

Crime Scene Investigations

by Leslie Ann Murakami, a Crime Evidence Specialist in the Scientific Investigation Section (SIS) of the Honolulu Police Department (HPD)

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SIS works out of the main HPD station on South Beretania Street. SIS's work is Island-wide. They are not held to any district. Evidence specialists and their supervisors work in the basement of the Police Department and give guided tours. There is also a museum there. SIS is composed of civilians. There are only two types of workers in the HPD: sworn officers and civilians.

SIS is composed of four components: Photography Lab (they just started using digital photography); Forensics Artist; a Crime Lab; and the Evidence Specialist team.

SIS can only do one case at a time. If a murder happens at night, the day shift will get the body in the morning. "This week is slow, only two robberies."

Leslie compared SIS's work to the "fiction" we see on the TV CSI shows. On CSI they do everything, including interviewing suspects. The shows simplify the lab works, with instantaneous results, and juries naively think that's the way it works in real life. (Years ago, SIS also did interviewing, but no longer.) HPD's SIS has divisions that specialize: i.e., the Crime Lab analyzes DNA, drugs, alcohol, etc. (If you are caught drinking in Ala Moana Beach Park you'll get arrested; whatever you're drinking will be analyzed.) Another division works on fraud cases: bank fraud, wills, forgeries, etc. Leslie is in the Crime Unit of 75 employees. There are no outside consultants.

Her Evidence Team is divided into three shifts. It's open seven days a week. Currently, she's working the 3 to 11 p.m. shift: murder, sex assault, robberies, suicides. They respond to all violent crimes and often other cases such as rock slides. They also do aerial photography and investigate scenes of high publicity to make sure everything is "okay." They no longer make a drawing around the body. Photos take care of that orientation.

SIS is responsible for documenting the crime scene, collecting the physical evidence: photography, diagrams, fingerprints. The detectives call the team in; that's the chain of command. The chief of police and the brass come out for big cases. "That's when the stress level is high," Leslie said.

When SIS arrives at the crime scene, they make diagrams; they do CAD (computer-aided design), "a CAD zone that looks like building plans," including furniture and items lying around. They take fingerprints at the point of entry and check other physical evidence. A knife would be processed for prints. When people rob a house they often eat or drink the victim's food, such as soda, beer, potato chips. Those items often contain prints. Physical evidence can also be biological, like blood. They look for DNA. If the victim scratches the perp, the tissue under the victim's nails, for instance, will give up DNA. (Leslie recommended that if, heaven forbid, any of us is ever in such a position, we should try to scratch the perp.)

If a perp is arrested, he is required to surrender DNA. Saliva is easier to obtain than blood (by swabbing). If a suspect has not yet been arrested, obtaining DNA requires a search warrant signed by a judge. Regarding gloves: “Everyone carries them. Everyone can obtain Latex gloves.” You can’t get DNA from garden gloves because the fabric is too thick, but you can get it from Latex gloves—from the insides, because Latex causes the hands to sweat.

Crime Scene Photography: Six Aspects

Photos of the scene

Injury photos

Full-length photos

Morgue photos

Aerial photos

Latent prints, tire track and footprint photos.

The Morgue

The SIS team members are always at the morgue. Leslie said, “My job is not for everybody.” They photograph every phase of the autopsy. The morgue is only open weekdays. “The Veterans Day holiday weekend [beginning Thursday, November 11, 2010] will be tough,” she said, “because there is also Furlough Friday. There will be no processing those four days.”

Somebody always has to be at the morgue for pickup or drop-off. SIS takes the photos; those photos go to court. An “unattended death” means the victim has not seen a doctor or had an illness within 48 hours of dying.

A job at SIS is not for the faint of heart. Everything smells to high heaven. Leslie gets the dry heaves. Even after they leave the scene, “your hair and clothes smell.” (After a case, one SIS team member went to McDonald’s. When he walked in, every customer backed away and started clearing out.)

