

Ellis Kerley's Service to the Military

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ABSTRACT: The purpose of this paper is to present the contributions Ellis Kerley has made to the United States Department of Defense in the area of forensic anthropology. His service began at the end of the Korean War in the identification laboratory established in Kokura, Japan, under the direction of T.D. Stewart. Ellis developed his research on the quantification of cortical bone microstructure as a means of age estimation while at the Armed Forces Institute of Pathology. In December 1985, Ellis was asked by the Army to form a commission to evaluate the Central Identification Laboratory, HI (CILHI). This lab is tasked with the mission of search and recovery and identification of American personnel killed or listed as missing from past military conflicts. Ellis's team reviewed the identification process and documentation, the qualifications of lab personnel, the adequacy of facilities and equipment, and some questionable cases. Their written report was supplemented with testimony in front of congressional committees. Ellis served as scientific director of CILHI from 1987 until 1991. In addition to overseeing the daily case work, he led several missions to Vietnam to examine human remains and served as spokesman for the lab. His input helped the lab gain needed scientific credibility. Despite the frustrations of trying to identify human remains within the Army's casualty and memorial affairs system, Ellis always maintained the utmost dignity, compassion, and respect for the victims and their families.

KEYWORDS: forensic science, forensic anthropology, human identification, Ellis R. Kerley, U.S. Army Central Identification Lab (CILHI)

A significant portion of Ellis Kerley's professional career is connected with the Department of Defense, notably his association with the U.S. Army Central Identification Laboratory, HI (CILHI), which spans 1985–1991. Since I was a CILHI employee for most of that time, I am pleased to be able to recount Ellis's contributions.

Ellis had a long record of service to the military, beginning with the Army in World War II. He served in the European theater until the war ended there and was en route to the Pacific when the Japanese surrendered. Little could he suspect how much time he would spend in the Pacific area later on, involved in Defense matters.

His earliest connection with forensic anthropology service to the military came after the Korean War. With the signing of the armistice in July 1953, the Memorial Division, Office of the Quartermaster General, contracted with T.D. Stewart to establish an identification laboratory in Kokura, Japan (1). By then the use of physical anthropologists to identify the war dead was standard pro-

cedure. Stewart contacted Charles E. Snow (1910–67), who had worked in the WWII lab, and Snow recommended graduate student Ellis Kerley. Other team members included Charles P. Warren (1921–88) and a Japanese college student named Tadao Furue (d. 1988). This was the start of a lifelong friendship between Ellis and Tadao. From 1954 to 55, Ellis identified United Nations war dead while he adjusted to his new role as husband.

After completion of the work in Japan, Ellis finished his doctorate at the University of Michigan in 1962 and interned at the Central Laboratory for Anatomic Pathology and Research, Armed Forces Institute of Pathology (AFIP) and Veterans Administration, Washington, D.C., where his research focused on the quantification of cortical bone microstructure as a means of age estimation, as discussed elsewhere in this symposium.

For the next several years, Ellis devoted himself to academia, including tenure at the University of Kentucky (1965 to 1966), University of Kansas (1966 to 1971), and University of Maryland (1972 to 1987). Along the way, he achieved status as a nationally known forensic anthropologist. Bill Maples once referred to the Kansas trio of Ellis, Bill Bass, and Tom McKern as "gods of forensic anthropology" (2), a well-earned appellation. Ellis was also a driving force in establishing the Physical Anthropology Section of the American Academy of Forensic Sciences in 1972.

In early 1985, Ellis was drawn into the Mengele investigation as consultant to the U.S. Marshall. Later that year, because of his reputation and experience with the Department of Defense, Ellis was asked by the Army to form a commission to visit and evaluate the U.S. Army Central Identification Laboratory, HI. This lab is tasked with the mission of search and recovery and identification of American personnel killed or listed as missing from past military conflicts (3). Several families of missing servicemen had become critical of alleged inaccurate identifications presented by the Lab, particularly those resulting from the analysis of human remains recovered from an AC-130A gunship shot down over Pakse, Laos, in 1972, with fourteen crew members lost.

Ellis recruited anthropologist Bill Maples and odontologist Lowell Levine for his team, and from December 9 to 12, 1985, they conducted an in-depth review and analysis of identification procedures and associated documentation used in the CILHI, including the soundness and acceptability of existing procedures and documentation, and a detailed discussion as to whether existing procedures could sustain the highest scrutiny by anthropologists and the legal community. They evaluated the qualifications of lab personnel (including six new hires, one of whom was me, and also Tadao Furue, who was now the senior anthropologist) and the adequacy of facilities and equipment. They also reviewed selected cases. Their report included 23 recommendations concerning staff duties and responsibilities, facilities, equipment, and procedures. The Department of the Army concurred with these recommendations and took steps to implement them (4).

¹ Department of Behavioral Sciences, San Diego Mesa College, San Diego, CA.

