Flight 93 victim identification long, arduous

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By Cindi Lash, Post-Gazette Staff Writer

A licked stamp. A used razor blade. A forgotten toothbrush left out of its owner's suitcase.

All over the world, these and other equally mundane items are being sought and retrieved from the desks, dressers and medicine cabinets of the people who were aboard United Flight 93 when it crashed into a Somerset County hilltop two weeks ago.

Those items will end up in Rockville, Md., at the Armed Forces Institute of Pathology's DNA-identification laboratory -- arguably the best in the nation at analyzing and matching DNA samples. Experts will attempt to match genetic material left behind on those items with DNA found in human remains recovered at the crash scene.

DNA comparison is just one of several techniques to be used by members of the federal Disaster Mortuary Operational Response Team, which is charged with recovering and identifying the remains of Flight 93's passengers, crew members and hijackers. All 44 people who were on board died in the crash.

The team that has been at work in Stonycreek, Somerset County, is one of several that have been activated to assist with identification of thousands of people who died in the Sept. 11 terror attacks. Other teams have been sent to identify people who died at the World Trade Center and the Pentagon.

The teams were created in 1996 under the federal Aviation Disaster Family Assistance Act. That legislation was passed in response to calls for better, more coordinated assistance from families whose loved ones died in the September 1994 crash of USAir Flight 427 in Hopewell and other airline crashes.

The teams are part of the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services' national disaster medical system. They are assigned to 10 regions around the country to identify victims after incidents with mass casualties.

Teams include forensic pathologists, anthropologists, dentists, fingerprint analysts, radiologists, X-ray technicians and others with scientific skills that can be used to identify remains. Members are private citizens who have offered their skills and who are activated and paid by the federal government to assist local coroners or medical examiners when disasters occur, said Paul Sledzik, who headed the team in Stonycreek.

A forensic anthropologist, Sledzik is a world-renowned curator at the Armed Forces Institute of Pathology's National Museum of Health and Medicine in Washington, D.C.

A specialist in identifying skeletal remains, Sledzik, 40, has worked as an expert in numerous murder cases. He has helped to identify bodies of soldiers killed during the Persian Gulf War as well as passengers who died in the USAir Flight 427 crash.

In Stonycreek, Sledzik supervised a team of about 65 DMORT workers from Pennsylvania, West Virginia, Virginia, Maryland and Delaware. They are expected to complete their work at the site this week. Somerset County Coroner Wallace Miller retains authority over the recovery process and will sign all death certificates, Sledzik said, but DMORT workers have been helping Miller with identification processes.

"Local jurisdictions often don't have a mass disaster plan," he said. "We don't come in and take over, but we augment what the local coroner has set up. We provide whatever support is needed by local officials."

Some DMORT members worked alongside FBI agents and state troopers at the site to recover tissue, bone and dental remains.

Dr. Dennis Dirkmaat, a DMORT member and forensic anthropologist from Mercyhurst College in Erie, said the remains were "extremely fragmented" after the crash, in which the airliner hit the ground at hundreds of miles per hour.

Still, Dirkmaat said, DMORT workers were attempting "to document every piece of tissue," no matter how small. By walking or crawling over the crash site and by sifting dirt through mesh screens, DMORT workers hoped to recover tiny samples that, despite their size, could be analyzed and identified.

Once the remains were recovered, they were sent to a temporary morgue four miles away in a Pennsylvania National Guard armory in Friedens. There, more DMORT workers analyzed the remains utilizing equipment shipped from Dallas.

Fingerprint specialists examined tissue and dentists examined teeth, fillings or wire from dental braces that had been collected for comparison with X-rays and other records obtained from relatives of the

crash victims. Anthropologists and X-ray technicians have done the same with bones, looking for evidence of healed fractures, past injuries or surgeries.

If remains still couldn't be identified, DMORT workers sent samples to the DNA laboratory in Maryland to be matched with the genetic markers of those who died.

That can be done by obtaining blood samples from relatives or by obtaining DNA from strands of hair left in combs, from saliva on toothbrushes or stamps, even from nearly invisible bits of blood or tissue or a razor blade.

Sledzik said it was too early to know how successful that identification process will be or whether they will be able to identify the hijackers.

"We know that it is very important to the families to be able to make those identifications and we will stick with it until we've exhausted all processes," he said.

"It's heart-rending work, absolutely," he said. "But this [DMORT operation] has a distinct difference to it. Given what's been going on nationally, people here are extremely focused on completing the work here. They feel they can provide a service to these families and to their country and they are here to do that."

Staff writer James O'Toole contributed to this report.