



Physical Anthropology Section – 2005

H53 Exhumation and Identification of a Particular Individual in a Mass Grave

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After attending this presentation, attendees will understand the importance of the recovery of remains and the collection of antemortem data on victims for the purpose of individualizing commingled remains for identification.

This presentation will impact the forensic community and/or humanity by providing knowledge of the forensic anthropology work performed in Portugal and the need for interdisciplinary teams to deal with the type of mass graves found there.

In June 2003, the authors were sent to East Timor to exhume the remains of a former member of the Portuguese military force who was executed along with 25 other prisoners during the invasion of the territory by Indonesia, in 1975. Portuguese authorities sponsored a mission to recover the remains of the military individual in order to deliver them to his family in Portugal. The bodies had been buried in a mass grave in Asirimou, a location in the mountains, about 45 Km from Dili. The excavation took place over three days. This presentation will discuss some of the major difficulties involved in the complex field work, including: 1) the individualization of the target individual from among the remains of at least 16 other individuals, 2) a hostile taphonomic environment, and 3) disarticulated and commingled skeletonized remains with a majority of the clothes preserved.

The relative position of the individual in the pit was a major contributor to the poor preservation of the remains. It is also possible that the grave may have been disturbed at some point. During the extraction of the individual involved, it was necessary to manipulate several of the adjacent sets of human remains. The process of identification was carried out mainly on the basis of sociocultural affiliation, individualizing traits, and personal belongings. Contextual information and associated artifacts were crucial to the identification. The previously collected antemortem data on the victim was paramount to the resolution of this difficult case, as a reliable assignment of the disarticulated, commingled and fragmented bones to the victim was particularly challenging.

Personal Identification, Mass Graves, Exhumation