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## Large-scale excavation is not the answer to finding remains

(Catherine Morrison, [Irish News](#))

*Four years after the last major digs to find the remains of people abducted, murdered and secretly buried by republicans in the 1970s, the forensic scientist leading a new push to locate the bodies speaks exclusively to Catherine Morrison*

Technology will be the key to finding the remains of nine victims of republican paramilitaries which have yet to be found, a forensic science expert has said.

Retired detective chief superintendent Geoff Knupfer said large-scale excavations like those seen in the past were no longer the most efficient way of locating the bodies of the 'Disappeared'.

Instead a team of specialists who have worked on 'cold cases' around the world are to examine potential burial sites using 'geophysics' radar analysis, detection dogs and advanced DNA technology.

They are to begin work on around half a dozen sites in the Republic within weeks, mostly in the border counties.

One, in Co Wicklow, is believed to be the same site searched by gardai in 1999 and 2000 looking for the body of Belfast man Danny McIlhone, who was kidnapped in 1978.

The bodies of four of the 'Disappeared' – including Jean McConville, who was found by accident – have been recovered.

But for the families whose loved ones have yet to be found, their suffering continues unabated.

Mr Knupfer, who assisted in searches for the victims of Moors murderers Ian Brady and Myra Hindley in the 1980s, said specialist equipment will be employed to try to pinpoint the spot where bodies lie buried.

While he said he is "optimistic" that this latest drive will recover some, if not all, of the victims' remains, he said anyone expecting massive excavation work would be

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disappointed.

"Where things have changed in the intervening years is that we now tend to use the non-invasive methods first," Mr Knupfer said.

"Only if they highlight or identify areas that could be the grave sites then we will move on from there.

"We don't know what this process is going to reveal. If it does reveal target areas or areas of probable grave sites, we will start working on them immediately."

The challenges facing the investigators are formidable.

"I think that probably in some cases... the people directly involved have died," Mr Knupfer said.

"If you're reviewing events that took place 30 years ago, then memories do fade and locations change and that's one of the things we have identified pretty rapidly – that the sites have changed dramatically."

Weather, vegetation growth and changes in the physical landscape have all taken their toll on suspected sites, making them look very different today than 30 years ago.

"What we are trying to ascertain is if there is anyone else out there that has not necessarily primary knowledge then secondary knowledge of what took place and could help us in terms of identifying locations," Mr Knupfer said.

"This is the next big step forward. Time is of the essence but we don't want to rush – nothing is dramatically changing here.

"We want to do this very carefully, very cautiously. We will be doing them site-by-site, not five or six sites at once. We are doing this in a very deliberate and careful manner using the same team to do all of them."

The experts gathered together by the Independent Commission for the Location of Victims' Remains include specialists who have worked on missing persons cases in Britain and further afield.

"We've got investigators who are looking at the background trying to identify and recover relevant information in terms of sites," he said.

"We have imagery experts looking at mapping and topography to fine-tune the locations. And we also have a

body detection dogs and handlers available to us.

"Last but not least we have a team of archaeologists who are ultimately heading up the physical survey. They are deciding the list or the sequence in which we do things."

Mr Knupfer was first approached by the commission for the 'Disappeared' to head up the latest inquiry in 2004.

Since then he has visited several suspected burial places with members of the IRA on numerous occasions and said the republicans are doing "everything they can" to assist in the searches.

"As an outsider to Irish politics and issues I really didn't know what to expect," he said.

"But I was very pleasantly surprised at the level of support that I and my colleagues have received and it has continued.

"The organisation [the IRA] has realised that this issue is not going to go away and in a spirit of cooperation and reconciliation they are trying to help in every way they can.

"I am absolutely convinced that they are doing everything they can to assist.

"The support we have had from them has been absolutely 100% from day one."

Mr Knupfer said the commission's decision three years ago to move from a "reactive" to a "proactive" organisation was a brave one.

"I think the result of that is what you see today – we've got a team of experts and scientists gathered together to undertake this work and that's because the commissioners decided that was the way forward," he said.

"It was a brave decision to take and probably the most important decision that's been taken."

Mr Knupfer said it is "crucial" that the victims' bodies are found.

"It's a well-used phrase but it is about bringing closure, as far as the families are concerned, and that is of great importance."

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