



Investigative Report of the U.S. Park Police's Response During a Missing-Person Investigation

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This is a version of the report prepared for public release.

SYNOPSIS

The National Park Service (NPS) asked the Office of Inspector General (OIG) to investigate the actions the U.S. Park Police (USPP) took in response to a May 2013 incident in which 83-year-old Victoria M. Kong went missing from Ronald Reagan National Airport. USPP assisted the Metropolitan Washington Airport Authority (MWAA) Police Department in the search for Ms. Kong, who was ultimately found dead in a wooded area of Gravelly Point Park, less than a mile from airport property.

NPS requested this investigation after its executives learned that a USPP shift commander made inappropriate, insensitive comments about Ms. Kong during recorded telephone conversations with a USPP communications sergeant. The NPS executives believed that the shift commander's remarks raised concerns about the sufficiency of USPP's response during the search.

Our investigation revealed that during the telephone conversations, the shift commander described Ms. Kong as a "9,000-year-old Alzheimer's woman" and said that she probably "went into the fucking river." During his interview with OIG investigators, the shift commander admitted that his comments were "crass" and explained that he had been frustrated due to staffing shortages on his shift.

Despite the shift commander's remarks, we found that USPP's assistance to MWAA during the search complied with USPP's policies and procedures. During our investigation, however, we noted that information about the case was not always effectively communicated within USPP. We also found that the policy governing USPP's response to missing-person incidents does not clearly define USPP's role when assisting another law enforcement agency in a search.

We provided this report to the Director of NPS for any action he deemed appropriate. In its response to the report, NPS informed us that administrative action has been taken against the shift commander, and new policies have been implemented to address the issues we raised (**Attachment 1**).

DETAILS OF INVESTIGATION

On June 6, 2013, Margaret "Peggy" O'Dell, Deputy Director of Operations, National Park Service (NPS), U.S. Department of the Interior, asked the Office of Inspector General to investigate the actions of the U.S. Park Police (USPP) in response to the disappearance and subsequent death of Ms. Victoria M. Kong in May 2013. NPS requested this investigation after officials discovered that a USPP shift commander made insensitive comments about the missing woman.

Friday, May 3, 2013: Ms. Kong Goes Missing

Ms. Victoria Kong, age 83, of Gaithersburg, MD, arrived at Ronald Reagan National Airport (DCA) on an American Airlines flight from Miami, FL, at 4:00 p.m.¹ Airport security video shows Ms. Kong, who was traveling alone and who had reportedly begun to show signs of dementia, exiting the plane, walking to the baggage claim area, and later wandering through the terminal and out of the airport by herself.

At approximately 6:00 p.m., family members who had come to DCA to pick Ms. Kong up contacted Metropolitan Washington Airport Authority (MWAA) police at the terminal. Efforts to locate her began, but she had already left the airport. At around 11:00 p.m., MWAA police initiated an official missing-person report for Ms. Kong.

Saturday, May 4, Through the Morning of Monday, May 6, 2013: USPP Assists MWAA in Search for Ms. Kong

USPP Notified of Ms. Kong's Disappearance

At 2:18 a.m. on May 4, MWAA police telephoned USPP Communications and informed them that Ms. Kong had gone missing from DCA. In response, USPP put out a “Be on the Lookout” notice for Ms. Kong to its street patrols.

MWAA police contacted USPP again at 3:42 a.m. and told the communications sergeant on duty that airport security cameras had recorded footage of Ms. Kong walking along the Mt. Vernon Trail, a bicycle path that runs beside George Washington Parkway, at approximately 6:30 p.m. the day before. (Although the security cameras recorded Ms. Kong’s movements while she was on airport property, MWAA did not review the recordings until several hours later.) She was heading toward Gravelly Point Park, just north of DCA. Gravelly Point is NPS property and falls within USPP’s jurisdiction; USPP District 2 has patrol responsibility for this area.

We interviewed this communications sergeant, who told us he had USPP dispatchers broadcast Ms. Kong’s information to the street patrols, especially to the officers in District 2. He said he also contacted the District 2 patrol supervisor, and gave him the information.

