

Walker spy case remains legendary 35 years later

By [Joanne Kimberlin](#)

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John Walker Jr. poses with electronic surveillance equipment in 1983. Walker was arrested May 20, 1985, at Rockville, Md., and charged with spying for the Soviet Union. (Associated Press)

At 75 years old, Wolfie remains a rock star among spy hunters.

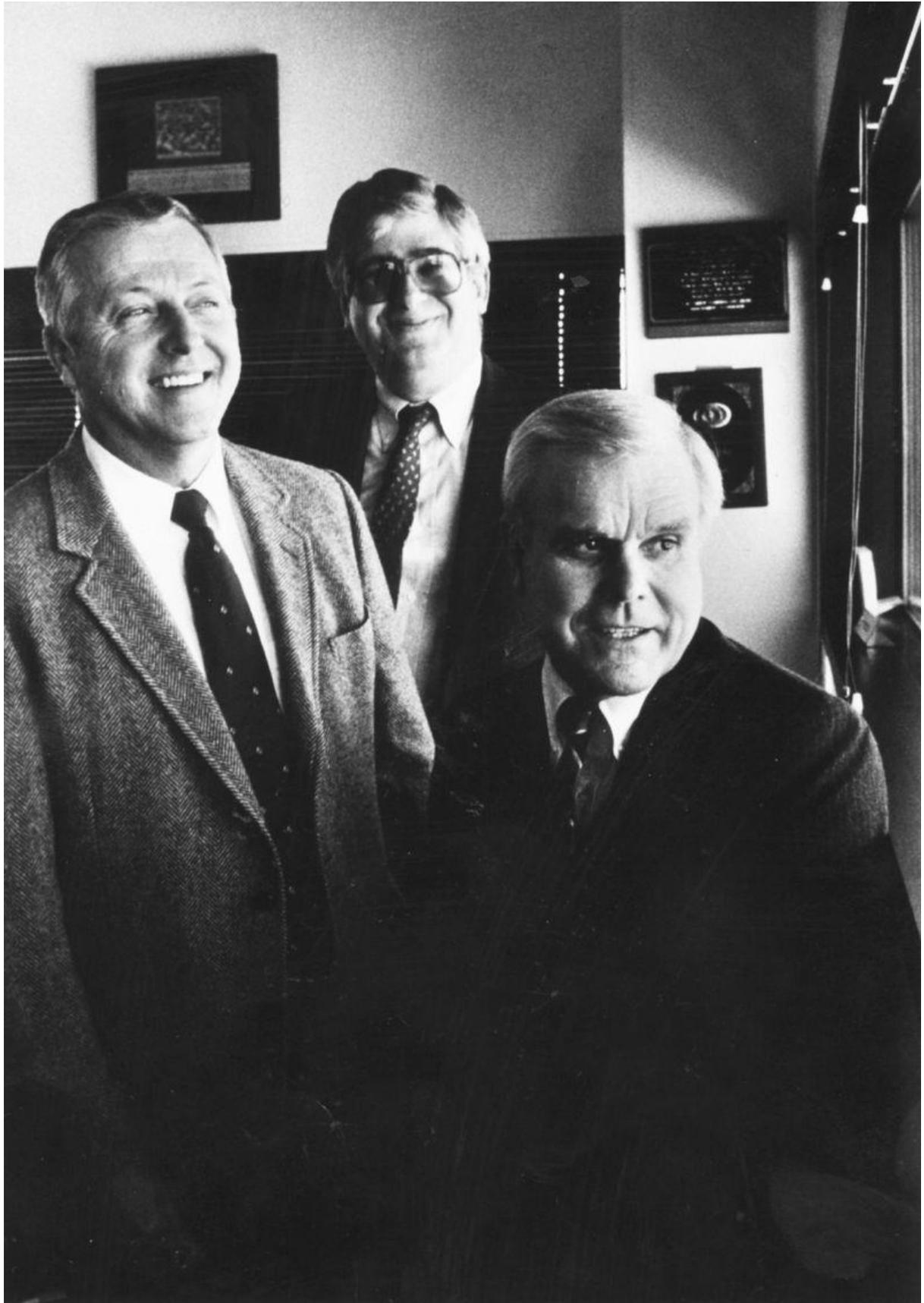
Joe Wolfinger led the Norfolk FBI squad that cracked the Cold War-era Walker spy ring — one of the most notorious cases of espionage in the nation’s history.

