



AMERICA'S MOST WANTED

Staying on Track and Learning from the Best

He's wanted by the FBI, Special Forces, the Border Patrol, sheriff departments, SWAT teams, and at least a dozen police agencies within California and Nevada. Law enforcement personnel are aware that he camps in the mountain ranges near Reno and that he uses "Grasshopper" as an alias. What makes him so hard to find is his ability to cover his tracks, never leaving a trail.

By looking at him, you would never suspect he is capable of doing what he has done: His dark, peaceful eyes, gentle smile, warm laugh, and calm demeanor are his most notable traits. But like the strategic chess player, his mind is always several moves ahead of you. The dictionary describes him to a tee under the word *stealth*.

His name is Fernando Moreira, the most sought-after tracking instructor in the United States. In 1988, he was awarded the distin-

guished title of *World's Best Tracker*. His certifications, merit letters, and commendations would fill an oversized notebook and include such honors as the American Red Cross Real Hero Award (2005, 2006), Rescuer of the Year (2001), Excellence in Search and Rescue Medal (1999), and recent nominations for the Jefferson Award (2005, 2006) and the America's Most Wanted All Star Award (2006, 2007).

Moreira became interested in the art of tracking while serving in the Portuguese Army. The year was 1976, and as a 16-year-old boy living in Portugal, he was required to join the military due to mandatory enlistment. After 9 months of

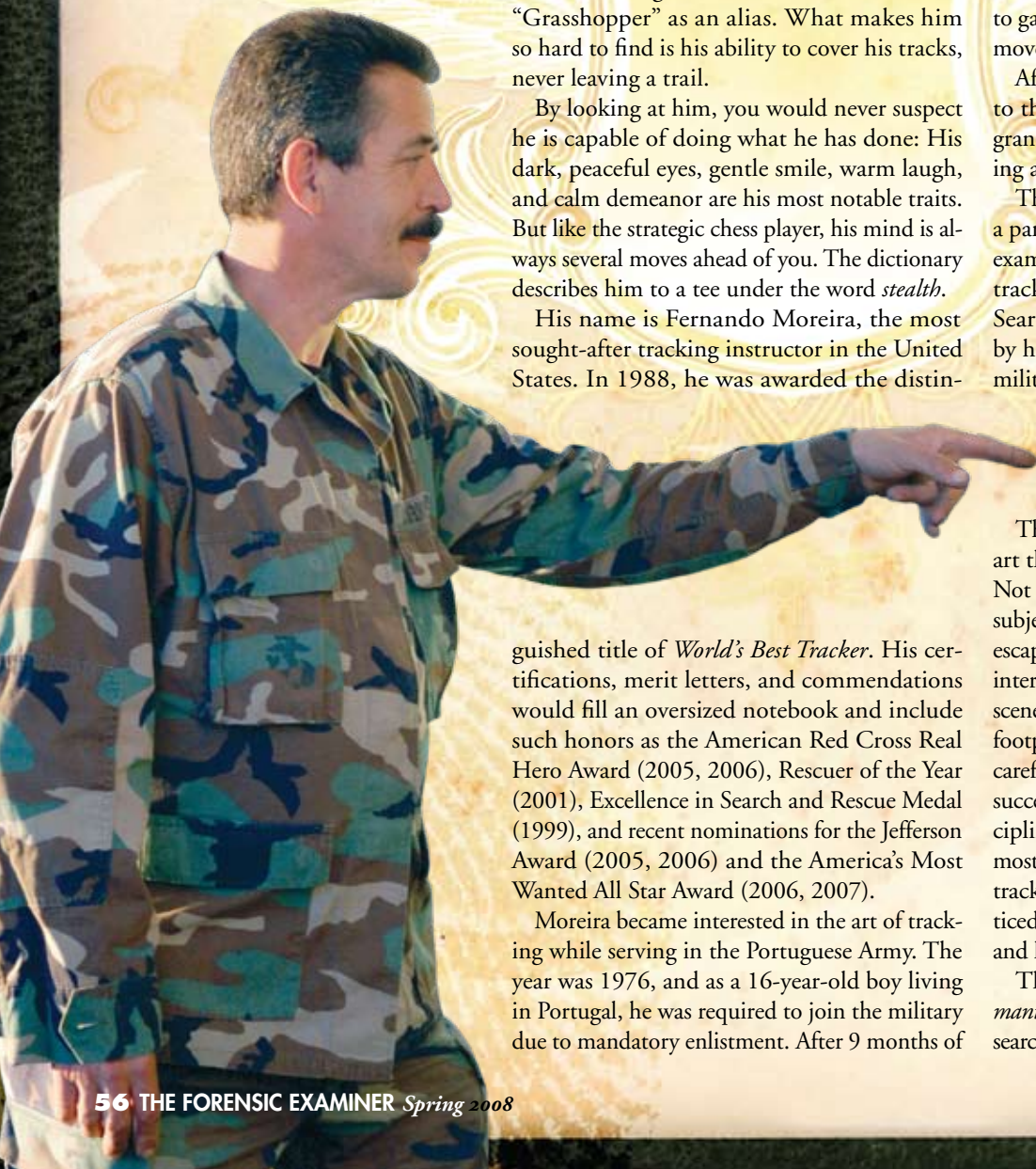
training, he was deployed to Angola to fight in the war against Africa. Over the next 2 years, he received specialized instruction in tactical tracking from the Rhodesian military, as they tracked enemy forces and provided crucial intelligence for ground and air attacks. Each day, the lives of numerous soldiers relied on trackers' abilities to gather precise information about the enemy's movements and position.