USPP subsequently dispatched patrols to Gravelly Point to search for Ms. Kong. During their interviews, two USPP officers explained that they searched the trail, the area from Gravelly Point to the Memorial Bridge, and Theodore Roosevelt Island. One of the officers noted that they conducted their searches mostly in their patrol cars, using their “takedown lights, alley lights, spotlights, [and] headlights” to improve visibility, but also searched the wooded areas on foot using flashlights.

The USPP communications sergeant told us that he also briefed the shift commander on duty at the time about the incident. He explained that it was dark outside when the initial MWAA calls came in, so he did not believe USPP would take much action; rather, he said, he understood from

¹ See pp. 8 and 9 of this report for a full timeline of case events.

the shift commander's comments that the shift commander would pass the information about the incident on to the next shift commander.

Shift Commander's Remarks About Ms. Kong

At 3:45 and 4:04 a.m. on May 4, the communications sergeant and the shift commander spoke by telephone about whether MWAA or USPP should handle the incident. During one of these conversations, the shift commander said of Ms. Kong: "You know if it's a frickin' 9,000-year-old Alzheimer's woman, she frickin' went into the fucking river. You know that." The shift commander also said that he would prefer to "punt this [case] over" to MWAA and expressed concern that MWAA was trying to "kick this over to us."

During an interview with the shift commander, we played him the recordings of his conversations with the communications sergeant. The shift commander admitted his comments about Ms. Kong were "crass." He explained that he was "extremely short on manpower" at the time and was frustrated over "trying to deal with a challenging situation that wasn't ours." He also told us that around the end of May 2013 his law enforcement authority was suspended because USPP wanted to review his overall response to the incident.

We interviewed the then-USPP chief of police and three members of her executive team about the decision to place the shift commander on administrative duty. The chief, who retired in December 2013, told us that when she listened to the recordings, she was "aghast" at the shift commander's comments about Mrs. Kong's disappearance. She and her team decided that due to potential criminal charges, they should relieve the shift commander of his law enforcement powers, remove him from his position, and ask the U.S. Attorney's Office to review the matter.

On May 31, 2013, the U.S. Attorney's Office for the Eastern District of Virginia reviewed the recorded conversations at USPP's request and found no evidence of criminal wrongdoing by the shift commander.

USPP's Efforts To Assist MWAA in the 3-Day Search for Ms. Kong

At 4:24 a.m. on May 4, the shift commander informed the communications sergeant that MWAA had assumed primary responsibility for the missing-person case, with USPP and other agencies assisting as needed. The shift commander explained to us that MWAA police told him that MWAA was taking the lead on the case, and that he told them to "let us know what we can . . . do to help." He also told us he had conducted a drive-through search of Gravelly Point and the airport property himself, although he could not recall details.

The shift commander described passing on information about the incident to the next shift commander, who would be relieving him at 6:00 a.m. on May 4. He felt that more searches would take place at that time because the MWAA police and its assisting agencies would have the benefit of the daylight hours. He said that before he ended his shift that day, he obtained a photograph of Ms. Kong from the MWAA police, enhanced it, and passed it on to the next shift commander.

We interviewed a second USPP communications sergeant, who told us that the communications sergeant briefed him about Ms. Kong at about 6:00 a.m. on May 4. The second communications sergeant told us that he understood that the USPP street units from District 2 were aware of the missing-person incident and were assisting the MWAA police by conducting routine searches of areas in their jurisdiction that were adjacent to the airport. He could not provide specific details of USPP's search activities during his shift but said that if units were at a location conducting a search they would normally call the Communications Section and provide their location for "officer safety" purposes.

We also reviewed approximately 900 hours of recorded communications obtained from multiple USPP telephone lines and radio frequency channels. These recordings indicated that between May 4 and 6, USPP officers conducted searches of Gravelly Point, Theodore Roosevelt Island, and other areas during their routine patrols.

We interviewed the MWAA chief of police and several MWAA police officers about the cooperative efforts between MWAA and USPP in the search for Ms. Kong. The MWAA police chief told us his department wanted to keep possession of the case since Ms. Kong had gone missing from MWAA's jurisdiction and his officers felt a responsibility to make every effort to find her. All of the MWAA officers we interviewed who had interacted with USPP officers, including the shift commander, were satisfied with the level of cooperation and assistance USPP provided.

