

# Dental Readiness Beyond the Clinic

## Forensic Identification and Humanitarian Recovery in South Texas

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Panoramic view of layered, arid mountain ridges and canyon terrain under a clear sky.

### Abstract

In the remote brush country of Brooks County, Texas, preparation can be the difference between a search that misses critical evidence versus one that helps

return a name to the unknown. Migrant remains recovered from this terrain may be incomplete, severely weathered from the Texas sun, often scattered, and recovered with limited identifying information. Dental records, when available, are often outdated, incomplete, and nearly impossible to obtain.

In his speech to the National Defense Executive Reserve Conference in 1957, Dwight D. Eisenhower said, “Plans are worthless, but planning is everything.” This phrase serves as a reminder that operational missions rarely unfold under ideal conditions. In a dental forensic mission, that planning translates to practical training: careful documentation, respectful recovery, accurate comparison, and the impact of a positive identification of remains for families waiting for answers. The Brooks County mission demonstrates how U.S. Army dental forensic training can serve both operational readiness and humanitarian recovery, preparing soldiers to perform accurate identification work under austere, emotionally complex, and less-than-ideal conditions.

### Dental Activities

Early in summer of 2026, Drs. Alex Bullock and Alex Kim, both Army Comprehensive Dentists (63B) from the Fort Hood Dental Activity (DENTAC), and Dr. Reed McKinney, an Oral and Maxillofacial Pathologist (63P) with Joint Base San Antonio DENTAC, traveled to Brooks County, Texas to assist Deputy Don White of the Brooks County Sheriff’s Office and

Remote Wildlands Search and Recovery. The mission supported the ongoing search for and recovery of the remains of missing migrants throughout the remote ranchlands, brush country, and plains surrounding the Texas-Mexico border. For the team, it also provided a field-based opportunity to apply dental forensic identification skills in a humanitarian setting while reinforcing the importance of disciplined forensic training across the Dental Corps.

Brooks County, Texas is a major recovery area for the remains of migrants, many of whom attempt to bypass the U.S. Border Patrol checkpoint in Falfurrias by walking through austere, remote ranchland. This environment includes brush country, plains, and private ranchland with minimal overhead cover. These conditions expose search teams and migrants alike to extreme heat, limited visibility, and difficult access and movement.

Search and recovery efforts are further complicated by rough terrain, unpredictable weather, animal activity, and limited cell service. On this mission, recent rainfall in South Texas introduced additional challenges: chin-high grass, ankle-deep water and record-high humidity.



CPT Alex Kim in the ranchlands actively sweeping for skeletonized remains.

The Brooks County Sheriff's Office plays a central role in coordinating migrant search and recovery efforts. Deputy White and his dog, Socks, are the only two conducting searches, limiting the scope of the area they can cover. Every January, Dr. Krista Latham, McKinney's undergraduate anthropology advisor at the University of Indianapolis, coordinates with her Human Biology and Anthropology Master's students to assist with search and recovery efforts. After arriving at Joint Base San Antonio, McKinney joined the team and has volunteered as often as possible to assist Deputy White.

On this mission, McKinney was joined by Army Officers Captain Bullock and Major Kim, helping strengthen forensic identification efforts across the Dental Corps, both within and beyond the 63P Area of Concentration. Deputy White shared with the three-person team that they truly served as force multipliers, covering during three field days an area that would have taken him a month to search thoroughly.

# The Forensic Process

The humanitarian importance of this mission cannot be separated from the forensic process. Every recovered individual has a family, a history, and a name. For families of missing migrants—as with the families of U.S. soldiers—the absence of identification can prolong the grieving process. Careful recovery, documentation, and forensic comparison can support efforts to identify the deceased and eventually return their remains to their families.



CPT Alex Bullock, MAJ Reed McKinney, and MAJ Alex Kim.

These forensic efforts not only strengthen the mission, but also serve the living by providing a final act of dignity to the deceased. Deputy White told the team that, since 2012, more than 1,000 human remains recoveries have been documented.

Dental forensic identification is particularly valuable in cases in which remains and records are less than ideal. This reality is reflected in annual DENTAC Individual Critical Task List training, including the simulated plane-crash scenario, and in operational cases in which fingerprint or DNA recovery may not be possible.