That was 35 years ago, but when Wolfinger showed up last month at FBI headquarters to share his memories with a reporter, his presence drew staff like moths to flame. The interview turned into an all-ears gathering of fans — agents, analysts, supervisors — who settled into chairs to soak up his every word.

One of them, Laura Harper, explained why: “Agents love to hear about any case from the past but this one is a legend.”

She tilted her head toward the silver-haired Wolfinger: “*He’s* a legend.”

For the Norfolk FBI, the Walker case remains their Olympic medal: The biggest leak ever of classified Navy documents stopped by one of bureau's smallest field offices. For Wolfinger, it was "*the* case of a career," he said.



Joe Wolfinger, center, pictured in 1987, was the FBI supervisor in charge of the Walker spy ring case. Agent Bob Hunter, left, was lead agent on the case. At right is Agent John Wagner. (JOHN H. SHEALLY II / THE VIRGINIAN-PILOT)

When it was over, “we felt great but also kind of guilty for feeling that way because something so awful had happened to our country.”

The Walker spy ring operated for nearly 20 years, spanning five presidencies, stealing top-secret information from the Navy and selling it to the Soviet Union.

Anyone who’s watched the FX spy series “The Americans” can easily picture the setting: The U.S. and Soviet Russia locked in a race for global domination. The world teetering on the brink of nuclear annihilation. A shadowy theater for cloak-and-dagger operatives, battling it out for an edge.

As Wolfinger talked, the Walker story came to life. Behind him, a display of evidence supplied its own color: Walking canes with concealed cavities and weapons, a clergy collar used as a disguise, contents from Walker’s final package, maps, photos, notes, instructions written in precise, hard-to-trace block lettering.



Joe Wolfinger, retired Norfolk assistant special agent in charge, recalls working the Walker spy ring case at FBI headquarters in Chesapeake, Va., on Thursday, July 9, 2020. (Kristen Zeis/The Virginian-Pilot)

Walker made it possible for the Soviet Union to decipher more than 1 million classified Navy messages — a betrayal of such magnitude it made international headlines and shook up security protocols forever.

It spawned the TV movie “Family of Spies” and a pile of books.

And it unfolded right here, on the stage of Hampton Roads.

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John A. Walker Jr. was a sailor at Naval Station Norfolk — a communications specialist with clearance to handle all sorts of confidential intel. He was ambitious, cocky and calculating. He was hungry for money. Unhampered by conscience.

Walker grew up in Pennsylvania, the middle son of a hard-times family with an alcoholic, abusive father. After a troubled youth — problems at school, brushes with the law — he followed in the footsteps of his big brother, Art, joining the Navy in 1955.

Over the next decade, Walker would get married — a woman named Barbara he met in Boston — and become a father of four. He worked on ships, carriers and subs, moving between bases, propelling himself to chief radioman even as his home life soured under the strain of deployments, tight finances and his womanizing.

By 1964, Walker was cleared for top-secret and cryptographic material.

