

CASE REPORT

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An Unusual Pattern of Gunshot Injury Linking Two Homicides to the Same Assailant

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ABSTRACT: This case report describes an unusual pattern of gunshot firing that proved useful in convicting one assailant of two murders. The assailant fired into the first victim, successively through the same entrance hole at contact range. This technique of firing twice through the same hole was also demonstrable on his second victim in the bare skull of the decomposed body. This unusual pattern noted in two homicides found two weeks apart, in concert with other circumstantial evidence, led to the successful conviction of the man for both murders.

KEYWORDS: pathology and biology, ballistics, wound ballistics, homicide

The following paper describes an unusual pattern of handgun injury seen in two separate homicide victims. The repetition of this unusual pattern, along with other circumstantial evidence, became important in the subsequent legal proceedings that led to the conviction of one assailant for both murders.

Autopsy Data

Case 1

A 26-year-old female was found dead in the kitchen of her home by her daughter. Her house had been ransacked. She was last seen leaving her home on a date with a male acquaintance (L.P.). She was found at 4:30 p.m. on 3 April 1985 and it was estimated that she had been killed approximately 12 h earlier.

She was dressed in blue jeans, a white sweater, a red knit top, and underwear. She was found with her hands and feet bound behind her with electrical cord. There was a pillow and pillowcase near the body which had a bullet hole in it and associated fouling.

Examination of the left side of the head revealed two contact gunshot wounds of the left temporal, postauricular region (Fig. 1). There was a 1/4- by 1/4-in. (0.6- by 0.6-cm) entrance gunshot wound located 3 in. (8 cm) posterior to the tragus of the left ear that had a concen-

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FIG. 1—*Photograph of the two entrance wounds on the left postauricular scalp of Case 1.*

tric abrasion ring. Soot and gunpowder were embedded in the margins of the wound and in the wound track. There was no soot or gunpowder on the skin around the wound. Thus, it was a contact gunshot wound. The bullet passed sequentially through the skin, left occipital bone, left cerebellar hemisphere, and pons, and lodged under the ethmoid bone. Infiltrating hemorrhage was noted along the wound track. A deformed, medium caliber, nonjacketed slug was recovered in the skull under the ethmoid bone.

Examination of the second gunshot entrance wound revealed a hole measuring $\frac{1}{4}$ by $\frac{1}{2}$ in. (0.6 by 1.3 cm) with an eccentric abrasion ring measuring $\frac{1}{8}$ in. (0.3 cm) inferiorly to $\frac{1}{16}$ in. (0.2 cm) superiorly. It was located 2 in. (5 cm) posterior to the left tragus. Soot was on the skin immediately around the entrance wound indicating a near contact wound. Further examination of the wound track revealed that two bullets emanated from this single hole. The bullets passed sequentially through the skin, left temporo-parietal bone, left inferior temporal lobe of brain, left parietal lobe of brain, and into the right frontal lobe of the brain. Two medium caliber, nonjacketed, deformed slugs were recovered in the right frontal lobe.

At this point, the pillow and pillowcase found at the scene were examined. There was a single perforating gunshot track in the pillow that was filled with soot and gunpowder. The pillowcase contained a single gunshot hole surrounded by a dense collar of soot (Fig. 2*a*). Approximately $1\frac{1}{2}$ in. (4 cm) distal to the entrance hole were two separate areas of fouling (Fig. 2*b* and *c*). These areas of fouling were located at approximately a 20° angle to a vertical line drawn through the entrance hole in the pillowcase. It appeared that two separate shots had been fired through the pillowcase at *a* with fouling being deposited from the gun at Points *b* and *c* from the two successive shots. It is probable the source of the fouling was cylinder gap from the gun. These two gunshots correlated to the near contact gunshot wound located 2 in. (5 cm) posterior to the ear.

Case 2

On 25 April 1985, the decomposing body of a 27-year-old female was found in a field. She had last been seen one week earlier leaving on a date with a male acquaintance (L.P.). The head was skeletonized and disarticulated from the torso. The remainder of the body was fully clothed and showed moderate to severe decomposition with maggot infestation.