Search Location Changed; Use of USPP Helicopter During Search

During the afternoon of Sunday, May 5, police dogs from the Fairfax County Police Department tracked what appeared to be Ms. Kong's scent to Theodore Roosevelt Island, approximately 2.5 miles north of DCA (see Figure 1 on p. 5). USPP officers provided access security and coordination at Roosevelt Island during subsequent searches conducted by MWAA SWAT teams, dogs, and other search-and-rescue teams.

At about 10:00 p.m. on May 5, a USPP helicopter with forward-looking infrared capability searched Roosevelt Island for Ms. Kong. Officers from the USPP Aviation Unit who assisted in the search told us that the unit received the search request from the MWAA police that same day. The Aviation Unit did not receive a request for, and therefore did not conduct, a search of Gravelly Point.

When the helicopter went up, Ms. Kong had been missing more than 48 hours. We asked the shift commander why he had not requested a helicopter during the early morning hours of May 4, when he was initially involved in the incident. He told us that he did not believe the use of helicopters had occurred to him, but added that if the MWAA police had requested an aerial search for Ms. Kong, he would have contacted the Aviation Unit and requested assistance.

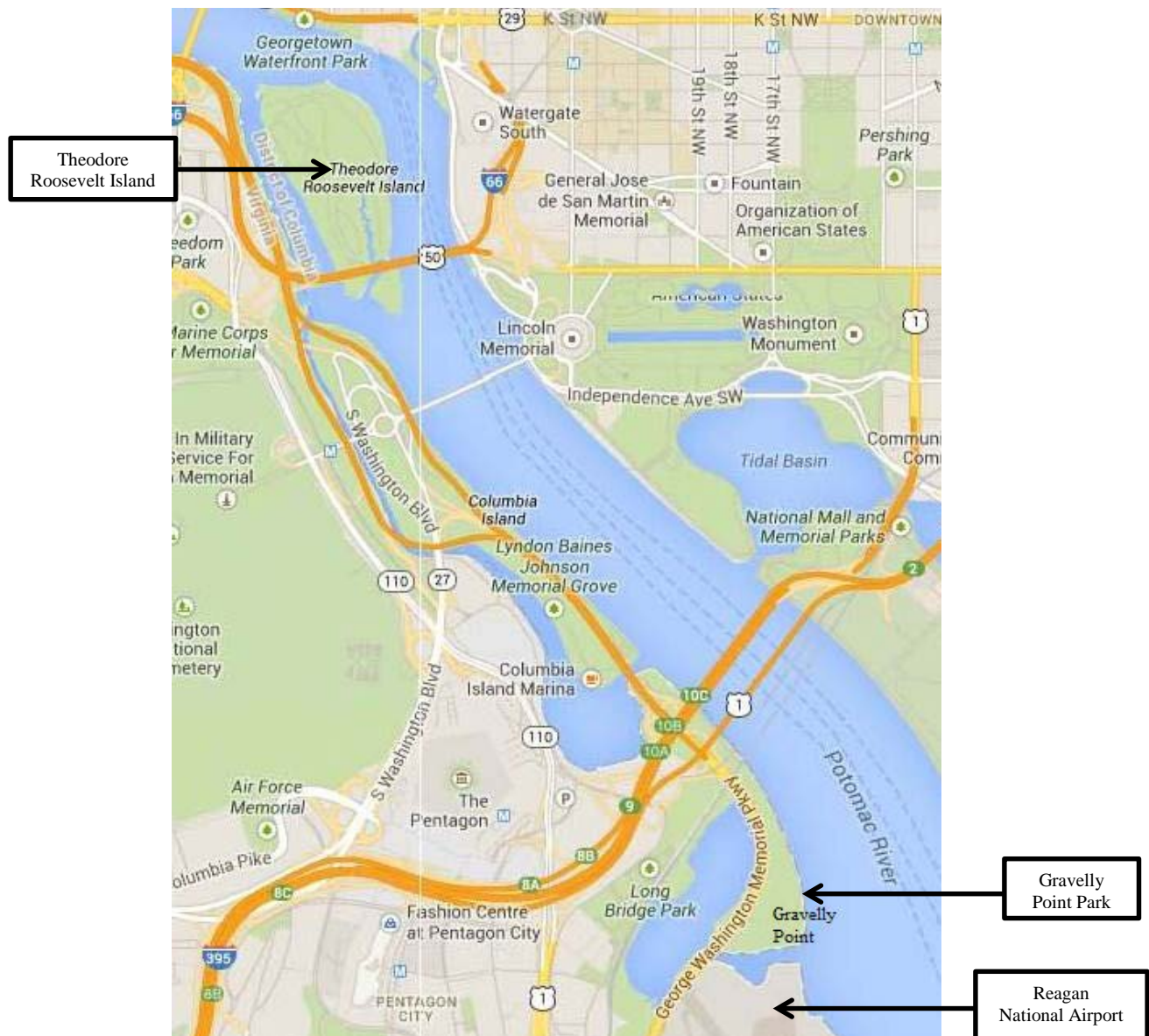


Figure I. Map showing Theodore Roosevelt Island, Gravelly Point, and the northernmost tip of DCA property. Source: Google.

Interviews of the other USPP shift commanders who were on duty between May 4 and 6 revealed some confusion about requesting assistance from the Aviation Unit. One of the other shift commanders, for example, believed that USPP’s helicopters had been grounded at the time of Ms. Kong’s disappearance due to a USPP furlough; this commander did not think helicopters would be called in to assist in a missing-person investigation anyway. Another shift commander was aware that a USPP helicopter had been used to assist in the search for Ms. Kong, but could not remember if she had been the one who requested it. The USPP missing-person policy does not address the use of aviation support in situations where USPP is assisting another agency in a search.

Afternoon of Monday, May 6: Ms. Kong's Body Is Found

At around 1:40 p.m., a volunteer search-and-rescue team located Ms. Kong's body in a heavily wooded area of Gravelly Point Park (see Figure 2). She was lying at the base of an embankment, about 30 feet from the trail she had followed from the airport.

USPP assumed primary responsibility for the investigation into Ms. Kong's death. The investigation concluded that her death was accidental.



Figure 2. Map showing the approximate location of Ms. Kong's body. Source: Google.

Issues Noted During Our Investigation

