



Physical Anthropology Section – 2006

H68 Burial Patterns of Korean War Casualties as an Indicator of the Social Relationships Between the Dead and the Living

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The goal of this presentation is to present two case studies of battlefield casualty burial pattern as examples of the social relationship between the decedent and the burial party. This paper will provide forensic investigators in both modern and ancient recovery/crime scenes with essential information for the reconstruction of events and relationships to the decedent.

This presentation will impact the forensic community and/or humanity by discussing critical elements of the social relationships between the living and the dead concerning burial practices encountered in several post-battlefield bio-archaeological settings in North Korea. These observations can be applied to war time casualties as well as modern crime scene investigations. (Needs to cite Holland 2001)

The position of a body in a burial has long been important in the understanding of the reconstruction of past events, whether this occurred several years ago or in a recent crime scene. Additionally, body position in a burial is often seen as an indicator of the relationship between the decedent and the burial party. Examination of burial practices at two sites associated with the Korean War (1950-1953) sheds light on this relationship and its importance in scene reconstruction. The primary social relationships that will be examined are whether the decedent held friendly or enemy status.

Two recovery scenes are examined below, both are associated with the Battle of Ch'ongch'on. In late November 1950, the 25th and 2nd Infantry Divisions had advanced up the Ch'ongch'on River basin to the town of Kujang-Dong. The Chinese forces launched a major attack along both divisions' line of defense. Due to overwhelming odds, the divisions were forced to withdraw to the town of Kunu-ri for consolidation.

In September 2000, a scene was located on the southwestern slope and ridge line of Hill 219. Scattered over the area were numerous "foxholes," one of which contained a burial of three individuals. The positions of the bodies ranged between extended to semi-flexed. The position of limbs and orientation of bodies suggest rapid placement with little or no concern for any ritual position. The burial feature consisted of the expedient use of an already dug pit (i.e., "fox hole"). The presence of a fragment of looped wire suggests that the bodies were dragged to this pit from some other locale. The bodies were oriented west, east and roughly south.

In 2004, three separate individuals were excavated from a drainage ditch that functioned as a makeshift cemetery located near a known Prisoner of War holding area in Pyongan Putko, North Korea. The bodies were separated by approximately 12 meters, with one individual buried alone and two individuals buried in close proximity to another. The body positions of all three burials were extended. Particularly interesting is that in two of the burials, an arm was placed across the chest. One burial (minus skull) had both hands crossed in front of chest. Care was obviously taken in the placement of these bodies. The bodies were oriented such that two were oriented to the south and one was oriented to the north. According to witness testimony, these individuals had died during captivity and their fellow internees buried them under guard by members of the Chinese Volunteer Army.

From these two examples, two situations representing the opposite ends of a continuum are presented. One represents a series of burials that appear to have been done in haste as well as suggesting a social relationship of antagonism. The second scene represents three burials in which care was taken to lay the individuals out in a standard Western (re: Christian) pattern, save for the body orientations. However, these burial patterns are more common when the social relationship is amicable.

Forensic Archaeology, Burial Pattern, Battlefield Casualty