SIGAR | SPECIAL INSPECTOR GENERAL FOR AFGHANISTAN RECONSTRUCTION

SIGAR Oral History Project (OHP)

Interview 05: Edited Transcript

Interview Date: 11/22/22

NAME/TITLE
[*NAME WITHHELD AT INTERVIEWEE'S REQUEST*]

INTERVIEWEE 05:
I was employed with SIGAR in Afghanistan for approximately eight-and-a-half years.

I was a special agent – title would be series 18-11, criminal investigator – for five years in Afghanistan. And three years afterwards, my last three years, I was the assistant special agent in charge in Afghanistan, the supervisor.

JOB DESCRIPTION

Our mission was oversight of U.S. reconstruction funds in Afghanistan. We were criminal investigators. We were federal law enforcement.
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We were looking for primarily criminal violations, with respect to the misuse of U.S. reconstruction funds. But we also looked at civil violations, administrative remedies, and we worked in a venue with the Afghan attorney general's office, and we also worked with the U.S. venue, typically with the U.S. attorney's offices, and Department of Justice in Washington D.C. That's where we took our criminal cases.

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CAREER HISTORY

I studied accounting in college. I went to night school. I worked during the day various jobs, studied at night, thought accounting was a safe degree. It was a lot of work in the private industry. So I graduated with an accounting degree.

And I went on an-- a few interviews after I graduated, and didn't really like the environment. And, you know, even though I had my degree in accounting, I said, "I don't think this is really what I want to do."

So, just by chance, there was an advertisement in *The New York Times* for "Treasury Agent." And my father called me up, and said, "Hey. There's this ad in the paper. You should try and take the test." And I said, "Dad, you know, nobody gets those jobs. You have to know somebody to get those jobs." And he said, "Just try it. You-- what are you doing now?" He said, you know, "You got nothing to lose."

So anyway, took the test, you know, passed the test. There's, like, a 30% passing rate. So I was able to pass, interviewed, and I got the job as a Treasury agent. I did various cases in the beginning – white-collar, tax-related charges, criminal charges – in New York, in the New York field office.

Then after about five years, I moved over to the money-laundering group, in a task force in New York City, working with the other agencies – Customs, in the beginning, which was Homeland Security, then later with DEA, and always with an NYPD team.

So we-- I started as just one of the other guys in the group. And I moved up to where I was-- we initiated our own U.S. Treasury-led undercover ops, and we were doing money- laundering undercover operations – international movement of money through undercovers – through informants in Colombia.

So I got into the realm of identifying, developing informants, a lot of them in Colombia. I would travel down there quite often. I would work the cases down there – with the Colombian police, with DEA in Colombia, and with all my informants, who were scattered all over Colombia.

So I got involved in the whole international money-laundering-type cases and heavy use of informants. So, when I was getting close to retiring, or when I was eligible for retirement, I saw-- this job came up. And, yeah, I thought it'd be interesting. It was overseas and I had a lot of international experience, working cases.

It was a different part of the world than South America, where I had worked for many years, so I thought this would be a new challenge. While I was still fairly young and vital, I could give it a try. So I called up, you know, the headquarters of the agency, in Washington, and said, "Hey. Could I get more information on that position? Could you send me some materials?"

And they said, "Come down. And, you know, if you're in Washington one day, you know, stop by. We'll give you some materials." I said, "I have to be down there in a couple weeks." I went down. I met with them, and they actually interviewed me when I showed up at the office, and offered me the job. So that's how I got the position in 2010.

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SIGAR DEPLOYMENT TO AFGHANISTAN

I first got to Afghanistan in February of 2010.
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First reaction when I landed in Kabul – I was based in Bagram, but I was-- I first landed in Kabul, obviously. When I landed, I looked around, and, honestly, I looked, and I said, "WTF." Like, "What-- what did I do here? Why did I do this?" [LAUGHS] I had a pretty good life as a special agent back in New York, and I was working in South America. And it looked kind of raw.

When I got to Bagram, it was even worse, when I got to Bagram Airfield.*
[* Bagram Air Base, aka Bagram Airfield, aka Bagram Airfield Base, located in the Parwan Province of Afghanistan, north of the capital city, Kabul – formerly the largest U.S. military base in Afghanistan, used by the U.S. military until U.S. withdrawal in 2021]

It was very challenging. So, my gut reaction was, "Oh, boy. This is-- this is gonna be tough. Can I get back on the plane and go back home?" [LAUGHS] But, that said, of course I would never do that. And persevered. And then, everything kind of fell into place, after that.

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My first two years or so, I was at Bagram Airfield, which was just north of Kabul, maybe half an hour north of Kabul. It's a well-known, large airbase there. I was there for two years. We covered – they called it Regional Command East – so, we covered the whole eastern Afghanistan.

So I was based in Bagram. And it was a huge base at the time, in 2010. I think there were 30,000-plus people on the base. So it was massive, with contractors, military. You know, they were running missions through there all night. The jets were in and out, F-16s all night long.

And, so-- but we also covered the east, which-- including, like Nangarhār, Jalalabad. It's a big city there, which is, like, the home of ISIS in Afghanistan, very difficult area. We covered Kunar Province, Asadabad. It was the capital,* which was right next to Peshawar, Pakistan.
[* Asadabad, capital city of Kunar Province, Afghanistan]

And it was a big portal for foreign fighters coming in, just because of the geography. And Pakistan had a lot of influence on the foreign fighters coming to Afghanistan. Everybody knows that.

So a lot of them came in through that area in the east, through-- from Peshawar, through-- into Kunar Province. And there was a lot of fighting with foreign fighters there – a lot of Al-Qaeda there, Taliban, that kind of thing. So Bagram covered all that area, covered-- there were several bases in Nangarhār, the Logar Province, and some other provinces.

