



Physical Anthropology Section – 2003

H64 Operacion Eagle: Clandestine Graves and a Taphonomy of Tyrants — Part 2: Searches on Coiba Island, Panama City, and Vicinity

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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.

The cemetery of the penal colony located on the island of Coiba presented an unusual problem. Witness testimony indicated that selected political prisoners were brought to the island for "special treatment" followed by burial in unmarked graves within or near the prison cemetery that had been in use since the 1920s. One individual in particular was said to have been tortured, killed, and disposed of at this site, and his brother, also an activist, accompanied the authors to Coiba. Witnesses provided possible locations within the cemetery and Eagle indicated that human remains were present in several unmarked places within those general locations. As time allocated by the Truth Commission for this site was short (one day only) a small group of prisoners were paid to assist by removing earth until the level approaching remains or coffins was reached. Dr Murray Marks excavated and recovered two sets of well-preserved remains found in coffins (one without a lid), while the Sauls concentrated on fragmentary remains in two other graves. One of these yielded badly deteriorated cranial and upper body remains. The remainder of that burial had to be left in situ for future excavation, as were the poorly preserved and even more fragmentary remains found in an adjacent grave, due to the Truth Commission's desire for the team to explore several other sites before the scheduled time in Panama ran out.

The two individuals in the coffins were later determined to be victims of blunt force trauma. Remarkably, a cut posterior arch of the first cervical vertebra was found associated with the fragmentary cranial remains recovered from one of the other two graves. This grave also contained an apparently clandestine marker consisting of two large nails fused in the form of a cross and placed upright beside the head. These nails may have been originally tied together but were now held together by rust. Rotted, blackened wood fragments were located under the cranial fragments and later excavation by Dr Ann Ross found that, based on the presence and arrangement of other nails, a coffin (or partial coffin) had once been there.

While the above excavations were underway, Anderson used Eagle to check on the possibility of additional unmarked graves. Eagle methodically indicated in less than an hour that although there were 29 crosses present he believed that there were actually 129 graves within the cemetery confines.

A series of possible gravesites located in or around Panama City, including Tocumen SAN, the major airport for Panama City, and Panama Viejo were investigated following witness information. Tocumen SAN includes a large (football field size) pit created by extensive searches with bulldozers after four fairly intact sets of remains were found in 1999 and 2000, a runway, a firing range and the former "House of Pilots." Each locale presented its own challenges, but the Tocumen pit is perhaps the most disconcerting inasmuch as it is suspected that the buried isolated bones and fragments found by Eagle might have originally been part of intact burials that were scattered by the intensive bulldozing that took place during earlier excavations. Recovery efforts were complicated by the adherent nature of the red clay itself, heavy rains and the huge area involved. Nevertheless the numerous scattered and fragmented bones and teeth recovered yielded an MNI of two individuals represented by bone and an MNI of three individuals represented by dentition.

Other witness testimony suggested that remains were located under a peripheral runway area. Small holes were drilled to provide olfactory access. When Eagle returned the next day he indicated between two of the holes that had been drilled. Water was used in the process of drilling a new hole, and the team soon realized that Eagle was indicating on small bone fragments brought to the surface by the water. An excavation unit in this location yielded several burned bone and tooth fragments from the gravel just beneath the pavement. Burning may have been due to the heat of the macadam during construction.

Checks of witness testimony regarding the area in front of the "House of Pilots" yielded surface finds of three tooth fragments plus a portion of fibula that appeared to have had its distal portion severed perimortem (the cut was old with possible blood staining and no signs of healing) through a collar of reactive bone that might have been the result of trauma produced by shackles (there are reports of people tortured by being suspended by bound wrists or ankles for long periods of time). The other end of this fragment had been recently broken. Two tibia fragments were found at an animal burrow entrance behind the firing range targets.

Reports that skeletal remains were encountered during construction of a building at historic Old Panama and then "put into the wall" brought the authors to a one-story office building. Holes were drilled in the sidewalk and juncture of sidewalk and wall to facilitate scent access. Eagle indicated scent at the bottom of the wall and then stood up to tap on the outer wall surface. When allowed to enter the building he led the team immediately to the other side of the wall, again standing up to touch the wall. Excavations by Panamanian archaeologists resulted in the finding of human teeth, small bones and bone fragments both within the wall and under the sidewalk at the wall's base.



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Altos de Miraflores sits on the highest hill in Panama City. The splitlevel house there had become known as the "House of Torture." During the time when it was leased to the military, it was rumored that political prisoners were brought to the house, tortured, and then "disposed of." The house has since been unoccupied, except for a caretaker in the lower level. During his first visit Eagle indicated the presence of blood spatter in the house (later confirmed by the Technical Police [PTJ]) and the presence of surface remains in the adjacent yard. A cranial fragment was recovered just beneath the soil surface beside the house. Metatarsals and phalanges were found scattered in the grass a short distance away. During subsequent visits, Eagle indicated the presence of additional human remains in several locations on the hillside below the house as well as more buried remains near the house. These locations were scheduled for future attention. Upon return, the team discovered that some of these "positive" locations were now "negative" locations and new areas were "positive." Bones seemed to be moving around. It became apparent that the team's recoveries were followed by clandestine attempts to move and destroy remaining skeletal evidence. A field that was scheduled to be examined was burned and traces of accelerant were found after the local fire department hosed it down. Fortunately, Eagle finds burned human bone, especially when wet, and Eagle located several bone fragments, some of which had been cut or fractured both in the past and recently. The property owner initially gave permission for searches but became increasingly hostile as human bone was found. However, these finds provided the PTJ with a basis for continued access to the property.

Perhaps the most meaningful information comes from a foul smelling culvert down the hill that became known to the team as "Lower Purgatory" in relation to the house at the top of the hill ("Upper Purgatory"). Indications by Eagle and subsequent excavations in the culvert yielded two separated but articulating maxillary fragments with teeth and an unusual dental restoration. Also recovered in this evil smelling place were two projectiles and rotting fabric with remnants of elastic similar to that of men's under shorts. In addition, a portion of femur shaft found lying within the drainage pipe was later joined to a smaller fragment that was excavated from the yard adjacent to the house at the top of the hill, thus physically linking "Upper" and "Lower Purgatory."

Adding to the taphonomy of the "migrating" remains is a virtually intact and unburned fibula that Eagle found standing on end in the tall grass above and adjacent to the culvert as if it had been tossed there from the culvert below, perhaps during a hasty attempt to remove remains. This location had been searched a few days before.

In conclusion, Eagle's ability to find very small units of remains (surface, buried and under water) both complicated and enhanced the investigation. Shallow burials or surface deposition allow access for carnivores and other scavengers, and the tropical climate not only quickly reduces the human body to skeletal remains but torrential tropical rains and rapidly growing vegetation combine to scatter remains. The initially disturbing fact that mainly bone fragments, teeth and small bones were being found, with few larger bones, skulls or mandibles, also suggests that remains may have been systematically removed to new and possibly multiple locations after skeletonization in order to "disappear" the victims. During such a procedure, more easily located and recognized bones are collected, while less easily located and recognized small bones, fragments and individual teeth are left behind. In some cases, this may be followed by dispersal of the collected remains in several different (and possibly widely separated) locations.

Eagle's special talents have provided insights into an unfortunate taphonomy of clandestine body disposal patterns – a "taphonomy of tyrants."

Skeletal Identification, Death Investigation Dogs, Taphonomy of Clandestine Graves