

CASE REPORT

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Unusual Hanging Deaths

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ABSTRACT: Four unrelated hanging deaths involving young white males, all in enlisted status in the United States military, are presented. Taken in a military context, one scene served as a suicide note equivalent with the unmistakable message of extreme defiance toward military regulations. In two cases, the elaborate attire of the decedents could have led to the misclassification of the manner of death if investigative information had not been considered. Extensive background investigation and review of medical records in the fourth case disclosed that the victim had an eight- to ten-year history of compressing his neck to cause unconsciousness. He left an extensive suicide note in which he concluded that "hanging would be good." Each case has certain unique features, and as a group, the cases all demonstrate a continuum from obvious suicide to cases where the manner of death is, at first, equivocal.

KEYWORDS: pathology and biology, criminalistics, suicide, asphyxia

Hanging as a means of suicide, execution, and ritualistic sacrifice has been described since antiquity; one of the more familiar historical accounts is that of the suicide of Judas Iscariot in the Gospel according to Matthew [1]. By the eighteenth century, sexual perversion associated with hanging had been described by The Marquis de Sade and others [2,3]. Hanging was a common means of execution in the British Empire and American West during the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. A number of scholarly treatises of the time deal with ideal location of the knot on the hangman's noose as well as the minimum drop required to fracture the neck [4-6]. Hanging remains a common mode of suicide and is the third most common method of suicide following gunshot wounds and poisonings in San Diego County, California (1985 population, two million) [7,8]. We have recently investigated a series of unrelated hangings in military personnel where there was initially some confusion by investigators as to manner of death.

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General Comments

All four cases presented represent young males enlisted personnel in the United States military who hanged themselves on government property. Hanging has, in our experience, been the most common means of suicide for personnel on military bases and aboard ships. This may at first seem paradoxical, but it should be pointed out that possession of privately owned firearms in military barracks and aboard ships is strictly forbidden by regulations. Personnel on military bases who are not serving as guards or training with weapons do not usually have firearms readily accessible to them. Hangings are commonly seen on land; however, hanging or "jumping over the side" of a ship at sea and subsequently drowning are the most easily accomplished means of shipboard suicide. The latter practice is infrequently observed probably because of fear of being eaten by sharks.

Case Reports

Case 1

Before enlisting in the United States military, this 19-year-old Chicano male lived his entire life in the barrio section of a large metropolitan area. Following the completion of eleven weeks of basic training, he was assigned to an infantry unit located in a remote and inaccessible area of a large military reservation. This base camp was located approximately 32 km (20 miles) from the local civilian community and access to activities required a car (which the decedent did not own), except on weekends, when limited bus service was available. Telephones were limited in number and long lines to make calls were common, further limiting interactive contact with the outside world. During the three to four weeks preceding his demise, the decedent became progressively more withdrawn, and he continually expressed regret to his limited number of friends about enlisting in the military, as well as extreme disdain for military regulations. Note that he did not once relate his feelings to his supervisors who judged him to be a reliable soldier.

On the first anniversary of his military enlistment he was found hanging by a clothesline-type rope attached to a basketball net near an outdoor swimming pool. His feet rested upon the ground and two plastic milk crates found in close proximity to the body probably had been used as a step. No suicide note was found, but at least three items at the scene served as a suicide note equivalent. Specifically, the written order "DO NOT HANG ON NET" was violated by the attachment of the noose to the basketball net (Fig. 1). In addition, two standing orders were violated in that the victim was outdoors in uniform without a cover (hat) and he had his right hand in a pocket while in uniform. Initially, one investigator at the scene opined that the death was autoerotic in nature because the hand in the pocket could have been used in masturbation through clothing. The clothing was intact, and there was no literature or "props" making the scene suggestive of anything other than a suicidal hanging. Autopsy findings were consistent with asphyxia caused by hanging. Analyses for ethanol and drugs were negative.

Case 2

This 22-year-old white male was found by friends hanging by a rope attached to a decorator-type hook in the ceiling of a barracks room which he occupied alone. One foot rested on the floor while the other foot rested upon a chair placed behind the body (Fig. 2). The outside temperature that day was in the 90s, the room air conditioner was set to the coldest setting, and the drapes were drawn. The decedent was clothed in an apparently new Western-style outfit consisting of a blue denim work shirt, blue jeans, chaps, leather gloves, and cowboy boots. The rope was fashioned into a modified hangman's noose (6-loop versus the



FIG. 1—Case 1: Note written order on backboard, lack of hat while outside in uniform, and hand in pocket.



