

Volunteers travel North America finding the dead

by Danette Dooley

An Idaho couple who recently found the body of a Newfoundland canoeist have spent two decades helping police across North America locate drowning and murder victims.

Gene and Sandy Ralston of Boise used their own submersible equipment to find 19-year-old Stephan Hopkins in the waters of Little Bonne Bay Pond, near Deer Lake, Newfoundland in September. They were contacted by the family after local efforts were unsuccessful.

"The loss of a child is probably the worst nightmare any family could experience," says Terry, Stephan's father.

"Couple with that not being able to find the body of your loved one. With the help and expertise of people like the Ralstons, and the usage of their equipment, they were able to recover Stephan in just 29 minutes. Prior to that, we were searching for 73 days via the help of the RCMP, search and rescue and many volunteers. This couple is to be commended."

The Ralstons never ask for anything more than money to cover their expenses. *Blue Line* interviewed Gene via e-mail about the work done by his company, Ralston & Associates, an environmental consulting firm that specializes in water-related services.

Q: What did you use to find Stephan's body?

We actually used two pieces of equipment. The side scan sonar is a torpedo looking device which is towed by the boat about 10 to 12 feet above the bottom. The transducer transmits pings of sound through the water and receives the return sound reflection. The computer on-board the boat processes the return reflections into an image of the bottom, as if you were looking straight down. Harder, more dense objects reflect more of the sound energy than the softer bottom sediments. The denser objects appear very bright in comparison with the soft bottom. Objects protruding above the bottom also have a shadow relative to the height and



shape of the object. Drowning victims usually have a very distinct reflection, as well as shadow detail. The shadows are caused by the person blocking the sound behind them.

We began searching a swath width of 50 metres because the bottom was fairly clean and did not have many features which could hide a drowning victim. After finding something of interest, we recorded the location of the object in the plotter portion of the software and made another pass at a shorter range. The shorter range provides a much more detailed and larger image, for better identification of the object. In this case, we knew from the first long range image that we had found a person, but the shorter range image just confirmed our identification.

We then placed a device on the bottom near the person. We made another scan of the person and our marker to determine distance and direction between the marker and the person. The ROV (remotely operated vehicle) is then deployed down the line to the marker and navigated the distance and direction to the person... grabs the victim and (is) raised to the surface by pulling on an attached cable.

(The Ralstons' equipment can scan a 20-60 metre-wide swath at about three kilometres per hour).

Q: How many bodies have you located?

Our official number found is 53 in the last

seven years using side scan. We found other victims prior to that, but they were on the surface. Not all of the ones we have found have been recovered.

We found four homicide victims in a deep lake in California for the FBI. Two were under a bridge in about 350 feet of water, while the other two were in about 250 feet of water under another bridge on the same reservoir. A fifth victim was found on the surface shortly after he had been pushed off one of the bridges. All five were kidnap victims who were held for substantial ransoms, which were paid, but the perpetrators murdered them anyway. All four were weighted with one or more 50 pound barbell weights. A dive team from the New York FBI office recovered the victims using an ROV. The perpetrators were convicted and sentenced variously to death or life without parole.

Q: I read that you found the remains of a person who had been missing for as long as 100 years (in nearly 350 feet of water).

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We were very surprised ourselves about that discovery. When we made the original side scan image, I thought it may have been a bear because of its short legs and “bulky” body. It was not until our friend’s search dog went wild in the area that we decided it needed to be investigated further. The video showed a distinct body shape lying on its side with an arm extended. We could see a hand and fingers quite well in the video. The remains were still very intact but much like caked salt in that when disturbed, they crumbled.

We did recover a portion of the remains but the forensic lab could not recover any DNA from it. They believe the portion recovered is hardened fat tissue. We want to return someday to inspect the small boat we found nearby and try to get more information, which may lead to an identification.

Q: You also assisted the Modesto Police Department in finding Laci Peterson and her unborn baby, Connor.

