



D24 Forensic Archaeology and the Good Friday Agreement: The Search for the Disappeared in Ireland

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After attending this presentation, attendees will learn about the work done by the Independent Commission for the Location of Victims Remains (ICVLR) in Ireland and the specific context in which it operates and discuss the need to reassess traditional search methods to increase successful search probability.

This presentation will impact the forensic science community by illustrating the need of forensic archaeology to improve upon its theories and methods, also demonstrating the manner and means to provide a more efficient search service.

The ICLVR was set up in 1999 by legislation that derived from the Good Friday Agreement (GFA). The GFA was the legislative turning point in the solution to the political conflict that had been escalating in Northern Ireland since the late 1960s. This Agreement set out to design a system in which Northern Ireland could move away from political violence and evolve gradually toward a peaceful environment based on mutual respect. It was deemed necessary by the GFA for this reconciliation process that the governments of Ireland and Northern Ireland commit to locating the remains of victims who had “disappeared” during a particular period of paramilitary activity. The ICLVR legislation allowed for the search for victims that fall into the category and time frame described by the legislation. It specifically excluded the forensic investigation of the “recovery” sites and the use of any such information for a criminal prosecution. To date 16 people fall into the category covered by this legislation and at the time of writing, nine of them have been recovered. Currently these cases that fall into the specific legislative remit range from 1972 to 1985 and present a unique and complicated challenge to those involved in their search and location.

At the outset, search activity was delegated to local law enforcement and following an initial 30 days of intense work search, was scaled down and took place on an intermittent basis over three years. Following calls for outside expertise, an independent forensic expert was engaged in 2005 to advise on how best to proceed. This marked a new phase and a new period of fieldwork activity that began in earnest in 2007. Search activity was extended to include the employment of forensic archaeology methodology. There followed a concentrated period of search over the next five years by a team of specialist independent advisors. This paper will look at the case specifics in terms of site type and search methods employed from the perspective of the forensic archaeologist and will look at the implications that follow for those searching for victim remains in other locations and political contexts.

Thus this paper will look at the forensic methods that were used and their relationship with the site type. The search methods considered and employed will be discussed in terms of merit and usefulness in light of the requirements of the search for “the disappeared.” It will also consider how direct interaction with victims’ families influenced the process and how initial identification of the scenes was based on confidential information received from those involved in the original killings.

The paper will demonstrate how the accuracy and specificity of the search for buried remains can be improved by the constant reassessment and reconsideration of the methods to be deployed. This will lead to more efficient searches of a potential body recovery location.

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