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# Mummified Remains From 1948 Identified

Scientists Used DNA To ID Merchant Marine Who Died In Plane Crash 60 Years Ago

ANCHORAGE, Alaska, Aug. 17, 2008

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This undated photo provided by Alaska State Troopers shows a photo of Francis Joseph Van Zandt on his merchant marine application. The frozen human forearm and hand found near the crash site of Northwest Flight 4422 on Mount Sanford located about 200 miles from Anchorage, Alaska was identified as belonging to Van Zandt. **(AP PHOTO)**

**(AP)** Nine years of sleuthing, advanced DNA science and cutting-edge forensic techniques have finally put a name to a mummified hand and arm found in an Alaska glacier.

The remains belong to Francis Joseph Van Zandt, a 36-year-old merchant marine from Roanoke, Va., who was on a plane rumored to contain a cargo of gold when it smashed into the side of a mountain 60 years ago. Thirty people died in the crash.

"This is the oldest identification of fingerprints by post-mortem remains," said latent fingerprint expert Mike Grimm Sr., during a teleconference Friday, during which the two pilots who found the remains, genetic scientists and genealogists talked about the discovery.

Twenty-four merchant marines and six crewmen were flying from China to New York City on March 12, 1948, when the DC-4 slammed into Mount Sanford, perhaps because the pilots were blinded by an unusually intense aurora borealis that night. The wreckage disappeared into the glacier within a few days.

The DC-4 was thought to be carrying gold because the merchant marines had just delivered an oil tanker to Shanghai. Though no gold was found, the two commercial airline pilots who discovered the wreckage found themselves on a scientific adventure filled with high-tech sleuthing.

The pilots, Kevin McGregor and Marc Millican, discovered the mummified remains in 1999 while

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recovering artifacts to identify the wreckage they had found two years earlier.

An Alaska State Trooper flew to the glacier to take possession of the remains, which were flown to Anchorage where the state medical examiner tried to obtain fingerprints. The remains then were embalmed.

The Alaska Department of Public Safety attempted to match the fingerprints to numerous databases but came up empty because the details of the fingerprints were unclear.

A few pieces of the arm were sent to a commercial DNA laboratory. However, no data could be obtained because the remains, having been in a frozen and dehydrated state for decades, were too degraded.

In 2002, the arm and hand were sent to a DNA expert in Canada. Dr. Ryan Parr at Genesis Genomics in Thunder Bay was able to extract some DNA. However, it was still necessary to locate family members related to the victim for a mitochondrial DNA match. Mitochondrial DNA is DNA passed down by females.

In 2006, Dr. Odile Loreille at the Armed Forces DNA Identification Laboratory in Rockville, Md., was asked to help. Her expertise is extracting DNA from the embalmed remains of unidentified soldiers from the Korean War.

Loreille developed new methods that allowed her to read the hand and arm's mitochondrial DNA.

"I managed to get a mitochondrial sequence," she said. "Now I just needed some relatives to compare."

That's when forensic genealogist Dr. Colleen Fitzpatrick got involved in the frustrating search for living relatives of the victims. She and her assistants found family members of 16 of the victims, but no DNA matches.

In the meantime, Grimm Sr., and his son, Mike Grimm Jr., began work with Edward Robinson, a professor of forensic science at George Washington University. Robinson made several attempts to rehydrate the fingers to raise the fingerprint swirls, but by this time only the layer of skin below the outer epidermal layer remained.

Robinson tried again with a newly-developed rehydrating solution. The fingers were soaked in the fluid and examined hourly. Special imaging techniques then were used to produce a complete set of fully legible fingerprints.

On Sept. 6, 2007, the prints were compared with some kept at the National Marine Center in Arlington, Va., and a match was found.

In the meantime, Loreille confirmed the finding with nuclear DNA from a nephew of Van Zandt's. A genealogist also located a relative whose mitochondrial DNA matched the remains.

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I beleive my uncle, Jack Post Faris, was on that airplane. We may never know, but I am trying to find out if his name is on the passenger list. Any ideas how?

---

Posted by capnfishhook at 03:38 PM : Aug 19, 2008  
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"the family can know what happened to.."

How could they NOT know? 60 years, he never returned, called, wrote, no sign of the dude, after a few weeks or months it's pretty obvious he isn't coming home, and after a year that means he is DEAD.

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Posted by newster1 at 12:40 AM : Aug 19, 2008  
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HOW WONDERFUL. I WONDER HOW MUCH IT COSTS US TO IDENTIFY A MAN WHO DIED 60 YEARS AGO. a GOOD WAY TO SPEND TAX DOLLARS.

Posted by KUEI12

Probably a few million dollars and weeks of police and forensics time that could have been better spent solving some CRIMES today

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Posted by newster1 at 12:38 AM : Aug 19, 2008  
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...Yeah! What is it with the name Van Zandt and plane crashes?

Posted by piercetheval

I think you'll find Miami Steve van Zandt of the E Street Band and the Sopranos is alive, while Ronnie van Zant of Lynyrd Skynrd is unfortunately no longer with us.

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Posted by usclimey at 03:38 PM : Aug 18, 2008  
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So were the parts actually mummified or just frozen?

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Posted by rf35 at 02:46 PM : Aug 18, 2008  
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HOW WONDERFUL. I WONDER HOW MUCH IT COSTS US TO IDENTIFY A MAN WHO DIED 60 YEARS AGO. a GOOD WAY TO SPEND TAX DOLLARS.

Posted by KUEI12 at 11:53 AM : Aug 18, 2008

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This man was a hero in a time of war. He deserves any and every effort that this government can give to him and his family. This is no less important than identifying people that died in Korea, Vietnam, or Iraq.

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Posted by wolfear1 at 01:25 PM : Aug 18, 2008  
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HOW WONDERFUL. I WONDER HOW MUCH IT COSTS US TO IDENTIFY A MAN WHO DIED 60 YEARS AGO. a GOOD WAY TO SPEND TAX DOLLARS.

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Posted by KUE12

Get back to work you chattering monkey. We have no use for your inane comments.

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Posted by diatrema at 12:52 PM : Aug 18, 2008  
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KUE12: You might feel differently if it were your father's body.

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Posted by DaGrandma at 12:45 PM : Aug 18, 2008  
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HOW WONDERFUL. I WONDER HOW MUCH IT COSTS US TO IDENTIFY A MAN WHO DIED 60 YEARS AGO. a GOOD WAY TO SPEND TAX DOLLARS.

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Posted by KUE12 at 11:53 AM : Aug 18, 2008  
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Sounds like something Clive Cussler will be writing about soon.

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Posted by DaGrandma at 11:29 AM : Aug 18, 2008  
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