Although we found that USPP followed its policies and procedures as it assisted MWAA in the search for Ms. Kong, we noted two issues during our investigative work. We discovered that information about Ms. Kong was not always communicated effectively within USPP during the search, and that USPP's missing-person policy does not clearly define USPP's responsibilities in cases where USPP is assisting another law enforcement agency in a search.

Information Was Not Always Effectively Communicated Within USPP During the Search

USPP has seven shift commanders, who are responsible for supervising the daily activities of USPP Districts 1 through 5 as well as specialized units. These commanders report to the USPP watch commander. We interviewed the watch commander and the shift commanders who were on duty between May 4 and 6, 2013. All described being notified by the "off-going" shift commanders about the incident and the assistance USPP was providing to the MWAA police.

We also interviewed several USPP officers from District 2 to determine their level of involvement in the search for Ms. Kong. The officers told us they conducted various types of searches for Ms. Kong, both in and out of their vehicles, during their shifts between May 4 and 6. Most of the officers told us their actions were consistent with past missing-person searches in which they had participated.

Officers acknowledged that Ms. Kong's information should have been communicated to new shifts during roll call since it was an ongoing missing-person case. Some officers told us, however, that they could not recall if any information regarding Ms. Kong had been passed along to them from the prior shift. We were told that, in general, information would occasionally not be passed from one shift to the next and that it would "just kind of float around" and officers only looked at it if they had a chance to do so. One District 2 officer told us he knew nothing of USPP's involvement in the search for Ms. Kong until he discovered a missing-person flyer lying on a table in the District 2 roll call room. This officer told us he did not know what agency had prepared the flyer and said no information about Ms. Kong was shared during roll call. He said he made a mental note of the information on the flyer and proceeded to his patrol area. He also said that he was later detailed to assist the MWAA police during the search.

During our review of the recorded USPP communications between May 3 and 6, we found several instances in which USPP communications sergeants and dispatchers were not fully aware of information pertaining to Ms. Kong's disappearance and USPP's assistance of the MWAA police. For example, during a telephone conversation with the MWAA police on Sunday, May 5, 2013, a USPP communications sergeant seemed to be unaware of the USPP assistance being provided in this case and requested a description of Ms. Kong and details on her disappearance. In another instance, a different USPP communications sergeant contacted the MWAA police asking to speak to Victoria Kong about a missing-person case. It was apparent from the conversation that the sergeant knew that a woman was missing but did not know that Ms. Kong was the missing woman.

