

delicacy now," she smiles, "with folks driving down from New York

to try them at Cantler's, the restaurant my Daddy started from

that crabbing money. Back then, we earned our living from the

Chesapeake Bay. Now we have fun on it, fishing, boating or just

plain relaxing. Most folks come here to get away

from it all...me, I go the other way. I head for

the big fun cities, like Baltimore and Annapolis,

to enjoy the museums, theaters, shopping and

night life...BUT THAT'S ANOTHER STORY."



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