XVIII ALL INDIA CONFERENCE OF DIRECTORS OF FINGER PRINT BUREAUX
AT
HARYANA POLICE ACADEMY (HPA)

30th and 31st March, 2017

LANDMARK CASES IN THE HISTORY OF FINGER PRINT SCIENCE

CENTRAL FINGER PRINT BUREAU
NATIONAL CRIME RECORDS BUREAU
MINISTRY OF HOME AFFAIRS
FOREWORD

I am placing this compilation "Some of the Landmark Cases in the History of Finger Print Science" in hands of worthy delegates of this conference. The purpose of coming out with this collection is to make the fraternity recall the contribution of science for over a century, in crime investigation and individual identification.

First conviction in the modern history through fingerprints was that of Francisca Rojas who murdered her two children in Necochea, Buenos Aires Province, Argentina in the year 1892. Details about Kangali Charan who murdered his former employee, in the year 1898 in India, can also be found in this booklet. Similarly, very first cases which were solved through finger prints in different countries like England, USA, and France, make it an interesting and informative read. Two cases where experts failed in making correct identification have also been included, so that fingerprint fraternity should stay focused and make sure that such mistakes are not committed, either in over confidence or in the hurry of closing the case.

The efforts of Mr. S.P. Singh, Dy. Supdt. (FP), CFPB/NCRB for accomplishing the task of identifying and compiling these cases solved through finger prints at such a short notice is appreciated.

I am sure delegates of this conference will also find it interesting.

Dr. Ish Kumar, IPS
Director, NCRB
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CASE No. I

FRANCISCA ROJAS, ARGENTINA, 1892

First conviction in the modern history through fingerprints

BACKGROUND OF THE CASE: On June 19, 1892, 27-year-old Rojas murdered her two children in Necochea, Buenos Aires Province, in Argentina, her six-year-old son, Ponciano Carballo Rojas, and his four-year-old sister Teresa Carballo Rojas were found brutally murdered in their home. Francisca tried to simulate an attack by incising her own throat and then blaming the murders on her neighbor one Pedro Ramón Velázquez.

Francisca Rojas is believed to be the first criminal established to have been guilty through fingerprint evidence in the world. In 1892, Croatian-born, Argentine police official Juan Vucetich helped convict Francisca Rojas for the murder of two of her own children by identifying Rojas’ bloody fingerprints at the crime scene.

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INVESTIGATION OF THE CASE: The report of the murder did not reach La Plata (the provincial capital) until July 8, 1892. Police Inspector Alvarez, of the Central Police, was sent to Necochea to assist local police with the investigation. When he arrived, he found police had no leads. Rojas denied having anything to do with the children's deaths. Velázquez also implicitly denied killing the children.

Alvarez quickly determined that Velázquez had an alibi, having been out with several friends at the time of the murders. Alvarez also learned that Rojas' other boyfriend had been overheard - saying he would marry her "except for those two brats".

When Alvarez returned to La Plata with the fingerprint evidence, Vucetich's faith in fingerprints was proven. The case laid the groundwork in proving the superiority of fingerprints for personal identification purposes as compared to anthropometry. As a result of the Rojas murders, Argentina became the first country in the world to abolish anthropometry and file its criminal records based solely on fingerprint classification. His resulting classification system is still used in many South American countries today.

Juan Vucetich, in charge of criminal identification at the regional headquarters, had been intrigued by the new theories of fingerprint identification and sent an investigator to see if the methods could help crack the case. Until then, the only other method of identification was the Bertillonage, named after its inventor, Alphonse Bertillon, who worked for the Paris police. This method involved the recording of body measurements in more than 11 different places. In an age when photography was very expensive, Bertillonage gave police their best chance of definitively identifying a person.

After the Rojas case, Vucetich improved his fingerprint system, which he called "comparative dactyloscopy." Adopted by the province of Buenos Aires in 1903, it spread rapidly throughout the Spanish-speaking world.

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CASE No. II

KANGALI CHARAN, INDIA, 1898

Outside Argentina the first use of fingerprints in a murder case was in Bengal, India in May, 1898 when a thief called Kangali Charan was charged with murdering his former employee.

