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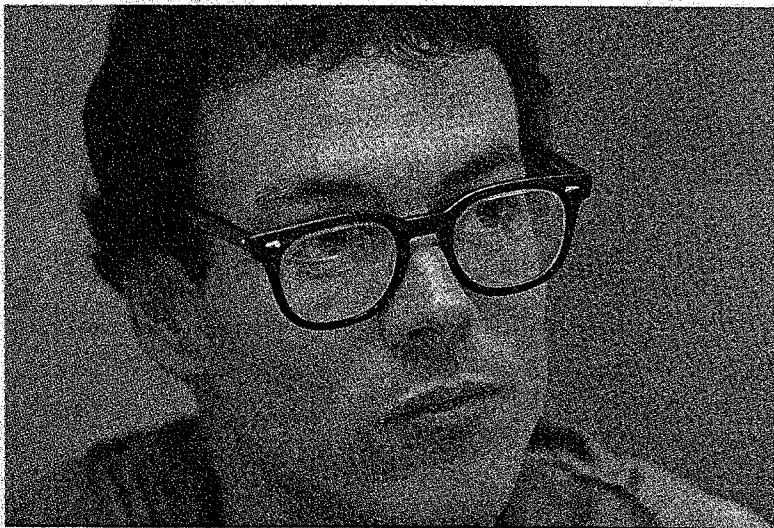
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Tom Lyons

Barfield's complaint

Inmate's suit has all the elements of a paperback thriller

By TOM LYONS
Sun staff writer

When Michael Barfield's lawyer first heard his story, it sounded so farfetched he almost laughed out loud.

It's common for state prison inmates to claim their rights have been violated. But Barfield's complaint included a classified satellite, a mysterious female naval intelligence officer, secret code words, and FBI-directed phone calls with Soviet agents.

To Orlando attorney Lee Barrett, the young inmate's story sounded like a paperback thriller.

After some investigation, he changed his mind and took the case.

But FBI agent Doug Jones said Barrett's original reaction was correct. Jones thinks Barfield was spinning a spy story inspired by a novel so he could get out of prison to help federal agents.

If so, that plan misfired dramatically.

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Barfield was an exceptionally intelligent high school dropout who worked in "an extremely sensitive position on board two U.S. Navy aircraft carriers" beginning at age 17.

Within three years, the soft-spoken, former Navy computer technician became a prison inmate serving a three-year sentence for forging checks and using stolen credit cards. He was sent to a medium-security prison.

And before the next year was out, Barfield spent 10 weeks in a place that very few of the state's worst criminals have seen: an isolated Death Watch cell a few steps from the electric chair at Florida State Prison in Starke.

Barfield — who was not even a discipline problem, according to prison officials — said the time spent in isolation was a nightmare. He said he was tormented by guards who acted as if he was destined for the

chair.

Prison officials deny Barfield was tormented. They said he was put in the Death Watch cell because they wanted to keep him away from other prisoners.

Richard Dugger, the director of Florida's prison system, was then superintendent at the prison.

"I'd be the first to admit I never had a case like this before or since," Dugger said. "We kept him fairly well isolated."

Barfield and the FBI have very different explanations for how he got there.

Barfield's lawyer said the young inmate was being harassed by the FBI as a suspected spy.

According to a sworn statement, Jones believes Barfield lied his way into a big jam — accidentally convincing agents he was a security threat — and now is trying to lie his way back out again.

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Michael Barfield's story is so bizarre that his attorney nearly laughed out loud when he first heard it.

Barfield

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It started with a letter and a phone call, Barfield said. Six months before he ended up in a Death Watch cell, Barfield told intelligence agents that someone who called himself "David" had phoned him at the medium security Baker Correctional Institution by posing as his lawyer.

Barfield said he had received a letter from a former girlfriend — a naval intelligence officer named Becky Olds — before the phone call came. In the letter, Barfield said, Olds told him to expect to be contacted by her friend.

When the phone call came, David said he was that friend, according to Barfield. David wanted to make a deal for information about classified satellite technology. Barfield said he promptly reported the call to federal agents.

The FBI's interviews with Barfield, however, soon yielded conflicting stories, Jones said. Barfield's original version of the contact involved a letter from a Soviet consulate employee, the agent reported, not a phone call.

And that was only one of a number of discrepancies Jones said were uncovered with the help of lie-detector tests.