And after two years, I went up to the north – Balkh Province, Mazār-e Sharīf. And just to backtrack, Bagram, whenever you moved around, if you went to another province, you went by helo [helicopter], usually. And then, you would go by, typically, a convoy in the east – to go wherever you had to go, with the Army.

After two years in Bagram, I moved up to Mazār-e Sharīf. We opened a new office up there. And, that was in the north, by the Uzbekistan border. And there was a different dynamic. It was different tribes

up there. It was self-drive. There was more security up there. So you could actually get in your Land Cruiser, as long as you had your partner with you, and drive to wherever you wanted to go.

You could drive throughout the whole province, so-- and we worked closely with, you know, the judges, and the prosecutors there in town. And it was much different there. It was challenging. And it was dangerous. You know, you'd get the occasional attacks there, and things. And but at least there was some movement there.

Then-- so I was there for about two years. Between Bagram and Mazar, it was about four-and-a-half years. Then, I came back home for about eight months. And then, I went back in 2015. So 2010 to 2014, I was [in] Bagram and Mazar. In 2015, I came back, and I was in Kabul, and I was based at the [U.S.] Embassy – from 2015 through 2019.

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CONDUCTING OVERSIGHT INVESTIGATIONS IN A WAR ZONE: AFGHANISTAN

And that was a different dynamic in Kabul. You could drive throughout the city, but it was total chaos in the city.

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When you drove through Kabul, you would see a lot of decimated areas – you know, buildings destroyed, the streets, kind of a mess, beat-up, not paved in a lot of areas, a lot of foot traffic, no control of traffic whatsoever in the city, very few traffic lights, not a lot of traffic control, no respect for, you know, one-way street or two-way street. It didn't exist. There were, like, no traffic controls whatsoever. So it was kind of chaotic in Kabul, at least.

And it was very different, you know? The language was completely different. When I was in Colombia, I could-- I was fluent in Spanish, so I could get-- I could move around. I could speak the language. And a lot of people spoke English, also.

But, you know, Afghanistan, there were-- a very small percentage of the population would speak English. You had to use an interpreter everywhere, so-- and it wasn't the kind of place where, you know, if you finished work one day, you'd say, "Hey. Let's go out and go grab a pizza or something at the restaurant." That didn't exist. You didn't do that. So it was-- it was very, very different.

And the security, obviously, was very poor, even when I got there in 2010. It got worse every year that I was there. The security deteriorated every year. But, even in 2010, when I arrived there, the security was very poor.

So it limited your movements. You could move around, but it was much more complicated to move around, logistically – how you would prepare for a mission, what support you would need, what

vehicles you would need. So it was very challenging in that respect. // Travel, logistics was very challenging. Moving around the country was challenging.

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Mazār [-e Sharīf] was pretty chaotic, too, with driving. But, you know, you had those challenges because you're a target when you're driving through-- in the city with all the traffic. And they have spotters all over the place, the bad guys.

So, they'd look for patterns and they'd look for cars – like, similar patterns daily. So they'll try to identify who were the U.S., who were the NATO guys, what cars were they driving? So if you don't change your pattern, you can be a target, you know, the next time you come through.

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Once you got out on the field to the smaller bases, combat outposts, or forward operating bases, it was difficult to travel within that area. So if it was a highly kinetic or volatile area, you'd have to get the Army to take you around. And, that would typically be some kind of convoy with two, three MRAPs, four MRAPs – mine-resistant, armor-protected vehicles, those big trucks you see. You have to travel with those, which was a lot of manpower, so it was tough getting around.

Luckily, in some provinces, we were able to travel, self-drive. So we had an up-armored vehicle, and you were allowed to travel with you and a partner, as long as you were both armed with long gun, and handgun.

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We took the tack that-- drive as fast as we could on the highway, just in case there was an IED in the road when-- if they set it off, we'd be going too fast and they couldn't time it, you know? So we drove, like, super-fast. But at the same time, it's dangerous because you're driving that fast in that big armored vehicle. It's hard to slow it down and you-- sometimes, you'd get kids running in front of the car and things.

So it was-- you know, there were all kinds of challenges. If you got in an accident in Afghanistan-- let's say, on-- God forbid, you hit some little kid or something. If you stopped, the crowd would quickly-- if you ever got stuck-- because we got stuck once in a while-- if you get stuck, in-- within an instant, you're surrounded – by dozens and dozens of people.

And, God forbid, it's an accident – if some little child is killed or something. They don't play games. They're not going to say, "What happened? Are you O.K.?" They're gonna pull you out of the car and they're gonna tear you apart. So you had to deal with that. God forbid, you'd got in some accident, you'd have to deal with that.

If you got stuck-- we had a couple times where we great stuck, flat tire, we couldn't get out of there, we're stuck on a ditch, and all of a sudden, you're surrounded. And we got stuck by a high school one time. And we were surrounded by, like, 100 kids.

Some of them were young kids. And some of them were fighting-age males. So-- and you see in the crowd, you can scan the crowd. And you know, like, you know, these guys are O.K., but that guy is no good. You know, that guy is on his phone – and he's calling somebody. You know, he's-- you know, he's got these two American guys stuck here, a target, and he's calling in the bad guys.

And sometimes, you would call for help, you know, "Get us out of here," but it didn't-- it wasn't always available. And it didn't always come that quick. So that was just another challenge, you know, of how you, you know, you operate and moved around.

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You know, you could travel in the field. And you might go to your destination. And you might accomplish what you would accomplish there, or maybe not.

And then sometimes, depending on weather – you know, winter especially – you would get stuck there. There could be a sandstorm. There could be a snowstorm. It could be low-cloud cover, where they won't fly. It's all mountainous there. So, you know, bad weather conditions – they're not going to fly.

So you could get trapped in places for days. And, you know, you travel light. You travel with a three-day backpack, with a change of clothes and, you know, your basics, but, you know, you'd get stuck out there for, you know, days at a time.