BACKGROUND OF THE CASE: The manager of a tea garden situated in the district of Jupaiquri (Bengal) on the Bhutan frontier was found lying on his bed with his throat cut, his dispatch box and safe having been broken and several hundred rupees carried away. There was suspicion also against the relatives of a woman with whom the murdered man had a liaison, also against a wandering gang of Kabulis of criminal propensities who had lately encamped in the neighbourhood. A representation was also made that the deceased had an enemy in an ex-servant whom he had caused to be imprisoned for theft. Inquiry, however, satisfied the police that there was no evidence to incriminate the coolies or the relatives of the woman or the Kabulis, and it was ascertained that the ex-servant had been released from jail some weeks before, and no one could say that he had since been seen in the district. The cook’s statement that the marks on his clothes were stains from a pigeon’s blood which he killed for his master’s dinner was supported by the Chemical Analyst’s report.

Fortunately amongst the papers in the despatch box was found a calendar in book form, printed in the Bengali character, with an outside cover of light-blue paper on which were noticed two faint brown smudges. Under a magnifying glass one smudge was decipherable as a portion of the impression of one of the digits of some person’s right hand.

In the Central Office of the Bengal Police, the finger impressions of all persons convicted of certain offences are classified and registered, and the impression on the calendar when compared there was found to correspond exactly with the right thumb impression of Kangali Charan, the ex-servant above referred to. He, in consequence, was arrested in Birbhum, a district some hundreds of miles away, and brought to Calcutta, where his right thumb impression was again taken, and the police in the meantime set about collecting corroborative evidence.

The Chemical Examiner to Government certified that the brown marks on the calendar were mammalian blood, the inference being that the actual murderer or
some associate had knocked his bloodstained thumb against the calendar when rummaging amongst the papers in the despatch box for the key of the safe. The accused was committed to stand his trial before a judge and assessors, charged with murder and theft, and finally was convicted of having stolen the missing property of the deceased, the assessors holding that it would be unsafe to convict him of murder as no one had seen the deed committed, but recording their opinion that the charge of theft had been conclusively established against him. This conviction was upheld by the judges of the Supreme Court, to which the case was taken on appeal.

**LOWER PUNISHMENT THEN EXPECTED:** Sir Edward Richard Henry assisted in the detection of this crime, a man was found with his throat cut in a tea garden near where Henry was working. An ex-servant of the deceased was suspected but the police had no evidence against him. Henry examined a book with two bloodstained marks on it and these were identified as the fingerprints of the suspect whose prints were on record. The man was eventually convicted of the offence. Although fingerprints linked Kangali Charan inextricably (inseparably) with the **theft and murder** of his employer, but the Indian court, evidently wary of power of new technology (i.e. fingerprint evidence), only saw it fit to find him guilty only of theft.

**THE BELPER COMMITTEE:** In December 1900, the Belper Committee in England, chaired by Lord Belper, recommended that all criminal identification records be classified by the fingerprint system (Lambourne, 1984, p 64). With this recommendation, the Henry Classification System and the individualization of criminals by means of fingerprints became standard practice in England and would eventually be adopted in most English-speaking countries. During this transition, other events taking place would also demonstrate the advantage of recording friction ridge skin.

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CASE NO. III

HENRY JACKSON, ENGLAND, 1902

The case of Harry Jackson is renowned as being the first criminal trial in the United Kingdom in which an individual was convicted based on fingerprint evidence.

BACKGROUND OF THE CASE: On June 27, 1902, a burglary occurred in a house in Denmark Hill, London, and some billiards balls were stolen. The investigating officer noticed a number of fingerprints on a freshly painted windowsill, apparently where the burglar made his entry. He immediately called the Metropolitan Police Fingerprint Bureau and Detective-Sergeant Charles Stockley Collins went to the scene. He examined the marks and decided that the left thumb made the clearest impression. After satisfying himself that the marks had not left by any member of the household, Collins took a photograph of it.

The first fingerprint evidence involving a scene of crime mark in England was heard at the Central Criminal Court on 13th September, 1902. Henry Jackson pleaded not guilty to a charge of burglary of a house of one Mr. Charles Driscoll Tustin at Denmark Hill, South London and stealing billiard balls on 27th June 1902. Detective Sergeant Collins examined the scene and an imprint of Jackson’s left thumb (LTI) was found in dirt on a newly painted window-sill (shelf). (He photographed the latent and with the assistance of colleagues searched the latent through the relatively small offender print collection and it was identified).

