

UNITED STATES COURT OF APPEALS FOR THE FIFTH CIRCUIT

William Mercer v. United States

514 F. App'x 455 (5th Cir. 2013) · No. 12-30762 · Decided February 21, 2013

SUMMARY

The Fifth Circuit dismissed William Mercer's pro se Bivens appeal as frivolous. Although the district court improperly dismissed the complaint sua sponte for failure to exhaust administrative remedies, dismissal was proper on the alternative ground that the claims were frivolous. The court also imposed the 28 U.S.C. § 1915(g) three-strikes bar and warned Mercer about further sanctions.

CASE DETAILS

COURT	United States Court of Appeals for the Fifth Circuit
WRITING FOR THE COURT	Per Curiam; Davis; Barksdale; Elrod
JURISDICTION	Federal
DECIDED	February 21, 2013
DOCKET	12-30762
DISPOSITION	dismissed
PROCEDURAL POSTURE	Pro se federal prisoner appealed the dismissal of his Bivens complaint for failure to exhaust administrative remedies and, alternatively, as frivolous under 28 U.S.C. § 1915(e).
STANDARD OF REVIEW	Dismissal of a prisoner's complaint for failure to exhaust administrative remedies is reviewed de novo.
PRECEDENTIAL VALUE	unpublished and nonprecedential
PARTIES	William Mercer v. United States of America, W.A. Sherrod, United States Bureau of Prisons, Staff of United States Penitentiary Pollock, Officer Willis, Officer Muffet

TOPICS

civil rights prisoners rights appellate procedure sanctions section 1983

PRACTICE AREAS

prisoner civil rights federal civil procedure appellate procedure remedies

QUESTIONS PRESENTED

1. Whether the district court could sua sponte dismiss Mercer's complaint for failure to exhaust administrative remedies before the Government filed a responsive pleading.
2. Whether the complaint and appeal were frivolous and therefore subject to dismissal without requiring exhaustion.
3. Whether Mercer's retaliation claims were frivolous because he failed to allege a specific constitutional injury.
4. Whether the district court incorrectly treated the instant complaint as one of seven actions decided at the same time.
5. Whether dismissal of the complaint and appeal as frivolous triggered the three-strikes restriction under 28 U.S.C. § 1915(g).

HOLDINGS

1. The district court erred by sua sponte dismissing Mercer's claims for failure to exhaust administrative remedies absent a responsive pleading from the Government because failure to exhaust is an affirmative defense, not a pleading requirement.
2. The district court was authorized to dismiss the claims as frivolous without first requiring exhaustion of administrative remedies.
3. Mercer's retaliation claims were frivolous because he failed to allege a specific constitutional injury.
4. Mercer abandoned the claims concerning alleged mail and document tampering because he failed to address the district court's grounds for rejecting them on appeal.
5. Both the district court's dismissal of the complaint and the Fifth Circuit's dismissal of the appeal as frivolous counted as strikes under 28 U.S.C. § 1915(g), and Mercer was barred from proceeding in forma pauperis in future civil actions or appeals while incarcerated unless he was in imminent danger of serious physical injury.

KEY QUOTATIONS

“Because failure-to-exhaust is an affirmative defense—not a pleading standard—the district court erred in sua sponte dismissing Mercer’s claims on this basis absent a responsive pleading from the Government.” (514 F. App'x at 455)

“Because the appeal is frivolous, it is dismissed.” (514 F. App'x at 456)

FACTUAL BACKGROUND

Mercer, a federal prisoner proceeding pro se, filed a Bivens complaint alleging that prison officials tampered with or delayed his mail and legal documents and retaliated against him. He contended that documents establishing exhaustion of administrative remedies had been lost or destroyed by prison officials. He did not address on appeal the district court's determination that he failed to show prejudice from the alleged tampering or his conclusory retaliation allegations, and he failed to allege a specific constitutional injury for retaliation based on delay in receiving his objections.

PROCEDURAL HISTORY

The Western District of Louisiana dismissed Mercer's complaint sua sponte for failure to exhaust administrative remedies and alternatively as frivolous. The Fifth Circuit held that the exhaustion dismissal was procedurally improper but affirmed the alternative basis for dismissal by dismissing the appeal as frivolous and imposing the three-strikes bar under 28 U.S.C. § 1915(g).

DISPOSITION

dismissed

CASES CITED

- Bivens v. Six Unknown Named Agents of Federal Bureau of Narcotics, 403 U.S. 388 (1971)
- Powe v. Ennis, 177 F.3d 393, 394 (5th Cir. 1999)
- Jones v. Bock, 549 U.S. 199, 212-14, 216 (2007)
- Carbe v. Lappin, 492 F.3d 325, 328 (5th Cir. 2007)
- Yohey v. Collins, 985 F.2d 222, 224-25 (5th Cir. 1993)
- Woods v. Smith, 60 F.3d 1161, 1166 (5th Cir. 1995)
- Adepegba v. Hammons, 103 F.3d 383, 387-88 (5th Cir. 1996)
- Holloway v. Hornsby, 23 F.3d 944, 946 (5th Cir. 1994)

OPINION

PER CURIAM.

