



Physical Anthropology Section – 2004

H89 U.S. Army Identification Laboratories for WWII and Korea and the History of Forensic Anthropology

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This presentation will provide historical information about the development of forensic anthropology in the history of the effort to recover and identify our nation's war dead. Attendees will retain valuable examples of the interaction between a developing forensic science and a bureaucratic institutional setting. The pragmatic application of this knowledge may help anthropologists and other forensic scientists to navigate institutional support for forensic scientific work.

The history of forensic anthropology contributes much to our sense of the obstacles and challenges that the field has overcome over the course of the last 60 years.

This paper highlights the significant contributions of several anthropologists to the science of forensic anthropology through work identifying war dead. This paper documents the transition from a beginning with a few select scientists adapting their broader research interests to address problems in identification, to the establishment of a vigorous science with its largest institutional support from the US Army. As an application of scientific knowledge, forensic anthropology depends upon building both a growing base of data and a growing awareness of how to resolve particular identification and forensic problems. The massive war dead identification program presented challenges and opportunities that served to spur professional and scientific improvement to methods and research designs in forensic anthropology. The effort to meet these challenges and design pragmatic solutions to diverse problems is a hallmark of the efforts made by anthropologists working for the U.S. Army identifying recovered remains from WWII and Korea. The impact of this effort has been demonstrated as central to the development of modern forensic anthropology. Anthropologists involved in this work faced many similar challenges to basic research and overcoming institutional barriers that affect current development of the field. A closer examination of these historical efforts offers avenues for discussion and guidelines for addressing institutional and scientific obstacles.

The role of anthropologists and anatomists as essentially technical advisors in the World War II identification effort opened the eyes of the military to the scientific expertise of the day. But more importantly from the perspective of the developing science the large scale of the analytical and practical problems that faced the scientists spurred multiple lines of research. The challenges of pursuing these lines of research within the institutional structure and bureaucracy of the military focused the scientists' arguments for changed practices and proposals for research. This process is examined in the correspondence and documentary history of the WWII identification effort. The expansion of the technical role of the anthropologists in the to identify recovered remains from Korea presented new challenges and fostered the advance of significant new analytical tools. The impact of these experiences on the anthropologists that participated in the identification effort would provide significant shaping to the professional development of the applied science. In addition, the techniques developed in the course of the war dead identification efforts paired with continuing expansion of the knowledge base and successes of human identification science outside the military domain. The effort to identify war dead from Southeast Asia coincided with significant changes in the contributions that anthropologists could provide to identifying recovered remains. The basic process for identifying remains from Southeast Asia built on the technical role and expertise that anthropologists had established for WWII and Korea. The processes then in place did not take account of all of the recommendation that the scientists had proposed or the growth of the field outside of the military. Since that time the continuous effort to recover and identify war dead from WWII, Korea, and Southeast Asia has profited from increasing the roles and expertise of the anthropologist in the process and has faced several challenges of overcoming institutional barriers that resist the implementation of expert advice.

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