Examination of the torso and extremities revealed no evidence of trauma. Examination of

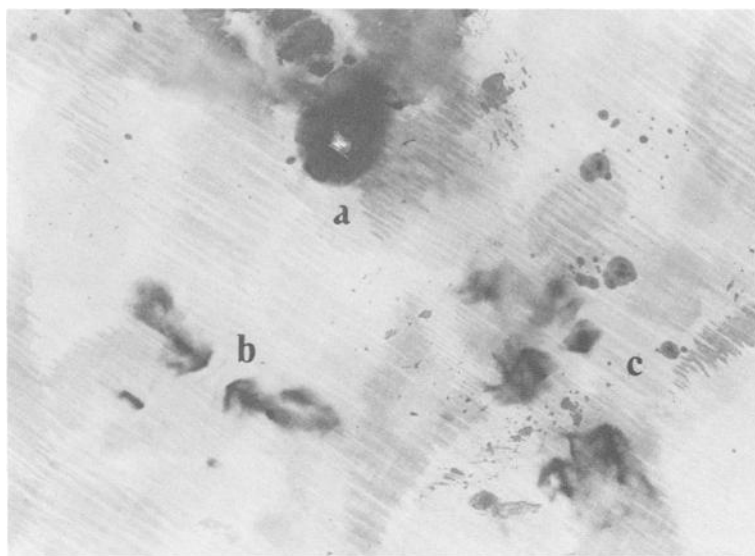


FIG. 2—Photograph of the pillowcase through which Case 1 was shot. Note the entrance hole surrounded by a collar of soot at a. Two separate areas of fouling from cylinder gap are at b and c.

the skull revealed four entrance gunshot holes (Fig. 3). There was an entrance hole in the skull in the right temporal region with characteristic bevelling on the inner table. A second typical entrance hole was in the occipital region. In the left temporo-occipital bone was a keyhole shaped entrance hole that appeared to be a composite of two intersecting entrance holes. Consistent with typical entrance holes there was uniform bevelling on the inner table around the hole. This distinguished the wound from a typical keyhole-type defect in the skull

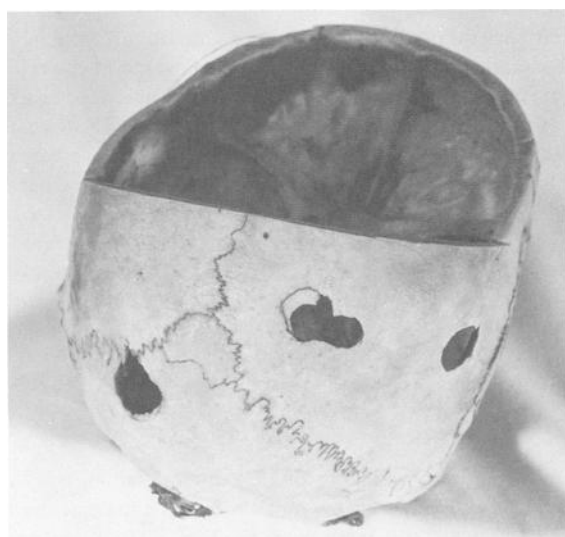


FIG. 3—Skull of Case 2. Note keyhole shaped intersecting entrance holes in center and two separate individual entrance holes to the left and right of center holes.

where there would be both internal and external bevelling in the same hole [1]. Inside the skull were four nonjacketed, deformed, medium caliber slugs. These slugs were subsequently examined by the Detroit Firearms Investigator and were determined to have been fired from the same gun as the bullets recovered from Case 1. All of the bullets were .32-caliber slugs.

Medicolegal Correlation

This unusual finding of successive gunshots through the same entrance hole would have been a mere academic curiosity, except that this finding was used as circumstantial evidence in the two criminal trials that followed these deaths. Both women were shot and robbed by the same man (L.P.).

The assailant met the woman described in Case 1 at her place of employment. He took her out on a date. After the date, they returned to her house, where he tied her with electrical cord, shot her, and robbed her home. It was clear from the findings on the pillowcase that the assailant shot her at near contact range through the pillowcase twice through the single hole, without moving the muzzle, only shifting the barrel of the gun. The assailant subsequently gave his girlfriend a ring stolen from the home of Victim 1, bragging about his conquest. His girlfriend subsequently informed the police of his crime.

By the time the assailant had met Victim 2, the Detroit police were suspicious of him. He took Victim 2 on a date to the rollerskating rink. He was the last person seen with the victim. Afterwards he went back to her apartment, shot her, robbed her, and dumped the dead body in a vacant field. Although the range of fire could not be ascertained as a result of the state of decomposition, it appears he used the same technique of shooting twice through the same hole. As he did not confess the second crime to anyone, circumstantial evidence was necessary to link him to the second slaying.

During the two trials, the prosecutor emphasized all of the factors that linked these similar cases. The prosecutor described the similar scenario of both crimes, the fact that the assailant was the last person seen with both women, the matching rifling marks on both bullets, and the unique pattern of gunfiring. Apparently this circumstantial evidence was sufficient to convince the jury that he committed the murder of Victim 2. The assailant was convicted of first degree murder in both trials.

Reference

- [1] Spitz, W. U. and Fisher, R. S., *Medicolegal Investigation of Death*, Charles C Thomas, Springfield, IL, 1980.

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