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Practical Methods for Processing a Vehicle

Practical Methods for Processing a Vehicle

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During a criminal investigation the crime scene investigator or evidence recovery technician may be assigned the task of processing a vehicle or vessel. That vehicle or vessel may not be a primary scene in the investigation however it will deserve the same attention.

As with any investigation the primary function of the crime scene investigator or evidence recovery technician involves the documentation and the collection of physical evidence. The evidence found in the vehicle may hold an important key to solving that particular investigation. The types of evidence that may be found in the vehicle will be dependent on the criminal act that is being committed.

As an example, a burglary to the vehicle may yield fingerprints to identify a person who gained entry into the vehicle. Where as a vehicle that was used in a homicide involving the shooting, stabbing, or transporting of a victim may yield an assortment of physical evidence.

It is important that the crime scene investigator or evidence recovery technician in the field establish an organized approach to processing the vehicle. As with any scene in an investigation the first task is to gather the information need to identify the vehicle and its contents. This starts with an initial examination of the vehicle. Careful examination of the vehicle will give the investigator or technician an idea of what types of evidence might be present.

After the examination the investigator will then need to thoroughly document the vehicle as it is seen. This will be done by a series of photographs depicting the vehicle. The photographs should start with the exterior and be taken from each side, each corner, front, rear, tag, vin, any decals, any damage or custom accessories. The interior of the vehicle should be photographed from the front drivers area, from each side with the doors open, the ignition area, the dash, the glove box, the instrument panel, the rear seat area, and the trunk area.

With the photographs completed an organized search will then need to be done. The purpose of the organized search is to find items of evidence not observed during the initial examination. The vehicle can be divided into sections (similar to an organized zone search pattern) for the search. It should make no difference what area of the vehicle the investigator chooses to start with, only that the investigator get into a habit to always consistently start from the same area each time he-she processes a vehicle.

The investigator or technician needs to practice on the side of caution when searching under seats and hard to see areas. He-she does not want to stick there hands under a seat and risk being punctured by a contaminated needle or other item. A small mirror and flash light will allow the investigator to check these areas without the risk of exposures or injuries.

If other items of evidence are located during the search, the investigator or technician can then place a series of evidence marking stands alongside the items of evidence to take a series of photographs depicting the location and relationship of any evidence found. If the search for pathways and directions of projectiles becomes the task at hand, the investigator can insert string or dowel rods to track the flight paths. A note to remember is that two (2) points of reference are needed to determine the flight paths of a projectile. The primary purpose of using the string or dowel rods is to illustrate and document the directions of the projectiles for flight paths to assist in locating the projectile.

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The next step in the process would be the collection of evidence. The investigator or technician will usually want to start with the most fragile evidence. Evidence becomes fragile by the passing of time, exposure to the elements or environment, any movement, and of course improper handling. The most fragile of the evidence types would be any trace evidence aboard. With the new developments in DNA an area to consider would be swabbing samples of the steering wheel, inside door handle and of course the driver's seat belt buckle.

Last but not least would come the mechanical processing for any latent fingerprints. The investigator or technician should search the common sense areas working a border of approximately 6 inches wide around the sides, hood, trunk, roof support post, and windows of the exterior of the vehicle. Common sense would also alert to the areas of the fenders surrounding the wheel weld if a tire is missing. For the interior, the door handles rear view mirror, seat belt buckles, windows, and any other nonporous item will need to be checked. An organized system in place allows a tedious task to be more simple and mistake free.

Safe processing!!!

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