I mean, I got stuck in places for weeks, sometimes, because I just couldn't get out, couldn't get travel out of there. And then, it was also challenging, meeting with people. Where do you meet with them? Like, some people wouldn't want to come to the base to meet with you because they might be spotted. And if they're spotted approaching a U.S. facility, they're finished.

You know, somebody's going to make a call and say, "Hey, 'So-and-So,'" – you know, and – "'Abdul So-and-So' – was at this base today. He must be working with the Americans." And then, they put that word out. They sell that information. And they sell the guy out. And he's finished.

So people wouldn't come to our facilities sometimes. So you'd have to try to find a way to go see them. And that could be challenging because it could be highly insecure, it could be really risky, going there, logistically. It could be a place that's just too dangerous to go there.

So you'd have to be creative and try to find some place where you could meet the guy, he would be safe, but you would be safe, too. So, it was challenging, just finding, you know, where-- places that you could actually meet and talk.

And then, just in general, obtaining records and things like that, it's not like here. [In] the U.S., if you're a law enforcement officer, you have all kinds of databases. You have-- Department of Motor Vehicles is your most basic. You have law enforcement databases, where you get arrest records, where you get-- different agencies keep their different databases with all the intelligence – their cases about people, targets. You know, there's all kinds of information out there that didn't exist there.

So, if you're trying to get information on some person – you know, John Doe, [or] the local Afghan person – 'Abdul,' you know, 'Rahim,' or whatever – it's not like you get on there, "Oh. Let me see what I can find on him." That doesn't exist.

If he has a Tashkera [aka Tazkira] number, which is like a social security number there – typically they don't always do, because if they're from the country,* they don't have one. So he might have a Tashkera [aka Tazkira] number, but that's it.
[* a rural environment in Afghanistan]

So how do you get information about that person. You know, where do you go to find it? It was very limited, very challenging. So, a simple check, like-- just, say, simple information, you wanted to find out where the guy lived. Not that easy.

So that's why even the informant network came in even more because you needed to get people that could get out there and get you information that you needed. So obtaining information was very challenging. Obtaining documentary information that you could use in court – another challenge.

So, let's say we had a case, and the venue ended up in the U.S. – you know, where we would charge the person, because maybe the person was an American contractor, maybe it was an Afghan American who traveled to the U.S. on occasion. We might bring the case to a U.S. attorney in the U.S.

So-- but the evidence might be documentary evidence from Afghanistan. So how do you get that documentary evidence into a form that you can use and present it in the court of law in the U.S.?

It's very-- you have to "judicialize" it. In other words, it-- the court has to find it acceptable, and legitimate, to present it in the U.S. court. So that was very challenging, also.

And our agency-- in the early days, we were one of the first agencies that was actually successful in getting – in this case, it was bank records and phone records – judicialized from Afghan institutions and used in a U.S. court. It doesn't sound like much, but it was very difficult and challenging. So that was just another challenge.

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And, you know, those are just a few of the things. But every day, it was a different thing. I mean, you might have a meeting set up to meet a certain person on Tuesday at 12:00. And you wake up Tuesday morning. And there was a VBIED* or-- you know, like, a "vehicle-borne improvised explosive device" – blowing-up on your route. And all of a sudden, your trip is off.

[* pronounced “VEE-bid”]
Or, you know, you're trying to go out to meet somebody on Wednesday. You call them. "We'll meet you at this place, this time." Then all of a sudden, that day, when you get up, there's bad intel reports out there, high security risks, and you can't go. So this happened day, after day, after day, after day.

So, the most simple things could take you many, many days to accomplish the most simple things. So it's very frustrating.

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In general, the Afghan people are very nice people, very gracious people. They're very family-orientated people. They'll give you the shirt off their back. They're very inviting, inviting you into their home to give you food, you know, to-- they're very good hosts.

But, you know, it was a war zone and there were a lot of, you know, warlords there, and, you know, not to mention, the Taliban, and Al-Qaeda, and other terrorist groups there, as well as warlords who were the power brokers in the different provinces.

And "warlords" is just another term for, like, mafia leaders – because that's how they ran it, through-- the country was run, and the different areas were run through threats, intimidation – you know, they'll hurt you, they'll kill you, whatever – to keep order, to keep their business, their legal businesses moving.

So, even though the Afghan people in general received this very well, there was an element, and a very dangerous element, that wanted us nothing but dead. And sometimes, it was hard to determine who was on your side and who wasn't on your side.

After a while, you learned and you sort of got an idea, like, "Is this person with me or is this person against me?" If you were driving through the city or through the streets, you know, there were certain things you had to look out for – to try to identify people that were trying to hurt us, you know, through either-- you know, they used IEDs a lot when you drove around, improvised explosive devices.

Some were magnetic, where they would stick them on the cars in traffic-- some they would plant in the roadway and set them off with cellular phones and things like that. So you had to be aware of that type of thing when you were driving around.

So getting back to your original question, yeah, we were received well in a lot of cases. A lot of cases, we clearly weren't. And the most dangerous thing was the middle ground, where you didn't really know if a person you were dealing with was-- had your best interest in mind – if they were trying to help us, if they were supporting the mission, or if they were just trying to find an opportunity to do, you know, harm to us.
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It becomes the norm, after a while. It's always in the back of your mind, you know, that you always have to be on your guard, you always have to try to do your best to, you know, provide security for yourself and your teammates, your fellow team members.

But it's always in the back of your mind. If it's not, there's a problem. You know, if you-- you're not walking around on heightened alert all the time over there, then you're really not doing the best to protect yourself. So, you learn to operate normally, but you always have to keep that in mind in everything you do.

So when I was over there, I-- every step that I took every day, I always – this was my routine – I always had a backup plan, so, "What am I gonna do if 'A' happens? What am I gonna do if 'B' happens?" And then, my backup plan, "What if that fails? What's my next backup plan? And what if that backup plan fails? What do I do then?"