After an honorable discharge, Moreira moved to the United States, where he lived with his grandmother and continued to hone his tracking and wilderness survival skills.

Throughout history, man has used tracking as a part of his daily survival. Prehistoric man, for example, had to track animals for food. Today, tracking has become increasingly utilized by Search and Rescue (SAR), and is being used by hunters, law enforcement agencies, and the military. It has recently gone through a rebirth, thanks to Moreira and his hard-working associates, who strongly believe that the more people they can train, the more lives they can save.

The time-honored tradition of tracking is an art that has proven its worth many times over. Not only is this skill used to find lost or missing subjects, it can also be used to track fugitives and escapees, as well as discovering, identifying, and interpreting various types of evidence at a crime scene. Tracking involves following *sign* (traces) or footprints, monitoring the subject's course, and carefully observing and pursuing that target to a successful end. A *tracker* is one who has the discipline needed to develop these skills, and like most specialties in the field of Search and Rescue, tracking uses skills that must be regularly practiced and perfected, or they risk becoming stale and lost.

The use of a specific type of tracking called *mantracking* is an invaluable ability to the ground searcher. It involves the art of tracking man-made





▲ The author pictured here with instructor Moreira during an excursion near Tracy, CA.

types of sign, the most common example being the footprint. Man-made sign is physical evidence, which means that mantracking yields important results for law enforcement. A person's actions, gender, and intentions can be read from the signs they leave—this can often link a specific subject to a crime scene and validate a criminal act.

It's important to note that when a search is initiated and rescue efforts are in full swing, the coordinator cannot merely flood the area with warm bodies and expect instant results; he must rely on a few highly trained volunteers—among them are a small group commonly referred to as *trackers*—to use their skills in finding the subject. These trained searchers can locate and differentiate *sign* in order to establish a direction of travel from a point last seen or last known. By pointing the SAR Coordinator in the right direction, the trackers can assist the search effort by placing other volunteers into a quadrant of higher probability during the initial stages of the operation, thereby saving valuable time and increasing the chances for success.

Anything that moves will leave some kind of *sign* that shows its journey across terrain. Animals, people, and machines all leave sign. It is an established fact that the average adult male leaves at least one clue every 18 to 20 inches. A trained and highly skilled tracker can detect and follow this sign, often when the untrained person sees nothing at all. "If it moves over the ground it must leave sign. A tracker is able to identify and follow sign," says Moreira to a group of sheriff deputies who recently participated in his P.O.S.T. certified course on Crime Scene and Evidence Preservation. For many law enforcement officers, it's an entirely new learning experience—one that is life-changing because anyone can benefit others using Moreira's skill set.

