

Experts Debate Suicide Ruling

Doubts surround former LANL official's cause of death

By Carol A. Clark

Wednesday, March 2, 2011 at 12:59 pm (Updated: March 2, 1:54 pm)

Editor's Note: This is the third in a multi-part series.



Carol A. Clark

Richard Burick's former Rocking Sigma Ranch is located in Sierra County, in Southern New Mexico.

An investigation began last summer as part of a March 2005 whistleblower lawsuit brought by former Los Alamos National Laboratory auditor Charles Montaño. The probe hit on a previously missing link that tied former LANL Deputy Director of Operations Richard Burick to Pete Bussolini, a former facilities maintenance manager at the lab.

Steve Doran, an investigator employed by attorneys for Montaño, is also a former LANL security official who settled a wrongful termination case of his own. He discovered a relationship between Burick and Bussolini, who was indicted along with Scott Alexander, a purchaser who worked under him at LANL, on 28 counts of fraud, theft, embezzlement and making false statements in

2004.

The two men were accused used of illegally buying more than \$300,000 worth of hunting equipment, outdoor gear and television sets. In February 2005, U.S. District Judge James Parker sentenced Bussolini to six months in prison followed by six months of house arrest and \$30,000 in fines.

According to the autopsy report, Burick may have been the subject of an investigation related to his job.

He was found dead with a gunshot wound to his head on Pajarito Mountain in Jan. 2003, which police and the Office of the Medical Investigator ruled a suicide.

In an interview this morning, Bob Ortiz, a former LANL business manager in the Engineering Sciences Application Division confirmed the testimony he gave several months ago as part of the investigation.

"I was under oath when I made the testimony and I absolutely stand by it," Ortiz said. "My boss, John Ruminer, and I had just attended a nuclear weapons meeting and went into the Otowi Building for lunch. We ran into Richard Burick and we had lunch with him. Rich Burick told us that he was retiring and that Pete Bussolini and he were going to operate a hunting lodge at his ranch in southern New Mexico."

The weapon found near Burick's body was a Smith & Wesson .44-caliber Remington Magnum, model 29-3, according to police records. The cylinder was found open at the scene and all but one of the unfired cartridges was firmly seated in the cylinder with the spent cartridge sticking out of the cylinder. There was no damage to the revolver and one unfired cartridge lay on the ground near the gun.

Court certified firearms expert Michael Stamm, a retired Michigan state trooper, said he did not believe it was possible for the gun to be found as it was in a suicide situation.

“I spoke with people who were much more mechanically proficient than I am and they also said it was virtually impossible,” Stamm said. “It’s like the turtle on top of the fence post situation, you don’t know how it got there but you know it didn’t get there by itself.”

Los Alamos Police Sgt. DeWayne Williams was the detective who investigated Burick’s death. He recounted the facts of his investigation saying he remains convinced that the evidence points to suicide.

“While it is unusual that you find a gun in that position, it’s not impossible,” said Williams, a certified firearms instructor also certified to ascertain firearm malfunctions and to repair firearms. “The mechanics of the gun and the way you hold it could allow the cylinder to release — you have to make decisions based on all of the evidence together as a whole — the totality of the circumstances.”

Capt. Randy Foster also is a certified firearms instructor and certified to ascertain firearm malfunctions and to repair firearms.

“During investigations, we sometimes find guns in unusual positions, but after working through the scene, we find there is always an explanation,” Foster said. “I reviewed this case very carefully and found nothing to indicate anything other than a suicide – I have full faith in the work that was done by the officers at the scene.”

Doran issued a challenge saying, “If in fact what they said could happen – then it can be created under laboratory conditions – so I would like to see them or anyone in the world come forward and recreate it.”

Burick’s widow, Karron Burick, discussed the death of her husband during an interview this morning.

“He had cancer and he was on medication and I am absolutely certain that it was nothing other than a suicide,” she said.

Nearly a decade has passed since the procurement and security issues first surfaced at LANL and many of the key players have since moved on to new and intriguing lives beyond the lab.