So I op-- that's how I operated. I always had a contingency plan for every simple thing that I did. But-- so it's stressful. Like, there's this underlying stress over there. And you don't realize how stressful it is until you actually leave the country and go on a break. But while you're there, it's just normal. You're just operating as normal.

And when you're meeting people, it can be stressful, also, you know? You may meet somebody either in the city, you know, wherever they live, or where their office was, or whatever, or you may bring them into the Embassy, for example. So if you're out there in the city, obviously there's inherent risk there. You're in somebody else's environment. And you don't know how-- what security measures they're taking, and how secure you are in those different locations.

But you do the best you can to, you know, be very cognizant of your security and where the vulnerabilities are. When you invite people to, like, the base we were working at, or to the Embassy, wherever we might be, yet another set of factors.

You know, I worked up north for a while at a base there. And we had the ability-- we had credentials where we could bring somebody onto the base without search – because typically, everybody would be searched. You go into a base at the Embassy, you've got to go through metal detectors, you get "wanded" – fully searched – before you're allowed onto the base.

But in the Afghan culture, especially when you're dealing with, let's say, an Army commander, a police chief, a deputy police chief, a higher-ranking official. In the Afghan culture, if you're walk-- if you're being bodily searched by some other Afghan or even the, you know, U.S. military person, it's highly insulting. It's-- it's a no-go. It's a nonstarter for them.

So, you had to deal with that. If they walked in to meet you, they showed up, and they had to be searched, and you needed information from them, to do what you were trying to accomplish, they might say, "I'm out of here. How dare you search me?" So you had to make a game-time decision, "Do I take the risk? Do I bring him in?" Because we could say, "We're not going to search him. We're bringing him in."

So we'd have to make a decision. Like, "What's the risk of bringing him in without searching him? We want the information. We know we want to-- he has valuable information to further our cases." But, at the same time, "How big a risk is he?" Is he the type of person who's going come in and maybe be wired up with-- well, you know, with a VBIED, like a vest with an explosive device?

So, it was very stressful in that respect. But luckily, we usually guessed right. And, you know, the person came in without incident. But you always had that high stress, not knowing. You know, is this the day that you're gonna guess wrong? And, you know, the guy's gonna be a bad guy.

And, people over there could be compromised very easily. So-- and we dealt-- like, with my group and the guys I worked with, we worked a lot with informants, so our cases were informant-heavy. They were driven by good informants. So we had to recruit a lot of people out there, bring a lot of people in who were kind of new to us.

So there was an assessment process. You had to kind of size them up and determine are they-- you know, are they valuable? How-- you know, is there any security risk with them? So, it was always an issue in dealing with those type of things. It was very challenging.

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

It really was: you had to rely on your experience as a law enforcement officer – and use that in the war zone. A lot of the same principles apply, when you get there. But a lot of them don't. A lot of it's, you're learning on-the-fly.

So, you know, it's problematic. But it-- the learning curve is really steep, and it's quick. So you catch on really quick.

And luckily, when you get there, there's other people who have been there already. And so as soon as you hit the ground, you know, you're being taught. You're learning. You're taking cues from the guys that have been there already, or the women that have been there already. You know, which is really what gets you through.

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I think the type of qualities that are needed for an agent to succeed in Afghanistan in that type of environment, I think all agents don't have those qualities. I think most special agents – federal agents – are very well-trained, but some might go over there and not succeed. And some might have more success. And that's-- you'll see the whole gamut.

I think agents are pretty smart, in general, so a lot of agents wouldn't even think of going there because they know that, you know, "I could not survive. I couldn't succeed in that environment," or,

"I wouldn't want to put myself in that position, where, you know, those-- all those inconveniences, and risks, and that type-of-thing."

So you get a big swath of agents – right out of the chute – that would never even think of going there. And then, the ones that do contemplate going there-- some, you know, in the interview process, you could probably determine that, you know, this person really wouldn't do very well over there, so they wouldn't be hired.

And then, you know, when you do hire some-- you know, the-- a different-- a whole gamut of agents from different agencies and different, you know, different career paths, there's a wide range of agents that succeed. And some just flounder and don't succeed over there. So that's another challenge, because some guys get there and they just have a lot of trouble. And some flourish. Some do very well.
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I think first and foremost, they have to be very flexible, they have to think out-of-the-box. They can't be rigid, they can't be very structured in their approach to investigations – because, if they are, it's so different over there, and things are constantly changing. If you can't adapt often and quickly, you're going to have a lot of trouble there.

I think, also, agents with "meet-and-deal" qualities – that can deal with people, from all different walks of life – that's a huge component, because it's a different culture. Even within the country, within the different tribes, they're very different within the country itself.

And that's just the Afghan people. You know, you got other groups there, too. You know, people from Pakistan, Russians, Uzbeks – I mean, you get the works. So, you have to be very good at dealing with people. So I think people with a background-- strong background in interviewing and things like that – tend to do pretty well there, because it's all about eliciting information from people. That's how you conduct investigations. You're fact-finding. You're trying to find facts.

It's very difficult, in a lot of instances, to find the evidence, find the facts you need. Sometimes, it's documentary. And sometimes, it-- more often, it's testimony from people. So you really have to be very adept at dealing with people, trying to convince somebody who's in a war zone, and who's vulnerable himself, as an Afghan person. If you're dealing with Americans, or you're dealing with law enforcement, but more so Americans, and the-- you know, the groups in Afghanistan – the Taliban, you know, the terrorist groups, Al-Qaeda, TTP, Lashkar-e-Tayyiba – there's different groups there.

If they find out that you're working with the Americans, you've-- you're finished. You're-- they'll kill you.

So, how do you convince a person like that that it's worth his while to give you information – when it could be putting his life at risk, and his family at risk? So there's an art to working with those people, to-- in those positions-- to convince them to work with you.
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If they don't trust you, if there's not a trust, or they don't -- and when [I say] "They," I'm just talking about Afghan people in general that you're dealing with in the course of an investigation; I'm not painting with a broad brush.

