



D24 “Viking Funeral” — Ritual Murder or Suicide?

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This presentation is designed to highlight the many components of equivocal death investigations, through the presentation of an unusual case.

The question of homicide versus suicide is the central issue involved in equivocal death investigations. These inquiries are approached as homicide investigations for obvious reasons. Equivocal death investigations are, by their very nature, complicated, and emotionally intense because of pressure from the surviving family members, and the community. Investigators, and medico-legal professionals face many challenges because of the lack of clear and convincing evidence.

The FBI's National Center for the Analysis of Violent Crime (NCAVC) is routinely consulted by federal, state and local authorities in a variety of cases of violent crimes, especially bizarre or repetitive homicides. NCAVC assistance was requested by local authorities in regards to a case involving the possible suicide of a 22-year-old male victim.

The victim was discovered by his girlfriend in a utility shed behind her parent's residence where the victim and girlfriend were residing. The victim suffered from a single gunshot to the forehead. The crime scene appeared very bizarre to the investigators and the victim's family. The contents of the shed, including a lawnmower, and other garden implements, had been removed. The interior of the shed had a number of objects placed in it, including rugs, religious figurines, and candles. The scene was arranged very carefully, with the rugs placed in the middle of the floor, surrounded by the various religious figurines and candles. The victim was found lying on the rugs, dressed only a pair of shorts, and had a cross with a circle scratched onto his chest. The door to the shed was closed, and his shoes placed neatly outside the door.

The gunshot wound was caused by a .38 caliber bullet, fired from a Smith and Wesson handgun which was found next to the victim's body. The entrance wound had a circumferential marginal singed abrasion with an accompanying 1/4 inch soot ring encompassing the wound. There was also a second soot ring surrounding the first soot ring. It appeared to be a contact shot. A deformed lead bullet was recovered in the left cerebellar hemisphere. The bullet path was front to back, and slightly left of midline. A toxicological drug screen was negative for any commonly used or abused substances.

The coroner ruled the cause of death was a penetrating contact gunshot wound of the head, with the manner of death undetermined.

Investigation revealed the handgun belonged to the victim's girlfriend's father and was kept in the residence. There was no suicide note found.

There was conflicting background information on the victim regarding suicidal tendencies. The victim was normally “emotionally” upset several times a week, but was not on any medications, nor was he participating in any therapy or counseling. The victim had not previously attempted suicide. The victim did not have any life insurance policies. The victim was unemployed, and did not have a criminal record. The victim's sketch book was located after the incident, and contained several drawings with bizarre themes.

The victim's family did not think the victim would commit suicide. They were aware of future plans he had for marriage, and returning to college the following fall. The victim had also offered to perform a number of household chores for his parents later that week. The victim's parents were concerned the victim may have been killed in a “ritual” murder.

The issues in this case highlight the difficulties faced by law enforcement and medico-legal death investigators in dealing with equivocal death investigation, including determining despondency, locating indicators of suicide, and eliminating the possibility of a staged homicide.

Equivocal Death Investigation, Suicide, Despondency