# Identifying the body

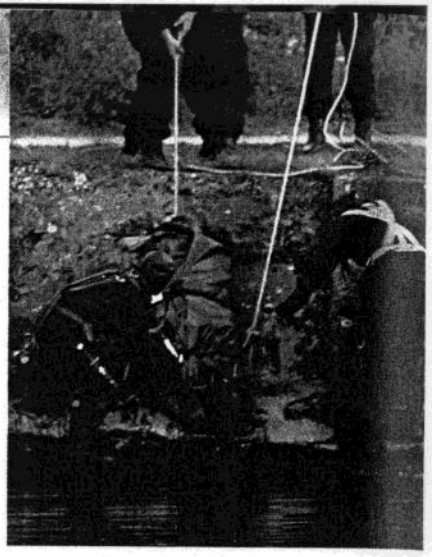
The ebbing tide gives up an anonymous corpse. A plummeting aircraft scatters bodies. A murder investigation turns up a shallow grave. The circumstances of death are never quite the same, but "who was this person?" is always the first question investigators ask. Finding out the answer demands ingenuity, patience, and sometimes sheer luck.

The identity of most bodies is either immediately apparent or reasonably simple to establish. Often the discovery of a corpse marks the tragic end to a missing persons investigation. Identification can also concern the remains of accident victims. Plane crashes, for example, are fairly straightforward for investigators, because bodies can be matched to a passenger list. This type of self-contained investigation is known as a "closed" case. "Open" cases, such as washed-up bodies or train crashes where no list of travelers exists, can be more difficult to solve.

## Plastic and gold

But even in open cases, there are usually some indications of the identity of the deceased. Few adults leave home without any identifying documents, such as a credit card or driver's license. However, in major transport accidents, linking the ID to the victims can have its difficulties. Men present fewer problems, because they generally carry their ID in their pockets. Women's possessions, usually kept in purses, are more easily scattered.

Clothes and jewelry can help to confirm identity when coupled with other evidence, but are of limited value on their own because most garments and cheaper jewelry pieces are mass-produced. Also, jewelry's value, as well as its size and ease of removal, makes it an attractive target for looters, particularly when an aircraft comes dow in a remote and impoverished region.



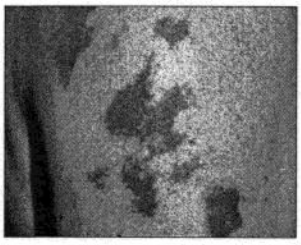
**A WATERY GRAVE ▲**
*Here, police officers remove a body from the River Thames, England. Immersion in water can make th skin swollen, wrinkled, and distorted, so it can be more difficult to identify the victim.*

**DIVING FOR CLUES ▼**
*When a car is seen plummeting into the water, the police divers are quick to reach the scene. Thorough searches of the surrounding area can help to recover, and identify, any victims.*

### THE TOP TEN IDENTIFIERS:

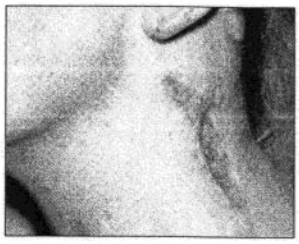
| | |
|---|---|
| 1 | *Dental evidence—fillings, missing teeth, bridgework, and crowns* |
| 2 | *Physical description* |
| 3 | *Jewelry and other personal effects* |
| 4 | *Documents, such as passports and credit cards* |
| 5 | *Fingerprints* |
| 6 | *Visual identification by a relative* |
| 7 | *Details of clothing* |
| 8 | *Medical records* |
| 9 | *Age assessment* |
| 10 | *Tattoos* |

## IDENTIFIABLE EXTERNAL MARKS



**SCARS ▶**
*Accidents, burns, and medical treatment all leave distinctive marks on the skin that can aid investigators in ID cases. However, relatively few people have large scars, and damage to the skin in fires can eliminate traces of even extensive scarring.*

**◀ BIRTH MARKS**
*Children's "strawberry" birthmarks usually disappear by school age, but "port-wine" stains, caused by abnormal distribution of blood vessels, are permanent marks on the skin. Photographs of these, and descriptions from relatives, help in making an identification.*



**TATTOOS ▲**
*Once the mark of sailors and criminals, tattoos are now commonplace and fashionable. Their permanence, and the individuality of the designs, means they can be a valuable guide to identity, as long as the skin remains intact.*

### Are you sure it's him?

Surprisingly, the most obvious ways of identifying bodies are not always the most reliable. Visual identification by relatives, for example, provides a definitive answer less often than you might imagine. In major disasters, grief, as well as the sheer number of bodies, makes recognition harder. But there can be other difficulties. Death erases character—few of us realize how much we rely on gestures, expressions, gait, and voice to recognize our friends and family. Fraud can be a factor, too. People have been known to "identify" the bodies of complete strangers in order to make false insurance claims.

### Distinguishing marks

When a direct visual identification may be unreliable or impractical, descriptions and photographs are useful. In particular, details such as birthmarks, scars, and tattoos are easy to identify, and are often very distinctive. Dental records can also be helpful (see p. 50). Fingerprints can confirm a tentative identification if relatives can produce personal objects bearing a set of prints.

If all these routes fail, the next step is a closer inspection of the body at the morgue. X-rays reveal old fractures, which may match relatives' descriptions of past accidents. Even implants can provide clues. When a dismembered, headless torso was found in a garbage bag in London, in January 2003, the body was identified by serial numbers on its breast and buttock implants. Blood tests are also useful, and can be quick, cheap, and easy to perform. But blood type is only helpful when blood is from one of the less common groups. Drugs in the bloodstream, or medical conditions that can be detected by serology, can also help confirm an identity. If a close relative can provide a DNA sample, then DNA tests can confirm a match with near certainty.

### Matching the clues

All of these procedures can assist in matching a body to a shortlist of possible identities. Few, however, are any help for anonymous, unclaimed corpses. In these cases, investigators trawl through lists and databases in the hope of finding a match.

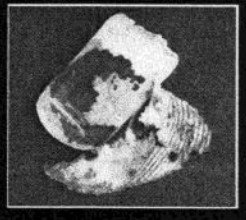
Convicted criminals can be identified by matching their fingerprints or DNA to police records. Local, national, and international missing persons bureaus may be able to resolve other "identity unknown" cases.

If these sources fail, the chances of investigators identifying the body are slim, especially in large cities that attract people who seek anonymity. For example, in New York City, around 1,500 people leave the city morgues each year anonymous, unnoticed, and unmourned.

## CASE STUDY

In Connecticut, in the winter of 1986, blonde Pan Am flight attendant Helle Crafts disappeared. Police had a murder suspect—her violent, adulterous husband—but no victim. When they discovered that he'd rented a wood-chipper, they realized the body hunt was going to get difficult. Witness reports led them to a nearby river. A search of the river banks turned up roughly one thousandth of a human body, including 59 slivers of bone, part of a finger (shown below), five droplets of blood, two tooth caps, and 2,660 human hairs—all blonde. Over 50,000 forensic tests were carried out on this tiny amount of material. They showed that the remains matched Helle's blood type, and the capped tooth matched her dental records. This led to Richard Crafts' arrest and subsequent conviction of her murder.

**FINGERTIP TEST ▶**
*The largest body part found by the police was Helle Crafts' fingertip, complete with painted nail. The nail polish was analyzed and compared to a sample recovered from the Crafts' home.*



## CASE STUDY

**ORTHOPEDIC EVIDENCE ▼**
*The metal implants that surgeons use to replace worn or weak bones provide a very distinctive identifying mark, which survives even ferocious fires.*