

## **BLOOD ON THE MOTORWAY**

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**Originally published October 2010**

In the past four decades, 459 deaths and 41 attempted homicides are believed to be linked to serial killers who are using the nation's highways to find and dispose of their victims.

A passerby found the severed head on Feb. 10, wrapped in two plastic bags and stuffed inside a backpack in Barstow, Calif. Authorities still haven't identified the victim or her killer, but the circumstances point in a particular direction.

The teenage girl likely had been killed days earlier, Barstow police say. Her head lay a few hundred yards from a truck stop just off Interstate 15, not far from I-40. To authorities, the proximity to the truck stop and the interstates suggests that the slaying might have been the work of a distinctive type of criminal: a serial killer operating along the nation's highways.

During the past four decades, at least 459 people may have died at the hands of highway serial killers, FBI statistics show. Investigators do not know how many people may be responsible for the killings but at least one such case — of murder, attempted murder or unidentified human remains — has been reported in 48 states, along roads as far north as Alaska and as far south as Key West. They believe the killers find their victims and dispose of the bodies along highways, sometimes near quiet roadside rest areas or at bustling truck stops.

Often, the victims are prostitutes, abducted in one state and dumped in another. And the killers? Authorities say they have 200 suspects; almost all are long-haul truck drivers. To date, the FBI says it has helped local authorities arrest at least 10 suspects believed to be involved in more than 30 of the killings.

That still appears to leave hundreds of killings unsolved, and the cases continue to mount. Not every killing along the nation's roadways is related, but since the FBI went public with the Highway Serial Killings initiative last year, local authorities have been sending information about unsolved slayings that fit the profile to FBI analysts.

Their hope: that the analysts can offer leads or find connections to other killings that may have happened years ago or several states away. Some of the killings recently added to the Highway Serial Killings database date back several years. Others, such as the one in Barstow, are relatively new.

"We seem to have one a week that comes in," says Michael Harrigan, the special agent who oversaw the FBI's effort for the past three years. "It could be a killing that's 30 years old. It could be one that happened a week ago." Whether the oldest and coldest cases can be solved, Harrigan is uncertain. But he's hopeful.

Harrigan and other law enforcement authorities believe serial killers still operate along some of the most well-traveled roads in the nation.

"They're out there," he says.

Even so, the FBI won't divulge the names of the victims, the dates the victims were abducted or discovered, even the locations where the killers either found their victims or dumped the bodies — places motorists might wish to avoid.

Despite President Obama's pledge of a more transparent government, Harrigan says the bureau is bound by its promise to local law enforcement not to disclose any details of the slayings — even basic information that is public record. The FBI makes such a promise so that local agencies will share details of the crimes with the bureau, Harrigan says.

Through a Freedom of Information Act request filed this year, I sought those details. "Many families drive from state to state and need accurate information to determine where they should and should not stop," I wrote.

The FBI denied the request, even though the bureau had posted on its website a small image of a U.S. map last year that shows the general location of many of the highway slayings.

Harrigan says a typical motorist isn't in danger. At least 234 victims were prostitutes, he says, and stranded motorists represent "a very, very small" number of the homicide cases. But Harrigan will not say how many, and he acknowledges that investigators know "nothing" about 130 of the victims. Among the mysteries are more than 80 cases — including the February case in Barstow — in which authorities couldn't identify the remains or recovered only body parts.

"It's creepy," says Keith Libby, the police detective in Barstow, Calif., who is handling the severed-head case. Libby says the victim appears to have been white or Hispanic, and police have released an image of how they think the victim looked. Beyond that, Libby says, investigators are hoping for help — from the public and from the FBI.

"We have nothing," he says. "Nothing."

## **A dangerous subculture**

Although the FBI launched the serial killer initiative in 2004, violence along the nation's highways is hardly new. Stopping crime at the thousands of rest areas, truck stops and travel plazas, however, remains difficult. In part, that's because the responsibility for policing rest areas varies from state to state. That often means no consistent records are kept about the rate of crimes, and no single agency takes ownership for fighting it.

But crimes also are difficult to stop because of the location of the rest areas — along major roadways. That makes getting away easy; just jump onto an interstate and speed off. At some locations, private security guards try to keep watch or police cruise through. Elsewhere, cameras monitor the area. Neither of those approaches offer any guarantees.

Sometimes, the crimes at these stops along the highways are orchestrated by sophisticated criminals. Some deal drugs. Others sell sex. And, like weary travelers, other dangerous criminals might use rest areas for the purpose for which they were intended: to rest. The Beltway Snipers, who terrorized the Washington, D.C., area for weeks in 2002, were caught after they pulled into a rest area to sleep. (Whether the snipers, John Allen Muhammad and Lee Boyd Malvo, are suspects in any of the highway killing cases is unclear. Muhammad was executed last year; Malvo remains in prison.)

What makes crime at rest areas and truck stops unique and especially troubling is that it occurs in spots intended to be oases for travelers — places where motorists expect to be able to relax and unwind, grab a meal and use the toilet.