We were initially contacted by the Modesto PD on January 6, 2003, about two weeks after Laci had been reported missing. We were on two other searches at the time and could not respond until later in January.

(Their initial searches, including one on San Francisco Bay, were unsuccessful. Police had only a general area of interest, so the couple requested water trained search dogs be brought in to narrow the search area while they headed to Texas to recover debris from the space shuttle Columbia. They returned to the bay in March, after dogs had identified an area of greater interest).

Focusing our search efforts in the area of the dog indication, we discovered an interesting object on March 11th. The following two days were spent with a county sheriff dive team getting video of the object and making one unsuccessful dive to recover it.

Several additional attempts to recover the object failed over the next two weeks. When Laci’s remains were recovered on shore one month later, evidence on her remains matched that which we saw on the underwater video. We were not present when she was recovered on shore, but we were asked to return in May to continue searching for additional evidence. We spent a little more than 30 days total on the search. This has been our most frustrating search, knowing we found her but could not recover her. This is one of the many reasons we purchased our own ROV for underwater recoveries.

Q: What drives you to do this work, and how does it feel to provide a family with closure?

What motivates us to do this is difficult to describe. Perhaps it is best described as the result of having seen the anguish families go through waiting for their loved one to be found when the official search has been ended, and not knowing if they will ever be found. It is a long, agonizing and wearisome time for a family to go through.

The feeling is likewise hard to describe. We are very elated we can bring some measure of resolution – I don’t like the word “closure” (since

there is never a “close” to incidents like this – to a family’s grief but it is a bitter sweet feeling. Many families we have helped stay in contact with us to let us know how they are doing and continue to express their appreciation for our efforts.

Q: Do any Canadian police agencies have this equipment?

As far as I know, the Ontario Provincial Police is the only Canadian governmental organization to have Marine Sonic or similar equipment. The Deer Lake community is hoping to fund purchase of similar equipment and the RCMP in Newfoundland and Labrador is also now investigating purchasing it. Quite often it takes a quick success on a search in a local area for the local folks to get interested in it.

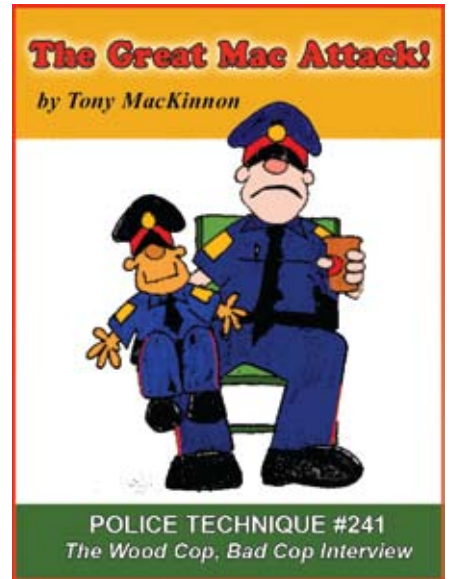
Many times we have sensed that agencies not aware of the benefits of side scan sonar regard it as a “smoke-and-mirrors” tool that seldom works. In some cases that may be true but it is not the fault of the equipment. Generally a team using sonar gets discouraged quickly because it can be a long and boring process to scan large areas with nothing of interest on the bottom.

Sometimes it is only with dedication and perseverance that a search is successful. Training and lots of experience are both critical to the success of a search mission. For instance, we have found three drowning victims in side scan images made by other operators because they did not have the experience interpreting images and did not know what a drowning victim would look like.

We offer our assistance in reviewing im-

ages for others as well as inexpensive training in both sonar operation and image interpretation. We are more than happy to provide whatever assistance an agency needs. We are working with a family foundation which is interested in helping to fund side scan sonar training for other agencies. We hope to start this program in 2008.

For more information, visit <http://gralston1.home.mindspring.com/> or contact **Gene Ralston** at gralston1@mindspring.com or 208 362-1303.



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