

ISP Investigation Results In Life Sentence For Muder In Missouri

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ULLIN – An Illinois State Police (ISP) Division of Criminal Investigation Zone 7 investigation results in the conviction of 35-year-old James A. Merritt of Morehouse, MO for the following charges in Missouri: Murder in the Second Degree (Class A Felony) – life sentence, Armed Criminal Action (Unclassified Felony) – 20 year sentence, Tampering with Physical Evidence (Class E Felony) – 4 year sentence, and Trafficking for the Purpose of Sexual Exploitation (Unclassified Felony) – 5 year sentence plus \$25,000 fee. The charges all stem from a body found in rural Pulaski County Illinois in March of 2020.

"The investigative efforts of the ISP agents and forensic scientists involved in this investigation are to be commended," stated ISP Zone 7 Commander, Captain Nicholas Dill. "I'd also like to express our appreciation to the Missouri Highway Patrol for their collaboration in this investigation. The cooperation between the state law enforcement agencies on both sides of the river resulted in a successful investigation and conviction."

On March 26, 2020, the body of an unknown female was located concealed inside a suitcase in the Cypress Creek National Wildlife Refuge in rural Pulaski County, IL. ISP agents searched through missing person records and believed the body was 18-year-old Haley Decker of Normal, IL. Decker was reported missing on March 4, 2020, in Normal, IL. Fingerprints were taken and the identity of the body was confirmed to be Decker.

Once Decker was identified, agents connected her through digital evidence to Merritt's residence in Morehouse, MO. On April 16, 2020, ISP, Missouri State Highway Patrol's Division of Drug and Crime Control, and the FBI executed a search warrant at Merritt's residence. The search warrant led to evidence that proved Decker had once lived with Merritt. Other evidence obtained during the search warrant revealed enough information to charge Merritt with Trafficking for the Purpose of Sexual Exploitation and he was taken into custody. As the investigation progressed, it was determined that Merritt was responsible for the death of Decker. On April 20, 2020, Merritt was also charged with Murder, Armed Criminal Action and Tampering with Physical Evidence.

On January 26, 2024, Merritt was convicted of all charges in a New Madrid County, MO court. Merritt's formal sentencing hearing was conducted on March 13, 2024 where he received the above-mentioned sentences and fines.

Assisting agencies were the Normal Police Department in Illinois, as well as the following Missouri agencies: New Madrid County Sheriff's Office, Sikeston Department of Public Safety, Cape Girardeau Police Department and the Morehouse Police Department. No further information is available.