USPP Missing-Person Policy Does Not Clearly Define USPP's Responsibilities When Assisting Another Law Enforcement Agency

USPP General Order 2220, dated September 30, 1999, and signed by USPP's chief of police at that time, is the current USPP policy that establishes guidelines for conducting searches for missing persons and for recording and investigating missing-person complaints. The General Order provides specific, detailed requirements only in cases where USPP has primary jurisdiction for investigating a report of a missing person. When USPP does not have primary jurisdiction but instead has received a request for assistance from another agency, the General Order merely states: "The shift commander shall be notified and shall determine if a search shall be conducted and, if so, at what location and to what extent."

TIMELINE OF EVENTS

Date	Time	Event
Fri., May 3	4:00 p.m.	Victoria Kong exits her plane through Gate 28 at DCA.
	4:00 – 6:33 p.m.	Security cameras capture Ms. Kong wandering through the terminal and baggage claim area and then leaving the airport. Later footage shows her walking alone on the Mt. Vernon Trail near George Washington Parkway, heading north toward Gravelly Point.
	Approx. 6:00 p.m.	After Ms. Kong's family cannot find her at a prearranged meeting spot, they enlist the help of MWAA police staff to search the airport for her.
	Approx. 11:00 p.m.	MWAA initiates an official missing-person report.
Sat., May 4	2:18 a.m.	MWAA contacts USPP and provides basic information about the situation.
	2:24 a.m.	USPP puts out a "Be on the Lookout" to its patrols for Ms. Kong.
	3:42 a.m.	MWAA contacts USPP and informs the communications sergeant on duty that Ms. Kong was captured on video walking toward Gravelly Point at approximately 6:30 p.m. May 3.
	3:43 a.m.	The communications sergeant briefs the on-duty USPP patrol supervisor, who tells the communications sergeant he will have USPP patrols check out the area.
	Approx. 3:45 a.m.	Two USPP patrols are dispatched to search the Gravelly Point area.
	3:45 and 4:04 a.m.	The communications sergeant briefs the shift commander on duty about the incident. The shift commander makes several comments about Ms. Kong and the incident to the communications sergeant.
	6:00 a.m. – Noon	USPP patrols conduct some searches of Gravelly Point and other areas during regular patrols.
	Afternoon and evening	MWAA continues search for Ms. Kong with other agencies assisting.

Date	Time	Event
Sun., May 5	Morning	MWAA and assisting agencies continue to search.
	Afternoon and evening	Fairfax County police dogs track Ms. Kong's scent from DCA to Roosevelt Island. MWAA SWAT and search-and-rescue teams search the island. USPP officers are on scene providing access security and other assistance as requested.
	Approx. 10:00 – 10:40 p.m.	A USPP helicopter conducts an aerial search of Roosevelt Island.
Mon., May 6	6:00 a.m. – 1:40 p.m.	USPP continues assisting MWAA at Roosevelt Island during ongoing search-and-rescue efforts. Other search-and-rescue teams search Gravelly Point and other areas.
	Approx. 1:40 p.m.	Ms. Kong's body is found on Gravelly Point.

SUBJECT

U.S. Park Police shift commander.

DISPOSITION

We provided this report to the Director of NPS for any action he deemed appropriate. In its response to the report, NPS informed us that administrative action has been taken against the shift commander, and new policies have been implemented to address the issues we raised (see Attachment 1).



United States Department of the Interior

NATIONAL PARK SERVICE

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IN REPLY REFER TO
2400

OCT 21 2014

Memorandum

To: Assistant Inspector General for Investigation

From: Deputy Director, Operations *Peggy O'Dell*

Subject: NPS Response to Report of Investigation – Case No. PI-PI-13-0405-I

The National Park Service has reviewed the completed Office of Inspector General (OIG) investigation regarding this matter and has taken several actions to address the report's recommendations. The identified misconduct of United States Park Police (USPP) personnel was investigated and disciplinary/administrative action was initiated. While the OIG found that the USPP complied with its policies and procedures regarding missing persons, a comprehensive internal review resulted in the publication of updated policies regarding standards of conduct, missing persons, and the dissemination of information. I am confident that these actions will enhance the efficiency and effectiveness of the United States Park Police.