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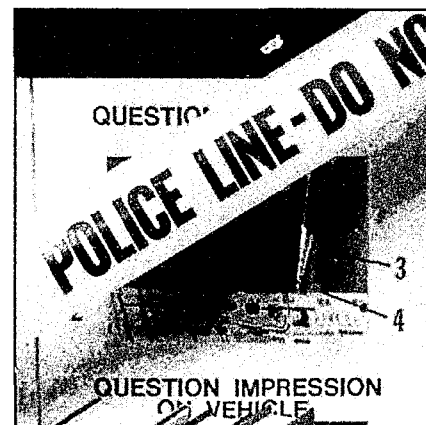
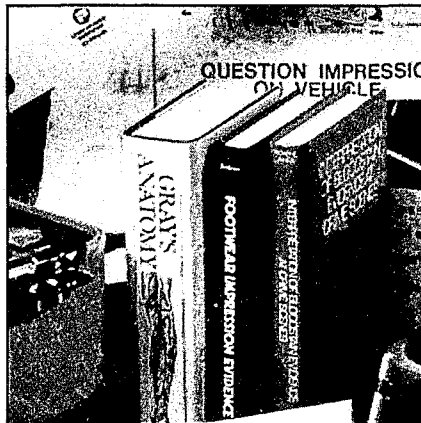
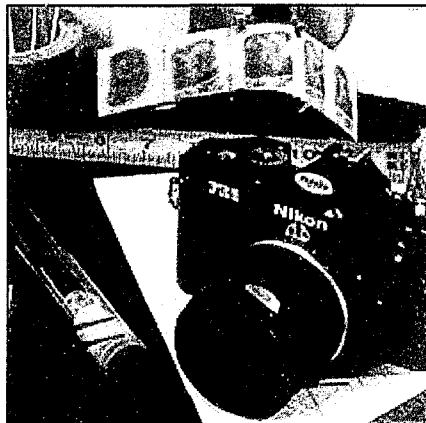
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MUST: A Team for Unsolved Homicides

By
HENRY POOLE and STEPHEN JUROVICS, Ph.D.



During the early morning hours of July 25, 1988, an intruder quietly entered a Washington, North Carolina, residence. The owners, asleep in their bed, were unaware of the armed stranger's presence. The intruder made his way to the master bedroom and violently attacked the man with a knife and a baseball bat, killing him; the woman sustained wounds to the sternum but survived.

The killer quickly left the house to join a companion, who was waiting in a car. They drove a short distance from the house, where they burned evidence of the crime—blood-stained clothing, shoes, the knife used in the crime, and other items.

The Washington Police Department asked the North Carolina State Bureau of Investigation (SBI) to assist in the investigation of this case. An SBI agent began working with the local police that same day.

Investigators found the burned material the next day, but fingerprint analysis revealed nothing of note. Within a week, the SBI agent learned that the murder victim recently inherited a large sum of money and modified his will to bequeath a substantial inheritance to his stepson.

Investigators conducted interviews with the victim's friends and associates, as well as with his family members. With no further clues from the crime scene or from the interviews, the investigation stretched into weeks. In the meantime, the local police and the SBI opened new cases.

With the rising murder rate in the United States, homicide investigators find that their workloads increase with each passing month, creating a backlog of murders that remain unsolved. The caseload of most homicide detectives today prevents them from focusing on specific cases and following these cases through to a solution.

This article discusses how the SBI established a special team of investigators, Murders Unsolved Team (MUST), to work unsolved homicides throughout the State. It also explains the organization of the team and how the team approaches the investigations of these unsolved



Special Agent Poole serves as coordinator of the Murders Unsolved Team of the North Carolina State Bureau of Investigation, Raleigh, North Carolina.



Dr. Jurovics is a consultant with a private corporation in Raleigh.

murders by assigning agents only one case at a time.

The Workings of MUST

The SBI established the Murders Unsolved Team in 1986 to deal with the pervasive problem of unsolved murders. The growing number of cases often forced local investigators to move on to other investigations when they could not quickly solve a homicide. And, because investigators could not give adequate time and attention to all homicide investigations, an increasing number of murders remained unsolved.

