The sheriff's department has refused to answer questions about how one of the largest manhunts in years could have missed Dorner.

LOS ANGELES (AP) -- Investigators determined fairly quickly that the burned human remains found after a shootout in Southern California mountains are those of Christopher Dorner, the ex-police officer suspected in a rampage that left four people dead. But the answer to a second question will likely prove more elusive - how did he die?

Evidence including descriptions from witnesses and the discovery of personal items including a driver's license had already led authorities to figure that it was Dorner who exchanged heavy gunfire with San Bernardino County sheriff's deputies at a cabin Tuesday, killing one person and never leaving as the cabin as it went up in flames.

But on Thursday the issue was officially put to rest when sheriff-coroner's spokeswoman Jodi Miller announced that dental examination had definitively shown the remains were Dorner's.

Virtually no other information was released. An autopsy report on the charred body was still being completed, and toxicology tests typically take several weeks to return results.

That means questions are likely to linger over which of three ways Dorner may have died: Was it the hail of gunfire that came from the deputies outside? Was it suicide by the single shot that was heard from inside the cabin as the flames began to rise? Or was it the flames themselves that engulfed both Dorner and the cabin?

The cause of the flames has remained in question in the days that followed Dorner's Tuesday death.

After milder tear gas had failed to bring Dorner out, deputies shot pyrotechnic tear gas canisters - called "burners" by deputies over the radio during the standoff and by Sheriff John McMahon at a subsequent news conference - into the cabin.

McMahon would only say that the fire broke out immediately after the canisters were sent in, stopping short of saying that they sparked the fire.

He added that the burning of the cabin "was not on purpose, We did not intentionally burn down that cabin to get Mr. Dorner out." Another news conference was scheduled for later Friday afternoon, but it was not clear what the department intended to reveal.

Meanwhile, court documents show Dorner gathered information on a women's basketball coach and her fiance before he apparently killed them earlier this month.

The Orange County Register reported that Irvine police believe Dorner researched Monica Quan, 28, and her 27-year-old boyfriend, Keith Lawrence. The records also say Dorner may have had documents containing information about Quan and her family.

Police tied Dorner to the slayings after reading a manifesto he wrote in which he sought

revenge against those he believed ended his law enforcement career. Quan's father represented Dorner during a disciplinary hearing.

The search for Dorner began last week after authorities said he had launched a deadly revenge campaign against the Los Angeles Police Department for his firing, warning in the manifesto that he would bring "warfare" to LAPD officers and their families.

The manhunt for Dorner brought police to Big Bear Lake, 80 miles east of Los Angeles, after his burned-out pickup truck was found abandoned last week. His footprints disappeared on frozen soil and hundreds of officers who searched the area and checked out each building failed to find him.

Karen and Jim Reynolds were next to see him inside their cabin-style condo within 100 yards of a command post for the manhunt when they arrived to ready it for vacationers.

Dorner, who at the time was being sought for three killings, confronted the couple with a drawn gun, "jumped out and hollered `stay calm,'" Jim Reynolds said at a news conference.

His wife screamed and ran, but Dorner caught her, Reynolds said. The couple said they were taken to a bedroom where Dorner ordered them to lie on a bed and then on the floor. Dorner bound their arms and legs with plastic ties, gagged them with towels and covered their heads with pillowcases.

"I really thought it could be the end," Karen Reynolds said.

The couple believed Dorner had been staying in the cabin at least since Feb. 8, the day after his burned truck was found nearby. Dorner told them he had been watching them by day from inside the cabin as they did work outside. The couple, who live nearby, only entered the unit Tuesday.

"He said we are very hard workers," Karen Reynolds said.

After Dorner fled in their purple Nissan Rogue, Karen Reynolds managed to call 911 from a cellphone on the coffee table.

Police have not commented on the Reynoldses' account, but the notion of him holed up just across the street from the command post was shocking to many, but not totally surprising to some experts familiar with the complications of such a manhunt.

"Chilling. That's the only word I could use for that," said Ed Tatosian, a retired SWAT commander for the Sacramento Police Department. "It's not an unfathomable oversight. We're human. It happens."

Law enforcement officers, who had gathered outside daily for briefings, were stunned by the revelation. One official later looking on Google Earth exclaimed that he'd parked right across the street from the Reynoldses' cabin each day.

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Timothy Clemente, a retired FBI SWAT team leader who was part of the search for Atlanta Olympics bomber Eric Rudolph, said searchers had to work methodically. When there's a hot pursuit, they can run after a suspect into a building. But in a manhunt, the search has to slow down and police have to have a reason to enter a building.

"You can't just kick in every door," he said.

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