FIG. 2—Case 2: Victim hanging from ceiling: left foot is on floor and right foot on chair. Note cowboy hat on bed and telescope at window.

13-loop noose commonly found in judicial executions by hanging). A new cowboy hat was found on a nearby bed. The bed actually occupied by the decedent was made with Western decor sheets (Fig. 3), and a pair of spurs was later found in the victim's car. Fifteen holes (of the type made when installing the decorator hook) were found in different parts of the ceiling. A broken decorator hook identical to the one in the ceiling was on top of a nearby television set. A pair of heavy-duty, needle-nose pliers with white powder (consistent with plaster from the ceiling) was found on the bed (Fig. 4). White powder was also present on the decedent's hands under the gloves. Additional items of significance in the room were an adventure-style computer game and a powerful, astronomical-type telescope which faced the windows of an adjacent coed dormitory. A vinyl-covered barbell weight with approximately

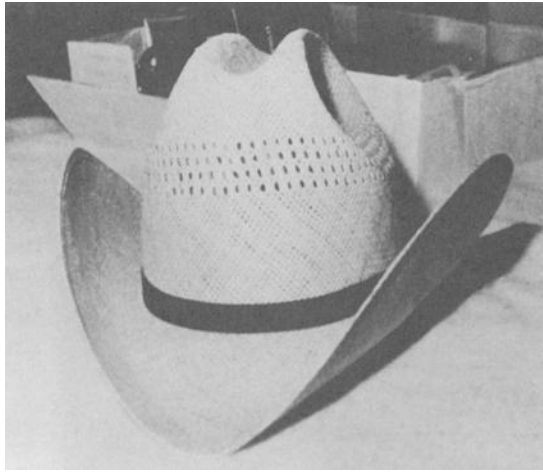


FIG. 3—Case 2: *New cowboy hat on bed.*



FIG. 4—Case 2: *Heavy-duty pliers on bed with plaster dust on jaws (arrows).*

1 m (3 ft) of shoelaces tied around it in a loop was also discovered in a closet. Autopsy findings were consistent with asphyxia as a result of hanging, and a 0.07 blood ethanol concentration was the only toxicological finding.

Scene investigation revealed two "notes" bearing notations. One, found on top of materials in a nearby desk drawer, bore the following notations: "Drug and other problems," "I don't want to let you go," "past grandma grandpa," "Complete message," and miscellaneous other cryptic references to military law regarding drugs and insubordination. The second "note" was found beneath other items in the same drawer. It contained the following notations: "Alone . . . 1:00 p.m. 22 Aug 83"; "Velvet all alone"; "I, . . . being of no mind and little body do hereby leave to . . . the following . . . my guide to." Also found on the second "note" were computations regarding an apparent leave (vacation) the decedent was planning for the future. The decedent had no debts, no disciplinary action taken against him, and a recent urinalysis showed no drug involvement. However, he had recently been disapproved for promotion. Interviews with his friends and coworkers gave a uniform picture of a hardworking individual who was in a good mood when last seen about 6 h before death. All individuals interviewed commented on the victim's frequent and vociferous statements concerning his profound dislike for cowboys, Western-style clothing, and all things associated with the American West.

Case 3

This 23-year-old white male had recently been reduced in military rate as a result of disciplinary action for drug abuse and was awaiting administrative involuntary separation from military service for a second drug-related offense. Despite these facts, he had recently written his parents telling them that a new commanding officer had arrived and would restore his lost rate and expunge his record (this was untrue). In the two-month period preceding his death, he was noted by shipmates to become increasingly preoccupied with the occult, numerology, astrology, and "the devil." A search of his personal belongings after death turned up a number of astrological charts and predictions from "mail order" astrologers. On the day before his death, he gave a close personal friend a picture of himself and stated "this is for you to remember me" At approximately 1:00 a.m. on the morning of his death he was observed to be packing his personal belongings and, when asked, told an onlooker "I'm packing for Hell."

The body was discovered by coworkers at 7:30 a.m. hanging at the end of a 4.6-m (15-ft) length of rope attached to an overhead pipe. The rope passed through a hatch in the deck and the decedent was suspended above the underlying deck. Attached through eyelets in the fabric to the rope above the noose was a large section of canvas tarpaulin stenciled with the letter "E." A second length of rope tied about the waist was attached to approximately 11 kg (25 lbs) of heavy chain links.

