H87   Preliminary Results on the Use of Cadaver Dogs to Locate Vietnam War-Era Human Remains

Paul D. Emanovsky, MS*, U.S. Army Central Identification Laboratory, 310 Worchester Avenue, Hickam AFB, HI 96853

The paper will examine some preliminary results of the use of cadaver dogs to search for missing American service members in Vietnam. Some issues associated with cadaver dog use will also be presented.

The location of clandestine burials is often a difficult task. The use of cadaver dogs is thought, by some, to be an effective tool for searching and ruling out large areas in the search for burial sites. However, the use of cadaver dogs has not been validated for a variety of environments and taphonomic scenarios. This paper will explore some of the issues related to cadaver dog use, particularly in Southeast Asia.

Cadaver dogs have, in some cases, proven to be useful for locating decomposing human remains. A dog search for buried remains can result in several outcomes: 1) the dog alerts and human remains are found, 2) the dog alerts and nothing is found, 3) the dog does not alert and there are no remains present or 4) the dog does not alert and yet remains are present. When a dog successfully locates remains the results are relatively easy to assess. However, when a dog does not alert in a given area the situation becomes more difficult to evaluate. In other words, did the dog miss buried bone or are there truly no human remains in the area? Conversely, if the dog alerts and nothing is found then it may be the case that external factors caused the false positive rather than the presence of actual human remains. These conundrums make it extremely difficult for an investigator to evaluate the efficacy of cadaver dogs. There have been only limited studies and case reports testing the validity of utilizing dogs for the detection of modern clandestine burials and surface deposition of decomposing human remains. One of the key issues explored in this paper is whether dogs who have been trained to find recently decomposed human remains can also detect the remains of individuals who have been exposed to the myriad of taphonomic processes presented by the Southeast Asian environment for over 30 years.

The Joint Task Force-Full Accounting (JTF-FA), in an effort to utilize new methods for locating the remains of fallen U.S. service members in Southeast Asia, chose to experiment with the concept of a Human Remains Dog Team (HRDT). To this end, JTF-FA enlisted the assistance of a Rhode Island State Trooper and his two cadaver dogs. From February 18 through March 20 2003, the HRDT (a team comprised of military and civilian personnel) surveyed sites associated with eight Vietnam War-era losses in the southern and central Socialist Republic of Vietnam.

The standard procedure for this investigation was as follows: The HRDT would interview witnesses who purported to have knowledge of a burial location. The witness subsequently pointed out a general area for the dogs to survey. The dogs would then search the area and if they alerted (the dogs were trained to sit down when they detected decomposing human remains) or showed interest (not a sit alert but expressed interest in an area as determined by the handler) the HRDT would conduct limited subsurface excavation based on the combined witness statement and dog responses. Exceptions to this protocol were two cases previously scheduled by JTF-FA to be excavated by full-scale recovery teams. The Investigators in Charge (IC) for their respective cases showed the dog handler where to search based on witness interviews. The dog handler then made recommendations to the ICs based on the dogs' reactions. Thus, the ICs were able to generate their excavation strategies based not only on witness statements and material evidence visible on the surface, but also by incorporating the dog handlers' input.

Of the eight cases investigated, the dogs alerted or showed interest at six of the locations. No human remains were found at any of the sites. Details of the investigation and the exploration of the cadaver dog alerts will be presented. General problems associated with the use of cadaver dogs will also be discussed, particularly in reference to their use in locating Vietnam War-era burials.

Forensic Archaeology, Cadaver Dogs, Taphonomy