SIGAR | SPECIAL INSPECTOR GENERAL FOR AFGHANISTAN RECONSTRUCTION

SIGAR Oral History Project (OHP)

Interview 04: Edited Transcript

Interview Date: 11/10/22

NAME

INTERVIEWEE 04:
[NAME]. I also go by the name of [NAME] because of my last name.

TITLE

I'm a retired FBI agent, and when I retired, I became a reemployed annuitant with the Special Inspector General for Afghanistan Reconstruction, SIGAR. // Those are retired special agents that come back on as a federal employee.

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CAREER HISTORY

Growing up, my dad had a friend that was in the FBI. And all we knew [was] that he was in the FBI. He'd work a bank robbery or two. A nice, nice man.

[I] went off to Santa Clara, and the University of Hawaii on a golf scholarship. Thought I was going to be a professional golfer. I could not make that right-to-left putt, so I went to law school.

And in my second year in law school, I was sitting in an aviation class. And an individual walked in that I did not know. He took his jacket off. He had a badge, and he had a .357 Magnum on his hip.

I got to meet him, second year [of] law school. And he said, you know, "What are you gonna do?" And I thought it was, maybe be an assistant district attorney back home in Santa Cruz. And he said, "You oughta do the FBI."
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I graduated from law school in 1985, and two days later, I was sworn in as a special agent with the Federal Bureau of Investigation. Went to Quantico. At the time, it was about 15 weeks. And in November of 1985, I was assigned Dallas, Texas.

I arrived in Dallas, Texas in December of '85. And the first day there, the special agent in charge said, "You can potentially go to a resident agency," one of the smaller offices.
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Twenty-six years later, I retired, in the same office.

Throughout my career, I worked white-collar crime during the banking crisis, and in 1992 started working violent crime and drugs, and corruption, throughout east Texas, northeast Texas. After that, in 1999, my supervisor retired. I applied, and I became the supervisor of the East Texas Violent Crimes Task Force.

And that lasted until 2007. But when 9/11 hit, I became the supervisor of the Counter-Terrorism/Violent Crime Squad. So the mission had changed with the FBI, overnight.

In 2003, the Space Shuttle crash, Columbia, came over East Texas. And I was the on-scene commander for the FBI, for about six months, and recovering the astronauts' remains and certain items on that military spacecraft.

That resulted, in 2004, [in] my first trip to Baghdad, Iraq. And I spent six months in Baghdad and throughout Iraq traveling all around, interviewing detainees. Finished that.

I stepped off the desk in 2007 to return to investigative duties. And in 2007, I went back to Iraq, and I was the operations officer for six months.
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Those experiences led me to choose to go to Afghanistan, and prepared me for what happens in a war zone as a special agent with the United States government.
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A friend of mine with the FBI was in Afghanistan and called. I've known him for 20 years. And he said, "I have found a job for you in retirement." I did not know what SIGAR was, or what their mission was at the time. I made a few phone calls, talked to the special agent in charge in Afghanistan. And he said, "If this is what you're looking for, we'd love to have you."
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When I learned about the job, researched the job, I said, "I can do this. I'll fit right in. I've kind of been there and done that." And was excited. A new challenge. As we get older, we like to get challenges, and, as I've always said, change is a good thing.

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SIGAR DEPLOYMENT TO AFGHANISTAN

In August of 2011, I retired from the FBI. Two weeks later, I was in Washington, D.C., being sworn in as a special agent with the Special Inspector General for Afghan[istan] Reconstruction. About a month of training was with the State Department throughout the United States, and I was deployed to Afghanistan in October of 2011.
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When I arrived there in Kabul, it was similar to my prior experience with the Bureau [FBI] in Iraq in 2004 and 2007.
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I had no idea it was going to be what I was looking for at the time. It was very unique. It was totally different than Iraq. I had heard they were similar. They couldn't-- that could not be further from the truth. Iraq was different, in the fact it had oil, water and education. And when I got to Afghanistan, there was very little water where I was at, there was no oil, and very little education.