Case: 12-30762 Document: 00512151497 Page: 1 Date Filed: 02/21/2013 IN THE UNITED STATES COURT OF APPEALS FOR THE FIFTH CIRCUIT United States Court of Appeals Fifth Circuit FILED February 21, 2013 No. 12-30762 Summary Calendar Lyle W. Cayce Clerk WILLIAM MERCER, Plaintiff - Appellant v. UNITED STATES OF AMERICA; W.A. SHERROD; UNITED STATES BUREAU OF PRISONS; STAFF OF UNITED STATES PENITENTIARY POLLOCK; OFFICER WILLIS; OFFICER MUFFET, Defendants - Appellees Appeal from the United States District Court for the Western District of Louisiana USDC No. 1:11-CV-1501 Before DAVIS, BARKSDALE, and ELROD, Circuit Judges.

PER CURIAM:* Proceeding pro se, William Mercer, federal prisoner # 15996-016, appeals the dismissal, for failure to exhaust administrative remedies, and alternatively, as frivolous pursuant to 28 U.S.C. § 1915(e), of his civil complaint, filed pursuant to Bivens v. Six Unknown Named Agents of Federal Bureau of Narcotics, 403 U.S. 388 (1971). * Pursuant to 5TH CIR.

R. 47.5, the court has determined that this opinion should not be published and is not precedent except under the limited circumstances set forth in 5TH CIR. R. 47.5.4. Case: 12-30762 Document: 00512151497 Page: 2 Date Filed: 02/21/2013 No. 12-30762 Mercer asserts he should

not have been required to exhaust his administrative remedies because the documents proving exhaustion were lost or destroyed by prison officials.

Dismissal of a prisoner's complaint for failure to exhaust administrative remedies is reviewed de novo. *Powe v. Ennis*, 177 F.3d 393, 394 (5th Cir. 1999). Because failure-to-exhaust is an affirmative defense—not a pleading standard—the district court erred in sua sponte dismissing Mercer's claims on this basis absent a responsive pleading from the Government.

Jones v. Bock, 549 U.S. 199, 212-14, 216 (2007); *Carbe v. Lappin*, 492 F.3d 325, 328 (5th Cir. 2007). On the other hand, the district court was authorized to dismiss the claims on the alternative basis that they were frivolous, and thus subject to dismissal, without first requiring the exhaustion of administrative remedies. 42 U.S.C. § 1997e(c)(2). Mercer does not address on appeal the district court's determination that he failed to show any prejudice to his legal position as a result of prison officers' alleged tampering with his mail and legal documents.

Nor does he address his conclusory allegations of retaliation made in his complaint based on the alleged tampering with his motion sent to the Washington, D.C., appellate court. Therefore, he has abandoned the claims he raised in district court. E.g., *Yohey v. Collins*, 985 F.2d 222, 224-25 (5th Cir. 1993). Mercer's claims of retaliation, based on the delay in the district court's receiving his objections to the magistrate judge's report and recommendation, are also frivolous: such claims require plaintiff to allege, as a threshold matter, a specific constitutional injury.

Woods v. Smith, 60 F.3d 1161, 1166 (5th Cir. 1995). He has not done so. Finally, Mercer erroneously contends the magistrate judge determined all seven of his pending actions at one time. In a prior order directing Mercer to amend his complaint, the magistrate judge noted the instant complaint was the sixth of seven civil complaints filed by Mercer.

The magistrate judge's report 2 Case: 12-30762 Document: 00512151497 Page: 3 Date Filed: 02/21/2013 No. 12-30762 and recommendation addressed only claims raised in the instant complaint. Therefore, this contention is also frivolous.

Because the appeal is frivolous, it is dismissed. 5th Cir. R. 42.2. Both the district court's dismissal of the complaint, and our court's dismissal of the appeal, as frivolous count as strikes under 28 U.S.C. § 1915(g). *Adepegba v. Hammons*, 103 F.3d 383, 387-88 (5th Cir. 1996). Mercer filed two prior civil rights actions which were dismissed as frivolous, resulting in a total of four strikes.

See *Mercer v. United States*, No. 11-CV-1498 (W.D. La. 6 Nov. 2012); *Mercer v. United States*, No. 11-CV-1505 (W.D. La. 15 May 2012). Because Mercer has now accumulated three or more strikes, he may not proceed in forma pauperis in any civil action or in the appeal of a judgment in a civil action while he is incarcerated or detained in any facility unless he is in imminent danger of serious physical injury.

28 U.S.C. § 1915(g). He is warned to review all pending matters, and to withdraw any that are frivolous or repetitive. He is further warned that his pursuit of any frivolous or repetitive actions may subject him to additional and progressively more severe sanctions. E.g., *Holloway v. Hornsby*, 23 F.3d 944, 946 (5th Cir. 1994). APPEAL DISMISSED; 28 U.S.C. § 1915(g) BAR IMPOSED; FURTHER SANCTION WARNING ISSUED.