I think, if there's not a trust – that you're being honest with them, and even more importantly that you have their security, in-- you know, at the forefront, like your primary concern is their security, of them and their family – if you don't convince them of that right out of the chute, they're not going to work with you.

Afghan people in general, they – again, I don't want-- mean to generalize, but – they don't like to say "No," so they'll say, "Yes, yes, yes." You'll talk to them. You'll ask them to do something. They'll say, "Yes. Yes, I will. Yes." Very respectfully.

But if they don't trust you and they don't believe in your abilities, and they don't believe that you can protect them, they'll say, "Yes," and then they'll leave, and they'll do nothing. So it's a big challenge. And, you know, being able to offer them something that's a benefit to them, too, is another thing.

You have to be creative. You have to find something that makes it worth their while – because, unfortunately, most people aren't going to do it-- you know, work with you for God and country there, unfortunately. So-- there's some that do, but the majority don't.

CONDUCTING OVERSIGHT INVESTIGATIONS IN A WAR ZONE: AFGHANISTAN 2

So, you know, they're looking for some kind of benefit in working with you. It's either monetary benefit – maybe there's something you can do to help them, help their family, maybe help them, you know, with travel. Maybe help them get a job.

A lot of people thought that we could help them with contracting, but we're not allowed to. You know, our agency, we're not allowed to do that.

But-- there's other ways you can help them. Maybe their family situation, they need something, they have a family member that has some kind of problem.

So there's limited things that you can offer them as an incentive to work with you. And as-- a good agent is going to know what those different opportunities are that may benefit those people. And that, that all has-- in response to your question before – that's kind of the thing that might help them trust you, or be more apt to work with you.

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There was one informant one time. He was a very high-level informant. He had previous experience as an informant, with other places. But he had-- he had issues.

He was actually kidnapped at some point – by some group – in a province in the east. And he was held for two or three months, chained up in a bathroom. He had to pay his way out, to pay this group a ransom to get himself out. After he was kidnapped, he was dropped, so people weren't working with him.

So, I found him because I was trying to find somebody in a certain part of the country that could help with the case that we were working on. So I was able to locate him and find him. In that case, it was a very simple thing. He had just come-- he had just been freed, like, a few months before, from being kidnapped. He had no money. He was a contractor.

He was owed a payment on a contract he had from over a year prior, that the Army had not paid him. Because the Army, a lot of times, were not that efficient, you know, with their payments, and tracking, contractors they were paying, and this-and-that.

And as an Afghan person that speaks very little English, it was difficult, especially with the Army. If you had one unit that rotated out after 12 months and left the country, and now there's a new Army unit on that base that doesn't know you as a contractor, has very little contact with you, it's-- being that Afghan contractor, it's very difficult.

You're trying to run down your money. The guy you worked with on the project is gone. You know, nobody knows anything about it. The Army has their hands full. They're fighting a war. They're doing all kinds of things. So, in this case, you said, "Hey. You could really help me. I'm trying to get this money. I'm entitled to it. It's like, oh, $100,000-something, $150,000" – which was a lot of money, to a person that just came out of being kidnapped with nothing.

So in that case, I-- you know, I ran it down. I went to the Army. I spoke to different people. Turns out he was owed the money. I said, "This poor guy's been waiting, like, a year and a half." So within, like, a week of when I met him, he got paid.

So, he was eternally grateful. So in that case, he was just really willing, you know, ready to work with me. And he couldn't do enough for me. So we worked some great cases together. He-- we actually-- he was very good on the intelligence side, as well, so I brought in some of the intelligence agencies, and we worked our criminal cases.

They worked their intel cases. He was responsible for the captures of some very high-level terrorist targets in Afghanistan, in addition to working some great criminal cases with us. So that's just one example. And another quick example I could think of was-- I had this one informant up-- when I was up in the north. That guy was in the east, near Pakistan.

But while I was in the north, it was another guy, young kid. He was providing information on a-- this real high-level Afghan contractor that was involved in logistics – field delivery – a very powerful guy, one of the most powerful guys in the country. Family was all members of Parliament, one of the richest people in the country. He was providing information.

But I had just met him, and he was new. So he mentioned in passing one day, "My brother's really sick. He has, like, a huge tumor in his stomach. And we can't afford to send him to India. My father died when I was a little kid. It's me, my mother, my two sisters, and my two brothers. And my oldest brother, who's, like, // the patriarch of the family, the breadwinner, is really sick. And we can't get him to India. He needs an operation. I don't know what to do."

So we asked one of the hospitals at Bagram Airfield* – one of the other country's hospitals – told them the situation, you know, "This is-- this guy is helping us out and his brother's really sick. He's going to die if he doesn't get treatment." And the hospital is nice enough to say, "Bring him in."
[* Bagram Air Base, aka Bagram Airfield, aka Bagram Airfield Base, located in the Parwan Province of Afghanistan, north of the capital city, Kabul – formerly the largest U.S. military base in Afghanistan, used by the U.S. military until U.S. withdrawal in 2021]

So the hospital brought him in, the older brother – operated on him, took out a massive tumor out of him, then he-- they saved him. So, to this day, that person, you know, for all my time there, he was one of my best informants. He would stick his neck out, do what we needed to be done, and he'd do things that nobody else would do.

And he even said to me, when his brother-- after his brother was operated on, he said, // "My boss" – the big guy I mentioned on that company – he said, "I've worked there for five years. I asked him for help. He did nothing for me, turned his back on me. He-- and he's my boss. He wouldn't do anything to help my family."

He said, "You're a guy I just met. I haven't known you that long. And look what you did." He said, "You went out of your way. You brought my brother and you did all this for me. You saved his life." He said, "I can't thank you enough." So it's just another example of you've got to be creative, and there's different opportunities – because we're not all about paying money to people, either, so.

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We did pay informants sometimes, although not a lot of money. A lot of times, informants are people that would come in, would provide information to you – on their competitors, or their enemy.