I spent a week in Kabul, and the supervisor advised that I would be going to Forward Operating Base Salerno, which was in Khost Province on the Pakistani border, about an hour flight on a helicopter from Kabul.
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I arrived in Salerno in mid-October of 2011 to open an office. And I was the only special agent there, with SIGAR. And arrived, and they dropped me off and said, "Good luck, and here's your counterparts with the State Department." And I met the colonel at the base. The base was about 6,000 – military and contractors, and four State Department employees at the time.
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I had a laptop, and I had to figure out, how are we going to make this work?
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When I arrived at Salerno, it was a stark reminder of where I'd been in Northern Iraq in 2004. You're basically all alone. There's no real support system for you, and you've got to make this happen. And I had signed on for 13 months and said, "I'll do this. I can do this." And-- yep, but you have to figure it out real quick on your feet.
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And you had to just hit the ground running. But you were alone. Had to figure out how-- "Where am I gonna put a desk? Where-- who-- how am I going to hook up a computer?" So you better hit the ground running and figure out, make some friends real quick and see what you can do.

There was no desk there. We got it out of a dumpster. Myself and some people from the State Department, we set up a phone system. Communications were limited. And you were also on a blacked-out base at night.
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You lived in an old Russian military barracks with seven or eight other military individuals. And to go to the bathroom was 75 yards away, at night, on rock. So you had to figure it out real quick. And you were on your own.
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Very little electricity, very little water, just the normal conveniences of life. So you had to just figure it out. You knew where to go eat, you knew where to sleep, you knew where to work out, where your office was at. And then you hit the ground running.
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You had no cases at the time, so you had to develop cases, develop a relationship with the military figuring out, "Where is the money going?" Because, as a watchdog agency, someone's got to be over the money.

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CONDUCTING OVERSIGHT INVESTIGATIONS IN A WAR ZONE: AFGHANISTAN 1

You're also in a war zone, and I've been in those previously. And you just-- you just don't know what's going to happen when the siren goes off. The "duck-and-cover" alarm goes off, and the next thing you know, you're under the desk, you're out in a field laying down on the ground praying that a rocket doesn't hit you.

And so it's a difficult transition from being in a normal place like // Washington, D.C., where you don't expect anything like that to happen.

But you have to have your head "on a swivel." It's called situational awareness. You've got to know what's going on, and you're limited as to where you can go and what you can do. But you have to get the job done.
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You have to think on your feet, and you've got to think fast. And it's not an 8-to-5 job. It's early in the morning till late at night, because there's a time change of anywhere from eight hours to nine-and-a-half hours. So your day is done, and the East Coast is waking up. So you're on a constant "go."

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I've used the words "the rule of six." If you think it's going to take one day here in the United States, it may take six days overseas, whether you're in Iraq or Afghanistan. Or it may not ever happen. It's easy to do an interview in Texas. You call the guy up, and you go visit with him.

In Afghanistan, it's extremely difficult. You have the security problem first. Can you go off the base to interview a subject, a witness of the case? Or do you have to bring them on the base? And the things that are required to bring a person on the base, for safety and security. Because you don't want somebody coming in and harming you or others. But it's a difficult thing to do, but it's a challenge. And I've always accepted challenges in my life, and, you know, you work your way through it.
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The first challenge you have in a war zone is security, yours and everyone else's. So if you want to go do that interview of someone, how do you physically get there, if they can't come to you? That would mean a convoy, taking up 10 to 12 military members, or a helicopter.

The cost – the potential loss of life – to do an interview. How critical is that interview for you to do? At the time, there were no Zoom calls like we have today. Telephones were terrible. But you would have to plan this out, and it would take a lot of time.

And sometimes you just couldn't do it. So then, what are your alternatives? How do we get around this? Do we get documents? I can get a grand jury subpoena through the U.S. Attorney's office rather easily. But over in a war zone, that grand jury subpoena is back in Washington, D.C.

It's logistics just getting that. And then you have to have it served. Get the documents, get the documents back, get them uploaded, get them back to D.C., where cases are prosecuted. The other side of the coin is, if you're going after a local individual, you work with an Afghan prosecutor with the military.

The language barrier is very difficult. You must have interpreters, because I do not speak Arabic, Farsi, Pashto. So you must have very qualified interpreters to know what's going on. Now you can take body language and see what's going on, but you have to, you know, if you ask them a question, it's got to be interpreted identical and then back to you. So, and then writing it up, and getting it forwarded onto your prosecutors. And those are just-- it's very difficult, but you just got to get it done.