In South Texas, remains are often incomplete, skeletonized, damaged by prolonged sun exposure, or scattered by animal activity—sometimes hundreds of yards away. Traditional visual identification is often impossible. However, dental structures can preserve information that assists identification even after prolonged exposure. Restorations, missing (or present) teeth, root morphology, prosthesis, pathology, and radiographic features can provide meaningful comparison points.

Antemortem records may be incomplete, in another language or difficult to obtain. Limited dental evidence can support an identification when integrated with other forensic and investigative findings.

In some cases, families expecting loved ones at rally points or collection points report them missing, giving the sheriff's office a limited list of possible identities to consider. Deputy White said that migrants traveling through this area may report leaving someone behind because of illness, injury, exhaustion or separation from the group. When personal effects, such as identification documents, phones or passports are found near or with the remains, they may provide an initial investigative lead. Although these clues are circumstantial, they can help guide a more targeted effort to obtain and compare records.

Dr. Reed McKinney, reflected on how his prior identification and recovery work shaped his approach to the mission:

*"My previous experience with mass casualty identification has reinforced that forensic work almost never occurs under ideal conditions. High case volume, fragmented or incomplete remains, difficulty locating or interpreting antemortem records, and the emotional pressure of the environment can all increase the risk for error. As a 63P, I have assisted with and led Service Member identification efforts, mass casualty incident responses, and now recovery operations in Brooks County. Those experiences have reinforced the importance of thorough documentation, radiographic comparison and consistent dental forensic training during routine training for all dental-related personnel."*



Deputy Don White and MAJ Reed McKinney searching deep vegetation for remains.

# Future Impacts

This mission directly supports Army Dental Forensic Readiness and emphasizes the importance of the Individual Critical Task List (ICTL) requirement, “Perform a Postmortem Dental Examination/Forensic Identification,” found throughout the entire 63 series. The mission in Brooks County parallels challenges military dental professionals must be prepared to encounter during their careers.

Performing under pressure, working in less-than-ideal conditions, and upholding the Army values—loyalty, duty, respect, selfless service, honor, integrity and personal courage—are essential both to this mission and to routine responsibilities.

Peacetime training missions like this, along with formal training exercises, are essential to dental forensic readiness. They expose dental personnel to the realities of forensic identification and emphasize the importance of mastering these skills before a crisis occurs. Classroom instruction can teach principles, but field missions develop judgment, adaptability, and discipline.

In Brooks County, the terrain and environmental conditions, along with limited evidence and records, make this exposure not only realistic but also meaningful on a deeper level. Such an experience builds forensic competence while serving an immediate, much-needed humanitarian purpose.

The mission at the border reinforces the ethical responsibilities at the center of forensic identification. The deceased cannot advocate for themselves, which places an even greater obligation on the recovery and identification team. Every photograph, chart, radiograph, and written observation may become a critical part of restoring an individual’s identity. While accuracy and objectivity are essential to forensic dentistry, respect remains at the core. That respect honors both the decedent and the families who continue to search for answers.



Recovered mandible with corresponding radiograph, highlighting the condition of both skeletonized remains and the quality of radiographs used for comparison.

The Brooks County mission demonstrates the intersection of forensic science, humanitarian service and Army dental readiness. It reminds us that forensic identification is not only a technical skill and an ICTL requirement, it is a professional obligation. By training in austere, operational environments before a crisis occurs, Army dental personnel are better prepared to serve Soldiers and their families, help restore identity and act as force multipliers when identification matters most.



## Authors

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**MAJ. Alexander Kim, DDS**, is an Army dental officer and senior resident in the 2-year AEGD program at Fort Hood. After graduating from Creighton University, he practiced civilian dentistry for six years before joining the Army. Leveraging his civilian clinical foundation and operational deployment experience, Maj. Kim specializes in advanced general dentistry and force health protection.

**CAPT. Alex Bullock** is a comprehensive dentist completing his advanced training at Fort Hood in 2026. He earned his dental degree from Loma Linda University School of Dentistry. His research interests include clinical outcomes, comprehensive care methodologies and interdisciplinary support in dentistry. His work aims to bridge collaborative dental specialties to enhance long-term patient care strategies.