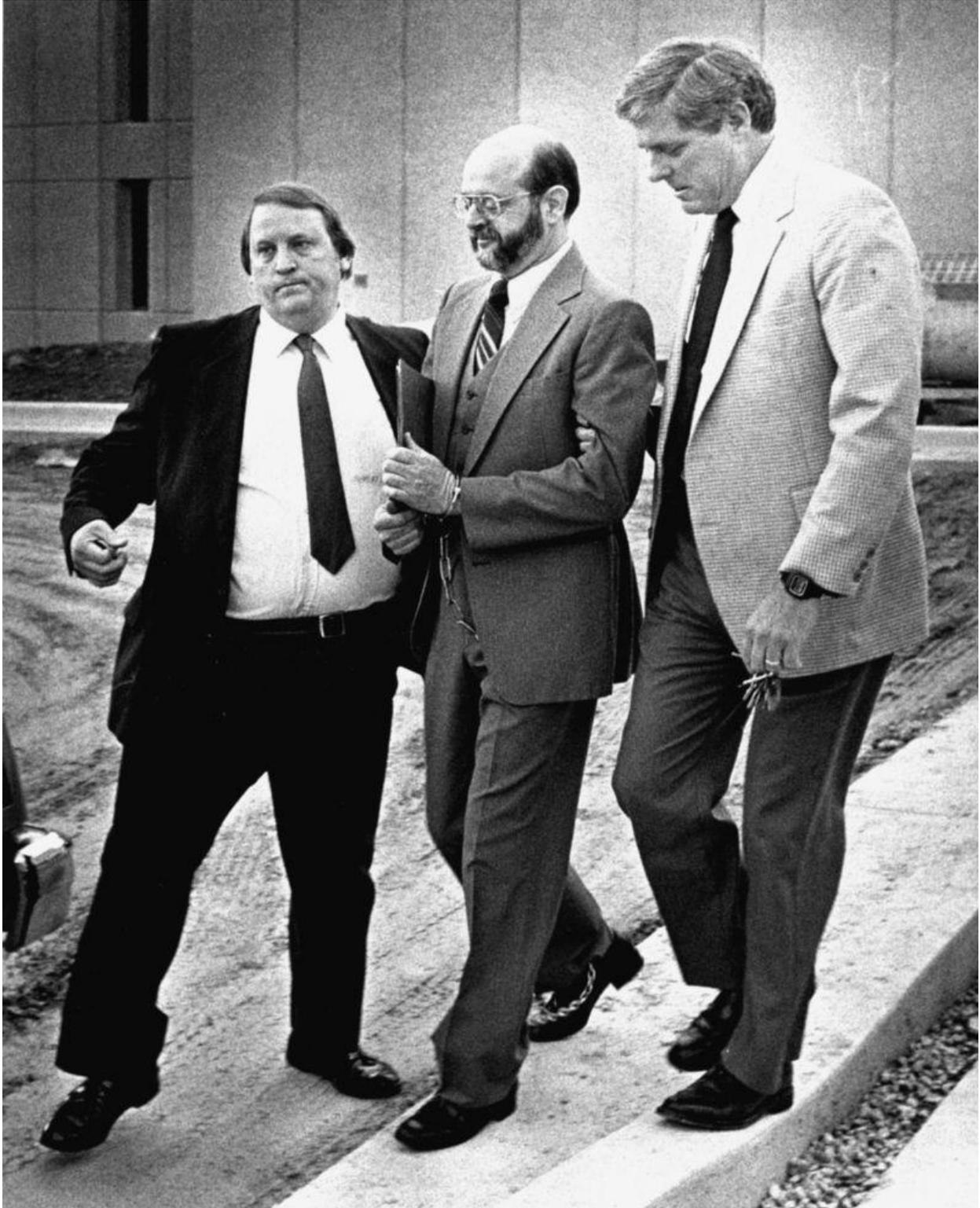
By 1967, he was a warrant officer in a communications center in Norfolk, on staff to the admiral in charge of all submarines and support ships in the Atlantic.

That October, Walker — now 30 years old — began wondering just how much the Soviets would pay for the information that was passing through his hands.

“Yes, John Walker was motivated by money,” Wolfinger said, “but more than that, he was motivated by whatever was good for John Walker.”

Walker copied a coding key that was needed to decipher the next month’s encrypted messages. He drove to Washington, walked into the Soviet Embassy and offered it for sale. He left with an envelope of cash and an arrangement for more.

For the next two decades Walker kept at it, pocketing an estimated \$1 million from the Soviets. He recruited his brother Art and Jerry Whitworth, a Navy buddy in San Diego. When his own son, Michael, became old enough to join the Navy, Walker pulled him in, too.



John Walker, center, shown here without his toupee, began spying in 1967 while he worked for the Navy, allowing the Soviets to follow U.S. troop and fleet movement - and leading to speculation that his treachery contributed to the deaths of American soldiers in Vietnam in the late 1960s and early 1970s. (John H. Sheally II)

Information spilled from bases, subs and carriers, including the Nimitz and Enterprise, and a Chesapeake defense contractor where Art got a job after retiring from the service.

The intel included not just decoding info but vessel locations, vulnerabilities and technologies, and U.S. movements and bombing patterns in Vietnam as the war raged — secrets the Soviets could pass to their allies on the other side.

Most deliveries were done through “dead drops” — spy lingo for a hand-off that involves no face-to-face meet. Using careful coordination and covert signals, the goods are dropped at one location and the payoff at another. Most of Walker’s exchanges took place around the outskirts of D.C. but some occurred as far away as Austria.

No one in the Navy seemed the wiser. Walker and his ring capitalized on cracks in the system and a general lack of oversight. When his clearance came up for periodic re-screening, Walker just faked the required forms.

After retiring from the Navy in 1976, he continued his middle-man role between Soviet handlers and the rest of his gang. Walker had gotten used to living large. He owned a plane, a houseboat and a two-story home in Ocean View.

