



Changes in decomp odor with perfusion of other than O2.

Overview

A K9 team in western Washington had two successive searches which raised the issue of proven-reliable HRD (cadaver) dogs reacting differently when the subject's remains were perfused with other than oxygen.

First Case

In the first case, a missing subject was known to have asphyxiated himself using helium obtained at a children's toy store. Deputies found a book on suicide at his residence, opened to that page. At the time, the Puget Sound area was undergoing a heat wave, with temperatures of around 90 degrees each day.

The subject had been missing for three days before search efforts began. On the second day of searching (death plus 5 days) a K9 team broke through some brush, and the handler found himself all but standing on the subject. His K9, with multiple prior HRD finds, had a very subdued reaction. The handler was clear. "This was not a K9 find."

Knowing this was a suicide, the sheriff's office allowed other handlers and dogs to approach the remains. None of the dogs exhibited their usual reaction to decomp odor.

When searchers were tasked to help the coroner remove the remains, they were struck by the lack of odor from the body. Given the heat wave, one would have expected decomp to be rampant. It wasn't until the body was moved that some internal gases were ejected with only a slight odor.

Second Case

The second case involved a winery owner who crawled into a grape bin, with a stack of additional bins on top. Unknown to searchers at the time of deployment, the subject used canisters of CO₂, typically used in the wine industry, to asphyxiate himself.

Multiple dogs had walked past the stack of grape bins enroute to search assignments. A security system for the winery had shown the man walking toward a nearby lake, and search efforts had concentrated there. It was later determined that gaps in camera coverage allowed him to sneak back and secrete himself in the grape bin.

The subject was only discovered when a tired deputy leaned against the stack, opening a gap through which he could see the subject. Multiple dogs known to have been reliable on prior searches had walked right past that bin without offering a change of behavior.

Takeaways

HRD handlers deployed to search for suicidal subjects should always be mindful of the potential cause of death. Sharp knives or firearms at ground level, or even bodies falling from trees, are possible risks.

It was the opinion of experienced handlers involved that the decomp odor picture was changed due to the remains being perfused with other than normal oxygen. If the subject is known to have chosen asphyxia via some kind of gas, handlers should be aware that their dog could offer a different or subdued reaction.

The mitigation is a smaller search grid with the dog, handler and field support searching with their eyes, and immediate follow-up to even the slightest change of behavior by the dog.

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