So that was another opportunity. They had ulterior motives, obviously. You know, they wanted-- because there was a lot of corruption. There was a lot of criminal activity with all the contractors there – not all of them, but a large majority of them.

So they-- one thing that the Afghans tended to do would be give up their competitors. So in that case, we were happy to listen. You know, if-- hey, it's not a clean business, dealing with informants, you know? They're not all angels, because they're in-- they're in the mix. They're close to bad people because maybe they're not always the cleanest people. We vet them as best we can.

You know, we're not going to work with anybody that's, you know, a terrorist or anything like that, or that's a total criminal. But-- in those cases, that's another way. It's kind of murky. It's a little muddy,

but-- they can give you information on the competitor, which we're glad to take. And, if it's good information, we'll work it and we'll, you know, we'll hopefully work a successful case against the competitor.

Then, if the competitor-- if we-- if the competitor's prosecuted either in Afghanistan or potentially in the U.S., they may cooperate with us once they're-- once they've been prosecuted. And they may turn around, and give us information on the informant that originally gave us the information. That's happened at times, too.

That's where it's not that clean, but you can-- there's still ways that you can operate. But you have to be very careful because, again, that's the security risk there, too, because you work with an informant and obviously, has-- he has an ulterior motive.
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There's a security risk, dealing with certain people because you know they have ulterior motives. You don't always know exactly what they're up to, or what their endgame is. But you have to kind of try to figure that out – for not only the success of the investigation, but for your own security, and your own team's security.

There's so many things to deal with over there. It's just a toxic mix. You have contractors – and we're talking big contracts, you know, Afghanistan. We're talking tens of millions, hundreds of millions of dollars in contracts.

So, when you have that much money involved in something, think of the country, like organi-- an organized crime entity. What does organized crime do when there's a lot of money involved? They put their hands in it. And how do they get their hands in it? They do it through threats, through intimidation. You know, they'll harm people. They'll kill people.

So you have that, the contractor has to work with that element-- they call them "warlords" there, which is regional power brokers. You have the Taliban. If you're a contractor there, like a field contractor, a lot of times when you're just trying to get your trucks through the country for delivery, you have to go through Taliban checkpoints. So how do you get through those? So these contractors deal with them sometimes.

You have to deal with local officials in the different provinces, or districts, or villages because, as a contractor, if you're building a big project in their area, in their district, or their village, or their province, the officials are very corrupt. They want <u>their</u> piece, you know? As a contractor, you have to pay them.

You know, as a cabinet member, a minister, or, you know, a high-level official, they have their hands in everything there, too. It's all very toxic corrupt mix. The police are involved in everything because they provide security. So you have to pay them.

So the point of all that is these-- some of these contractors are so well-placed, they're involved with all these different elements. You know, bad elements over there. And you have to work with those

people every day. So sometimes, they're O.K. But, you know, sometimes, they're dealing with bad people.

And, you know, it's easy for some warlord to kidnap a member of somebody's family than say, "Hey. I have your wife. If you don't go into this-- you know, your next meeting and set off this VBIED or blow yourself up in this meeting, your wife is dead," or -- so that kind of thing happens. It's very easy. Life is cheap there.

It's very easy to pay somebody a few dollars – a few hundred bucks – to have somebody killed or hurt there. So it's-- there's a lot of different security risks and elements that you have to deal with, when dealing with these different informants. It's very challenging. And it's very-- you know, it's a tough environment to work in.

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Business in Afghanistan was all about corruption. It was all about bribery. It was all about paying people. It was just // endemic. It was in the soil. That's the way they did business. And, unfortunately – it was the exception, not the norm, but – you know, some U.S. people that were over there fell prey to that, to the temptation.

You know, if you get a poor guy-- I'm not making excuses for anybody. It's wrong. It's, like, treasonous to take bribe money from-- if you're deployed in a war zone, like, no excuse. But, you know, they prey on the vulnerable. Like, you get some poor guy, some poor soldier, who was, you know, maybe making very little money, maybe he's getting a divorce, or maybe he's got all kinds of problems at home, maybe he's not good with his finances, or maybe he's in debt.

And, this Afghan person comes up and says, "Hey. Turn the other way. Let me take a truck of fuel out of here every other night. And I'll give you 10 grand [$10,000] for each truck." And the guy's there for a 12-month rotation. I-- mean, it's a lot of money to some peo-- you're throwing cash in front of the person.

And then, they were very adept at it, too – at the way they bribe people. So sometimes, they would give soldiers cash, or sometimes they would work and send it back home – by, like, *hawala* – which is, like, an informal money-movement system.

And they could place the money right in the person's hometown, give it to his-- some guy would show up and give it to his wife, or give it to his brother, or-- you know, we even did operations with that. We had people paying bribes to our cooperators.

And, sometimes, we would have them steer the money back to the U.S. Like, instead of paying-- you know, we had soldiers working with us, where Afghans were paying them bribes. So in some cases, instead of the Afghans paying them bribes at the base, we would tell the Afghans-- tell the soldier, tell the Afghan, "You can't keep all this money in your tent, so start sending the money home." And we'd

have the Afghans send the money back to the U.S. through *hawala*. And we'd identify other targets that way, in the U.S., and obtain evidence in the U.S.

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SIGAR OVERSIGHT WORK: INVESTIGATIONS: FUEL THEFT CASE: AFGHAN COURT

I testified at trial in the Afghan court. It was a case we had-- it involved this guy. He was the right-hand man of one the provincial governors over there. So the provincial governors are-- there's 34 provinces. There's a governor for each province, so they're powerful people.

So this guy was the right-hand man of the provincial governor of one of the provinces. And he was involved in all kinds of fraud. And he worked his way over to Mazār-e Sharīf, our base up there, Camp Marmal. And that was a big fuel hub. You know, millions and millions of gallons of fuel, being distributed from that hub all over the north, over the entire north of the country. So there's huge movement of fuel there.