By consultation between Henry, the Director of Public Prosecutions, Stedman and Collins, a famous barrister of the time, Richard Muir, conducted the prosecution case, Collins explaining the system and producing photographic enlargements and tracings of both latent and known print. Jackson was convicted and was sentenced to 7 years penal servitude.

HARRY JACKSON’S LTI AT THE SCENE OF CRIME

The fingerprints belonged to 41-year-old Harry Jackson. Jackson, who worked as a labourer, had previously served time in prison for burglary. Jackson was arrested and, at that time, was handling stolen goods from a different burglary.

Since the crime of burglary required a jury trial in the Old Bailey, Edward Henry, the Assistant Commissioner (Crime) of the Metropolitan Police
Service and head of the Criminal Investigation Department, was determined to make this case succeed. As the man who devised The Henry System of Fingerprint Classification and the founder of the Fingerprint Bureau, he knew that only the soundest sort of Crown prosecutor would be able to convince conservative English judges and a sceptical jury to overcome their prejudices. For this purposes, he decided on Richard Muir, a prosecutor with a reputation for thoroughness and exacting nature.

Henry sent Collins to Muir to brief him on fingerprinting technique for four days. Muir afterwards became so convinced of its value that he said later on that he would have taken a far shakier case if it could have helped Henry win public recognition for his work.

When Harry Jackson went on trial at the Old Bailey, Muir did what he was asked to do: he convinced the jury of the absolute reliability of fingerprints. As a result, Harry Jackson was found guilty and sentenced to seven years in prison on September 13, 1902.

While it clearly set a precedent on the admissibility of fingerprints as evidence, some people were unhappy about the turn of events. As one letter to The Times (signed by "A Disgusted Magistrate") stated: "Scotland Yard, once known as the world’s finest police organisation, will be the laughing stock of Europe if insists on trying to trace criminals by odd ridges on their skins."

Jackson's status as the first person to be arrested on the basis of fingerprint evidence was the subject of episode 4 of "Connections 2", a documentary series by James Burke.

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CASE NO.IV
ALFRED AND ALBERT STRATTON, ENGLAND, 1905

Fingerprinting evidence was first used in England, a case of murder in 1905 at the Central Criminal Court. Alfred and Albert Stratton pleaded not guilty to the murder of Mr. and Mrs. Farrow at their shop in Deptford.

BACKGROUND OF THE CASE: On the morning of 27th March 1905 in Deptford, 16-year-old William Jones visited the paint shop of Thomas Farrow, 71, and his wife Ann, 65, but found the shop closed. The couple lived in a flat above the shop, and it was very unusual for the store to still be closed at this hour. Jones knocked on the door numerous times and, when he received no response, peered through the window. He was alarmed by the sight of numerous chairs knocked over so went for help. He approached a local resident, Louis Kidman, and the two forced their way into the shop around the back of the building. Once inside, they discovered the beaten dead body of Mr Farrow in a pool of blood and the unconscious body of his wife.

Mrs Farrow was rushed to hospital and the police were called. Unfortunately she died a few days later. There were no signs of forced entry, however an empty cash box was found on the floor of the dishevelled flat, suggesting a burglary had occurred. Further examination of the scene turned up two black masks made from stockings. Police speculated that the attackers had knocked on the door in the middle of the night or early in the morning and, when Mr Farrow opened the door, attacked him and barged inside, proceeding to attack his wife in the bedroom.

The cash box was examined and a greasy fingerprint found on the inside, at which point the box was carefully collected and transported to Scotland Yard’s Fingerprinting Bureau. Detective Inspector Charles Collins, who was heading the Bureau at the time, examined the print and established it was most likely from the thumb of an individual. The print was compared with those of the two victims, the officers at the crime scene, and the 80,000+ sets of prints kept on file by the Bureau, but no match was found.

With the fingerprint evidence trail cold, police began interviewing possible witnesses to the crime. Fortunately numerous individuals claimed seeing two men leaving the Farrows’ shop early the morning of the murder, and one witness was able to identify one of the men as Alfred Stratton. Alfred and his
brother Albert did not have criminal records, but they were well-known by police for their involvement in criminal circles. The witness descriptions matched the two brothers, and Alfred’s girlfriend informed police that he had given away a set of clothes worn that day, clothing that was described by witnesses as being worn by a man leaving the crime scene. Furthermore, he had asked her for a pair of stockings. Albert’s girlfriend was also interviewed and confessed that Albert had returned home that morning with unexplained money.