He got a divorce and became a private investigator, opening Confidential Reports in an office building in Kempsville.

His ex-wife would become the ring’s downfall.

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Barbara Walker had caught on long before, after her husband moved the family from a tiny trailer into a high-end apartment in Norfolk. He’d admitted he was spying, even let her tag along on a few exchanges.

In 1984, she was living in Massachusetts, bitter and drinking heavily. When she summoned the Boston FBI for a tell-all, she had no idea her son was also involved.

Initially, Barbara Walker’s tip wasn’t taken seriously. She had no proof and “she was complaining about alimony,” Wolfinger said. “It was obvious she wanted to hurt her ex-husband. And it probably didn’t help that she drank a water-glass of vodka during the interview.”

But three months later, the file made its way to Norfolk FBI headquarters on Granby Street for a routine review before being officially dismissed.

It landed in the hands of an agent named Bob Hunter, who worked for Wolfinger.

When they read Barbara Walker’s description of the exchanges she’d witnessed, they recognized the hallmarks of a dead drop.

“It sounded like she knew what she was talking about — like real espionage,” Wolfinger said. “How else could she know about such things?”

Support was shaky.

“Most people in the bureau didn’t really believe it,” Wolfinger said. “And we were cautious, too. I mean, if we were wrong, this was a man with a 20-year Navy career. You can’t take that lightly.”



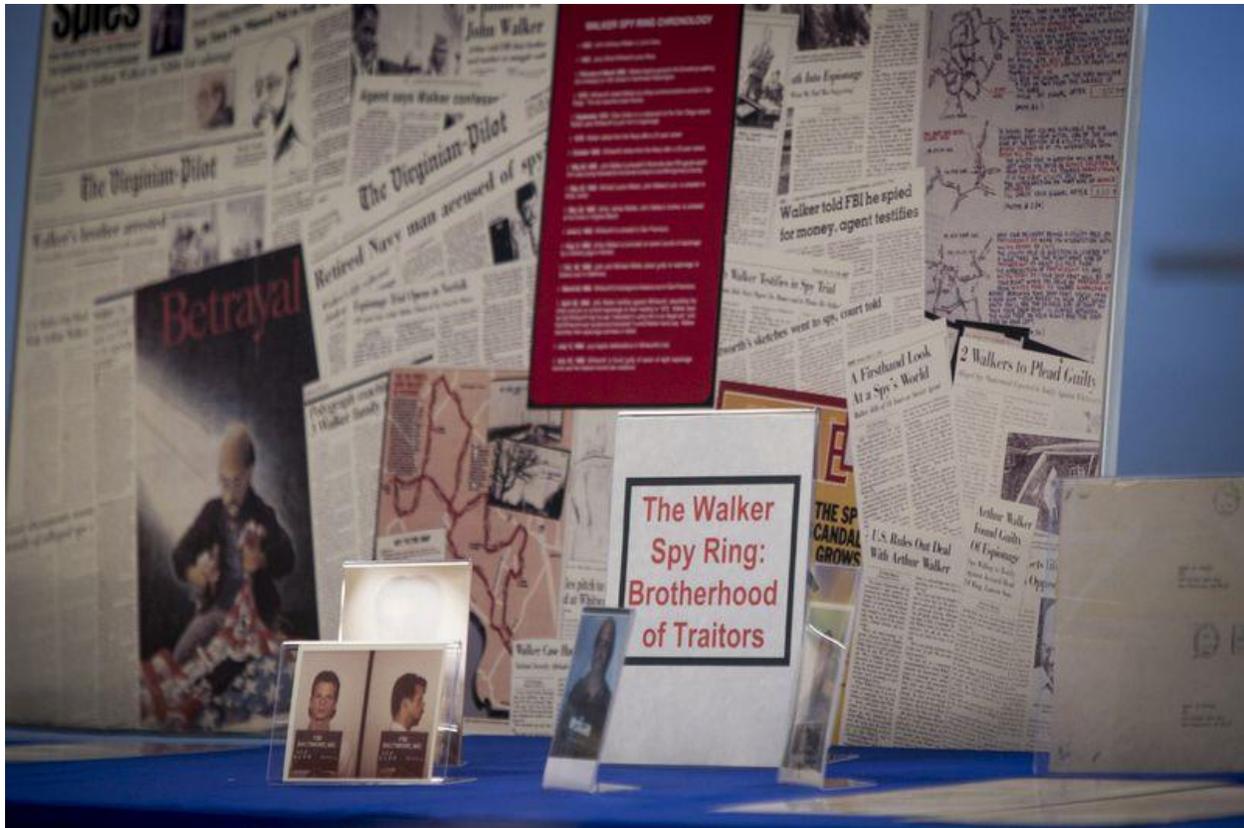
Convicted spy Arthur Walker is escorted into court in Norfolk, Va., on Nov. 12, 1985. Arthur Walker made \$12,000 for selling classified documents to Soviet agents through his brother John Walker Jr. Arthur and John Walker died in prison. (Steve Helber / Associated Press)