"For those who think that distinguishing a single footprint from another and following it is a simple task, I recommend they go to a lo-



▲ During a recent course on Crime Scene and Evidence Preservation, Moreira teaches law enforcement officers the proper chain of custody techniques.

cal park and try it. If you can follow a single set of tracks for a distance of one mile in less than 30 minutes, then you are exceptional indeed. A tracker who has developed and practiced these skills can easily do that and much more. Just imagine being able to tell your SAR Coordinator not only a subject's direction of travel, but also his or her approximate speed, height, weight, and mental attitude, as well as other various tendencies. Pretty cool, huh?" Moreira quips as he adjusts one of the straps of his tactical vest and checks the contents of his rear pouch.

Whether it is a bent branch, a broken twig, or something that has been dropped, the tracker's duty is to find and follow this sign. A leaf that has been crushed may appear bruised and turn a dark color from damage. A log that is stepped on may show dirt transfer or scuffing. Even rocks show marking and disturbance. For example, a branch of crushed needles becomes transferred to a shoe, which, in turn, is transferred to a rock. These are important clues to look for.

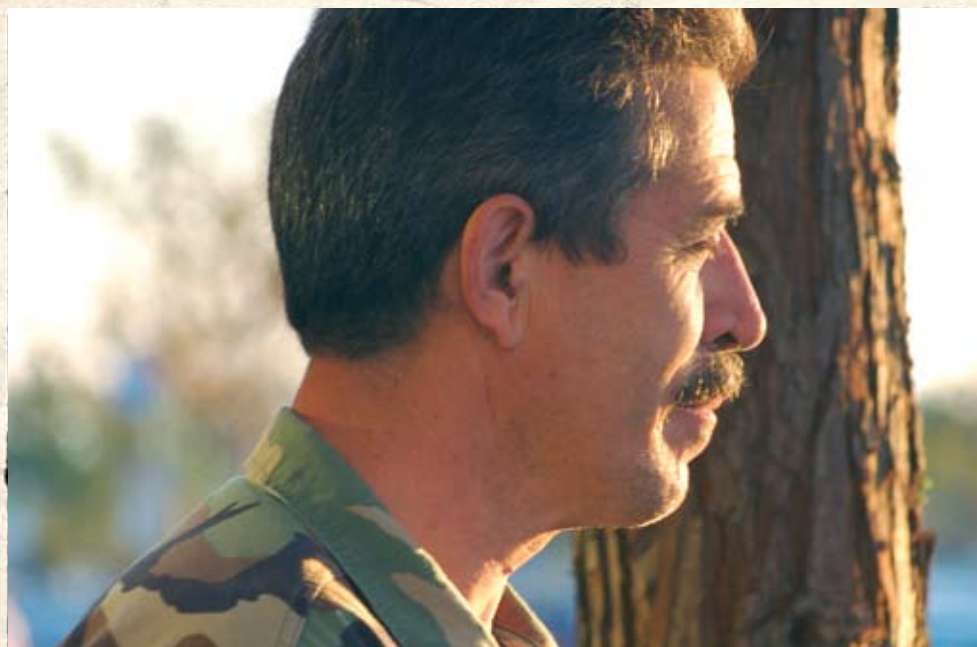
Consider a crime scene: A common myth is that the subject (or suspect) has left several clues, making the initial search effort rather straightforward. In actuality, however, most scenes are contaminated because first responders have other priorities during their response efforts. Their main concern is to save a life, examine a corpse, put out a fire, set up a barrier, and so on. Tracking a suspect takes a professional like Moreira, who knows the procedures of documenting crime scene evidence: making sketches

▼ Moreira demonstrates the use of a mirror to harness the sun, a technique used to highlight tracks during peak hours of sunlight.