During examination of the scene an impression was found on a cash box. Inspector Collins gave evidence in this case and explained the identification system with the aid of a blackboard and photographic enlargements of the impression from the cash box and the right thumb of Alfred Stratton.

The prosecution was again conducted by Richard Muir, and the jury found the Strattons guilty. They were later hanged.

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CASE NO. V
BOUDET & SIMONIN CASE, FRANCE, 1912

First case solved using Locard’s Poroscopy

BACKGROUND OF THE CASE: On June 19, 1912 the apartment of M. Chardonnet, at No. 6 Rue Centrale, was broken into and several pieces of jewellery together with 400 francs in money were stolen. There was no witness and no clue to the thieves; but a rosewood box in which the jewellery had been kept was literally covered with blurred finger marks. These were developed with carbonate of lead and photographed. On comparing these with the collections at headquarters an assistant named Chambon discovered that certain impressions belonged to a man by the name of Boudet who had been sentenced several times before for theft. On looking up the records, it was found that Boudet habitually operated with a pal named Simonin. The two were put under arrest and impressions of their hands, other than the fingerprints, were taken. There were obtained from the prints which covered the box, a fair impression of the middle phalange of the left middle finger of Boudet and one of a small area of the left palm of Simonin. From the ridges alone, in the usual way, there were established 78 points of identity for the first (Boudet) and 94 for the second (Simonin). Yet, as the accused would not confess, the case was brought before the assizes.

Pores can be seen as white dots on black ridges.
Here the jury was shown enlarged photographs of the regions in question, taken both from the impressions on the box and from the men themselves, developed in the same way. In addition to the ridge details, emphasis was laid upon the correspondence of the pores of which, in the area from Boudet's finger, there were 901 separate pores. All of these, allowing for the difference in the amount of pressure, were shown to correspond exactly. In the area from the palm of Simonin there were more than 2000 such correspondences.

Born in 1877, Dr Edmond Locard was a French criminalist renowned for being a pioneer in forensic science and criminology, often informally referred to as the “Sherlock Holmes of France”. Whilst studying medicine he developed an interest in the application of science to legal matters, writing his thesis on Legal Medicine under the Great King (La médecine légale sous le Grand Roy). He went on to publish over 40 pieces of work, the most famous being his seven-volume series Traité de criminalistique (Treaty of Criminalistics).

Dr Edmond Locard is considered as also considered as Father of Poroscopy

The use of poroscopy as a positive method of identification is rare, if not non-existent today. The general feeling of identification specialists and others working in the field is that Poroscopy has little practical value due to the minuteness of its detail and the failure of pore structure to be reproduced consistently in crime scene and inked fingerprint impressions. The acceptance of this train of thought without challenge has, no doubt, allowed a valuable method of identification to slowly slip into oblivion.

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CASE NO. VI

GEORGE KELLY, USA, 1933

Smart victim

BACKGROUND OF THE CASE: George “Machine Gun” Kelly was a notorious criminal during the Prohibition era, taking part in bootlegging, kidnapping and armed robbery. On July 22, 1933, he and another man kidnapped wealthy Oklahoma City oilman Charles Urschel. After a series of ransom notes and communications, a $200,000 ransom was paid — the largest amount ever paid in a kidnapping to date.

The kidnappers set up an elaborate system for the handling of their captive and the delivery of the ransom. But they didn’t count on Urschel’s sharp mind and the authorities keeping track the ransom money’s serial numbers. The ransom was delivered on July 30 in Kansas City and Urschel was released the next day. He was unharmed and, although blindfolded some of the time, he was able to provide a number of clues to authorities. From Urschel’s descriptions of what he heard and saw while being held hostage, the authorities were able to figure out that he must have been near Paradise, Texas. Earlier there also had been a tip that the Kellys were involved.
SMART VICTIM-URSCHEL

The oilman had shrewdly paid close attention to every detail during his ordeal and was able to relate it all to police. Although he was blindfolded, he could tell day from night and was able to estimate the time of day that he heard airplanes fly above. He also noted the date and time of a thunderstorm and the types of animals he heard in what he presumed to be a farmhouse. Using his memories, the FBI pinpointed the likely location in which Urschel was held to a farm owned by Kelly’s father-in-law. What truly linked Kelly and his gang to the kidnapping, though, was Urschel’s fingerprints, which he made sure to place on as many items in the house as possible. Kelly was sentenced to life in prison, where he died in 1954.