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I was the oldest person on the base at Salerno, agent-wise. And you're working with 18-year-old kids that are fresh out of high school. How difficult it is, and how tempting it is to do the wrong thing.

They all want to get home. They want to go back to their families. But they're put in a position as very young folks, at least in my opinion, that they don't have a clue at that point what they're getting into. I was fortunate, along with the other agents, we knew what we were getting into. We were prepared for this mission.

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BEST QUALITIES FOR OVERSIGHT-IN-A-WAR-ZONE INVESTIGATIVE AGENTS

They want agents that have the experience. // That have been down this road before, have seen this. There's-- there's no surprises, you know.
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Based on my experience in a new agency, a relatively new agency, you know, formed in 2008, you have to have that experience. Because if you don't, you're totally lost, absolutely lost. You don't know how to make those relationships. Taking from my FBI experience, when I first got here, we had to work with the ATF.

We had to work with DEA. Because you couldn't cover the doors. You only had two or three agents, and safely you couldn't do it. So you must build those relationships. And as I moved further into my career, [I learned] the place to make the relationships is not at the crisis situation.

You had to know who could help you. // You can't do it alone. And especially over there in a foreign environment, you are alone. And you must make relationships quickly, be able to get along. Everybody has their own mission, but you're all one team. And to get it done and do-- and do it right and do it safely.

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I don't think you have to be extraordinary. You have to be committed and have a passion to do it. You-- you're not over there for the money, at all. I mean, it's dangerous. But you're committed to do the right thing and protect the American taxpayer.

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CONDUCTING OVERSIGHT INVESTIGATIONS IN A WAR ZONE: AFGHANISTAN 2

Probably the most challenging thing is to get the job fully done. And that means you've investigated the case. You've put it all together. And then you prosecute the case, because you want to finish what you've started. And when you're in a war zone, there's all things that can go wrong all the way along the line.

You might have the greatest case in the world, but how are you going to get witnesses back to venue in the United States, O.K.? And it's very, very difficult. So you must work as hard as you can to get a confession. That really helps.

But then, can you extradite this person back to the U.S.? Because there's no extradition treaty at the time, when I was over there, with Afghanistan. So free and clear, he stole the money, the company stole the money. And then they re-upped the company [as a contractor].

Fortunately, SIGAR has a debarment*, which will limit, you know, government contracts for these crooks – because they are crooks. And wherever there's money, you know, they're going to come. They're going to come after it.
[* *Suspensions and debarments are administrative remedies used to prevent the Government from working with parties who are not "presently responsible" – i.e., those that have engaged in criminal or other improper conduct, or demonstrated serious poor performance of such a compelling and serious nature that it would lead one to question their honesty, ethics, or competence. Federal agencies, exercising their inherent authority as consumers of goods and services, lessors, or awarding officials, use these remedies to exclude these parties from obtaining new Federal contracts and certain subcontracts (procurement), or discretionary assistance and certain funded lower-tiered transactions, leases, loans and loan guarantees, or other benefits (nonprocurement).*
https://www.doi.gov/sites/doi.gov/files/faq-suspension-and-debarment-for-website.pdf]

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SIGAR OVERSIGHT WORK: INVESTIGATIONS: FUEL THEFTS CASES

The biggest investigation we had going over there was a fuel theft investigation. That is where the money was being siphoned off and used to finance the bombs, the rockets that were coming against us. We were successful in changing the contracts and how they were written, so the Afghan folks, the truck drivers, the fuelers, could only steal a smaller percentage.

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We did a lot of fuel theft operations over there, because the contracts were designed-- that allowed shrinkage, shortage.

But the Afghans took advantage of that. And we did a lot of fuel cases. And fuel is – "liquid gold." It's purchased by the government, at about $4 a gallon, on the border. But by the time it gets to these forward operating bases, it's about $18 a gallon, because of the security to get that fuel there. And the Afghans were amazing at the-- how they would steal fuel. Millions of gallons just disappeared.

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ATTACK INCIDENT #1

In Iraq, I was involved in at least 50 rocket attacks. When I arrived in Afghanistan, Forward Operating Base Salerno was known as "Rocket City." I did not know that when I got there. And within the first day, the alarms went off, the "duck-and-cover" alarms.

They're very loud. I knew what to do. Basically, it's you lay on the ground, because these huge rockets come in, from about three to four miles away. And you don't where they're coming from or where they're going to land. So, within days, rocket attacks were on a regular basis, two to three a week.

