



## Physical Anthropology Section – 2003

### H63 Operacion Eagle: Clandestine Graves and a Taphonomy of Tyrants — Part 1: The Truth Commission of Panama, Witness Testimony, and Searches in Western Panama

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After attending this presentation, participants should be better able to use death investigation dogs and forensic anthropologists to search for clandestine graves.

While passing through the Miami airport, a U.S. lawyer working in Panama purchased the September/October 1999 issue of *Archaeology Magazine* featuring a story on the role of a dog named Eagle in locating a "lost" historic cemetery in Monroe, MI. Eagle is a Doberman Pinscher/German Shorthair Pointer mix that was trained by Sandra Anderson to find only human remains ranging from intact bodies on through skeletal fragments and human trace evidence (blood, etc). This includes fresh, decomposed, burned, as well as recent and ancient remains (Saul, JM, Anderson, S, and Saul, FP, Proceedings of the AAFS 2001:247) Brought to the attention of the Panamanian Truth Commission, members quickly recognized the potential value of such an "investigator" in their search for the remains of political opponents and others who were secretly "disappeared" during the military regimes of Generals Torrijos and Noriega (1968-1989). The Commission had accumulated a great quantity of witness and other testimony concerning potential gravesites that needed to be explored quickly, as the Commission's mandate was scheduled to expire soon.

The Commission's invitation was accepted on a volunteer basis by Anderson and her anthropologist associates, Julie and Frank Saul, who formed the U.S. nucleus of a joint Panamanian-U.S. team that was coordinated and overseen by Bruce Broce, an anthropologist who holds both Panamanian and U.S. citizenship. They were accompanied in the field by additional personnel from the U.S. and Panama. These included anthropologists and archaeologists, lawyers, law enforcement/crime scene specialists (Policía Técnica Judicial de Panama, or PTJ) and members of the Panamanian Presidential Guard. The latter provided security with the help of the PTJ. The PTJ and lawyers witnessed and maintained the chain of evidence for each find. The President of the Truth Commission, Licenciado Alberto S. Almanza, constantly supported efforts by his presence and actions while also maintaining continuity with both the President of the Republic of Panama, Mireya Moscoso, and the families of the "Disappeared Ones."

In preparation for work in this new environment, Eagle was introduced to non-human primate remains and trained to ignore them. The Sauls' years of experience living and working in Central American jungles excavating ancient Maya remains also proved to be helpful - sometimes in unexpected ways, such as understanding the root and vine systems of tropical vegetation and their potential role in transporting the scent of human remains.

Due to time constraints, the Truth Commission charged the team to quickly check as many potential disposal sites as possible (as indicated by witness testimony), and where indications by Eagle were positive for human remains, to attempt to recover at least one portion of human remains as proof and for future DNA analysis. Complete recovery was not possible nor was it desired at this time. Others carried out subsequent excavations in several locations after Eagle and preliminary recovery of remains confirmed the presence and location of human remains.

Eagle's special abilities, and the results achieved as a consequence, proved to be an inspiration to the people of Panama. For reasons of security the authors had hoped to come and go quietly in Panama, but the President of Panama decided to surround the team with media as a means of protecting them (in addition to providing them with members of the Presidential Guard and the PTJ). This seems to have worked well and as a byproduct of this constant media attention, new witnesses, who had previously considered the situation hopeless, were encouraged to come forward. Eagle became a national hero with full-page photographs as well as editorial cartoons in the newspapers. The extent of this public approval is suggested by an incident while searching for remains on the grounds of a maximum-security prison. As the heavily guarded group (including three women) passed a few hundred feet from a razor wire fence surrounding a prison yard filled with male prisoners, shouting was heard that was at first assumed to be obscenities but turned out to be cries of "Eagle! Find our dead!"

The Province of Chiriqui and city of David, Noriega's home province and initial power base, provided the team with a number of very different settings for disposal of single and multiple victims. In addition, as in other areas, witness testimony needed to be related to changes to the crime scene brought about by human and/or natural agencies over time. For instance, stories of "animal" remains encountered during relocation of a rural road brought the team to a hillside near the road that produced human remains from both the steep cliff over which the "animal remains" had been tossed and the bottom of the rapidly flowing river below. This difficult recovery took place during a cold rain, making the cliff face treacherous and causing the water to rise during the search. Nevertheless, several bones and bone fragments were recovered, with an MNI of two individuals indicated by the



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recovery of duplicating portions of two right tibiae. One of these individuals would probably have walked with a limp, as the right patella recovered bore signs of severe osteoarthritis.

Eagle investigated another cliff below a mountain roadside winery after witnesses told the team that bodies were disposed of by throwing them over the cliff. Eagle indicated that human remains were indeed present in several locations on the cliff face and its drainages, and the team was able to recover the distal half of a human tibia showing signs of burning. This again was a fairly difficult recovery - the drainage was steep and full of slippery rocks, vegetation and trash. There was insufficient time to recover more.

Rumors of an individual tortured and buried to his waist, presumably while still alive, produced one metacarpal buried in the rumored gravesite with a sacrum and several rib fragments found scattered in the dense vegetation of surrounding jungle. Subject to confirmation by DNA these finds are consistent with partial burial followed by scavenger scattering (surface bones show evidence of animal activity). Or, in this case as in many others, possibly some remains such as the skull and the perpetrators surreptitiously removed recognizable long bones in order to prevent recovery and identification. Although the sacrum and rib fragments appear to be consistent with being from one individual, the metacarpal may be from a different individual.

A search of an isolated area indicated by witnesses failed to yield anticipated burials. However, Eagle was attracted to a large tree with embedded barbed wire that was located some distance away, at the edge of the forest. His indications on the trunk of this tree produced several small bone fragments imbedded in the bark at about 34 inches above ground level, including a circular 9 mm diameter human bone fragment. This is consistent with the possibility that this may have been a "killing tree" to which victims were bound and then executed.

Several other potential sites within this province were investigated with both negative and positive results. These included the Cuartel, the regional police station/jail where a witness said that he had dug (with a bulldozer) a large excavation for a "swimming pool" into which many bodies were later thrown. Eagle's indication began inside one end of the current office building and lead the team through the building to the floor at the other end, resulting in an excavation under that floor that produced a mix of human and animal bone fragments but no mass burial as yet (excavations are continuing). Eagle confirmed a now unused well in the town of Volcan, rumored to be a body disposal site. Excavations by Panamanian archaeologists and local firemen yielded large quantities of non-human bone plus small fragments of probable human bone, but were halted due to concerns for the health of excavators, who were working deep in the well with hazardous breathing conditions.

As the authors continue to review some of the findings from the three search missions of Operación Eagle to date (August 2001, October/November 2001 and January-February 2002) it must be emphasized that the search and recovery procedures utilized and the resultant finds were directly related to Eagle's abilities as he enabled the team to rapidly check witness testimony in a large number of unusual and frequently difficult settings. It must also be noted that the starting points for Eagle's investigations were based on the witness testimony gathered with great skill and effort by the various investigators employed by the Truth Commission of Panama.

**Skeletal Identification, Death Investigation Dogs, Taphonomy of Clandestine Graves**