GEORGE KELLY: The once-notorious Machine Gun Kelly was mocked in the news as "Pop Gun Kelly." He was sent to Alcatraz Prison in California, home to many hardened criminals, including Al Capone. In the 1950s, Kelly moved to Leavenworth, Kansas, where he died of heart failure on July 18, 1954.

Today, Kelly is remembered, along with the likes of "Pretty Boy" Floyd, "Baby Face" Nelson, Bonnie Parker and Clyde Barrow, as one of the criminals that made up the Midwest crime wave of the early 1930s.

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CASE NO. VII

JOHN HERBERT DILLINGER, USA, 1934

_Finger tips burnt with acid to eliminate fingerprints_

JOHN HERBERT DILLINGER (June 22, 1903 – July 22, 1934) was an American gangster in the Depression-era United States. He operated with a group of men known by some as the Dillinger Gang or Terror Gang, which was accused of robbing 24 banks and four police stations, among other activities. Dillinger escaped from jail twice. He was also charged with, but never convicted of, the murder of an East Chicago, Indiana, police officer who shot Dillinger in his bullet-proof vest during a shootout, prompting him to return fire; it was, ironically (given his infamy), Dillinger's only homicide charge.

In the heyday of the Depression-era outlaw (1933–1934), Dillinger was the most notorious of all, standing out even among more violent criminals such as Baby Face Nelson, Pretty Boy Floyd, and Bonnie and Clyde, as evidenced by the fact that decades later, the first major book about 1930s gangsters was titled _The Dillinger Days_. He courted publicity and the media of his time ran exaggerated accounts of his bravado and colorful personality, styling him as a Robin Hood figure, causing the government to demand federal action. In response, FBI Director J. Edgar Hoover developed a more sophisticated Bureau as a weapon against organized crime, using Dillinger and his gang as his campaign platform.

After evading police in four states for almost a year, Dillinger was wounded and returned to his father's home to recover. He returned to Chicago in July 1934 and met his end at the hands of police and federal agents who were informed of his whereabouts by Ana Cumpanas (the owner of the brothel where Dillinger had sought refuge at the time). On July 22, 1934, the police and the Division of Investigation closed in on the Biograph Theater. Federal agents, led by Melvin Purvis and Samuel P. Cowley, moved to arrest Dillinger as he exited the theatre. He drew a Colt Model 1908 Vest Pocket and attempted to flee, but was shot four times and killed.
John Dillinger (1903-1934) used acid to burn his fingerprints in an attempt to permanently change them by removing the ridge patterns. He failed, and the fingerprints that reappeared were identical to the ones he had tried to change.
CASE NO. VIII
ROBERT J. PHILLIPS AKA ROSCOE PITTS, USA, 1941

_Fingertips sutured to his chest_

History’s most famous case is Robert J. Phillips aka Roscoe Pitts who in 1941 had his fingertips sutured to his chest for weeks in an effort to smooth out his prints. A long time-criminal doing bank robberies and burglaries, Phillips made his New Jersey physician perform this painful operation. Phillips, however, was identified on the basis of the unaltered peripheral skin areas surrounding his fingertips and the pattern on the second joint of his fingers.

John Dillinger (1903–1934) used acid to burn his fingerprints in an attempt to permanently change them by removing the ridge patterns. He failed, and the fingerprints that reappeared were identical to the ones he had tried to change. In a more dramatic attempt to permanently alter his fingerprints, another American criminal named Roscoe Pitts had a plastic surgeon remove the skin from the first joints of his fingers and replace it with skin grafts from his chest. Investigators were able to identify him from his fingerprints and his palm print.