Manpower was another concern. The Norfolk FBI has now moved into a larger building in Chesapeake, but its ranks remain among the smallest of the bureau’s 56 field offices.

Martin Culbreth, the office’s current head honcho, was among those who dropped in to hear Wolfinger.

“Big offices have counterintelligence experts who deal only with espionage,” Culbreth said. “But in a small field office a case like this puts the brakes on everything. All else comes to a standstill.”

If the ex-wife was right, Wolfinger said, “and this guy was spying, it was catastrophic. One bad crypto guy passing code to Russians could break everything.”



Evidence from the Walker spy ring case at FBI headquarters in Chesapeake, Va., on Thursday, July 9, 2020. (Kristen Zeis/The Virginian-Pilot)

They opened the case in February 1985.

Walker would be tough to simply follow. His Ocean View community was the kind of place where neighbors would notice agents lurking in cars. His experience as a PI meant he'd be good at detecting surveillance himself. And Wolfinger's squad knew by now that Walker was not one of the egghead "kind of bad guys we usually deal with. He was armed and dangerous."

They decided to start from a distance.

In early April, the OK came to tap Walker's phones. Agents eavesdropped with monitoring equipment set up at a rented office in a strip mall on South Witchduck Road, in Virginia Beach.

For more than a month, they listened as Walker yakked about everything except spying. An alert sounded in mid-May when he told several folks that he wouldn't be attending a family funeral because there was something he had to do on that weekend and only he could do it. He said he was going to Charlotte.

Was he planning a dead drop?

It was time to get closer.

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Agents were posted on roads leading out of Walker's neighborhood. A plane circled above, watching his house. His blue and silver van was distinctive. Hopefully, hard to miss.

Shortly after noon on that Sunday, May 19, 1985, a radio call came from the plane: Walker was pulling out of his driveway.

"He circled the block two or three times — dry-cleaning," Wolfinger said.

Wolfie's listeners nodded. They knew the term: a technique to reveal cars that might be following.

"When he jumped on 64, we all piled in behind."

As Walker rolled through the Hampton Roads Bridge-Tunnel and headed west, Wolfinger's squad ran a "loose tail." If all went right, they'd stay close enough to keep the van in sight but far enough back not to spook its driver.

"If we blew this and he caught on to us, he'd never pay the price."

Wolfinger felt extra pressure. He and Hunter had decided not to put an electronic tracker on Walker's van, despite bureau advice.

"They even made one special for us but we threw it in a closet," he said. "You have to remember, trackers weren't very good back then and they were bulky. We were too worried he'd find it."

On the Peninsula, Wolfinger peeled off to find a pay phone.

"What we would have given to have *these*," he said, wagging his cellphone at the room.



Evidence from the Walker spy ring case at FBI headquarters in Chesapeake, Va., on Thursday, July 9, 2020. (Kristen Zeis/The Virginian-Pilot)

He called the Washington field office in case Walker was bound for a drop in D.C., then sped to catch up with the chase. On the highway, agents moved into leapfrog mode to avoid being noticed. Communicating through secure car radios, they took turns passing the tail off to someone ahead, then picking it up again farther down the road.

When Walker's van took the ramp for I-95 North, Wolfinger fired up a cigar.

“At that point, it was clear he'd lied about going to Charlotte,” he said. “That was the first of about 10 heaters I smoked that day.”

The Washington office issued “the big beep” — a pager signal that rallied 85 agents from a Sunday afternoon off. As Walker drew near, some took over the tail from the Norfolk unit; others fanned out in the wooded suburbs that KGB operatives were known to favor.

Wolfinger and Hunter dropped out and drove to the command post at D.C. headquarters. They glued themselves to a radio, following its chatter, hearts pounding as agents shadowed Walker into Maryland, then lost him for three tense hours.