The decedent was dressed in a heavy jacket as well as a work uniform including heavy boots. A blindfold fashioned from a camouflage-type bandana covered the eyes, and a thick bath towel padded the sides of the noose (Fig. 5). A heavy, canvas work glove was in place on the right hand, and the left hand was ungloved (Fig. 6). Autopsy findings consisted of a very deep, inferiorly abraded ligature furrow with a prominent rope transfer pattern and a transverse fracture of the body of the third cervical vertebra. Toxicologic studies were negative.

Case 4

A 19-year-old white male was discovered in the early morning hours hanging by a rope attached to an overhead pipe in an isolated ship compartment. He was fully clothed in a work uniform and his feet rested securely upon the deck; no paraphernalia were at the scene. Despite the absence of vital signs he was cut down and the body transported to a local hospi-



FIG. 5—Case 3: Decedent on deck after body was cut down. Note blindfold, padding around outside of noose, and the deep, inferiorly abraded ligature furrow.

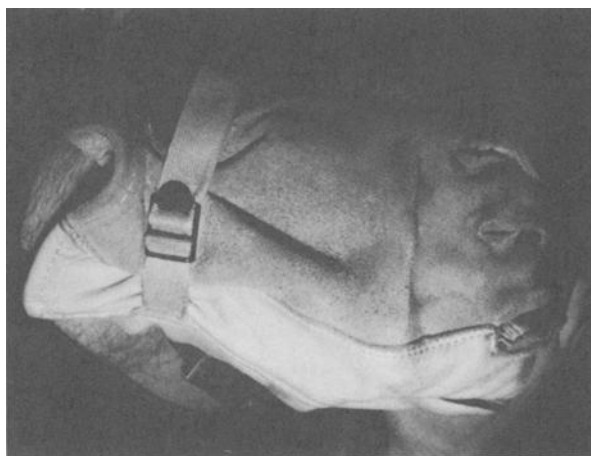


FIG. 6—Case 3: Victim's right hand with glove in place.

tal where it was apparent that he had been dead several hours. An autopsy demonstrated a deep ligature furrow and generalized visceral congestion; toxicologic analyses were negative.

Shipboard investigators found an envelope on the victim's bunk addressed to "the police." Inside the envelope was a handwritten 35-page suicide note which detailed the decedent's difficulties with life, and his conclusion that suicide was the only solution for his personal problems. Of particular interest were two passages in the note where he discounted drowning as an acceptable means of suicide and lamented that he could not obtain a gun. He concluded that "hanging would be good" (Figs. 7 and 8).

Subsequent review of the victim's medical records yielded a psychiatric evaluation five months before death. At that time he gave a nine- to ten-year history of applying bilateral manual pressure to the neck in order to "pass out." His major complaint at that time was the addictive nature of the practice which he repeated eight to ten times per day because he

IF I JUMP OVER THE SIDE
 I SUFFER AN HOUR OR TWO THEN D.O.
 THEY WON'T MISS ME FOR ANOTHER
 DAY OR TWO BECAUSE I'M NIGHT
 COOKING. DO I WANT TO LIVE?

FIG. 7—Case 4: Excerpt of suicide note. "Night cooking" refers to the decedent's job of cooking breakfast for the ship's crew while most of the crew slept.

WHY SHOULD I GO ON LIVING?
 HOW CAN I DIE? I DON'T WANT TO
 I DON'T WANT TO DROWN, IT'S TOO
 SLOW! GOOD
 HANGING WOULD BE GOOD.
 I CAN'T GET A GUN.

FIG. 8—Case 4: Another excerpt from the suicide note.

enjoyed the "tingling" as well as the "numb, mellow feeling throughout my whole body." He gave no history of masturbation or the use of "props" with this practice. He failed to keep scheduled follow-up psychiatric appointments.

Discussion

These cases demonstrate a spectrum of different types of hanging deaths and emphasize the importance of recognizing the significance of such items as a uniform in purposeful disarray. Taken in this context, and coupled with the fact that the victim hanged himself on the first anniversary of his entrance into military service, the death scene itself serves as a suicide note with a clear message of defiance towards military regulations.

