



## Preface



In August 2011 a remote community in Northern Libya approached the International Committee of the Red Cross (ICRC) requesting forensic assistance for finding and recovering their missing relatives. They had been detained and killed two months earlier by members of an opposing warring party and buried in an unmarked mass grave. The community told the ICRC that the recovery, identification and dignified burial of their loved ones was, at that moment, more important than any other humanitarian assistance they might receive, such as medical care or food. They required urgent humanitarian forensic assistance which was otherwise unavailable as a result of the armed conflict, for fulfilling their right to know what had happened to their loved ones and to be able to mourn and to bury them as required by their own traditions and beliefs.

In response to the request the ICRC deployed an urgent forensic operation which helped locate, recover and identify the dead for their bereaved families, who were thus able to mourn and properly bury their loved ones.

In 2012 the Argentine Government called on the ICRC for forensic assistance to help identify the remains of 123 Argentine soldiers buried in a military cemetery near Darwin in Falkland Islands (Malvinas). They had died in armed conflict during the short war between Argentina and the United Kingdom over the islands, following which the United Kingdom recovered and buried the battle dead with honors, as required under the Geneva Conventions, but many remained unavoidably unidentified. After nearly five years of negotiations between the former warring parties, the ICRC was finally able in June 2017 to launch, with the help of both parties and the local population, a humanitarian forensic operation to help put a name to the graves lacking one in Darwin military cemetery, as requested by many of the bereaved relatives and required under International Humanitarian Law.

What is the background for growing global awareness about the role of forensic sciences for fulfilling humanitarian goals, such as ensuring a dignified treatment and the identity of the dead?

This Special Edition provides some answers to this question and it offers a glimpse to an emerging field of forensic science: Humanitarian Forensic Action (HFA).<sup>1</sup> The selection of papers highlights the contribution of HFA to a range of innovative areas in which forensic science is applied to helping reduce human suffering. It is hoped that they will help motivate and inspire further research and future development of this growingly necessary field of forensic science.

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<sup>1</sup> The ICRC defines Humanitarian Forensic Action as the field of application of forensic sciences to humanitarian action (i.e. fulfilling international humanitarian law), most notably but not exclusively for the recovery, management and identification of the dead from armed conflicts.