**HOW WAS THE OPERATION PERFORMED?**

Using a knife, the doctor peeled the skin from Philipps’ right fingers then taped his hand to skin that had been pulled away from his chest. Three weeks later, when the chest skin had grown onto his fingers, the hand was separated from his
chest. The technique worked; on the tips of Philipps’ fingers were patches of smooth, pink skin. The doctor repeated the process on his patient’s left hand. Philipps endured six weeks of boredom and pain but when it was over he was delighted with the results.

The FBI fingerprint people compared the fingerprint cards of Roscoe Pitts and Robert Philipps and found enough detail in Pitt’s obliterated prints to match them to Philipps’ impressions. The match-up confirmed Dr. Brandenburg’s identification of Roscoe Pitts as Robert Philipps. Once identified, the police in Austin sent Philipps back to North Carolina where he was tried and convicted of the warehouse burglary.

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CASE NO. IX

SHIRLEY MCKIE FINGERPRINT SCANDAL, UK, 1997

False implication due to erroneous comparison and identification

Shirley McKie (born August 1962) is a former Scottish police detective who was accused by fingerprint analysis staff of the Scottish Criminal Record Office (SCRO) of leaving her thumb print on the bathroom door frame of a murder crime-scene in Kilmarnock on 14 January 1997.

Shirley McKie denied she had ever been in the house of murder victim Marion Ross, but Detective Constable McKie was initially suspended, then sacked, then arrested by Strathclyde Police in 1998, and tried and acquitted in 1999. In February 2006, the former detective received a £750,000 out-of-court settlement.

A scandal subsequently developed because of allegations of misconduct on the part of the SCRO and the police. With continuing public concern over what became known as the Shirley McKie fingerprint scandal, Scottish Justice Secretary Kenny MacAskill announced in March 2008, that a public inquiry into the case would begin in September of that year.

The Fingerprint Inquiry report was published on 14 December 2011.

Shirley McKie (born August 1962)

BRIEF CASE HISTORY

On 6 January 1997, the body of Marion Ross was found in her home in Kilmarnock. She had been stabbed multiple times during what is presumed to have been an act of housebreaking. David Asbury, a handyman who had once worked on the Ross house, developed as a suspect. A fingerprint found on a tin box in Asbury's home was reported to be that of Marion Ross by examiners at
the Scottish Criminal Records Office. The SCRO also reported they had identified a fingerprint found on the gift tag on an unopened Christmas present inside the Ross home as that of David Asbury. While checking other, unidentified fingerprints from the victim's home, examiners reported one of those prints to have been identified as Constable McKie's. During Asbury's murder trial in which he was found guilty, McKie testified she had not been inside the home and could not have left her fingerprint.

Because Marion Ross was known to hoard possessions, making it possible for Asbury to have left a print on the gift tag years earlier while he was working at the home, the print on the tin box in Asbury's home became the key piece of evidence in the case against him. McKie's testimony at Asbury's trial that she could not have left a print inside the Ross home implied, if true, that the SCRO examiners were capable of error in a fingerprint comparison. David Asbury was subsequently freed from a life sentence due to questions raised about the identification of the print on the tin box. Other features of the case include allegations that police tried to link DC McKie to the actual murder and that they conducted a whispering campaign to discredit her, inventing a non-existent affair with a married male detective, and claiming that her denial of ever having been at the murder scene was made in an attempt to cover up a sexual liaison with the detective there

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CASE NO. X  

MADRID TRAIN BOMBINGS, SPAIN, 2004  

*Case of Erroneous Identification, blot on the image of finger print fraternity*

**BACKGROUND OF THE CASE:** In the morning of 11 March 2004, ten synchronised bombs went off on regional commuter trains killing 192 people and injuring more than 1,500. The **2004 Madrid train bombings** (also known in Spain as **11-M**) were nearly simultaneous, coordinated bombings against the Cercanías commuter train system of Madrid, Spain. The explosions ripped through train carriages during the morning rush hour in what was the deadliest terrorist attack in Europe since the Second World War. The Madrid blasts were Europe’s 9/11. As the aftermath was broadcast in real time, viewers watched the horror of a premeditated act of mass murder with a sense of grief and shock. The Spanish and European reactions to the attack, however, were very different to the military response triggered by the collapse of the twin towers.