On June the 2nd of 2012, we had some folks come down with the Army CID [Criminal Investigation Division] to visit. They were doing an inspection of their folks that we worked with, our partners down there. And we decided to go to lunch. And we gave these individuals – they had come from Virginia, all the way there, to do their inspection – gave them a choice of the barbecue tent or the main dining facility.

And they wanted to go to the barbecue tent. Which probably saved our lives.

About noontime on that Friday, a truck bomb carrying about 2,500 pounds of ammonium nitrate drove up to the gate, back on the south side of the base, and it exploded. I was in a tent, that collapsed on top of us.

There were six of us at the picnic table inside the tent. We were the southernmost point, and it blew us all into the wall. I got up, opened the door, and I could smell ammonium nitrate. You could smell the fertilizer. I knew what it was. You could probably see about 20-25 meters, and it was just pure darkness.

Grabbed my partner, // grabbed these two CID guys we were with. Everybody was O.K. We did an accounting of what weapons we had, because it's always a secondary attack coming. And so we left that, and all I could think about was, "Get to the office, get to my vest, helmet, and machine gun. And let's just get through this."

Said a prayer. I said, "I am not dying here." We proceeded for the next 10 minutes to get involved in a firefight. Getting back to the office, RPGs were being launched down the road. We made it back to the office. Did not know casualties or what was going on. We got our gear.

The first call was made back to the SIGAR office in Kabul. And-- left a message said, "We're O.K." And a few minutes later, I got a call from the State Department, not knowing it was the [U.S.] Ambassador. And he called to make sure everybody was accounted for.

We were missing one State Department employee. He had suffered a concussion, and he was in the local hospital there at the base. A few hours later, somebody tried to get on the base with a motorcycle-- motorcycle bomb. And he blew up at the-- at the western-- or eastern gate.

And so that afternoon – and evening – there was about 800 folks that had concussions. We lost heroes that day – individuals, contractors, Afghans, military service people that went to respond to this. Because the secondary wave had seven or eight Taliban fighters that had come onto the base.

And they did-- they'd gotten all the way into the gymnasium area. And they had suicide vests on. The following morning, it was like a bomb zone – everywhere. We were very lucky that we didn't go to the dining facility, because it was made out of brick. And that's where most of the injuries had taken place.

So following the bombing, our SIGAR office was notified in Kabul, and they offered to fly [NAME] and myself up to basically debrief a little bit, decompress. We chose to stay, and work through rebuilding the office and everything that we had-- had worked so hard to build up.

The base was in absolute shambles. A few days later, the Taliban posted on YouTube and other media, they had filmed the whole thing. And when you relive that-- it was surprising the power of the bomb going across.

I did <u>not</u> tell my family what happened. I didn't want to shake them up, and I was fine, and we were good to go. But I also knew at that point, or we knew, that that base was going to close. It was going to end, because of the situation there, the security situation. And they started to demobilize the base over the next year or so.

So, throughout that demobilization, heightened security was everywhere, but you were still a sitting target down there for the rockets coming in, on a weekly basis. You almost become immune to it as you spend more time there. You don't do the duck-and-covers. You just say, "O.K., if it's gonna happen, it's gonna happen. There's-- there's a reason."

So it's a little disconcerting that you're not following protocol. Because everybody's ducking, and you're just kind of walking along, saying, "O.K., if it happens, it happens."

In June of 2013, they finally closed the base down. So we did basically an accounting with our SIGAR agents, with the military, of, "What's left over here? How are we going to get this out of here?"

Because there's millions of dollars in these Conex boxes. So we did basically a "Storage Wars/Conex Box" [reality TV episode], and they tagged them all, and we opened 'em up. And we went through them, and we found millions and millions of dollars. Stuff that had been there for-- since 2004.

And it was brand-new, but it was in a Conex box, because they kept reordering, and then they would redeploy. Other units would come and go, and it would show up months later, or never show up. And then you had to tear everything down.

So the things that they had built, the millions of dollars they had spent were bulldozed down with D9 Caterpillars. And then given back to the Afghans.

