

Compromised Crime Scenes

The Case of Captain Jeffrey MacDonald, an Army doctor charged with the murder of his wife and two children, is an example of how the physical evidence of a crime scene can contradict the defendant's version of what happened.

Overview:

Early on the morning of February 17, 1970, military police at Fort Bragg army base in Fayetteville, North Carolina responded to an emergency phone call. They arrived to discover MacDonald and his wife Colette, lying on their bedroom floor. Colette was dead, with a blue pajama top draped across her chest. MacDonald was quiet, but conscious and wearing only blue pajama bottoms. On the headboard of the bed was the word "PIG" written in blood. Down the hallway, their two daughters were dead from repeated stab wounds.

MacDonald's Story

MacDonald told officers he had fallen asleep on the living room couch when he was awakened by the sound of Colette screaming. In the darkness, he said he saw four people—three men and one woman—standing over him. They were chanting "Acid is groovy, kill the pigs." MacDonald stood to defend himself and the intruders attacked, slashing him with an ice pick. To help ward off the blows, MacDonald wrapped his blue pajama top around his hands, but still sustained multiple stab wounds and was knocked unconscious.

MacDonald said that he came to sometime later to find the intruders gone. He stumbled through his house, finding the bodies of his wife and children. He unsuccessfully attempted mouth-to-mouth resuscitation on his daughters. He pulled a small knife from Colette's chest and tossed it on the floor before draping his pajama top over her. Then he made his phone call for help.

The Crime Scene

The murders were brutal. Colette had been stabbed more than 20 times in chest, her skull fractured and both arms broken, likely in a vain attempt to fend off the attack. Two-year-old Kristin and five-year-old Kimberly had both been stabbed and beaten dozens of times. By contrast, MacDonald's injuries were relatively minor and before being taken to the hospital he was able to give officers detailed descriptions of the attackers.

When detectives investigated the crime scene later, they felt like something wasn't right. In the living room, where a life-and-death struggle has supposedly taken place, the disorder was minimal. Apart from a coffee table overturned on top of some magazines and an empty flowerpot in the middle of the floor, the detectives thought the room had a distinctly staged appearance.

Among the magazines spilled on the floor was the latest edition of *Esquire*, featuring an article on the Charles Manson-led murders in Southern California. The similarities between that crime and this one seemed immediately obvious to the detectives. If MacDonald had been looking to cover up his actions, the story of violent "hippies" high on hallucinogenic drugs might just have provided him with the inspiration he needed.

The detectives had other questions, too. Why had the attackers allowed MacDonald, the only eyewitness, to live? How was MacDonald able to so clearly see his attackers in a near pitch-black living room? Not only did he have but a few chaotic moments before he was knocked unconscious, but MacDonald has poor eyesight. He needed glasses to read and drive. Why were all the lights off in the house when the police first arrived? Wouldn't someone turn on a light when dialing the phone to call for help?

The Physical Evidence

The physical evidence of the crime scene offered even more specific and tangible reasons for doubting MacDonald's version of events.

Blood and Fingerprints

There was spattered blood throughout the house. Quite improbably, each family member had a different ABO blood group and so investigators were able to track the movements of the victims based on those blood groups. There were only two places where MacDonald's blood appeared in significant amounts. One was by a kitchen cabinet containing rubber gloves. Among the bloodstained bed sheets was the finger section of a latex glove, the kind used by surgeons. It was torn as though it had been removed in a hurry. The second place was the bathroom sink. Investigators speculated that this was where MacDonald stabbed himself after murdering his family.

Equally important was the blood that investigators didn't find. There was no blood in the hallway where MacDonald said he fell after being stabbed. The only trace of MacDonald's blood in the living room was on a pair of glasses and the copy of *Esquire*. MacDonald claimed that he'd used two telephones to call for help. Neither showed any signs of blood or even fingerprints. The knife MacDonald claimed to have pulled from Colette's body was also free of fingerprints. In the back yard, detectives found a knife and an ice pick. Both instruments had been wiped clean.

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Blue Threads

MacDonald said he had placed his pajama top on his wife after finding her, but several blue threads were found underneath Colette's body. More than eighty of these fibers were recovered from the master bedroom. Still more were pulled from a chunk of bloodstained wood discovered outside the back door. Nineteen threads, including one under her fingernail, were found in Kimberly's bedroom. Two threads were found in Kristen's bedroom. The only room where investigators didn't find any blue thread was in the living room, where MacDonald claimed to have fought for his life. Microscopic analysis matched all the blue thread to MacDonald's Pajama Top.

On May 1st, the army felt it had enough evidence to charge MacDonald with triple murder, but inquiries into the investigation revealed officials had improperly handled the case. For example, samples of trace evidence had been misplaced or lost completely. The charges were dropped.

The FBI Weighs In

After leaving the Army, MacDonald appeared on a TV Talk Show. His indifferent attitude and the dismissive remarks he made about his family's deaths helped revive suspicions about his role in the tragedy. MacDonald's blue pajama top was sent to the FBI Lab in Washington D.C.

Investigators found that all forty-eight holes said to have been made by the attackers' ice pick were smooth and round. For this to have happened, the pajama top would have been held still. MacDonald's arms and hands most certainly weren't stationary while he was fighting off attackers, as he had claimed. The FBI also noticed a large stain of Colette's blood that covered two parts of the torn pajama top. This suggested that the stain has been produced before the top was torn, although MacDonald said he had placed the top over Colette only after the attack was finished and he had found her dead body.

The FBI evidence was presented to a grand jury in 1974 and resulted in three murder indictments against MacDonald. After delay, motions, and counter-motions kept the case in limbo. MacDonald was finally brought to court in July 1979. During the trial, examiners demonstrated a simulated attack in the courtroom with an ice pick and a pajama top. They showed how such an attack created a pattern of cuts. The cut pattern on MacDonald's pajamas was inconsistent with the kind of attack he claimed had occurred.

Consequently, MacDonald was found guilty and ordered to serve three consecutive life sentences. A succession of appeals, started in 1997, continues today. Supporters of MacDonald maintain his innocence. Others believe the physical evidence, despite the errors in collection and storing, offers convincing proof that justice was served.

Answer the following on a SEPARATE sheet of paper: Be thorough in your analysis if you want to receive credit!

–A case overview

What was said to have happened (either by a witness or potential suspect)?

What was/could be theorized about the crime?

–A synopsis of the crime

What was the crime?

When and where did it occur?

Who were the victims?

What was the cause of death?

Who was the suspect? What was their relationship to the victims?

–A detailed explanation of how the crime scene was botched

What evidence was collected?

What was done correctly?

What was done incorrectly?

How was the crime scene botched? How did this impact the case?

What do you think? Was justice served?