SIS’s Goal: Crime Preservation. The team is legally bound:

1. *To photograph the scene as it is; to keep it undisturbed.* Sometimes that’s impossible because people have already been there, such as the EMTs. Case: A woman dead on the beach in Waikiki. When Leslie got there the water was already lapping at the body and they had to move her. All SIS could do was cover her up; they couldn’t take any measurements. Also, beachgoers were roaming all around.

2. *To prevent the adding or removal from the scene of any items that might be evidence.* Crime scene tape is used to keep the media as far away as possible.

Leslie joked that on CSI and other TV crime shows, the women investigating are beautifully dressed and drive Hummers. “We drive a Suburban, and I wear tough clothes, cotton, tennis shoes, and steel-toed boots.”

Three main sources of evidence:

1. The site of the crime.
2. The victim.

3. The suspect and his environment at the time of his arrest.

Leslie has to know her stuff when she's in court. At the crime scene, her first and most important duty is the legal preservation of the evidence, which can establish guilt.

Sexual assaults: Often suspects get off because the crime can't be proven.

Photos of Criminals (mug shots):

All the photos have an alpha number like a social security number, and the perp's physical characteristics (height, weight, etc).

1. First photo: A career criminal in two shots has red curly hair; then two photos where he has straight short black hair; skilled at changing his looks. But SIS has his fingerprints, which is why collecting the evidence is so important.

2. Second photo: the perp altered his appearance from short dark brown hair to longer, blond.

3. Third photo: changed his looks from male to a female.

4. Fourth photo: twins; fingerprints helped identify them.

Evidence Collection:

Items they collect include weapons, clothing and bedding. Trace evidence includes fibers and hairs. Tire tracks: they take castings. SIS carries water and plaster of Paris, which they mix together right away; they make excellent casts of tire tracks. They also make impressions of tools; if your door is jimmed with a screwdriver, it leaves an impression. But screwdrivers are so common it's hard to prove a particular one was used. Photos of handprints and fingerprints are all part of the arrest record. SIS does not make any determination as to whether evidence is circumstantial.

SIS also does fingerprint processing; they get a lot of work from the officers. To lift prints that are visible, they use fingerprint-lifting tape, i.e., Scotch tape and a chemical solution that turns the prints purple. Latent prints are those that can't be seen by the naked eye. SIS uses various techniques to lift latent prints, such as chemicals like rubber cement thinner and heated-up Superglue—when applied it turns prints white.

Everyone who drives will have his/her right thumb prints on file. SIS has a machine that stores the prints and the team can get the response in five or ten minutes.

A photo of bank notes: the prints will come up purple. If perps hand over a note demanding money, now they'll take the note back (because they know it contains their fingerprints). Perps are, unfortunately, getting smarter.

Gunpowder is black. You have to fire many rounds to leave a lot of powder.

Luminol is used when the crime scene has been cleaned up. Case: Blood treated with Luminol showed up in a stainless steel sink. Luminol is very sensitive. Case: At a high school a girl was killed. There was a lot of blood. The janitor thought it was pig's blood because kids had thrown pig's blood around once before. But was the girl's. Luminol detected the difference.

SIS takes photos first, then processes the area with Luminol. A photo of footprints: Luminol detected blood on a wood floor. A photo of drag marks across a wood floor: Luminol revealed that the marks were blood. Luminol comes up blue. Their ability to detect blood depends to an extent on where the blood is.

SIS has been accused of taking the money off a victim. The family will come and insist the victim had more money on him than was found. Leslie says, "We don't even want to go there."