Photos courtesy of Peggy Siers and Kim Hernandez

“ ‘In my experience,’ says Moreira, ‘I have taught and used the art of mantracking successfully countless times to assist agencies in need. . . . Together we can save lives.’ ”



▲ **Top:** Moreira instructs students on the proper methods of measuring a lost subject's footprint.
Middle: A group of students pose after a 4-day Tactical Tracking course near Reno, NV.
Bottom: Tactical Snow Tracking is one of the most demanding courses offered, especially when conditions become subzero.

of sign, completing a track report for each set of tracks, establishing a perimeter, recording all personnel who have entered the scene, processing and photographing, and marking trails and tracks with flagging and GPS coordinates. This is the stuff that solves cases and puts offenders behind bars. “Taking really accurate notes has its advantages because they [notes] may be used in court years later. Your careful documentation can lead to a conviction,” remarks Moreira, recalling just such a case.

During his travels to different counties and states teaching the art of mantracking, Moreira offers his services at an affordable cost to ensure that volunteers are properly trained. “I feel volunteers should not have to pay too much for their own education in order to help save a life. After all, they are already spending their own money to purchase equipment, food, gas, and maintenance expenses.”

Moreira is no stranger to news crews—he’s been interviewed by the media so many times regarding his searches in Washoe County, Nevada, that he practically has a camera and microphone with his name on them! For liability reasons, a local law enforcement agency must request Moreira prior to his involvement with a search; he cannot just show up at the scene and announce his arrival.

An example among many that illustrates why Moreira has been the two-time recipient of the American Red Cross Real Hero Award occurred this past year while he and team member Travis

Osterhout were en route to teach a class. They came upon a traffic accident in which an elderly retired surgeon had fallen asleep at the wheel, striking an RV head on. The two took immediate action and notified the Highway Patrol, rendered first aid to the victims, assisted paramedics and fire personnel, then remained at the crash site for over an hour until an inbound helicopter arrived to medivac the injured parties to a hospital.

Though the types of cases Moreira has solved is expansive, the development stage of each case determines the kinds of details that can be disclosed. He explains further, “For cases that are pending, meaning the investigation is still continuing and there has been no resolution as yet, then I am not at liberty to discuss any details.” His hand re-positions his boonie hat as he considers the frustrations encountered on the recent search for billionaire (and world-record holder) Steve Fossett, which was more of an aerial search than a tracking exercise. Then there was the 1977 high-profile case against Siaoosi Vanisi, who brutally murdered campus police officer George Daniel Sullivan. Moreira discovered key evidence that ultimately led to a conviction and sentencing that may not have been possible otherwise. The judicial system is still talking about that case! Although many believed it was impossible to track a fugitive on concrete and asphalt, Moreira managed to re-trace Vanisi’s movements from the crime scene, through the city of Reno, along sidewalks, across the univer-

sity campus, over parking lots and busy streets, and eventually to Vanisi's residence. In fact, it was during the courtroom trial when Moreira amazed everyone. The presiding judge decided to put Moreira to the test with a little demonstration. During a court recess, the judge took the jury outside, and, for the next several minutes, walked around on pavement to see if Moreira could validate his skills. When asked to come outside and re-trace the judge's steps, Moreira did just that—right down to the last print. Officials who witnessed the demonstration were so impressed, Moreira was deemed an expert witness by the court system.

One of Withrow's favorite tracking cases from Moreira's repertoire deals with the armed robbery of a U-Haul truck from Reno, Nevada. On a November evening in 2004, the Nevada Highway Patrol initiated a routine traffic stop with two subjects, only to be met with gunfire. As the subjects sped away, they continued to fire at the officer, who was able to take cover, radio dispatch, and request backup. Nearly 20 minutes into the pursuit, the subject's vehicle crashed into a guardrail near Lake Tahoe. One subject was apprehended while the other fled the scene on foot, running into thick brush and a heavily forested area. An APB (all points bulletin) listed the subject evading capture as armed and dangerous.

