G6 The Dental Identification After an Air Disaster 45 Years Ago: The Dubai Accident in 1972 With 112 Victims

Tore T. Solheim, Institute of Oral Biology, Box 1052 Blindern, Oslo 0316, NORWAY*

After attending this presentation, attendees will better understand how forensic odontologists worked after a disaster that occurred 45 years ago. In addition, attendees will be familiar with the problems encountered and understand that not all concepts being employed today are new.

This presentation will impact the forensic science community by demonstrating that there is something to learn from old cases that were solved under rather primitive conditions — conditions that may still be encountered in poorly developed countries today.

On March 14, 1972, a Supercarvelle airplane hit a mountainous area in the Emirate of Fujairah, now part of the United Arab Emirates. The plane was from a Danish charter company, Tjæreborg, and carried Scandinavian tourists from Sri Lanka (at that time Ceylon) to Copenhagen. On board were 106 passengers and a crew of 6 persons. All died. The plane struck the upper part of a rugged mountain and went over the top; wreckage and bodies were dispersed over a 300m by 400m area on the back side of the mountaintop. All bodies suffered severe trauma, some after a fall of several hundred meters, and for some, only small fragments were found.

Ad hoc ID teams were sent from Denmark, Sweden, and Norway. A dentist and a police officer from Norway were included, while the Swedish and Danish teams also included forensic pathologists. Only 14 of the victims were Norwegian citizens.

On March 17, the Norwegian and Swedish teams arrived in Dubai, while the Danish team had arrived the day before. As the Danish team had two dentists, there were four dentists in total.

The teams, including the dentists, went to the accident site, registered, and packed up the bodies. The victims were then transported by helicopter to an old British air base at the Emirate of Sharjah. Here, autopsies could be performed outdoors while the bodies were kept in a refrigerated room. Without computers or the internet, the work in Sharjah was completed on March 28 after ten days. The bodies were returned to Denmark, where a few more bodies were identified. The identification work was terminated on April 24, and a total of 96 victims were identified. The remaining 16 victims were buried in a common grave in Denmark. All Norwegian victims were identified, due in part to antemortem information accompanying the forensic team that went to Dubai. The two other teams did not have that advantage and had to establish a home commission to take care of the antemortem material. All information was set up in systematic way. In addition, an enthusiastic police officer's keen interest contributed to this result. Forty-one victims were identified, including a dental comparison, and 28 by dental comparison alone.

With no Interpol form, a newly designed Danish form was used. With no transportable X-ray machine, an iodine-isotope radiation source, which the Swedish dentist brought with him, was used for exposing the radiographs. Searching through this large amount of data was difficult. It was initially decided to look for characteristic restorations; however, often those registered antemortem were lost postmortem, and those found postmortem were not registered antemortem. One full day was lost without a single identification being made by this approach. Then, the postmortem forms were laid out on a long table and teams compared antemortem forms from postmortem form to postmortem form. Separating the men from the women was attempted, but was often impossible due to the severe destruction of the bodies. Considering all these conditions, the teams succeeded well.

Air Disaster, History, Identifications