

Staff photo by Bill Green

Dr. John S. Levisky, a forensic anthropologist, uses a model skeleton to point out the location of bone fractures found in the exhumed body of Dr. Frank Olson. A panel of scientists gave a report Monday morning in Washington, D.C., on their findings about the 1953 death of the local scientist.

Olson tests don't prove murder

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By DAN BURNS
News-Post Staff

WASHINGTON - Forensic investigators studying the remains of Dr. Frank Olson found no conclusive evidence that the Fort Detrick scientist's fatal plunge from a New York hotel room 41 years ago was murder, they said Monday.

While their six-month investigation raises the possibility of foul play, they admitted they unearthed no

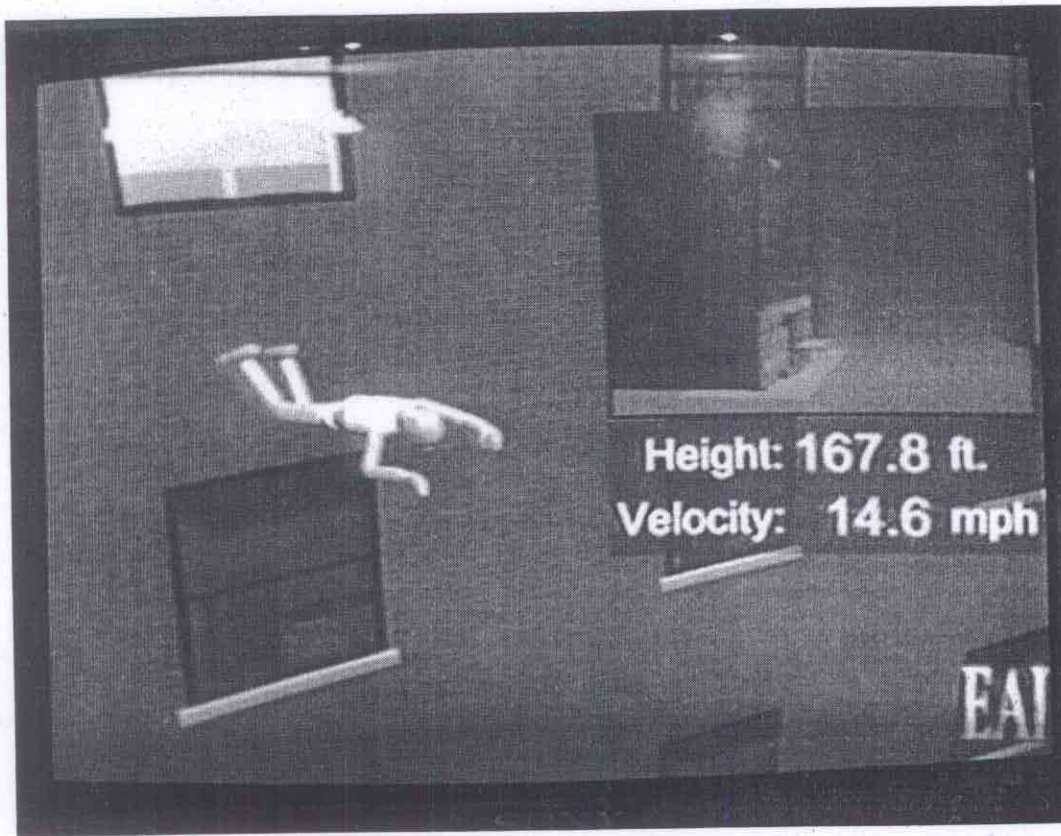
concrete evidence to disprove the official explanations for Dr. Olson's death. The germ warfare researcher's fall for now will remain listed as either an accident or a suicide.

"The results of the scientific investigations are, in short, inconclusive," said Dr. James Starrs, a professor of forensics at The George Washington University National Law Center and the lead investigator in the case.

Dr. Starrs led a team of more than a dozen scientists from across the country in a forensic probe begun in June, when Dr. Olson's body was exhumed from Linden Hills Cemetery in Frederick at the request of his two surviving children, Eric and Nils. The Olson brothers, both of Frederick, have never accepted the official explanations for the death of their father, a top civilian researcher

(Continued on Page A-4)

ERICK, MD., TUESDAY, NOVEMBER 29, 1994



Staff photo by Bill Green

A computerized three-dimensional animation on a television screen depicts Dr. Frank Olson falling from the 13th floor of a New York hotel. The model was used to compare theories explaining the fatal 1954 fall.