The FBI said it then found a list of Navy ships and several Navy documents when agents searched Barfield's car and prison bunk. The items were not secret, but some were unusual. A mysterious packet labeled "Top Secret" held references to Soviet submarines and satellites, Jones said it contained what appear to be X-rays of human teeth. It is not clear who they were designed to fool.

Jones said the investigation also turned up a letter allegedly written by Barfield and addressed to Moscow. In it, Barfield posed as his former girlfriend in naval intelligence offered to supply information to the Soviets. Barfield denies writing the letter, but the handwriting in it is strikingly similar to his own.

Jones said Barfield later admitted to agents that he fabricated the story about getting a letter from his girlfriend and that he falsely implicated her in the plot. The Navy said she has been cleared and retains her security clearances.

It was all Barfield's plan, Jones claims, to convince agents to take him out of prison to help in espionage.

Barfield denies that, pointing out that he was scheduled to go a work-release center soon anyway.

He said he cooperated with agents for months while still in prison by following their coaching and making other phone contacts at David's direction. Jones neither confirms nor denies that.

His statement also does not deny Barfield's claim that agents threatened to charge him with lying and withholding information.

The inmate was taken to Florida State Prison in what he said was a surprise trip on the day he thought he was going to a work-release center in Pensacola, his home town.

His only admission of wrongdoing to agents, Barfield said, was in a letter he wrote while locked up near the electric chair.

"I realize that this entire escapade was caused by myself and wish to make amends," Barfield wrote. "I intend to ... clear Lt. Olds of any wrongdoing that she may stand accused of."

Barfield said that letter was written under pressure and was the only lie he told during the time he was involved with the federal agents.

"I told them I'd sign anything," he said, "if I got the hell out" of Florida State Prison.

Barfield's suit blames what he calls an illegal stay in Death Watch on Jones, another agent and David Brierton, inspector general of the Department of Corrections.

Jones went to Tallahassee in July to tell Brierton that Barfield was a serious threat to national security. Jones' court statement said Barfield seemed then to be trying to contact foreign powers to pass classified information.

Barfield says Brierton told him much later that Jones claimed there would soon be a federal grand jury indictment. Dugger, who was then a prison superintendent, said he also had the impression that federal charges were pending — though he was not at the Tallahassee meeting.

No federal charges were filed. Jones said he never mentioned an indictment to Brierton and never specified that Barfield be "totally isolated" or taken to a maximum-security prison.

Brierton, who is named in Barfield's suit against several prison officials, would say only that "the Department of Corrections acted in good faith."

It was 10 weeks after Barfield's arrival at Florida State Prison that Dugger had his only meeting with the federal agents, who produced nothing to show that charges were pending.

"As a result of that conversation, I began to get the idea that this could drag on forever," Dugger said. "I eventually took it upon myself to transfer him."

Barfield went to another prison near Lake Butler, where federal agents continued to contact him. It was several months before he made it to a work-release center in Pensacola. He was allowed to work at a normal job every day but had to return to prison each night.

But Barfield walked away from his job at a shoe store only days before his release date. He said he panicked at new FBI threats to send him back to Florida State Prison and because of phone threats — allegedly from the foreign agents he said he had talked to under FBI tutelage. He has no evidence for those claims.

And after nine days of freedom, Barfield was recaptured as he was planning to leave the country.

A Pensacola judge did not buy his explanation for the escape and sentenced Barfield to 12 more years behind bars for escape and for forging checks during his nine days out of prison.

"My most important objective is to eventually go back to court on the escape charge," Barfield said.

And his Orlando lawyer said no matter what the rest of the story is, there is no question that his client was illegally sent to Death Watch.

"They just moved Mike around like a pawn and then did nothing to rectify the damage," Barrett said. But he acknowledges that much of Barfield's "spy story" is probably impossible to prove.

"It's sort of like a Rubik's Cube" Barrett said. "Every time you think you've got it, someone puts another crank on it."

Clearly, the FBI thinks Barfield is the one doing the cranking.

One prison employee described Barfield as a likable guy who just can't resist chances to use his intelligence to try to beat the system.

Lt. Becky Olds, who spoke reluctantly when contacted near Washington, D.C., had a stronger impression.

"I don't believe Michael has ever told the truth," she said quietly. "I wouldn't believe a word he said. He's got his own little reality."