The importance of being cognizant of all aspects of a death scene is illustrated by Case 2 which was originally believed to be a suicide because the victim's demise was clearly the result of a self-inflicted hanging. Also, the notes indicated possible suicidal intent. Critical to the analysis of this case is the evidence of repetition based on the additional holes found in the ceiling. It is not known, with certainty, if these represented repetition or if the decedent was merely attempting to find a stud into which to install the decorator hook. Additionally, while no information was found indicating the purpose of the barbell weight with attached shoelaces, it is possible it could be a device to restrict the flow of oxygenated blood to the brain (a modified form of "hanging"). Haglund³ reported a case in which a similar device was used as the instrument of death in a suicide where an individual hanged himself while

³W. M. Haglund, personal communication, June 1985.

lying in bed. Haglund stated that this individual lay on his back with his head over the end of his bed, and placed a ligature over his neck with a weight (telephone book) suspended just above the floor. The broken decorator hook at the scene is also consistent with past hanging attempts. So far as could be ascertained by investigators, the decedent was happy when last seen about 6 h before the discovery of his body by a friend. Evidence at the scene indicated he was planning for future events, and interpretation of the notes was equivocal regarding suicidal intent. Interest in fantasy (a computer adventure game) as well as voyeur tendencies (a telescope pointed at a coed dormitory) were overt at the scene.

The most fascinating aspect of this case is the decedent's "cowboy outfit" attire, since he had, on many occasions before his demise, professed his extreme distaste for cowboys and the American West. This "secret life" of dressing up as a cowboy certainly represents a form of risk taking since the possibility of discovery and the subsequent ridicule were always present. Litman and Swearingen [9] emphasize that real or perceived humiliation and degradation are strong drives in many individuals who practice bondage and repetitive hanging behavior. Since hanging was a very common end to life of malefactors (at least in the Hollywood version of the Old West), the victim was probably combining risk taking with a fantasy of execution.⁴ The number of loops in the modified "hangman's noose" (6 versus 13) undoubtedly played a role in the fantasy as well. In one of the few interviewed practitioners of autoerotic asphyxia, the patient noted extreme sexual arousal when watching a cowboy movie which depicted a hanging [10]. The overall effect of the scenario in Case 2 was probably pleasurable to the decedent since there is physical evidence of repetition. There is no evidence of sexual activity; the clothing was intact and no pornographic literature was evident. Whether the asphyxial nature of the act heightened the excitement of the fantasy, or hanging in and of itself was only part of "the script," is a matter of speculation.

If only the scene is considered in Case 3, the manner of death could be misinterpreted as accidental. The blindfold, glove, and a large piece of canvas attached to the noose suggest a strong element of fantasy or ritualistic orientation or both. The padding around, but not under, the noose could, by itself, lead to an incorrect diagnosis of autoerotic sexual asphyxia if the intact clothing, lack of other "props," and lack of evidence of repetition are ignored. The 4.6-m (15-ft) drop in and of itself is inconsistent with repetition since it produced a cervical fracture. British executioners in the late nineteenth century calculated the minimum drop in feet required to produce a broken neck by dividing the number 1260 by the victim's weight in pounds [3]. According to at least one source, this number was usually halved [4], meaning that the drop used for a 91-kg (200-lbs) victim would be 0.9 m (3 ft). The items at the scene undoubtedly had some sort of occult or ritualistic significance to the victim who was clearly in a suicidal state of mind for some period of time before his demise.

Autoerotic sexual asphyxia has always been an enigma to investigators, since practitioners of this form of behavior have apparently arrived at this practice independently of one another, and there does not appear to be an "autoerotic underground" [11, 12]. Only one case has been documented where a patient admitted learning autoerotic practices from others [13], and in the extremely limited numbers of autoerotic practitioners interviewed, compression of the neck coupled with masturbation has been described as pleasurable [10, 14]. Hazelwood et al [11], in their definitive treatise, caution that there is no evidence that autoerotic activities are pleasurable in normal people.

Case 4 presents an extremely interesting variant on the autoerotic theme, since this patient discovered at age nine or ten that compression of the neck to the point of "passing out" was pleasant. He sought medical attention at age 19 because this practice became addicting. This victim did not masturbate or use "props" in conjunction with self-inflicted carotid compression. He eventually committed suicide by hanging because, in his own words, "hanging would be good."

⁴R. R. Hazelwood, personal communication, 22 Aug. 1984.

These four cases illustrate a continuum of hanging deaths that emphasize the importance of correlating scene and autopsy findings with a thorough investigation before classifying the manner of death.

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