With the formation of MUST, local law enforcement agencies in North Carolina can now request assistance in the investigation of unsolved homicide cases. In such cases, the MUST agents work cooperatively with the requesting agency. A primary benefit, however, is that MUST agents are assigned only one case at a time. This allows them the time to familiarize themselves with all aspects of the

investigation and to pursue all possible leads. And, when local investigators turn their attention to other pressing matters, MUST agents can continue to concentrate their efforts on solving the case.

For example, in the case described in the beginning of this article, local police virtually discontinued the investigation. However, a new police chief reopened the investigation and requested the assistance of MUST.

By the time MUST entered the case, the deceased's family had moved to another city. Therefore, agents from two geographical districts began to work cooperatively with the local agency.

MUST agents conducted extensive interviews, particularly with the stepson and his fellow university students. The agents soon learned that the stepson displayed an intense interest in the game "Dungeons and Dragons" and that he and two friends played it regularly. This information precipitated interviews of the two friends, whom agents hy-

pothesized murdered the victim in return for a substantial portion of the stepson's large inheritance.

Furthermore, a review of the physical evidence focused on charred paper found at the scene. The paper appeared to depict the route between the murder site and the university. The word "Lawson"—the street on which the victim lived—was also found on the map.

An agent convinced the stepson to draw a diagram of how he would drive from the university to the victim's home and to write the word "Lawson." When experts compared this diagram with the stepson's handwriting on other documents and with the writing on the charred map, they concluded that the same person wrote all three samples.

Armed with this information, the investigating team again interviewed the suspects. During this interview, one suspect confessed to his role in the murder. He also confirmed the investigators' theory that the stepson masterminded the plot.

Investigators arrested the stepson, along with the two other suspects, and charged them with murder. They were tried, convicted, and sentenced to lengthy jail terms.

Organization

The SBI divides the State into eight geographical districts, with a MUST agent assigned to each district and one unit supervisor who oversees all MUST investigations. The agents—who generally have from 5 to 7 years of field experience—report operationally to a unit supervisor who, in turn, reports administratively to the SBI district supervisor.

When a local agency asks for help in a particular case, the MUST supervisor reviews the case to determine whether previous investigators followed all likely leads and whether they interviewed all possible witnesses and suspects. If not, and the case appears to hold some promise for a solution, the supervisor accepts the case.

The supervisor then assigns the case to two MUST agents—one from the requesting agency's geographical district and one from a neighboring district—who then begin their investigation by reading all files on the case. If all agents already have cases assigned to them, the case is put on hold until agents become available.

Next, the district SBI agent, the newly assigned MUST agents, and investigators from local law enforcement agencies previously involved in the case meet to review all aspects of the case. MUST agents work as a team with local law enforcement agencies, sharing information at joint status meetings until they exhaust all leads or the case is solved.

When investigators exhaust all possible leads, the unit supervisor decides whether to place the case in an inactive status. Unit personnel never close files. Instead, the cases remain inactive until new leads develop, at which time the unit coordinator reactivates the case.

MUST Database

MUST agents use a database to help manage complex cases that involve multiple agencies. This database allows investigators to store information gathered and to share their information with other agen-

cies involved in the case. Agents record who covers certain leads, what information they acquire, the results of the lead, and the date the lead is completed. Then, to share information, they simply transfer the information to a disk and send it to the appropriate agency.

Cooperative Efforts

Many MUST investigations require a cooperative effort on the part of law enforcement agencies and private concerns alike. For example, in 1988, the SBI solved a homicide case through the cooperative efforts of the SBI, a physics professor at a local university, and the FBI.

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The case, which occurred in 1985, involved a man who died in his home from a 12-gauge shotgun wound. Only his wife and 3-year-old son were home at the time, and his distraught wife described to investigators how her young son pulled the shotgun from a closet, dragged it down the hall to the living room, and while sitting on her lap, accidentally discharged the weapon, fatally wounding his father.