CONDUCTING OVERSIGHT INVESTIGATIONS IN A WAR ZONE: AFGHANISTAN 3

So I was given a choice to go to Mazar [-e Sharif] or to Herat. And I chose to go to Herat, to the U.S. Consulate there on the western side of Afghanistan, and continue an office there. The agent that was there was retiring.

He had done his tours, and I decided, "I'm going to re-up for another 13 months." I'd almost finished my two-year, 25-month contract and decided, "Yeah. I'll do this one more time and retire." And go home to east Texas and, you know, do a little construction on the side, and just hang it up.

Hang the gun up, hang the badge up. So arrived in June. It was a self-drive area. Herat is a very educated part of Afghanistan. And we were right across the street from the embassy [Consulate] at Herat on the Ring Road. But it was very dangerous, because this was a spot where thousands of trucks went by every day.

And it was not a matter of if, but just when someone was going to attack the base. They had a new State Department regional security officer come in. I met with him. I had known him previously. We said, "We've got to prepare for this, just in case."

And we're driving about 15 kilometers to the base to do your work – which was Camp Stone, a small military base on the outskirts of Herat. So started working cases there, starting all over again, although taking over cases that were previously there.

But had to develop your own caseload, get to know people, do the same thing we did in Salerno. But this time I was by myself, totally by myself. The agent had left, and so every day I would get in the car, gear up, do a security plan, and drive to go to Camp Stone – through a city of a million.

And you stand out like-- how do I say this? You stand out like a sore thumb in the middle of nowhere, in an up-armored vehicle that looks beautiful. And you're a guy with a helmet on and geared-up, and you're by yourself, or you bring a partner that may need to go to the base, for safety.

So it would take about 40 minutes through the city, to drive back-and-forth. We also had weekly security plans to change the routes up, so you weren't "patterning," so a bad guy couldn't, you know, run into you, kidnap you or do other things to you.
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The unique thing about Herat was you were able to self-drive and get out and do interviews. So if you needed to interview contractors, military folks, you didn't have to worry about flying on a helicopter. You just got in the car, and drove. But it was very dangerous to drive.

You were always on the radio. They knew exactly where you were at all times, and what time you were coming back. We would also do mail-runs. So we were all mail employees, if you will. We had mail cards to go get the mail, at Camp Stone.
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During the summer of 2013, we were able to develop cases and start working these cases interviewing people. It became a lot easier because of the convenience of the self-drive at the time.

ATTACK INCIDENT #2

Everything was working great until the morning of September the 13th.

Over the years, you understand that insurgents like to do things on an anniversary. They're numbers folks. // [For example, on] September the 11th [in 2012] – we had Benghazi.*
[* 2012 attack against two U.S. government facilities in Benghazi, Libya]

I'm in a [U.S.] Consulate now [on September 13, 2013], with about 35 other Americans and Afghans.

It's well-secured, but on the morning of the 13th, I woke up flying through the air. Knew exactly what it was. It was the loudest noise I'd ever heard in my life, but I knew again, here-- here's a bomb – that went off. And I'm waiting, "Oh my gosh, I'm in a seven-story building. Is this building going to collapse?"

It was built by the Russians in '79. The road was about 140 meters from where I was at. I was on the third floor in my room. And the blast blew the door off the hinges, past me, and it blew me into a wall. Knowing the next thing [that] was going to happen is a secondary wave coming.

And decided, "All right, let's-- let's get the clothes on. Let's get down to the second floor. Let's again, get that vest, get that helmet, get that ammunition." But prior to this, we all had jobs. And one of my jobs, along with a border patrol agent, was to secure the east side of the Consulate.

So my job wasn't to go to the safe haven in the basement. It was to go to the sixth floor and cover the east side. There was an elevator in the middle. We had an east side, west side team. We had practiced this on Saturdays. We knew what to do. We were trained to do this.

When I got up to the sixth floor, I looked for my partner, and he wasn't there. And I thought to myself, "Well, say a prayer. He's dead. Because nobody's going to live through what I've seen." And went down and started kicking doors. And there were State Department folks there.

There were United States-- USAID folks there. And they were-- discombobulated is the best word I could use. They had not been through what I'd been through, but they're not law enforcement, prepared for this. And so we got them out of the sixth floor.

I looked at the guys that were on the west side. They were O.K. We communicated back and forth, like, "Where's-- where's your partner, [NAME]?" And he wasn't there. So when we got down to the fourth floor, I looked up, and there he was, smiling. And he had his M4.