**FALSE IMPLICATION OF A LAWYER:** Mayfield, a lawyer, as a material witness in an investigation of terrorist attacks on commuter trains in Madrid, Spain. The FBI Laboratory maintained that Mayfield’s fingerprint was found on a bag of detonators in Madrid that was connected to the attacks. Two weeks after Mayfield was arrested, the Spanish National Police advised the FBI that it had identified another individual named **Ouhnane Daoud** as the source of the fingerprint. After the FBI examined Daoud’s fingerprints, it realized that it had made a mistake and released Mayfield from custody.

Brandon Mayfield was falsely accused of involvement in the Madrid train bombing on the basis of the mistaken analysis of fingerprint evidence.

**Brandon Mayfield:** Mayfield, who had not travelled out of the United States for 10 years, claimed the fingerprint was not a good match. Mayfield was held...
in custody for two weeks, until the Spanish authorities told the FBI that the mark was, in fact, that of an Algerian citizen.

Closed-circuit television captured this image just seconds after three bombs exploded at Madrid's Atocha train station on 11 March 2004. The attacks killed 191 people and injured 2000 others.

**ERRONEOUS IDENTIFICATION:** In light of the fallibility of human nature, and the serious consequences of making a mistake, it is important that fingerprint examiners be held to a high standard of performance. Results need to be checked and double-checked to prevent false convictions and to maintain the integrity of the science.
Following the misidentification of Mayfield, the Office of the Inspector General (OIG) investigated the causes of the misidentification and issued its written conclusions.

The Office of the Inspector General (OIG) identified the following six primary causes of error:

1. Although Mayfield and Daoud did not have identical fingerprints, they did, nevertheless, have very similar-looking prints;

2. After the FBI found as many as 10 points of unusual similarity between Mayfield’s fingerprint and the fingerprint located on the bag of detonators, "the FBI examiners began to ‘find’ additional features in [the fingerprint on the bag] that were not really there, but rather were suggested to the examiners by features in the Mayfield prints. As a result of this process, murky or ambiguous details in [the fingerprint on the bag] were erroneously identified as points of similarity with Mayfield’s prints."

3. The FBI fingerprint examiners "apparently misinterpreted distortions in [the fingerprint on the bag] as real features corresponding to [extremely tiny details] seen in Mayfield’s known fingerprints." Thus, whereas error #1 had to do with comparatively large fingerprint details, error #3 had to do with extremely tiny details.

4. FBI fingerprint examiners are taught to adhere to the "one discrepancy rule" according to which "a single difference in appearance between [an unknown] print and a known fingerprint must preclude an identification unless the examiner has a valid explanation for the difference." In Mayfield’s case, the examiners failed to adhere to this rule when they accepted an "extraordinary set of coincidences" and "cumulatively required too many rationalizations to support an identification with the requisite certainty."

5. As noted in error #2 above, the FBI found as many as 10 points of unusual similarity between Mayfield’s fingerprint and the fingerprint located on the bag of detonators. "However, the limited clarity of [the fingerprint on the bag] prevented the examiners from making an accurate determination of the type of many of these points (that is, whether they were ending ridges or bifurcations”.

6. Although the Spanish National Police advised the FBI on April 13, 2004 that the fingerprint on the bag of detonators did not match Mayfield’s prints, the FBI nevertheless arrested Mayfield more than three weeks later on May 6, 2004. In
what is certainly an understatement, the OIG concluded that "the FBI Laboratory’s overconfidence in the skill and superiority of its examiners prevented it from taking the [April 13 report] as seriously as it should have.”

WHAT FBI SHOULD HAVE DONE

According to the OIG, what the FBI should have done was

1. Determine precisely why the Spanish National Police examiners believed that Mayfield’s fingerprints did not match the print on the bag before arresting him; and

2. Have a new FBI examiner examine the fingerprint on the bag in order to verify whether or not it was Mayfield’s.

3. In reviewing the OIG’s report, the two things that stand out to me the most are:

   The fact that the six errors discussed in this article were committed by not just one person but four people including: a fingerprint examiner with the FBI Latent Print Unit, a second FBI Latent Print Unit examiner, a Unit Chief in the FBI Latent Print Unit, and an independent expert appointed by the judge to review the FBI’s fingerprint identification.

   The fact that the FBI arrested Mayfield, searched his home and office, and took items from those two locations three weeks after being told by the Spanish National Police that Mayfield’s fingerprints did not match the print on the bag of detonators.

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