The investigating team took detailed photographs of the entire crime scene that evening but limited

their questioning to the wife, at her request. The following day, the wife refused to take a polygraph test and referred detectives to her attorney. Shortly thereafter, she burned the couch because of the extensive blood damage and discarded other potential evidence in the house.

The investigation eventually came to a standstill, and the wife moved to another State. However, relatives of the deceased wrote the State's attorney general, urging that the investigation be resumed. In 1988, after reviewing the file, the State's attorney general requested that the SBI undertake the case. SBI officials assigned the case to MUST.

To begin, MUST investigators focused on the wife's story that the 3-year-old child fired the 12-gauge shotgun, especially since the child did not complain of any recoil injury or ear discomfort from the noise of the blast. They enlisted the aid of a physics professor at a local university to determine the precise force caused by the firing of a 12-gauge shotgun.

Using detailed information about the gun and shells, the professor calculated that the force of the blast would definitely injure a 3 year old. In addition, the SBI laboratory determined that the gun was fired from a distance of 10 to 12 feet, not at close range as the wife described.

Next, investigators contacted the FBI Laboratory, which used the original 1985 photographs to reconstruct the crime scene. A comparison of the reconstruction, the wife's story, and laboratory analysis of the shell's trajectory revealed a damaging inconsistency: In order for the story to be accurate, the husband

would have had to be sitting on a couch that was 6 feet in the air.

Finally, extensive interviews with friends and neighbors of the deceased revealed that he never took a loaded weapon into his house. In addition, he kept all shells for the weapon on a high shelf in the hall closet so that his child could not reach them.

This cooperative investigative effort took approximately 8 months. In 1989, the wife was charged and convicted of her husband's murder—a murder that would have most likely remained unsolved had it not been for the efforts of MUST personnel.

This case clearly benefited from full-time investigators who could coordinate the activities of personnel from local law enforcement, the FBI, and the university. The MUST investigator focused exclusively on this particular case, bringing it to closure, while investigators from the local police department could only provide minimal attention because of their need to attend to other cases.

Conclusion

MUST has an enviable record of successful investigations. Investigators solved more than 46 percent of the cases assigned to them. Tentative

plans call for doubling the number of MUST agents in each district, both because the MUST methodology has proven effective and because local agencies now tend to solicit assistance earlier in the investigation.

The rising rate of unsolved homicides requires immediate attention from the law enforcement community. With the establishment of MUST, the SBI proves its commitment to reduce the rate of unsolved homicides within the State of North Carolina, while at the same time building a cooperative spirit among the State's law enforcement agencies. ♦

Crime Data

Hate Crime Data

With the Hate Crime Statistics Act of 1990, the FBI began collecting data on these types of crimes. The first statistics released cover calendar year 1991 and were supplied by nearly 3,000 law enforcement agencies in 32 States.

In 1991, agencies reported a total of 4,558 hate crime incidents involving 4,755 offenses. Of the offenses measured, intimidation was the most frequently reported hate crime, accounting for 1 of every 3 offenses. The other offenses included destruction/damage/vandalism of property, which accounted for 27 percent of the crimes; simple assault, 17 percent; aggravated assault, 16 percent; and robbery, 3 percent. In addition, murder, forcible rape, burglary, larceny-theft, motor vehicle theft, and arson each made up 1 percent or less of the total.

Racial bias motivated 6 of every 10 offenses reported; religious bias, 2 of 10 offenses reported, and ethnic and sexual-orientation bias each, 1 of 10 offenses reported. Among specific bias types, antiblack offenses accounted for the highest percentage, 36 percent of the total, followed by antiwhite and anti-Jewish motivations, 19 and 17 percent, respectively.

In 43 percent of the hate crimes reported, information on the offenders was unknown. However, when the race of the suspected offender was reported, 65 percent of the incidents were committed by whites, 30 percent by blacks, and 2 percent by persons of other races. The remainder of the incidents were committed by groups of offenders not all of the same race. ♦