And I said, "He's got my six, he's got my back, so let's get this done." We made our way down to the second floor where our offices were at. And I thought, my office – the SIGAR office – is gone. And it's about a 12'x14' office. It had a safe in it.

It had all my gear. And all I wanted to do was get to that vest, get to that helmet. By this time, RPGs had hit the building, and bullets were coming through the building like Swiss cheese. And so I got there. You had to climb through all of the debris, all of the electrical system.

Water was going off. Alarms were going off. And the thing I remember most was Post One saying, "Attack, attack, attack. This is not a drill, this is not a drill." And the flashing lights going off. Put my helmet on, got about 240 rounds of ammo.

Grabbed my automatic weapon, and the next thing I know I'm bleeding. And I didn't realize that the bulletproof glass had shattered and was in my helmet. So it was a self-inflicted wound. Wiped it off. Got there, got down to the safe haven.

Ran into some of our Afghan contractors. Did not know that they were, so we arrested them and put them in the gym with zip ties, and unfortunately forgot about them for a couple hours. But that's what happens, in the moment. Got to the safe haven, and we were assigned the back door. Because the back door was blown off. And it looked up a hill.
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We were assigned a machine gun to the back door. And orders were, "Don't let anybody get through the door." And fortunately, didn't have to use it. Nobody came through. Forty minutes later, the snipers were still shooting at us from the college across the street.

Some suicide bombers had gone off. And through my earpiece was told, "Hey, open the other back door. The cavalry has shown up." The Quick Reaction Force from the base and a couple of Navy SEALs are coming in. So I opened the door for them.

They went up and took positions on the roof, as snipers, to take out the last guy that was shooting at us. It all transpired in about 30 minutes, but it seemed like an eternity at the time. But it's-- it's very quick. Everything slows down when you're under fire.

It's not like anything anybody ever experiences. And here I am the second time, so I'm, like, thinking, "This may be enough." But we got through it. I called SIGAR headquarters, let them know what was going on. And it was an early, early morning, thank God.

Because if it was 8:00, no one would be here today. Because it took out the cafeteria that we ate in. We evacuated some of our guards. The heroes did not make it. They were pulverized by that bomb. So once everybody got there, they secured the scene, medevacked those that needed to be medevacked out, we joined up on a helicopter after being briefed by the regional security officer, Paul.

And off to the airport we went. Because it was uninhabitable. We remained there for a few hours. The FBI came in to do a post-blast analysis. I gave 'em keys to my safe, where all the ammo was at, and told 'em to be safe, and "here's how bad it was."

Because when we flew over, I got to see the crater, how bad it was. And it blew every window out for about a one-mile radius. So we got there, and then we were evacuated to-- through the [U.S.] Embassy, where we met with the ambassador, SIGAR leadership.

And they really took care of me at that point. The next day, we met with the psychologist there for the State Department. And I got to see the video of what had happened. So you see the truck driving up from the west. He turns in, and he detonates, and then everything's gone.

So, the IG* called me. [NAME]: Mr. Domin called me and said, "Hey, how're you doing?"**
"I'm doing fine, [I replied.] "I've been through this now, twice."
[* John Sopko, former Special Inspector General for Afghanistan Reconstruction, 2012-2025]
[** Doug Domin, SIGAR Assistant Inspector General for Investigations]

And-- so I stayed in Kabul for a couple weeks, came home, met with [NAME] Mr. Sopko, and his staff. And they gave me three choices. And choice number one was, "You can go back to Kabul, but you're not going to any of these outlying areas. And you finish out your contract," that I'd just signed. "You can go to Washington, D.C.," which I've avoided my entire federal career as an agent.

Or, "You can open an office in // Texas." And I said, "Well, you know the answer to that. Let me call the real boss." I called my wife.

Of course, I'd been in contact with my wife. That was the hardest call I've ever made. Still get emotional over it, because we called every day at a certain time. And she's, like, "Why are you calling me? It's 5:30 a.m. there." It's-- I said, "Where are you at? What are you doing?" And she was at school. My daughter was in a play. // And I said, "All right, take notes, and listen very carefully. I've been in another bombing. I'm O.K. Don't know where I'm going to be, don't know when I can contact you again. But you call my mother, her mother, everybody we know. And I don't care if you put it on social media. Get the word out – I'm O.K."