"It used to be the place *to* go. It used to be the safe haven," says Sgt. Pat Postiglione, a detective with the Metro Nashville (Tenn.) Police Department. "But now, I think the opposite is occurring."

That's not the case everywhere, says Lisa Mullings, president of NATSO, a trade group that represents the truck stop and travel plaza industry. Mullings says most of the areas remain "probably one of the safest places to stop. There's always people."

Indeed, some truck stops have become more like bustling neighborhoods — for better or worse.

"It's kind of like when you live in the big city," says Frank Silio, a long-haul trucker since 1990. "You want to make sure you look at the quality of the people there. Are they paying too much attention to you?"

At many truck stops, the area for cars is separate from the area for semi-trailer trucks. The worlds are just as distinct, especially after sundown. On the trucking side, prostitutes might wander from cab to cab, looking for business.

"It *is* dangerous," says Vednita Carter, the executive director of Breaking Free, a Minnesota-based group that helps women escape prostitution. "They're having sex with them in the trucks." The truckers "might drive off and say, 'Well we can't stay here,' and they'll never come back."

Truckers even have names for the truck-stop prostitutes: lot lizards or fender lizards. "Those are the terms we hear all the time. But you only hear it there," Postiglione says.

"It's almost like a subculture, to be honest with you," Postiglione says. "You've got the family going to Myrtle Beach on one side, and you have the shady-looking truckers on the other. ... You have a lot of good truckers out there," Postiglione quickly adds, but "you have other truckers who go to these truck stops and get drugs or prostitutes."

Postiglione has good reason to think as he does. On June 26, 2007, the body of Sara Nicole Hulbert was found at a Nashville truck stop off I-24. Hulbert, 25, had been shot. Her killer also had used black electrical tape to fasten a plastic bag over her head. Postiglione contacted the FBI to tell analysts about that case and another similar killing in Lebanon, Tenn. He had little to go on except some surveillance tape of trucks coming and going from the Nashville truck stop around the time of the killing.

On July 12, 2007, Postiglione was near the truck stop when he noticed a semi that "seemed familiar." He followed it to the truck stop where Hulbert's body had been found and questioned the driver. When he looked inside the cab, he noticed a garbage bag. Inside was bloody clothing. The blood, he recalls, was fresh. The clothes, however, didn't belong to Hulbert.

Authorities now believe they belonged to another woman, Carma Purpura, who had disappeared the night before at a truck stop in Indianapolis. "There were items of female clothing ... that came back with Ms. Purpura's DNA," says Denise Robinson, a prosecutor in Marion County, Ind.

The trucker, Bruce Mendenhall, 56, was convicted in May in the Hulbert killing. He's likely to stand trial for at least three similar killings, including the slayings in Lebanon and Indianapolis. Postiglione believes other unsolved cases also might lead to Mendenhall.

"He's 56 and just starts killing people at 56?" Postiglione says, incredulous. "I have to believe that he may have been killing over the years but changed his methods. There's probably another victim or two out there that we're not linking yet."

### **Timelines are key**

That search for connections between crimes is where the FBI effort has proved useful. Analysts continue to develop timelines for each of the 200 suspects, trying to determine whether their whereabouts match any of the unsolved killings.

Technology has made that effort easier — at least in terms of the most recent killings and any possible connections to truckers. Many truck companies, for instance, track their drivers using GPS. And when a trucker uses a toll road, systems such as E-ZPass log it. Credit card records and surveillance tapes also help pinpoint who used the truck stop around the time when a prostitute there vanished.

The timelines are "tedious," FBI agent Harrigan says. "We want to look back and try to figure out, were there any other killings where they were?"

Harrigan says analysts might hear about five cases a week. They seem to fit the profile, but further investigation shows a serial killer isn't to blame. No matter, Harrigan says getting information from local law enforcement is critical. Already, the FBI has heard from law enforcement in 340 jurisdictions. Even if some of those cases turn out to be unrelated to the serial killer inquiries, others do, and those that do might be key in solving slayings hundreds of miles apart, Harrigan says.

The FBI and other law enforcement authorities also are careful not to condemn truckers as a whole. "We don't view this as some sort of indictment of the industry," Harrigan says.

As Norita Taylor, a spokesman for a trucking trade group says, millions of truckers are on the roads each day. Even if all of the highway serial killers happen to be truckers, that's still a tiny minority of the profession, says Taylor, spokesman for the Owner-Operator Independent Drivers Association.

Trucker Silio hopes motorists won't stereotype. "Not all people riding motorcycles are bad people, either," he says. Others, including Nashville detective Postiglione, wonder whether the trucking profession might be a draw for someone "predisposed to become a serial killer."

With help from the FBI, David Campbell, a detective with the Los Angeles County Sheriff's Office, was able to link trucker Eugene Upshaw to a year-old sexual assault near a truck stop in Castaic, Calif. In late August, authorities arrested Upshaw near Rochester, N.Y. He stands accused of beating and raping a woman and is "a person of interest in similar sexual assaults," Campbell says.

"What a perfect manner if that's what you're into," Campbell says. "What better way to mask your wrongdoings than by going from state to state doing a legitimate job?"