

Case Report

IAFIS Fingerprint Search Solves 45-Year-Old Double Police Officer Murder

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Deputy Howard Speaks was working the Latent Print Detail on a hot summer Los Angeles night when he received a call that would follow him throughout his career. Shortly after midnight, four teenagers were parked at a Los Angeles County “lovers’ lane” when a male approached their vehicle. The lone suspect robbed the teenagers, raped one of the girls, and fled the scene in their vehicle. The date was Monday, July 22. The year was 1957.

Shortly after the incident, a nearby patrol unit observed a 1949 Ford run a red light. A routine traffic stop turned into a nightmare as dispatch received a garbled radio transmission requesting an ambulance. Responding officers found two of their own (Milton Curtis and Richard Phillips) shot and dying at the scene (Figure 1). Nearby was an abandoned vehicle, which proved to be the one stolen from the teenagers.

Deputy Speaks of the Los Angeles County Sheriff’s Department’s Scientific Services Bureau conducted the crime scene investigation. Two latent prints were developed on and lifted from the steering wheel, and one latent print was recovered from a chrome strip on the vehicle. A latent to latent comparison revealed that the two partial prints (Figure 2) obtained from the steering wheel were made by the same

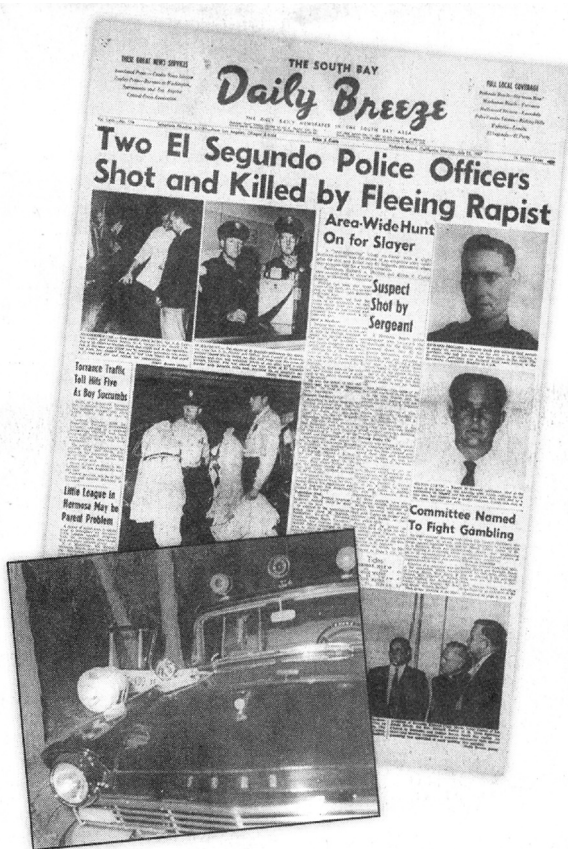


Figure 1
Headlines July 1957.

finger. Using photographic negatives, a composite of the two prints was made (Figure 3). The handgun used in the crime was recovered during a search of the neighborhood. On the basis of witnesses' descriptions (white male, 25 to 30 years old, 190 lbs., 6'2", light brown hair, slight drawl), composite drawings of the suspect were made, and a wanted bulletin (Figure 4) was distributed showing the drawing and fingerprints of the suspect. For the next 45 years, detectives from the El Segundo Police Department and the Los Angeles Sheriff's Department (LASD) would pursue the murderer.