And he was working for these different logistics companies, which are huge. They've got $100 million contracts to deliver fuel. And there was a lot of theft – tons of theft of fuel. You know, if you deliver 10 5,000-gallon trucks to a base, on one day, they might steal five of them. And they might deliver five.

And then they would fudge the delivery documents to show, like, it was delivered. And then, that fuel will all be sold on the black market. And everybody had their hands in the black markets. So a lot of that money from the fuel – stolen fuel – went to insurgents, to Taliban, to warlords. All the crooks got the money.

So it was really a problem. So a lot of times when they would have these deliveries that weren't delivered and they faked the paperwork, they would catch-- the Army would catch the paperwork. Sometimes, they wouldn't. But sometimes, they would.

And they'd tell their contractor, "This fuel was never delivered." So this guy was a crook. And he came-- he approached his soldier on the base and said, in so many words, "I'll pay you if you can make these documents right, if you can-- they're bad deliveries, but I'll pay you."

Unfortunately, a lot of the soldiers fell to that temptation. They said, "Yeah. I'll pay you, like, $5,000 for each bad delivery document you can fix." So that was our-- how our case started. And-- so the soldier brought it to us. And he dealt with the guy. And we were doing an op, where he was providing them these fake documents, saying, "O.K., the load of fuel is good. Pay the company."

But there was a three-month lag for paying the company. So we'd have three months to do this op. So the soldier was working with the guy and he was paying him $5,000, $5,000, $10,000, $30,000, $40,000. He was paying them in cash. And we were recording everything, doing the op.

Then, the soldier had to leave. He had to rotate out. So he introduced me to the crook then. // And I was a DoD* civilian. And I was going to take over the fuel duties for him. So then, I started working with the crook.
[* U.S. Department of Defense]

And it was the same thing. He's paying me, paying me, you know, "Here's the document. Fix it." And we had the whole thing set up where we would get emails from Bagram, up to Mazar, saying, "O.K.. The invoice has been fixed. The company's going to get paid." And I would give him that email. We were working together with Bagram.* And he would pay me – the cash.
[* Bagram Air Base, aka Bagram Airfield, aka Bagram Airfield Base, located in the Parwan Province of Afghanistan, north of the capital city, Kabul – formerly the largest U.S. military base in Afghanistan, used by the U.S. military until U.S. withdrawal in 2021]

This went on for several weeks. And then finally, at the end, he said, "All right. Now, I just want to steal fuel from the base, so can you get me truckloads of fuel." And we said, "This is a good time to take down the case." So we said, "How many trucks do you want?" And he said, "I've got 10 5,000-gallon trucks. I want to bring them in, fill them up, and I want to take all the fuel, and I'll pay you."

So we worked with the Army, you know. He brought in these 10 trucks. We filled up all the trucks. This was after all the other payments with the fake paperwork. Filled up the trucks, let the trucks drive off the base, and then he paid me a big bag of money.

So then, the trucks drove off the base. He paid me. We stopped all the trucks.

And we had-- the Afghan prosecutor came in and locked him up. And that's when he found out, "Oh, shit. ~~[NAME]'s an~~ He's* not my friend. He's an undercover."
[*[NAME] = "He" = the unnamed subject of this interview.]

So anyway, the case went to trial. And we went one day to visit the judge of the case to say, "Hey. How's the case going?"
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You know, "Any updates on the case?" And the judge said, "Well, as a matter of fact, there's a hearing downstairs in the courtroom in, like, half an hour, an hour." He said, "You're welcome to sit in on it."

And it was me, two soldiers from Finland – who were rule of law guys – a colonel and a sergeant. And there was a Department of Justice AUSA [Assistant U.S. Attorney], from the [U.S.] Embassy, to come up to visit us. So they all were with me at the meeting, because we were going to introduce them to the judge – to give them exposure and, you know, see how the system works.

So we said, "Sure. We'll go down. We'll sit in on it." So we went down, sat in the courtroom. And on the left side was us – like, five or six of us, on the left side of the courtroom. On the right side, it was the whole family of the defendant.

And the defendant's in the front, on the lectern. And he's in front of the mic. And there's this three-judge panel in the front. And I'm sitting in the front row. And the defendant's pointing my way. And obviously, he wasn't happy, right? Yelling, and screaming, and pointing my way.

And then, the judge asked me. He said, "Would you-- do you mind stepping up to testify?" Everybody's telling me, "Don't do it. Don't go up there. You're cra--" and so-- and the defendant's family was yelling because, they said, "He's disgracing our courtroom. They're-- they have rifles. They have pistols. This is a disgrace. This is an insult to our courthouse." But, you know, we'd had to travel that way.

So I said, "I'll go up. I'll do it." The guys are telling me, "Don't." And I said, "If I don't go up, it's going to look like I'm a dishonest guy. And we're trying to build the rule of law. If I turn around and run out of the courtroom, what's that going to tell the people – like, the Afghan people? We're going to look like a bunch of frauds."

"Is it a little risky? Yeah, maybe. But we're trying to build a rule of law here. We're trying to give them an example. What kind of an example is it is I'm asked to testify, and I run out like, like a scaredy cat, or whatever? So I'm not gonna do it. So if you guys want to leave, go. But I'm going up-- I'm going up there."

Maybe it wasn't the smartest thing to do. But anyways-- but I went up, with my interpreter, and testified. You know, the judge was asking me all these questions. The defendant was saying you didn't have the authority to take bribe money from me.

And I said, "Well, I did because every time you paid-- every time the defendant paid me money, we had an Afghan prosecutor who wrote a letter – and it's in the file – and it gave us authorization to take the money. We didn't do anything unless the prosecutor was there."

So he gave us all the authorization. So the judge said, "Is that true?" – to the prosecutor sitting at the table. So the prosecutor wasn't our regular prosecutor; he was a substitute. And the prosecutor said, "Judge, I'm just filling in for the--" [LAUGHS] They paid the prosecutors off.

