



John Doe ID'd Thanks to Cold Case Detective... and New DNA Science

by Laura L. Sullivan, Public Relations Specialist

Bones can tell a story, but when they remain silent detectives must look even deeper to unravel the secrets of the most mysterious cases. Cold Case Detective Ron Chalmers put a name to unidentified remains, gave closure to a family, and showed that a possible homicide was something else entirely by using the new technology of genetic genealogy.

The remains lay in a heavily wooded section of the Bay Pines Veterans Affairs campus, so close to the bustling health care center, busy street, and active boat ramp, but far enough away that they were undiscovered until a man doing court-ordered community service on March 8, 2016, was instructed to clean up a transient camp and other debris amid the pines and palmettos. Some distance from the camp he stumbled across bones. It can sometimes be hard to tell animal from human remains from just a vertebra or long bone, but there is no mistaking a human skull. He reported his discovery and the Pinellas County Sheriff's Office (PCSO) began an investigation into a possible homicide.

"I think when you don't know what it is you always default to the highest level. It's easy to ratchet back an investigation, but evidence is lost if you start at a lower level and then try to bump it up. So they treated it as a potential homicide from the get-go." As a cold case detective, Chalmers approaches each case from a vantage point of years, even decades, relying on reports and forensic evidence gathered by the original investigators. When detectives can't solve a major case it is never closed. Sometimes all it takes is a fresh set of eyes, a new way of looking at old evidence, or a novel technology to make the leap to a solution.

The initial investigators left no stone unturned in their effort to find out who the Bay Pines John Doe was and how he died. All they knew was that he was a male, around 60 years old or more, and between 5'8" and 6'1" tall. The medical examiner was unable to determine a cause of death from the bones. They had no fingerprints and were unable to get a match from teeth. He had metal plates in his arm from a previous surgery, but they weren't serialized in a way that was traceable. A DNA profile didn't match with anyone in the system.

An extensive search of the woods around the Bay Pines VA yielded no further clues to his identity, but there was one major piece of evidence that they hoped might one day lead to the John Doe's identity. "I know when I got involved in the case in 2021 and I went through the photographs of the scene one of the things that stood out to me was the watch that was recovered with the skeletal remains," Detective Chalmers said. "The presence of something of value doesn't eliminate the possibility that it's still a crime, but it makes it less likely that robbery was the motive. The watch was a little unique; I hadn't seen that brand before." He researched the watch and did pawn searches but turned up nothing. Still, he had a feeling that the watch might prove important later.

In an effort to identify the Bay Pines John Doe, the USF Forensic Anthropology Lab used a scan of the skull to create a digital image and a clay sculpture of what he looked like. The images were circulated, but no one recognized him.

Enter Parabon NanoLabs, a DNA company located in Reston, VA. "The Pinellas County Forensic Lab was able to extract DNA from the bones, which is not necessarily as easy as it sounds," Detective Chalmers said. Parabon can use the genotype (the many variations on a strand of DNA) to predict a phenotype, which is the way those genes are expressed in physical traits such as skin color, eye color, hair color, freckling, and face shape. Using this technology Parabon provided their own prediction of the Bay Pines John Doe's appearance. When the new image still produced no leads PCSO cold case detectives turned to genetic genealogy.

Genetic genealogy has become a popular pastime, with hobbyists sending in DNA samples to find out more about their ancestry and family tree, and even learn about genetic health risks. When people have their DNA analyzed by certain companies they can choose to upload their information to one of the major genealogy databases and opt in to law enforcement programs to have their DNA data accessible by companies like Parabon, which can use the samples to generate investigative leads.

Parabon compared the DNA to that of the many people who had voluntarily added their samples to the databases, hoping to find a close relative of the Bay Pines John Doe who could identify him. Unfortunately, the closest match was for a second cousin once removed who had no knowledge of the most distant branches of their family tree. A Parabon genealogist suggested other members of the lineage that PCSO detectives

could interview, based on possible family surnames and geographic locations, but none produced any results.

It was a stroke of luck that cracked the case in August 2022 when another relative uploaded their information to one of the DNA databases Paragon was using. It was an even more distant third cousin, but this new lineage made it possible for Paragon's genealogist to triangulate the connection and zero in on a possible identity for the Bay Pines John Doe: **Robert Ralph Higgins**.

Now that he had a name, Detective Chalmers began delving into Mr. Higgins' past to see if he could positively confirm his identity. He determined that he was an Air Force veteran who was known to be transient, which was consistent with the location where the remains were found. But it was the thorough work of another PCSO deputy years before that really helped confirm the Bay Pines John Doe's identity.

Mr. Higgins had a history of frequent, though minor contact with law enforcement. The most recent had been with Deputy Terrance Fallahee who made contact with Mr. Higgins on July 9, 2015, out of concern for his welfare. Mr. Higgins seemed unstable and looked like he was about to fall off the bus stop bench. Deputy Fallahee wrote that his legs were "extremely swollen" and Mr. Higgins said that he retained water in his legs due to a medical condition. Deputy Fallahee told him that he could help him get medical assistance, but Mr. Higgins declined. He noted that Mr. Higgins appeared to be capable of caring for himself.

Before they parted ways, Deputy Fallahee did something that would prove crucial to identifying Mr. Higgins: he took his photo. The picture shows a strong resemblance to the forensic interpretation of the Bay Pines John Doe's face. More importantly the photo shows a watch on Mr. Higgins wrist – apparently the identical uncommon watch that was found with the remains.

"I was as surprised as anyone when I learned that one of my FIR's (Field Interview Reports) had helped in identifying Mr. Higgins," said Deputy Fallahee. "This case is an example that good patrol FIR's are important and useful to investigations, sometimes even years later and in unexpected ways."

Based on the available evidence, the Medical Examiner's Office was satisfied with the identification of Mr. Higgins as the Bay Pines John Doe. Although the cause of death was officially undetermined, it seemed reasonable to conclude based on a documented history of heart-related issues that he died of natural causes.

Despite the identification, Detective Chalmers' work wasn't done. He was determined to find out if Mr. Higgins had any close living relatives. Not only would a DNA match confirm his identity even more accurately, but he wanted to make sure anyone who loved Mr. Higgins didn't go through life always wondering what happened to him. He scoured the Internet for anyone who might be related and started making cold calls. After a lot of dead ends he made contact with a woman who stopped him in the middle of his story. "Hey, are you talking about Robert Higgins?" she asked him. Detective Chalmers asked how she knew him. "He's my father," she said.

Mr. Higgins hadn't been in his daughter's life since she was very young. She'd received an occasional phone call and once, a random greeting card. Some relatives in California had also heard from him every few years. She had heard he was in Florida but didn't

know anything beyond that. She provided a DNA sample and it identified them as father and daughter. The Bay Pines John Doe was now unmistakably identified as Robert Ralph Higgins.

Although Detective Chalmers is glad the case has been successfully closed, it is a melancholy ending to a man's life. "It's sad that no one was looking for this individual, that he was never reported missing because of the lifestyle he led and some of the issues he was dealing with. But to at least be able to give a name and closure to the case is a good feeling."

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