



## Physical Anthropology Section – 2003

### H61 In Search of Floyd Britton: Investigations of Human Rights Issues on the Island of Coiba, Republic of Panama

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The purpose of this paper is to discuss how physical anthropologists apply their skills in working with Truth Commissions and taphonomic variables affecting recovery of skeletal remains in a tropical environment.

The task of investigating human rights issues is sometimes complicated by ill perceived and misguided "territorial" claims by some colleagues. Unfortunately, this is not an atypical phenomenon in the forensic realm, in particular among forensic anthropologists working in human rights (e.g., Bosnia, Kosovo, Panama, etc.). The role of forensic practitioners is to investigate, provide the most accurate and parsimonious interpretation of the evidence, provide unbiased testimony, and ultimately closure to the victims families.

The island of Coiba (positioned between 7° 10'N and 81°32' - 81° 56' W) is Panama's largest island in the Pacific, which is administered by the Veraguas province. Coiba is located 24 km offshore and is separated from the mainland on the east by the Gulf of Montijo and on the northwest by the Gulf of Chiriquí. It has an area of 494 sq km and a maximum elevation of 425 m. The island has served as a penitentiary since 1919 and was declared a national park on 17 December 1991.

Floyd Britton was a leftist university student leader who was arrested on October 12, 1968 and sentenced by the military government of Omar Torrijos (1968-1981) to the Penal colony on the island of Coiba on November 3 of the same year. He died in November of 1969, allegedly beaten to death by prison guards under direct orders of General Omar Torrijos. His body was flown to Panama City for an autopsy and his death was determined to be of natural causes. Purportedly, his body was then sent back to Coiba and interred at the "Marañon" Cemetery. Was the autopsy report legitimate? Why return the body of Floyd Britton to Coiba and not release it to family members or bury him in Panama City?

Previous attempts to locate Floyd Britton occurred in May of 1991 and then again in 2001. The first excavation was concentrated in the northeast sector of the cemetery. New eyewitness testimonies led to another exhumation on August 2 and 3, 2001, by the Comisión de la Verdad de Panamá (Panamaian Truth Commission) and another team of U.S. forensic anthropologists. Skeletal remains were recovered from four burials on the northwest sector of the cemetery. During this phase, two of the burials were only partially excavated.

Continued efforts to locate Floyd Britton during a third excavation and exhumation phase took place between February 26 and March 6, 2002, by field crew members from both the University of Florida and Panamanian Truth Commission. Three burials were identified for excavation from information derived by la Comisión de la Verdad de Panamá from several eyewitness accounts and the remains of the three burials were transported to the C.A. Pound Human Identification Laboratory for analysis. Because of various taphonomic processes, for example, soil acidity, insect activity, and bacterial activity, roots, humidity, etc., the conditions are not conducive to good skeletal preservation and therefore the remains sustained considerable postmortem damage. However, the biological profile determined from the remains of burial 3 were consistent with biological information made available for Floyd Britton, two molars were sent out for mtDNA testing. The mtDNA results will be presented to confirm identity. In addition, excavation protocols and taphonomic processes in a tropical environment are discussed.

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