Case: At the crime scene they start from outside in, at the doorway. Leslie chose a selection of photos to show us (out of a possible 200 they take). First we saw the doorway, then a sketch, detailing where the evidence was. The diagram showed it all at one glance. We saw a photo of a neat, well-decorated living room, contemporary black and white, containing a big stuffed polar bear and a piano. A photo of one wall showed the entrance and first bedroom, where there were two bodies, a man and a woman, lying on the floor. No sign of a struggle. First SIS checked to see whether they were alive. Neither one was. The man lay on his left side; wore a T-shirt and athletic shoes and had tattoos on his back and arm. He was holding a gun. The woman, on her back, wore blue shorts and blue print top. The girl's mother was in the living room. She heard a shot and thought it was an intruder. As Leslie "processed the mother" the mother screamed at her that she was being treated like the perp when her daughter had just been murdered. The facts: The girl was dumping her boyfriend. She came into the house with her mother to get her clothes in the bedroom. He shot the girl, then himself. There was gun shot residue (GSR) in front of his right ear. There is very little blood when a person is shot in the head because the heart stops instantly (although it depends on the caliber of the gun). He used a 38 revolver. The girl was standing, was shot on the left side of her head, and died instantly. He was a drug dealer.

Suicides. Leslie had two suicide cases this year. Both shot themselves in the stomach, which is a "hard way to go, because they lasted a day." SIS goes to suicides. Case: A guy hung himself from the bathroom doorknob and was in there for a week. The windows were up. You could hear flies buzzing at the windows.

The case of her first jumper. "The tension is so bad sometimes," Leslie said. "We have families and children. It's kinda hard to separate work from home after a case like that."

The jumper jumped down onto Lewers Street in Waikiki. There was a lot of blood, so SIS thought at first that he was shot. But he was holding a knife with blood on it. We saw a photo of a man with knife wounds in his throat. He was still alive when he landed, but not for long. The team located the building manager, who knew which apartment the man lived in. Surprisingly, Leslie knew the jumper; she had worked with him at The Pocketbook Man at Ala Moana Center. She said, "He was the display guy." At the apartment (on the 26th floor), we saw a photo of the front doorway. It showed signs of a struggle; everything in disarray, with blood on the carpet and another body, lying face-up, a woman wearing jeans and a white top. The woman had two stab

wounds in the heart. She was in rigor mortis and had been dead for awhile. They knew that because her face was cherry red; pooling takes 12 to 24 hours. She also had defensive wounds. The knife was very sharp, no torn skin. SIS determined that the man killed himself a day or two after killing her. He stabbed himself in the throat, stood on a chair next to the balcony railing, then probably sat on the railing before jumping. She was his girlfriend and he was staying in the apartment. She was leaving him. SIS found her journal. She was letting him stay there free until he found someplace to go. HPD detectives interviewed their friends. The couple had been arguing, having problems. He was from England and probably didn't want to go back. He wasn't a citizen. The girl was well off, she had a Lexus, paid the bills. He knew he was losing everything. The man's family came from England and made a huge scene, insisting it was robbery and that the robber killed them both. SIS needed meticulous evidence to prove that wasn't true. The front door was locked, nothing had been taken, so it wasn't robbery.

Case: A photo at the morgue. Leslie was asked to take a photo of a dead woman with blood all over her jaw. It turned out that she died of natural causes and was attacked after death by her German shepherd.

Leslie emphasized that the photos she showed us were all from closed investigations; she couldn't show us any from open cases. Thirty years ago, officers did work crime scenes. The SIS team members are all civilians and are "cheaper" (get lower salaries) than officers. SIS is impartial. HPD officers can only stay in certain divisions for seven years and then they get transferred, partly because other officers want to work in those divisions: Narcotics, Vice and SWAT, for example. Those in the Canine Division can stay as long as they want because of the extensive training needed.

Regarding Federal crimes: They have their own people who investigate, but they often call SIS in. Bank robberies are Federal crimes and involve the FBI, but SIS does all the work.

Queen's Hospital is by far the best trauma hospital.

The majority of SIS's work is writing reports. Leslie wants to write a book about her experiences but must wait till she retires. She takes notes for her future reference.

According to HPD's website, SIS is "the only full-service forensic laboratory in Hawaii. It provides support for the department and for federal, state, and other county agencies. SIS provides speakers for schools, businesses, and government agencies on Oahu and the neighbor islands on a variety of topics such as the role of SIS within the department and how the section aids in solving crimes. The section also participates in a number of career day programs put on by local schools during the year. A highlight of the year is a Forensics for Teachers/Students course."

For more information, please send a letter to:

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