



Physical Anthropology Section – 2005

H80 Fifty Years of Questions: The Re-Evaluation of a Korean

War Soldier Buried in the United States

Mary H. Manhein, MA*, and Ginesse A. Listi, MA, Louisiana State University, Department of Geography and Anthropology, Baton Rouge, LA 70803

The goal of this presentation is to inform researchers of problems and rewards associated with exhumation and reanalysis of previously identified soldiers from the Korean War era who have been returned home and buried in the United States

This presentation will impact the forensic community and/or humanity by showing that taphonomic processes can affect the DNA extraction from well-preserved bones, and that dental identification continues to be a valid tool in forensic science.

On December 2, 1950, PFC James B. Sanders, of the United States Army, Company D, 32nd Infantry Regiment, was reported missing in action while helping to secure the town of Hagaru-ri in the Chosin Reservoir of Korea. In the fall of 1953, the Sanders family received a telegram that noted there was reason to believe that Cpl Sanders (promoted to Cpl after he was missing in action) might be or might have been in communist custody. In February, 1954, the Department of the Army declared Cpl Sanders "to be dead." According to the Army's report, they based this declaration on "the lapse of time without information to support a continued presumption of survival." Following the end of the war as part of "Operation Glory," communist forces reportedly recovered ten sets of buried remains from an area within the region of the Chosin Reservoir. In the fall of 1955, the Army advised the Sanders family that they had approved the identification of one set of the remains as those of Cpl James B. Sanders. According to official government documents, "Association of Cpl Sanders ... is based on favorable dental; very favorable comparison of physical characteristics, and place of casualty in relation to recovery site of remains." Cpl Sanders' remains were shipped home to the United States in a sealed casket. However, on May 27, 1957, Cpl Sanders' name once again appeared in a government publication entitled "Return of American Prisoners of War Who Have Not Been Accounted For by the Communists" (1).

For close to fifty years following the burial, the Sanders family felt that the remains in the casket might not be those of their son and brother. Their fears were based in part on the fact that his name continued to appear on various lists of soldiers missing in action that were published after Cpl Sanders' remains were returned home. In addition to that were the medical records associated with the recovered remains which indicated that Cpl Sanders had a healed, broken foot bone. The family knew of no broken bone. Also, Cpl Sanders' brother Lloyd, a soldier himself in that era, was not allowed a furlough to attend his brother's funeral. Sealed caskets; list after list of prisoners of war thought to be in enemy custody; ambiguous government papers; an undocumented healed, injury; and seemingly unwarranted decisions about a funeral furlough added to a grieving family's concern.

Eventually, through association with a victims' advocate group, the family contacted the Louisiana State University Forensic Anthropology and Computer Enhancement Services Laboratory (LSU FACES Lab) and asked for assistance in opening Cpl Sanders' grave, reanalyzing the remains, and sampling bone and teeth for DNA confirmation of his identity. In the summer of 2003, FACES Laboratory personnel exhumed the casket.

Unknown to surviving family members, the casket was enclosed in a metal vault. The vault, a Clark, was still sealed; so was the casket. When the casket was opened, the state of preservation of the interior casket lining, associated burial goods, and the skeletal remains themselves (which were tightly packed in a bundle) encouraged the researchers to conduct a complete skeletal analysis and to sample the remains for DNA testing. One unusual, though not totally unexpected, feature of the burial was a heavy coat of grayish-white powder covering all of the bones in the bundle. Referred to by some as "burial powder," this material was known to have been placed in soldiers' caskets at a particular mortuary in Japan. According to one researcher, this powder had affected the extraction of DNA from at least one other case from that era (personal communication).

Results of the reanalysis of the skeletal remains by anthropologists and a forensic odontologist showed congruency with the antemortem dental records for Cpl Sanders. Additionally, cranial features and other skeletal markers were consistent with the description of Cpl Sanders in life. Though no small foot bones showed any obvious, healed break, x-ray equipment used for confirmation of the old injury by the Army was not available in the embalming laboratory where the skeletal analysis took place.

Subsequent x-ray diffraction analysis of the powder from Cpl Sanders' casket showed that it is comprised mainly of inorganic calcium sulfate in varying degrees of hydration. Calcium Sulfate is the main



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component of Drierite, a popular desiccant. Also, after months of exhaustive efforts to extract DNA from the bone or tooth, Reliagene Laboratory in New Orleans was unable to do so. However, the biological profile and the dental profile confirm that Cpl Sanders is buried in Cpl Sanders' grave.

References:

1. Return of American Prisoners of War Who Have Not Been Accounted for by the Communists. Hearing before House of Representatives Subcommittee. U.S. Government Printing Office, May 27, 1957, p 28.

Korean War Soldier, Forensic Anthropology, Burial Powder