

**Faces 10 years behind bars**

# Family awaits word on son held in Cuban prison

By MIKE SCANLON

John Fekete views the daily mail differently from most people. A lot faster, too.

Before the mailman left the porch Monday, Fekete was flipping impatiently past the catalogues, the coupons and the deodorant samples.

He got lucky. He was reading the letter from the U.S. Department of State about to his wife before the mailman got next door.

THE FEKETES' son Paul, 27, has spent the last eight months in Combinado del Este, a Cuban prison east of Havana. He is still awaiting trial. His parents are not sure what crimes their son is charged with.

The family's tenuous ability to stay in touch with him is based on irregularly delivered State Department updates like the one that arrived Monday, and on a loosely connected network of relatives returning from visits to some of what the State Department identified in Monday's letter as 38 other Americans held at Combinado.

At best, these limited sources provide limited news, so sketchy information is the only kind of information the Feketes have.

But in some respects, the network operates with chilling efficiency. The Feketes don't know the charges their son faces, but John Fekete has beaten the mailman to the door often enough to know too well what a conviction

means — 10 more years at Combinado.

"We are led to believe the government is doing all it can," said Joyce Fekete in the living room of the family's Livonia home. "The prisoners believe something different because of some of the rumors they've heard. We tend to believe our government, but maybe . . ."

ON DEC. 7, 1979, Paul Fekete, Bill Nelson and Mark Schierbaum were arrested at sea after a brief firefight with Cuban authorities who were dressed in plain clothes and manning a fishing boat. Fekete, a 1970 graduate of Bentley High School, was wounded in a hail of automatic weapons fire.

The trio was three days out of Key West on a run to Montego Bay to deliver a new boat. It was Fekete's first such trip. Nelson, the captain, had gone the route before, but never in command.

Key West regulars say the trip usually takes about a day, but the boat's navigational instruments were broken, and they were travelling by dead reckoning.

Fekete was working as a carpenter in Key West when he joined the sailing trip. After graduating from high school, he worked at Fisher Body in Livonia for two years then headed to Florida.

He worked for a short time in the Key West Water Department before joining the carpenter's union.

Paul Fekete and his companions now face charges of illegal entry into Cuban



PAUL FEKETE

territorial waters. And as a result of the shoot-out, they are either charged with resisting arrest or attempted murder. And, because a small quantity of marijuana was found aboard the vessel, they are either charged with possession or trafficking in that drug.

After their arrests, the three faced what relatives of other prisoners describe as a universally offered choice: Be held in solitary confinement indefinitely, or choose to sign a confession either to drug trafficking or to serving as an agent of the CIA.

On Dec. 30, Fekete signed as a drug trafficker. The statement went further:

It said the gunshot wound Fekete received in the firefight before the arrest was self-inflicted.

SUNNY SEITLER keeps careful records. She is the ad hoc director of a group called "Inside/Out," representing relatives of Americans held in Cuba.

Since her son was arrested last year in an incident that bears similarities to Fekete's case, she has distributed 21,000 pieces of paper from her home in Glen Cove, N.Y. She has sent 1,805 letters, made 4,000 phone calls, contacted 55 U.S. senators or members of the Senate staff and met with 223 members of Congress.

In the meantime, her son Michael, 25, a four-year Navy veteran, has served one year in Combinado. He has 14 years left in his sentence for drug trafficking.

"I think our administrative arm of government couldn't care less," said Mrs. Seittler. "As far as congressmen and senators are concerned, I think they are really trying to help us all find a way."

Since she began her campaign, Mrs. Seittler figures the State Department has "moved its priority from minus 5 to maybe plus 50."

Mrs. Seittler has visited her son in the Cuban prison five times since she was notified in August that he was being held there — since he was arrested in May, she had previously assumed "he was at the bottom of the ocean."

"I'm not stopping until he's home,"

she said. "Of course, I had 32 merit badges when I was a Girl Scout, so I never knew when to stop."

Mrs. Seittler, incidentally, believes as many as 60 American citizens may be in Cuban custody, including 18 Cuban-Americans.

Craig Patton, a Key West lawyer, has made two trips to Cuba in the past two weeks seeking the release of a number of the American prisoners.

"They have a fairly decent legal system, unless you get hooked up in political crimes," said Patton.

Under the "very egalitarian" Cuban system of jurisprudence, foreign nationals are entitled to receive the same treatment while incarcerated as Cuban citizens, Patton said.

SINCE CUBAN convicts were among the more than 110,000 Cubans allowed to flee the country through the port of Mariel, Patton has argued that American nationals should receive the same opportunity.

"They've been receptive," Patton said of Cuban officials.

Fekete, who retired from Fisher Body six weeks ago and hasn't received his first pension check yet, said Patton contacted him and offered to attempt to secure his son's release in return for \$12,500.

The Feketes say their problems could be worse. John Fekete and Tom Nelson, the brother of Bill Nelson who was arrested with Paul Fekete, visited their imprisoned relatives in April.

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