



NEWS RELEASE

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Search for Missing Palm Coast Woman More Than 22 Years After Her Mysterious Disappearance Uncovers Vehicle, Bones and Additional Evidence

Human Remains Believed to Belong to Mary Lou Combs Located

BUNNELL, Fla. — The Flagler County Sheriff’s Office, with assistance from Recon Dive Recovery, Helo & Sub, the Federal Bureau of Investigation’s (FBI) Underwater Search and Evidence Response Team (USERT) – Miami Office, and the FBI Jacksonville Evidence Response Team (ERT), have recovered parts of a vehicle, clothing, child toys, and human remains believed to belong to Mary Lou Combs, a Palm Coast woman who mysteriously vanished in 2003.

FCSO detectives began investigating Combs’ disappearance on Oct. 9, 2003, after a family member reported her missing. Combs was last seen on Aug. 19, 2003, leaving the home she shared periodically with her mother and her three children. Her family became concerned when she failed to show up to her daughter’s birthday party days later. According to her family and friends, Combs had a history of disappearing; however, it was out of character for her not to show up for her children’s events. The family later contacted FCSO upon learning she had never collected her paycheck from her former employer, a Food Lion located in Flagler Beach. Combs was 41 years old at the time of her disappearance.

Over the course of the investigation, detectives received tips about Combs’ disappearance, including locations to search for her body and her vehicle, but aerial and water searches of these locations

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yielded negative results.

In 2020, Sheriff Rick Staly created the Cold Case Unit to investigate unsolved homicides, missing persons and sexual assaults. At the time, Sheriff Staly said, “We must be the voice for the victims and their families and to provide answers on what happened and hold offenders accountable.”

In Feb. 2024, a voluntary dive team, in coordination with the FCSO Cold Case Unit, offered to search for Combs’ vehicle, a red 1996 Plymouth Neon Coupe. In Oct. 2025, the voluntary dive team located a bumper — of what appears to be the same make, model, and color of Combs’ vehicle — underwater in the Intracoastal Waterway near the area of 18th Road in Palm Coast.

Due to the location and fragile condition of the vehicle, a member of the FCSO Dive Team and lead detective contacted the FBI USERT – Miami Office and FBI ERT – Jacksonville Office, who agreed to assist with recovering the vehicle, which was submerged approximately 14 to 17 feet underwater, upside down, and partially buried in muck. The three-day recovery operation began on Feb. 3, which was also National Missing Persons Day.

During the operation, FBI divers located and entered the vehicle through the broken driver side window and used dredging equipment to remove its contents by suctioning the items into a sluice basket on shore. Members of FBI ERT and FCSO’s CSI team then sorted through the sediment to collect any evidence. Parts of the vehicle were among the items retrieved, including red plastic, a manual window crank, floor mat, and a steering wheel with “Neon” written on it. Divers also located a size 7 shoe, consistent with Combs’ shoe size. Human remains, which were identified by the FBI’s onsite forensic anthropologist, were also recovered.

In addition to the vehicle parts and human remains collected, divers also located Combs’ Florida driver’s license, items known to belong to Combs, and children’s toys and child seat. One of the bones recovered had a metal plate known to have been used in an ankle reconstruction on Combs for an ankle injury. Detectives are currently awaiting confirmation on where the medical devices were shipped and whether the serial numbers were registered to Combs.

The human remains are currently with the medical examiner, who is conducting an investigation to determine cause of death. Once the investigation is complete, they’ll be sent to a lab, and the DNA will be cross referenced with the DNA on file to determine if they are a match for Combs.

“All the evidence gathered thus far suggests that the remains we have recovered are those of Mary Lou Comb,” said Sheriff Rick Staly. “While this is not the outcome anyone hoped for, we knew locating Mary alive was extremely unlikely given the length of time she had been missing. Our detectives and

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partnering agencies worked tirelessly to bring this family answers so they have the opportunity to finally lay their loved one to rest.”

This investigation remains active as detectives work with the medical examiner and DNA to confirm the identity of the remains and determine the cause of death. Rumors that she overdosed at a house party and someone then disposed of her body have not been confirmed and current evidence indicates this may have been a tragic accident after she accidentally drove her car into the Intracoastal Waterway and likely drowned.

“I would like to acknowledge the men and women of the Flagler County Sheriff’s Office who have worked diligently on this recovery mission as well as the FBI, Florida Fish and Wildlife Conservation Commission, District 23 Medical Examiner’s Office, Ken Fleming from Recon Dive Recovery, and Vern Shurtz from Helo & Sub. By working together, we were able to solve this case and provide some answers and peace to the Combs family after decades of uncertainty,” Sheriff Staly added.

Anyone with information on this case or any other FCSO cold case should contact the Flagler County Sheriff’s Office non-emergency line at 386-313-4911 or email tips@flaglersheriff.com. You may also contact Crime Stoppers at 1-888-277-TIPS (8477).

Unsolved FCSO cold cases can be viewed at: <https://www.flaglersheriff.com/cold-case>.

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