Because what had happened during the attack when I'm manning a machine gun with the State Department special agent, on the scroll-line news, "U.S. Embassy advises U.S. Consulate in Herat attacked with bomb, unknown casualties." And that's the immediacy of today's world and social media.

You didn't hear about that when I was in Iraq. You heard about it two or three days later. But in 2013, everything was immediate. So she did that. Pretty upset. But again that support system. She knew what I was doing. She knew I'd signed on the line that things could go south.

And so right back in-- // in November [2013], the FBI was kind enough to do a PTSD program with me in Houston and got through that. And-- came out all the better on the other side. And for the next six years, I traveled the country and the world chasing down bad guys and taxpayer dollars. And I've enjoyed every minute of it. And then retired in November of 2019.

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WHAT ARE YOUR OWN LESSONS LEARNED?

The thing that surprised me the most is the Afghans are very smart folks. They are able to exist in an environment that's very austere. Able to grow food to live in a place that is unbelievable. Harsh. Whether it's winters, whether it's summers.

It could be -10° [F] in winter and 130° [F], yet they're able to survive. There's a book out there called *The Graveyard of Empires*, which should be read by everybody that travels to Afghanistan. Should be a requirement. Because, since Alexander the Great, they-- they've been able to make it. And we threw billions of dollars at 'em, and they're still making it.
//
I think the Afghans-- I think we underestimated going into Afghanistan their knowledge to survive. They are survivors. And money doesn't always fix the problem. Sometimes you've got to-- it's generational there. I believe that the Afghans need education more than anything to succeed. But they've been able to succeed without it. And do pretty good job of it.
//
The biggest disappointment I see is we left too soon. We pulled the plug and saw it coming, I mean, from miles away – that the Afghans could not stand on their own, and the [Afghan] government, without U.S. government support and contractors. And it's just a disappointment that we spent all these millions and billions of dollars, and the lives lost – more than anything – and Afghan lives lost, to try and make this-- a better place for the Afghan people. So the word is "disappointment," how it ended. I think it was short-sighted. Don't underestimate the Taliban. These guys are sharp. And they just waited us out.

//

We need to learn as a country to respect history, and learn from it. A total failure has been in Afghanistan that no one learns thousands of years what makes this country work. And we make assumptions, and assumptions is not what we should do.

We should learn from history, because the Afghans have survived. They fought the biggest armies in the world for thousands of years, and they will continue. So if we go into these conflicts, we need to look back and say, "What did we do right?" and "What did we do wrong?" In Afghanistan, there's

been dozens of armies that did everything wrong. And we're back at where we started thousands of years ago.

//

This agency did a great job in Afghanistan, unbelievable job in auditing, lessons learned, investigations. More accomplishments than I could have ever imagined in a war zone. And lessons learned is how to do it right. And I believe SIGAR did it right.

//

The thing that comes to mind when you talk about, you know, what did we do for the American people – we protected their dollars. That is the bottom line. Making sure it was spent wisely, making sure it wasn't wasted. And for those that decided to steal, we prosecuted them or debarred them from further government contracts.
//
We did our job. We were hired to do a job, and we executed that job to the best of our abilities. It's-- difficult to put into words how hard it is to get something done over there.

As an agent, we like to get stuff done. We like to put points on the board, statistics and things like that. And it's disappointing that you can't. But the ones that you did, it's a win, so that maybe, down the road, somebody'll look and say, you know, "Maybe I shouldn't do this." Maybe there was somebody – a deterrent, to criminal activity. But it's-- unfortunately, it's rampant in our society today.

//

To accomplish what we did is truly amazing, over the short time period. The recoveries that we made, the convictions that were, you know, made in dire straits.

//

Wherever we go next in the world. There must be a watchdog agency – SIGAR or otherwise – that can protect the taxpayer dollars. Because we spend a lot of money, and lives, to change places throughout the world.

//

An agency such as SIGAR or other watchdog groups is required – to protect our dollars. We're spending billions of dollars.

//

And so you really need-- whether it's Afghanistan, Iraq, or potentially today in Ukraine, we're pouring a lot, billions of dollars, and somebody's got to be there to guard that money. Otherwise, they're gonna take it and run.

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Someone's got to be over the money. Because money can corrupt.