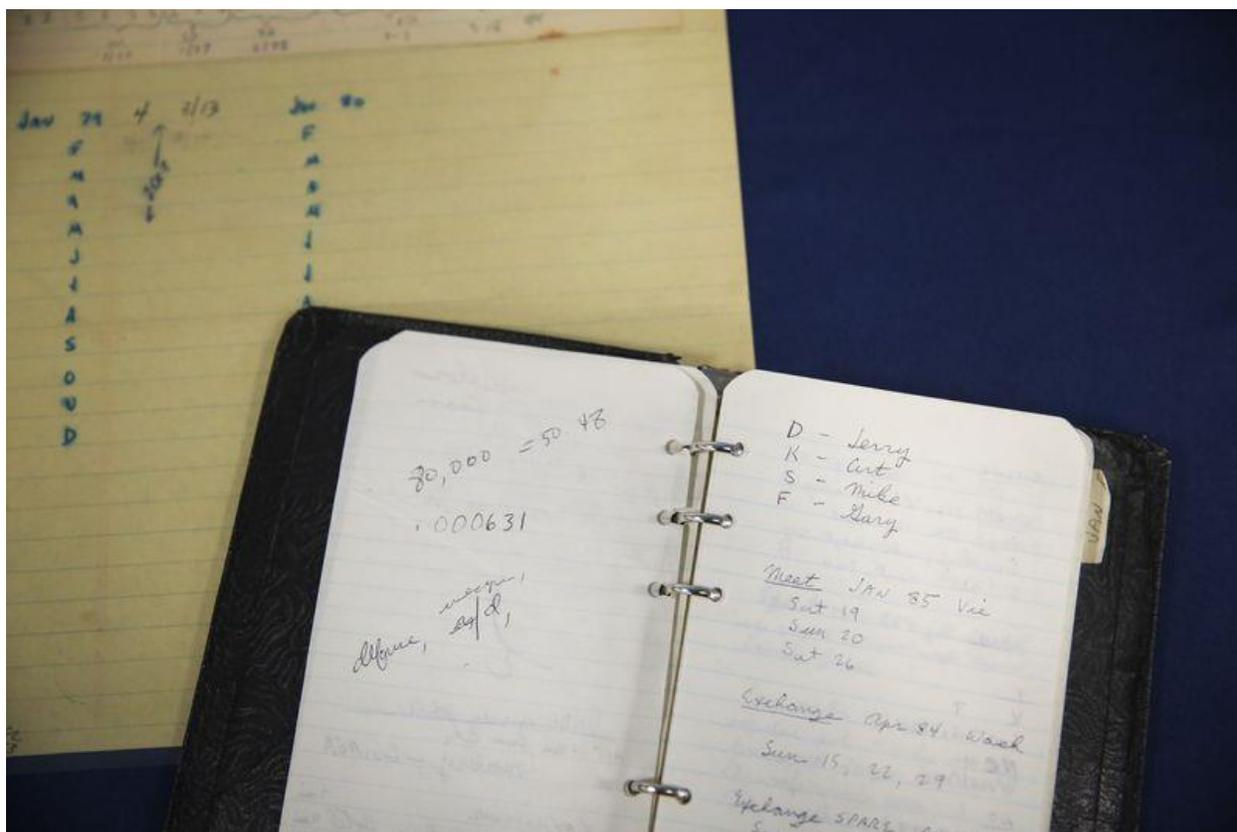
With so many feds staked out, Wolfinger said, no one panicked. Sooner or later, Walker's van had to drive by one of them.

“We’d planned for this, anticipated the fact that we might lose him. But yes, it got very quiet in there for a while. We were all worried. And the fact that Bob and I had said no to the tracker — that was certainly a factor in how bad we were feeling. We were just hoping we hadn’t screwed this whole thing up.”

Cheers erupted in the command post when Walker was finally spotted again, around sunset. “A great sense of relief.”

The hunt played out. Agents in the air. On the streets. In cornfields and brush.

By the time the evening was through, they’d seen Walker make several stops in a secluded area of Montgomery County. Teams moved in behind him, looking for evidence.



A notebook from the Walker spy ring case at FBI headquarters in Chesapeake, Va., on Thursday, July 9, 2020. (Kristen Zeis/The Virginian-Pilot)

Near the base of a utility pole, they found a paper bag. Hidden beneath its layer of trash: a stack of documents.

