



D1 The Los Angeles County Department of Coroner Special Operations Response Team: Case Examples of the Utility of Such Teams in Large Jurisdictions

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Attendees will learn through case examples the structure and utility of special operations and recovery teams for coroner/medical examiner offices in cases needing special handling or traditionally needing assistance from outside agencies, including mass fatality incidents (>5 decedents), multiple decedent assistance, special decedent recovery, buried bodies, decedent searches, and public relations events.

The Los Angeles County Department of Medical Examiner/Coroner (LACDOC) is one of the busiest offices in the U.S. In 2000, the LACDOC certified 9,156 cases: 2,668 accidental deaths, 21 fetal deaths, 1,070 homicides, 4,068 natural deaths, 728 suicides, 258 undetermined deaths, and 343 "other" (the latter category includes specimens and other remains not of forensic value).

It is estimated that approximately 75 of these cases involved multiple decedents, mass fatality incidents, special decedent recovery, and buried body recovery. Because of the difficulty in processing such scenes, the need for specialized training was recognized, and in 2001 the Special Operations and Recovery Team (SORT) was created.

Specially selected and trained coroner investigators, criminalists, forensic technicians and attendants, and other experts, including an anthropologist and an archaeologist, staff the SORT.

SORT is designed to provide field assistance to coroner investigators in cases needing special handling, or traditionally needing assistance from outside agencies. The general case categories to which SORT is designed to respond are: 1) mass fatality incidents, with five or more decedents; 2) multiple decedent assistance, at the discretion of relevant personnel; 3) special decedent recovery, including decedents found in remote areas or areas with difficult or restricted accessibility; 4) buried bodies; 5) decedent searches, including scattered skeletal remains and clandestine graves; and 6) public relations events.

The LACDOC is, to the knowledge of the authors, the only county agency in the country to initiate such a team. The reasons for this are likely many, but prominent among them is the large number of "special" cases seen in Los Angeles County. Through the use of case examples this paper presents the utility of teams such as SORT from the perspectives of the coroner investigator, criminalist, forensic pathologist, anthropologist, archaeologist, and outside law enforcement agencies.

The first case study involves the mid-air collision of two small aircraft over water. This was the first activation of the SORT, and as such was a learning experience. In this case, SORT was able to assist in the recovery of two decedents under very difficult circumstances.

Case example two involves deployment of SORT on a decedent search in a mountain environment. Prior to deployment, fragmentary skeletal remains from two individuals were recovered from a single campground on two separate occasions. The area was considered a body dump, and a search was organized for the remainder of the two partially recovered decedents. Although no human remains were found, the search provided an invaluable avenue for personnel training and interagency cooperation.

The third case example involves an urban scene where construction workers unearthed human remains. An almost complete skeleton, including most of the feet and hands but excluding the cranium or mandible, were recovered over the course of three days under challenging conditions.

A fourth example involves a fire scene. In a high-profile incident, a suspect barricaded himself in his home. The house burned to the ground. SORT recovered several burned tooth fragments, along with cranial fragments, long bone fragments, and personal possessions of the decedent. The tooth fragments were useful in positive identification of the decedent.

The case studies illustrate well the value of a team such as SORT in large jurisdictions. Personnel, both within LACDOC and in outside agencies which interact with LACDOC, agree that having a team that trains together for difficult special recoveries, the members of which work well together, makes any recovery, no matter how difficult, run more smoothly. The SORT also increases the likelihood of complete recovery of relevant remains and the rate of positive identification of unknown decedents in Los Angeles County.

Special Decedent Recovery, Coroner Special Operations, Buried Body Recovery