



Physical Anthropology Section – 2003

H72 **Attack on the Pentagon: The Role of Forensic Anthropology in the Examination and Identification of Victims and Remains of the '9/11' Terrorist Attack**

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The learning objective of this presentation is to present the forensic science community with an overview of the role of the crucial role forensic anthropology played in the processing of remains recovered from the 9-11 terrorist attack on the Pentagon.

On September 11, 2001, at approximately 9:43 am, just 26 minutes after a second hijacked plane struck the South Tower of the World Trade Center in New York, American Flight 77 out of Washington – Dulles crashed into the Pentagon. American Flight 77, whose destination was Los Angeles, was hijacked by five Islamic terrorists who took control of the cockpit and crashed the airliner into the Pentagon. The crash resulted in the death of 189 people, which included all 64 individuals on Flight 77 and 125 individuals on the ground in the Pentagon. A second terrorist attack on Washington, DC, was thwarted by passengers aboard United Flight 93, resulting in the airliner crashing just 125 miles outside Washington, in Somerset County, PA. Shortly after the Pentagon attack all federal buildings in the capitol were evacuated, and the various local state and federal entities went into action.

Being that the jurisdiction for the Pentagon is federal, the FBI and military were tasked with the lead role investigation and recovery efforts. A temporary morgue was established on the Pentagon grounds which served as an initial collection and processing site for the bodies and remains of the victims. Each body or portion of human remains recovered at the crash site was assigned an evidence number that correlated to their respective recoveries. The bodies and remains were then photographed at the temporary morgue and then transported directly by helicopter to the Dover Air Force Base Port Mortuary in Dover, Delaware. Processing of the bodies and remains was conducted by the Office of the Armed Forces Medical Examiner. The Dover port mortuary was staffed around the clock by multiple military and federal personnel. Personnel assisting in the processing of victims included the forensic pathologists, anthropologists, odontologists, radiologists, federal and military investigators, and an enormous staff of medical support personnel.

Processing the bodies and remains involved passing them through a complete network of stations in which they were radiographically screened for evidence and hazardous materials, photographed, entered into a computer data base, fitted with a secure numerical and bar-coded identification tag, fingerprinted, received full body x-rays, postmortem odontological exam, postmortem autopsy and anthropological exam, DNA collection, then embalmed and casketed awaiting confirmation of positive identification. The explosive forces of the crash and ensuing fire resulted in the burning, fragmentation and commingling of a number of the victims. Forensic anthropological examination was utilized extensively to deal with the burnt and fragmented remains as well as intact remains in which there was a question of approximate age, skeletal injury or reassociation.

In order to deal with anthropological requirements the assistance of eight forensic anthropologists were employed. The forensic anthropologists who volunteered to assist included those from the Armed Forces Institute of Pathology, the U.S. Army Central Identification Lab in Hawaii, and the Department of Anthropology - Smithsonian Institution, Washington, DC. Forensic anthropological examination of the remains were divided into two areas, one being examination at the initial triage of remains as they arrived and at autopsy in conjunction with the forensic pathologists examinations. During triage the incoming specimen was examined to determine if the remains were human, non-human, or crash debris. Those specimens determined to be human tissue were examined to ascertain their anatomical origin, then were re-packaged with a specimen tag and brief description of the specimen. During triage specimens were also evaluated as to suitability for identification by DNA analysis. In the autopsy area forensic anthropologists provided assistance to the forensic pathologists by identifying skeletal elements, providing biological profiles based on skeletal morphology, reconstructing skeletal anatomy, conducting radiographic comparisons in reference to positive identification, conduct separation and re-association of commingled remains, and provide consultation on skeletal injuries.

The role of forensic anthropologists in the Pentagon mass disaster was extremely important, as were the roles of the other forensic scientist and investigators who were involved. The teamwork of the forensic anthropologists and their scientific colleagues lead to an extremely high level of identification of the victims and remains recovered from the Pentagon. The tremendous loss of lives will not be forgotten, but through the dedication of the forensic sciences families of the victims can find comfort and closure to the families of the victims.

Forensic Anthropology, Identification, Mass Disasters