G29 The Reno, Nevada Air Race Accident

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After attending this presentation, attendees will be acquainted with information regarding the Reno, NV, Air Race accident which occurred at 4:25 p.m. on September 16, 2011, and resulted in 11 fatalities and approximately 60 injuries.

This presentation will impact the forensic science community by providing an understanding of the vital role the dental team plays in the management of the identification of the victims of a Multiple Fatality Incident (MFI).

On the afternoon of September 16, 2011, at a popular annual air show in Reno, NV, located in Washoe County, a modified World War II-era fighter plane crashed into the edge of the VIP grandstands. Eleven people, including the pilot, were killed and approximately 60 spectators were injured, many suffering amputations.

This incident occurred within the jurisdiction of the Washoe County Medical Examiner's Office (WCMEO). The WCMEO, located in Reno, NV, is responsible for forensic death examinations for all of the State of Nevada (with the exception of Las Vegas and several southern Nevada counties) as well as a few northern California counties. The office covers an area of approximately 100,000 square miles and a population of 800,000.

The WCMEO was notified and responded to the former Stead Air Force base, approximately 12 miles from the morgue. An initial site assessment was completed, and recovery, antemortem data collection, and postmortem data collection teams were activated. This scene assessment led to the discovery of many fragmentary remains and an indeterminate number of deceased victims. Survivor and decedent dismemberments were commingled with the crash site debris.

This presentation will illustrate how the WCMEO recovered and made scientific identifications of these remains. Specifically, it will demonstrate how the dental team, composed of one forensic odontologist and one WCMEO death investigator, positively identified victims using traditional methods of comparison of antemortem and postmortem dental records and dental radiographs. One intact body from the scene as well as 16 individual dental fragmentary remains, which included teeth, were identified. All positive dental identifications were completed by September 21, 2011. Subsequent DNA sequencing, one to two days later, confirmed the dental identifications.

Information will also be provided on how other postmortem modes of scientific identification (fingerprints, radiology, and DNA) were used to identify and to re-associate remains. All remains were able to be released within one week of the incident. This rapid release highlights the teamwork required of law enforcement, first responders, medical examiner office personnel, and members of the health care community when dealing with the aftermath of an MFI. It also clearly demonstrates the respect the forensic science community has for victims and families during a very stressful and emotional time.

Forensic Science, Forensic Odontology, Multiple Fatality Incident