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Towards the end of January 1986, Ellis was again summoned by AFIP to perform the anthropological analysis of the human remains from the Challenger shuttle disaster. He advised the Army pathologist on issues of identification for the extremely fragmentary remains and facilitated the identification of all crew members. When he finished this project, he stopped at the U.S. Air Force Mortuary at Dover Air Force Base, DE, to check on my progress in identifying the remains of 256 military and civilian casualties of an aircraft accident at Gander, Newfoundland. The identification team was headed by the Aerospace Pathology Division of AFIP. This was my first one-on-one encounter with the famed Dr. Kerley.

The consultants' written report on CILHI was supplemented with testimony before the House Armed Services Committee, Investigations Subcommittee, on September 10, 1986. Representing CILHI were Ellis, LTC Johnie Webb (CILHI commander), and five staff members, including me (5). As a result of this evaluation, new case review procedures were instituted to ensure that the quality of forensic science practiced at CILHI met the highest standards. The decision was made that all recommendations for identifications involving Southeast Asian casualties would be reviewed by Ellis and his team.

One of the team's recommendations was to hire a nationally prominent senior forensic anthropologist to serve as Scientific Director of the laboratory. Bill Maples served as interim director from November 1986 to February 1987, and Ellis was eventually hired for the job, beginning in February 1987. He held this position until June 1991. His contributions to CILHI were now three-fold: continue to act as a spokesman for the lab when necessary, direct day to day work at the lab, and head missions to the Socialist Republic of Vietnam.

As spokesman for CILHI, Ellis's reputation and standing in the field helped the lab gain needed credibility in the scientific community. The CILHI of the year 2000 bears little resemblance to the CILHI of fifteen years prior, in terms of facilities, staff, and scope of work. Ellis also served as guest speaker at the annual meeting of the National League of POW/MIA Families in Washington, D.C., in 1988, 1989, and 1990.

His role as scientific director was more complicated. He helped design the new laboratory at Hickam AFB and oversaw the move from the old quarters at Kapalama Military Reservation (Pier 40). He attempted to supervise a diverse group of often-fractious anthropologists with a semi-firm hand and gentle humor. He performed triage (evaluation of priority) on all incoming cases and assigned them to one anthropologist or another depending on their abilities and current caseload. He assigned anthropologists to the various field, forensic, and repatriation missions. He coordinated efforts with what seemed like a continual stream of visiting dignitaries and scientists. He tried to stimulate scientific discussion among staff members. His Macintosh computer churned out memos on a daily basis, covering such topics as the value of gluing rib fragments together, case routing, attendance at professional meetings, and comp time, as well as more serious topics such as rules of evidence, the nature of identification, pathologies, case protocol, postmortem evidence, and contingency plans for a mass disaster. Most importantly, he assumed responsibility for the accuracy and reliability of all reports and identifications by reviewing each case file. He presided over periodic case conferences, during which each anthropologist and dentist would present their findings, with input as necessary from search and recovery or records personnel. These conferences were an opportunity to discuss the problems and lessons of each case before it was sent out to the Director, Casualty and Memorial Affairs Operations Center, for administrative review.

Ellis himself led a number of missions to the Socialist Republic of Vietnam, seven to Hanoi and two to Ho Chi Minh City, from 1988 to 1990. During repatriation missions, representatives of the Socialist Republic of Vietnam turned over remains to representatives of CILHI to bring back to the lab for analysis. During forensic investigations, Vietnamese and American scientists (anthropologists and dentists) jointly examined skeletal remains which had come under the control of the Vietnamese government. The purpose was to determine which were likely to be Americans and should be repatriated to CILHI for detailed analysis. The inventory, measurement, photography, and discussion of remains were carried out in a peculiar mixture of Vietnamese, French, and English. The daily analysis was punctuated by breaks featuring fruit, baked goods, tea, soda, and discussion of more mundane topics. The Vietnamese were well aware of Ellis's stature in the forensic arena and of his tenure as President of American Academy of Forensic Sciences (1990 to 1991). Their respect for him was increased because he made these trips personally.

Along with most of the anthropologists and dentists at CILHI, Ellis was a member of the Mid-Pacific Association of Forensic Scientists and enjoyed the quarterly lunch meetings at Paradise Park, lending his expertise to the discussions. He was a featured speaker at the Homicide Investigation Seminars sponsored by the Tripler Army Medical Center Department of Pathology in 1988 and 1990.

Ellis took seriously his job of trying to reconcile the scientific need for solid identifications with the administrative needs of the Army's Casualty and Memorial Affairs system. Although he may have been frustrated at not having complete autonomy in fulfilling the mission of identifying human remains, he never let it show. Certainly less vocal and flamboyant than many of his colleagues, Ellis always maintained his gentlemanly demeanor while showing the utmost dignity, compassion, and respect for the victims and their families. He remains one of the most distinguished figures in forensic anthropology.

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Additional information and reprint requests:

Dr. Madeleine Hinkes
Department of Behavioral Sciences
San Diego Mesa College
7250 Mesa College Drive
San Diego, CA 92111-4998