

Tethered to ropes as they navigated the steep hillside, the searchers discovered ribs and other remains. They cut through brush and found a banged-up motorcycle lying near a concrete wash.

Coroner officials were more optimistic about giving a name to John Doe No. 187, the 187th unidentified male body.

The black Honda motorcycle had gold forks and a vehicle identification number. A sticker on the bike read: "Alameda 12th Naval District." A black biker jacket and a "Torrance Athletic Club" T-shirt were found nearby.

"I thought, 'Oh, good, we have really good leads to follow,' " recalled Gilda Tolbert, the veteran investigator in charge of trying to identify remains for the coroner's office. " 'We should be able to solve this case.' "

While hundreds of bodies each year are transported to the coroner's office without identification, skeletal remains are the coldest of the cold cases. With its vast mountains, desert moonscapes and coastal bluffs and tangled hillsides, Southern California yields dozens of such remains each year, including about 30 in Los Angeles County.

The bones are unearthed at the bottom of ravines, below freeway overpasses, in dank culverts, inside homes and in backyards. They are hikers, the homeless, the elderly, the estranged and the murdered. Often, they are hidden and forgotten.

Many are never identified.

"You would be amazed how many people never file a missing-persons report," said Tolbert.

She is now investigating the case of a boy, thought to be about 13, whose remains were found in the chimney of a vacant halfway house in South Los Angeles earlier this year.

The boy was shoeless, which made Tolbert think he was probably from the neighborhood. He wore tan pants and probably stood no taller than 5 feet 3. His skull was covered with soot.

"Having children myself, I can't imagine there's not someone trying to find their little boy," Tolbert said.

But she has not received a single call from a worried parent.

"I'm seeing how young he is," Tolbert said, "and I ask myself, 'Where are his parents? Where are his friends?' "

The chimney case came with more clues than many.

For forensic anthropologists faced with bones and no identity, every case starts out as a cold case.