



A41 Resolving Commingling and Past Accounting at Cabanatuan Prison Camp Cemetery

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After attending this presentation, attendees will understand the unique history of the World War II Cabanatuan Prison Camp assemblage and learn about some of the challenges in identifying individuals from this highly commingled context. In addition, using some specific examples within this assemblage, this presentation will inform attendees how identifications (and past mis-identifications) can be resolved with a multidisciplinary approach using anthropological, historical, and DNA analysis.

This presentation will impact the forensic science community by highlighting both the complications and the strategies used to solve commingled human remains cases.

Cabanatuan Prison Camp was one of several Japanese-run Prisoner Of War (POW) camps located on Luzon Island in the Philippines. It was occupied from June 1942 until the end of WWII in September of 1945. There were 2,763 confirmed casualties of American POWs at Cabanatuan. Several factors have influenced the degree of commingling present in the Cabanatuan skeletal remains and have created unique challenges to identifications.

A brief history of the Cabanatuan remains illustrates several different points in which commingling of the remains occurred. The initial burial system at Cabanatuan was a series of mass graves where all individuals who died within a 24-hour period were interred together. Each mass grave received a “Common Grave” (CG) number, and this number is still used today to reference the original provenience of the remains. After the war, the American Graves Registration Service (AGRS) exhumed the Cabanatuan Prison Camp cemetery. The remains were inventoried, preliminary anthropological analysis was performed, and many (300+) individuals were identified. The unidentified were interred temporarily at the United States Army Air Forces Cemetery in Manila. Beginning in approximately 1947, the Cabanatuan remains at the United States Army Air Forces Cemetery were disinterred (again), processed, and more identifications were completed (1,000+). A review board in 1951 recommended that due to the commingling present, all remaining unknowns be buried in what is now the Manila American Cemetery and Memorial (MACM) in the Philippines. Historians estimate between 990 and 1,006 unresolved casualties from Cabanatuan are currently at the MACM.

Common Grave 717 was originally associated with 14 individuals who died, according to Cabanatuan prison camp records, on November 19, 1942. Four of these individuals were identified in the late 1940s during the initial analysis of the Cabanatuan remains. The remaining ten individuals were buried as unknowns in the early 1950s at the MACM. In August of 2014, these ten caskets from CG 717 were disinterred from MACM and sent to the Defense POW/MIA Accounting Agency Laboratory in Hawaii for anthropological analysis and identification. The ten caskets from CG 717 are extremely commingled and, as of May 2017, there are 15 mitochondrial DNA (mtDNA) sequences represented in the ten caskets. These include sequences that are consistent with individuals who were previously identified out of CG 717 in the late 1940s, in addition to sequences that are consistent with the historical roster of individuals associated with CG 717.

The commingling present in the Cabanatuan assemblage includes individuals who were identified and resolved soon after WWII and individuals who were unresolved, or “unknown.” This particular circumstance creates anthropological and historical complexity for these cases. For instance, given a set of remains from a resolved individual, how do we navigate an identification for those remains, and the set of (now unknown) remains that were buried after an erroneous identification several decades ago? Identifying the commingled remains of Cabanatuan entails revisiting identifications made under completely different operational and scientific standards of the late 1940s.

Using a specific example from an individual associated with CG 717, this presentation examines how commingling of both resolved and unresolved individuals requires an approach that uses anthropological, historical, and DNA data. In addition, it offers some lessons about past mis-identifications, and insight into how to best move forward with our current identification practices for commingled remains.

Commingled, Cabanatuan, Identification