The agent who discovered it came running through the woods, clutching the bag to his chest.

“That was the next big moment in the command post,” Wolfinger said. “Hearing him on the radio shouting, ‘I got it! I got it! I found it! It’s got secret stuff in it!’ ”

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The package contained 129 classified documents from the carrier Nimitz, deployed in the Mediterranean with Walker's son on board.

Walker was tracked to a Ramada Inn in Rockville.

Around 3:30 a.m., agents used an old trick to flush him out. Posing as a front desk clerk, one dialed Walker's room and told him that someone had hit his car in the parking lot.

Suspicious, Walker took his time, finally grabbing his pistol and creeping from his room.

Hunter and a D.C. agent were hiding near the elevators.

As Walker pushed the down button, they jumped out, guns drawn.

"FBI! Drop your weapon!"

Walker hesitated, then slowly lowered his Smith & Wesson.

"I've asked Bob why he didn't shoot when John turned around with a gun in his hand," Wolfinger said. "FBI policy says to shoot. When I asked him, there was this pregnant pause. Then he said, 'Well, he had a story to tell and I wanted to hear it.' "

During his arrest, Walker showed no fear or remorse, no emotion at all. He seemed surprised, though, when he was brought out in handcuffs and saw a parking lot full of federal law enforcement.



John A. Walker Jr. is escorted by a federal marshal in 1985 as he leaves the Montgomery County Detention Center in Rockville, Md., for federal court. The American Navy spy was sentenced to life in prison for passing intel to the Soviets. (Bob Daugherty/AP)

“He said something about how he had no idea so many people were involved. I considered that a compliment.”

Wolfinger spent the rest of the night on the horn, dispatching Norfolk agents to seal off Walker’s home, business, houseboat and plane. With no sleep, he pressed on to Hampton Roads in the morning to obtain search warrants.

“I was tired but I felt exhilarated. I’m sure I drove too fast.”

That night, he poured himself a scotch and slept long and hard.

True, it hadn’t gone perfectly.

Aside from the sweat-filled hours where they’d lost their target, one agent had mistakenly collected a 7Up can that Walker dropped as a signal to his contact. Its absence tipped off his KGB handler, who aborted that end of the exchange.

Also, “agents hiding in the shrubbery found out the next day that it was filled with poison ivy — one of the risks of the espionage game,” Wolfinger said, as chuckles rolled through his fan club.

But fingerprints on the Nimitz package matched those of Michael and John Walker. The search warrants turned up more evidence.

John and his brother Art got life sentences. Both died in 2014 in their 70s in the same North Carolina prison, mere months before they would have been paroled.

Whitworth, the West Coast ring member, will never get out. After John Walker turned against him as part of a plea deal, Whitworth was sentenced to 365 years. He’ll be eligible for parole at age 109.

Michael Walker was released in 2000 after 15 years. He goes by his middle name now, Lance, and works as an artist in Cape Cod, Massachusetts. His take from his father’s spy ring? Around \$1,000.

It’s unknown — at least publicly — if the Walker spy ring cost American lives, and if so, how many. The price of replacing compromised communications systems was estimated at \$1 billion.

The Department of Defense scrambled to plug holes, establishing a security review commission and ordering top-to-bottom inspections. Procedures tightened. Among the new rules: No one is allowed to handle classified information alone anymore.

The Walker case is now part of instruction at the U.S. Naval Academy and in standard counterintelligence training. Evidence is on display at the International Spy Museum in D.C.

Wolfie and his squad made FBI history: The first time the bureau caught a spy in the actual act.



Joe Wolfinger, retired Norfolk assistant special agent in charge, shows evidence in Walker spy ring case at FBI headquarters in Chesapeake, Va., on Thursday, July 9, 2020. (Kristen Zeis/The Virginian-Pilot)

“I’d put our little undercover operation up against anybody’s,” Wolfinger said.

For the rest of his career — Wolfinger retired in 1999 — “all anybody wanted to hear about was this.”

He wrote a book about an unrelated case, but whenever he gave talks about the book, his audience was more interested in Walker.

“He *was* an excessive character. Almost the perfect spy. It’s a good thing I never get tired of telling this story.”

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Want to know more about the Walker spy ring?

Sources for this story included “Traitors” — a 2013 series written by Pilot reporter Denise Watson that chronicled the Walker case in depth. A reprint of “Traitors” is available at store.pilotonline.com.