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The piece of advice I would pass onto another watchdog agency would be interview the folks at SIGAR. Find out what went right, what went wrong, [the] lessons learned. Don't go into it, and just open up shop and say, "Here's what we're going to do." Because whether it's Ukraine, or whether it's Iraq or Afghanistan, all are different. But we still have the same mission, and that is to protect the taxpayer dollars. And accounting and prosecution of those who choose to steal from us.

//

You know, in order to do this, you must have a support system, a family that supports this. My kids were in high school at the time when I first started going overseas. And without that, it's really difficult. They must be behind you 100%. // I have a very supportive family behind me - that is critical.

//

I think it's a passion. It's a passion to, you know, do the right thing. I was put on the face of the earth for a reason, and I never questioned it.

//

You want to make a difference. And there are people out there that, they don't care. They want to steal money from you. They don't-- they don't care whether they're contractors.

Unfortunately, we have service members who don't have the same integrity that I believe in. And I've always believed in that, and I continue to believe in that. That there's a calling and a passion to do the right thing. And you-- if you don't want to do that, don't get in law enforcement, especially if you don't want to go overseas in non-military positions.

Because it's difficult, and every day you don't know what's going to happen. You've just got to get through it and make a difference at the end of the day. And I felt that all of us at SIGAR have made a difference in one way or another. Because without agencies like SIGAR, the U.S. government's going to pour money down-- "down a bad well," as we say in east Texas. So it's just-- just doing the right thing. And I believe it-- I was, you know, wired to do this.

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ADDITIONAL MATERIAL: AFGHANISTAN AND SIGAR ITEMS SHOW-AND-TELL

On my shelf here is an end of a rocket motor. And this is one of the rockets that came in on us at FOB* Salerno – "Rocket City" – first week there. The alarms went off, three rockets came in. One was close by, about 20 meters from where I was at.
[* Forward Operating Base]

After getting the dust off of me, I walked over, and saw a piece of this rocket motor, and picked it up and burned my hands. And-- then put it in a bucket of water and brought that home with me, to remind me of how precious life is over there, and how it could be gone in a second. So I've kept that.
//
INTERVIEWER:
You said before that it was glowing?

INTERVIEWEE 04:
Yes. It was red-hot, and I was-- just thought it was the color. And in fact, it was the heat from the exhaust of the rocket motor itself. And when it detonated, I was fortunate that didn't lose any hearing. There was no hearing loss or things like that. And, fortunately, no one was injured by it, other than a pretty good scare.
//
So I look at this every day and say, how lucky I've been. // How lucky I was throughout my entire deployments in Iraq and Afghanistan. One foot either way, and I wouldn't be here talking to you and showing you a piece of the rocket.
//
The other thing that I have here, and it's very unique in the military, are "challenge" coins. // SIGAR designed coins for Afghanistan. // So you have a picture of Afghanistan, and it says, "Strength Through Oversight, established 2008." This is the SIGAR coin that we would use and give to our military counterparts and in some cases contractors that were overseas.
//
I bought about 500, to give to the military. Because challenge coins are a big deal in the military. // These cost us $5 a piece, and that will get you just about anything you need, a ride on a helicopter. Give it to a GI to help you out, to get something done.
//
We'd always give them to the helicopter pilots, to the military officers when you needed to go somewhere and get something done. Because you can't do it by yourself. So that was the best investment I probably ever made over there.
//
Probably purchased about 500 of them in two years over there, and I have two left. And this happens to be one. And one was given to my mother-- just to remind her. But that buys so much goodwill, in getting something done. And it's just a kind little gift, and it'll get you wherever you need to go.
//
It's amazing for $5 what you could get. // It's worth its weight in gold.

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POSTSCRIPT

INTERVIEWEE 04:
You didn't ask the question I thought you were going to ask.

INTERVIEWER:
I'm not done yet.

INTERVIEWEE 04:
Oh, yeah. O.K., understood.

INTERVIEWER:
What question did you think I was going to ask you?

INTERVIEWEE 04:
"Would you do it all over again?"

INTERVIEWER:
Oh, that's-- that's too cliché. [But:]
“Would you do it all over again?”
//
INTERVIEWEE 04:
[LAUGHS] I know. I'm jackin' with you.

[PAUSE] The answer's “YES.”

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