Olson

(Continued from Page A-1)

in Fort Detrick's biological weapons development program at the height of the Cold War.

Dr. Olson's fatal fall came just nine days after he had been the unwitting subject of a Central Intelligence Agency experiment with the hallucinogen LSD. Researchers began the investigation with hopes of uncovering evidence that U.S. intelligence operatives murdered him after he became a security threat following the experiment.

At a packed press conference Monday at the National Press Club, Dr. Starrs refused to discount the possibility of homicide even while admitting he had found no smoking gun. "I am exceedingly skeptical of the view that Dr. Olson went through that window on his own. There is a strong possibility that he went through at the hands of someone else."

He said one piece of evidence revealed in the autopsy - a severe bruise, or hematoma, above the left eye - could not be explained as the result of the 173-foot fall that killed Dr. Olson on Nov. 28, 1953.

"This hematoma... is singular evidence of the possibility that Dr. Olson was struck a stunning blow to the head by some third person or instrument prior to his exiting through the window," Dr. Starrs said.

He concluded the bruise could not have been a point-of-impact injury caused by the fall to the pavement because there was no fracture in that area of the skull, he said. All other pavement-impact sites on the body were accompanied by extensive clusters of fractures.

The "hematoma is a landslide in our favor," Dr. Starrs said in an interview afterward.

Also, the Starrs autopsy revealed

inconsistencies with the original coroner's report. For instance, the coroner mentions extensive cuts to Dr. Olson's head, face and neck. But Dr. Starrs' examination found no such cuts. A man throwing himself through a closed window presumably would suffer at least some lacerations as he passed through the jagged, breaking glass, Dr. Starrs said.

Dr. Starrs also held out hope that results still due from a toxicological exam may offer some scientific evidence suggesting homicide.

A sample of Dr. Olson's hair is being tested for evidence of LSD and other drugs and toxins at a lab in Tokyo. Previous toxicological tests, however, have returned either negative or inconclusive results.

The scientific evidence that cannot be reconciled with the official explanations does, when combined with findings in his non-scientific inquiries, lend credence to the Olson family's belief that their father was murdered, Dr. Starrs said.

"The non-scientific investigations conducted by this team, when considered in combination with the findings from the scientific investigations are rankly and starkly suggestive of homicide," he said.

The non-scientific inquiry, conducted largely by Dr. Starrs alone, involved a review of the relevant documentation about the CIA's experiments, research into Dr. Olson's mental health and a number of interviews with central figures in the case, including the two men responsible for drugging him during a secret conference at Deep Creek Lake on Nov. 19, 1953 - one of whom was in the hotel room with him the night he died.

The CIA had ample motive to want Dr. Olson, who retained a library of highly sensitive military secrets in his head, silenced in the name of national security, Dr. Starrs said.

In the days following the LSD experiment, Dr. Olson, then 43, became agitated and told his superiors at Fort Detrick that he intended to quit his job. Alarmed by his sudden change of demeanor, CIA officials, who were involved in overseeing his work at the Army base, whisked him away to New York for evaluation by an allergist on retainer with the CIA who was considered one of the day's few authorities on LSD.

He never returned to Frederick.

Early on the morning he was scheduled to return home, Dr. Olson plunged from his hotel room to the sidewalk below. His death was ruled a suicide.

His family found that explanation unsatisfactory, and their suspicions were confirmed, at least in part, 22 years later when a congressional investigation into the CIA's domestic activities revealed for the first time that Dr. Olson had been the subject of a secret government experiment. The cause of death was changed to accidental.

The Olson brothers, both of whom attended Monday's press conference, were cautious in their reaction to Dr. Starrs report.

"I'm very impressed and grateful for the quality of the work, the magnitude," Eric Olson said. "What was said today is not inconsistent with our belief that he was murdered."

He and his brother had just received the report, he said, and they would have to spend some time reviewing it before indicating whether they would pursue other action.

Nils Olson, who attended the press conference with his wife and two daughters, had no comment on the report. However, at one point, asked for a reaction as he watched a computer-animated recreation of his father's fall, he answered: "It's an eerie feeling, that's for sure."