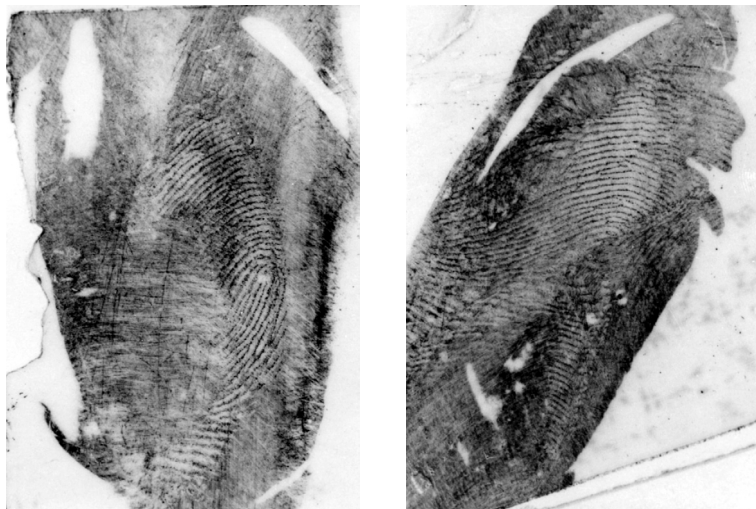


Figure 2

Two partial latents lifted from the steering wheel.



Figure 3

Composite latent. The two arrows indicate where the two latents were joined together.

Murderer of Police Officers !

WANTED

Also Wanted for Rape, Robbery, Kidnapping and Auto Theft



DESCRIPTION: WM, 25 to 30 years old, 190 lbs., 6' to 6'2", light brown hair, combed back in pompadour style, parted on left side, has receding hairline both sides of forehead; medium complexion with clear skin; sharp clear voice with a slight drawl; muscular build with broad shoulders and slim-waist; was dressed in khaki trousers with short-sleeved sports shirt with red and white squared check pattern, worn outside the trousers.

MODUS OPERANDI: At approximately 11:45 PM - 7-21-57, four teen-age victims, (2 Girls & 2 Boys) were parked on a "Lovers Lane" when suspect approached carrying a chrome plated .22 caliber revolver, 2" to 4" barrel, a small flashlight and a roll of 1 inch adhesive tape.

Suspect forced victims to tape their own mouths and eyes with strips of tape which he cut from the roll with a pocket knife. He then tied the male victim's arms behind them, with pieces torn from their shirts and then robbed the victims of their wallets and wrist watches. Suspect then raped one of the girls while the two boys and the other girl were forced to lie down in the back of the car. He then forced all the victims to disrobe, after which he drove away with their car with their clothing on the rear seat, leaving them nude.

Approximately twenty minutes later at 1:29 AM - 7-22-57, suspect murdered two police officers when he was stopped for a minor traffic violation while driving the stolen car.

During Robbery - Rape & Kidnapping suspect was very polite, used no profanity and at times was apologetic for his actions. Several times he used the expression "fella" or "fellas". He also referred to police as "policemen." Suspect's opening statement was, "This is a robbery. All I want is your money. I won't hurt you." Suspect spent considerable time with the victims before the rape and at times seemed to be indecisive as to his next moves.

The recovered slugs are .22 caliber, short or longs with a right hand twist, 6 lands and grooves. It is possible that they were fired from a .22 caliber Harrington & Richardson revolver, 2" or 4" barrel.



This print was found in the stolen car and is believed to belong to the suspect. All known persons who had access to the stolen car have been eliminated.

NOTE: The above print is a composite made from two lifts. This print is most likely a fingerprint but may be a section of palm print.

All police departments are requested to check this print against all robbery-rape suspects known to your personnel.



White metal Wittnauer lady's wrist watch, 17 jewel, white face, white gold numerals. Case number unknown. No repair scratch marks. White metal expansion band with white metal crucifix and blue enamel "Miraculous Medal" attached as illustrated.

White metal Tower boy's waterproof wrist watch, white face, black numerals and hands. No second hand. No movement or case numbers. No repair scratch marks. New clear crystal. White metal expansion band.



Above are illustrations and descriptions of the wrist watches stolen from the robbery victims. All pawn shop and second hand details are requested to check dealers in their jurisdictions for the purchase of the watches. The photograph of suspect is a composite drawing and is believed to be fairly accurate, as described by teen-age victims.