Moreira and the county SWAT team were assigned to track the subject, who now had been at large for nearly 6 hours. A background check of the subject revealed prior military training and evasive tactics. Somehow, the subject became privy to the information that a tracker had been called to assist in the search, so he began using several methods to throw searchers off the trail—removing his shoes and walking in socks, stepping on rocks and logs instead of the forest floor, doubling back to leave false clues—anything to aid his escape. Although he traveled through heavy vegetation that did not leave prints, Moreira was able to successfully track his movements, leading the SWAT team into position and surrounding the subject just 3 miles from the crash site. He surrendered and was taken into custody without incident.

Another case involved a child molestation. The FBI contacted the Washoe County Sheriff's office regarding a divorced male with federal warrants who was wanted for pornography and child abuse in another state. He had crossed the Nevada state line and abandoned his vehicle in a remote mountain area. Once Moreira was assigned to the case, he was able to identify faint traces of the subject's prints and began to track sign for more than 2 miles.

As he got closer to where the trail was leading him, he could smell a campfire. Tracking carefully into the camp, Moreira noticed the fire was still warm and contained a melting pot of plastic and paper. He was so intent on his find and so focused on the evidence in front of him that he forgot to look up. There, in a tree just a few yards away was the subject, who had hanged himself after attempting to destroy a collection of incriminating photographs.

Moreira tells each episode with such gusto, one can't help but get excited. "He has the wonderful ability to take your imagination, sprinkle it with flavor, and make you feel as though you are actually there as part of the search team," says Roger Rickman, Regional Director for NEMT Region 9. "He is one of the most humble people I have met in a long time. He lives his life according to the SAR creed—*So that others may live*—and doesn't search because of the money or publicity," says Dave Moezzi, DSS Officer for the U.S. Department of State.

Despite his many accolades, Moreira gives much of the credit to his tracking staff, the search team members who have proven their loyalty by remaining with him through the years, assisting in a variety of tasks that promote the art of mantracking. The staff is available 24/7/365, and, with Moreira's leadership, will travel wherever their services are requested.

Moreira has this to say to those who are interested in Search and Rescue training: "Tracking is a specialized skill that needs to be a part of every SAR organization. The tools required are few to none; this skill is successful where modern technology has been known either to fail, or at least create unnecessary complications. There is much to learn in order to become a competent and reputable tracker.

"In my experience," says Moreira, "I have taught and used the art of mantracking successfully countless times to assist agencies in need. If you have the dedication and time, I strongly suggest you become involved and make a difference. Together we can save lives."

In his spare time, Moreira is compiling the materials necessary to publish the first of two books on Search and Rescue Tracking and Crime Scene and Evidence Preservation for the SAR Tracker. The anticipated release date is set for June 2008. These texts will include plenty of photos, along with numerous tracking techniques and exciting stories from Moreira's adventures during his 30 years as a tracker, both in the military and as a civilian. The only thing better than reading his books is registering for a class and being taught by him in person.

For more information, refer to Moreira's website: www.searchandrescuetrackers.com. Take time to view the site, schedule a training class, or contact him with questions.

About the Authors

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for Region 9, grew to love the outdoors through his involvement in Scouting, receiving the Eagle Scout award while in high school. His passion for flying encouraged him to join the Civil

Air Patrol, and he became active in Search and Rescue as a cadet in Mendocino County, California. Since meeting instructor Moreira, he became certified as a tracker and plays an active role in promoting the art of tracking to law enforcement personnel, and continues to hone his skills by attending Moreira's P.O.S.T. courses. He can be reached at issacpl@aol.com

Rev. Roger Rickman, NEMT Region 9



Regional Director, is a CHS Life Member, private investigator, and church pastor. Raised in the Ozark Mountains, he achieved Scouting's highest honor, the Eagle Scout award, and

later went on to serve his country in the U.S. Air Force. He devotes his time promoting the CHS program, and offers his skills to the SAR community. He can be reached at rrickman@garlic.com