We request you check your MO Files and notify either of the following, telephone collect, immediately.

T. B. DE BERRY, CHIEF OF POLICE, EL SEGUNDO, CALIF., PHONE EASTGATE 22424;
E. W. BISCAILUZ, SHERIFF, LOS ANGELES COUNTY, CALIF., MADISON 69511, EXT. 3615

Figure 4
Wanted poster circa 1957.

In the early years of the investigation, LASD latent print examiners compared the latent prints with the fingerprints of hundreds of possible suspects. Years later, detectives still brought fingerprint cards to the home of retired Deputy Speaks to check against copies of the latent prints that he retained. In the mid-1980s, the latent print was searched through the then-new CAL-ID AFIS network with no success. In the early 1990s, copies of the latent prints were searched against the AFIS databases of several other states. The break in the case didn't come until September of 2002.

For almost half a century, the latent print section of the LASD had received newly developed suspects, compared the prints in the case, and reported non-identifications. So it was no surprise when this happened again. However, this time was different because LASD had just received access to the FBI's IAFIS containing the fingerprints of 30 million criminals. The composite print was digitally replicated and electronically submitted to IAFIS. It just so happened that the prints of the suspect who had eluded justice for so long were contained within that database. An exemplar card (Figure 5) from a January 21, 1956 arrest in South Carolina provided the suspect's prints for the database.

Figure 5

Gerald F. Mason's fingerprint card from a 1956 arrest.

The September 17, 2002, IAFIS hit and subsequent identification (Figure 6) sparked an investigation focusing on Gerald F. Mason, a now 68-year-old white male. As with most major investigations, multiple disciplines took part in the investigation. Firearms examiners concluded that the recovered handgun was indeed the gun that had been used to murder the police officers. Detectives traced that gun to a Sears store where it had been purchased three days prior to the murders. Near the store, investigators discovered a YMCA guest registration card bearing the same name used to purchase the weapon. A handwriting comparison between the firearm purchase paperwork, YMCA guest registration card, and the Department of Motor Vehicle's records of Gerald F. Mason established a positive identification.

Forensic artists, using descriptions provided by witnesses and victims, had drawn accurate composite drawings. Forty-five years later, three surviving witnesses, including two officers who had driven by the traffic stop less than a minute before the shooting, were able to identify Mason in photo lineups.

At his arraignment, Gerald F. Mason pled guilty to the murders and was sentenced to two consecutive life sentences. Present at the arraignment, Howard Speaks was now able to close the books on a case that he had worked for so many years. The successful resolution of this case took the relentless efforts of many people and multiple forensic disciplines. Ultimately, the case was solved through the application of emerging technology to fingerprints developed at the scene almost half a century earlier. To our knowledge, this is the oldest case solved through the use of an AFIS system.

For further information, please contact:

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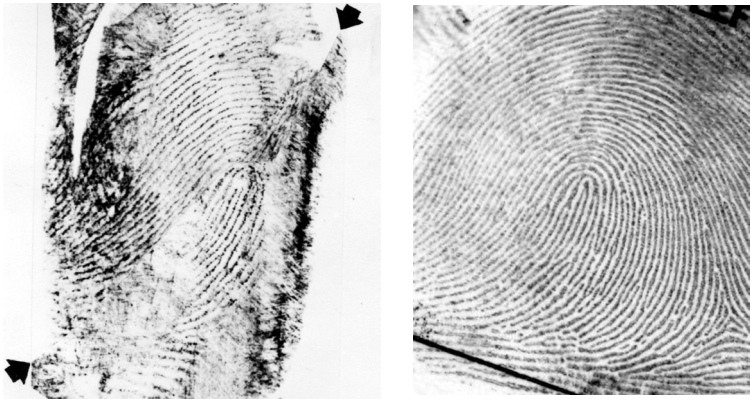


Figure 6
Composite latent and the left thumb of Gerald F. Mason.