The prosecutor said, "I'm just filling in. I don't know anything about this. I don't know where this file is. I don't know where these letters are that ~~[NAME]'s saying he had~~." And the judge is like, "This is a big problem." Now, we had it. We did everything by the book. Every time he paid me, I handed the money to the prosecutor. The prosecutor would put everything in writing. It was all done.

But unfortunately, he wasn't there. He wasn't there because the defendant paid him not to show up. So, as I'm testifying up there, it was getting kind of raucous. But the-- so the judge said, "No. This might be a problem." You know, he said, "Let me adjourn. And I'm going to think about what the-- sentence I may or may not give this guy. And I'm going think about if ~~[NAME]~~ had the authorization to do what he did or not."

So the judge adjourned. And then, we were all talking in the courtroom – me, the NATO rule of law guys – and we're saying that it's not good, no. So they're-- again, they're-- some of the guys were saying, "We better go. You know, this could turn bad. What if he comes out and says, '~~Lock [NAME] up.~~ Throw him jail,' or whatever? 'Lock him up,' you know?'"

So, again, I said, "You know, it-- we're kind--" again, I said the same thing: "What kind of message is that going to send?" Like, if they're-- if they're accusing us in our case of doing something wrong, and the judge adjourns to think about his decision, and while he's adjourned, we leave. It's going to look like we did something wrong.

So, yeah, there's a security risk. But we're going to really lose because we-- you-- we've been trying to build with this rule of law team. We're going to lose everything. I said, "Let's stay." So I said to the Finland guy – who's a friend of mine now – I said, "Will you stay? Will you and the sergeant stay?" And he said, "Yeah. I'll stay with you guys."

The other guys wanted to leave. I said, "Well, I'm staying with these guys and going to ride it out." So we made a plan while we were waiting. If it really did go bad, how were we going to get out? So we staged our cars in a certain way. And we had a plan how to deal with certain people in the courtroom if we had to leave – by force or whatever.

And we had to plan that. It-- luckily, it didn't happen. But, you know, these are things you have to plan, because it-- I wasn't-- we weren't going to let them take me. So luckily, the judge came out and said, "You're sentenced to, you know, four years," – or whatever – "five years," or whatever he gave the guy.

And he said, "I'm going to ask the prosecutor to review the case file to make sure that the agents did everything right." Which we did. And it was fine. And then later, my interpreter – this was another meeting later – my interpret-- we had met with the judge, the defendant. We left the office. So the judge said, "You guys can leave." We left the office.

My interpreter was still by the entrance to the judge's chamber. And the defendant was in the judge's office. And the defendant was dressing down the judge, yelling at him – like he was his minion, like the judge was the defendant's minion – yelling at him and saying, "I paid you all this money – and <u>this</u> is what you do for me?"

My interpreter overheard that. He said, "This is the best you could get for me, after everything I gave you?" And the judge was saying, "I have my hands tied. The agents have too much evidence. They had recordings. And they had, you know, you talking." And he said, "I couldn't do anything." And he was cursing him out. He was treating him like he was his-- his little you-know-what.

So, you know, it just shows you that-- that more of the challenges, like the corruption you're up against – you think you're doing everything right, and then it's going wrong behind your back, and you don't even know it. And then once the defendant was sent to jail, we heard – although we never documented it – that he never went.

You know, he's-- he was supposedly in jail, but he was home – because he paid somebody off at the jail, just to be able to say, "He's there," when he wasn't there. So it was just, you know, it was just another example of the corruption, the problems. You know, you could do everything. You can, you know, do everything right, and then it's done. You know, it's going wrong.

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It would have been easy for a lot of people to just throw their hands up in the air and say, "Screw this. I'm-- I'm done. I'm-- why am I bothering with this?" But we didn't, you know? You persevere.

BEST QUALITIES FOR OVERSIGHT-IN-A-WAR ZONE INVESTIGATIVE AGENTS 2

And that's another quality of an agent that succeeds over there is somebody who really perseveres and doesn't take, "No," for an answer, and, you know, has the-- really puts his nose to the grindstone or her nose to the grindstone, and says, you know, "I'm gonna-- I'm gonna succeed at this. I'm gonna-- I'm going to accomplish this mission, regardless of what it takes."

As opposed to some other people who might say, "I just can't take this anymore. It's too frustrating. I'm done. I'm finished." And you can't-- you can't do it here. So that's-- you know, those challenges are the one that weeded out the people that were successful and the people that were not, so.

INTERVIEWER:
It sounds like it took a lot of fortitude.

INTERVIEWEE 05:
It certainly did. It absolutely did. I mean, I myself-- I know I would wake up every day-- I was there for a long time, but-- and I was fortunate. I had great people I worked with. I had great support in the agency. Couldn't ask for more. So no complaints for me, at all. I would wake up every morning and my-- when my eyes opened, my first thought in my head would be, "God. Not again." [LAUGHS] "Not another day." You know, it was my first thing when my-- as soon as I opened my eyes, I'd had the feeling, "Aw, jeez. I gotta go through this again?"

But I-- that would pass. That-- my eyes were open. I would think that. Then, I would say, "Well, yeah, I do gotta-- do go through it again. So let me get at it." I'd get up. I'd get ready. And I'd go out and I'd do it again. I would never think about it again.

But it was like that. It was tough. And then, you know, at night, when you go to sleep, the last thing I would think every night when I went to sleep was – this is just me, I'm assuming other people thought the same way there – but the last thing I would think as I'm putting my head on the pillow would be, "If a truck gets driven into our building and blows up, or if they shoot a rocket IED, through the window here, what am I going to do? Like, do I have my gear in place? If it comes through this

window, I'm-- where am I gonna go? How am I going to get out of here. If it-- they blow it up by the front gate, what am I gonna do there?"

So I would think about that before I went to sleep. I'd go through a checklist, in my mind, to try to check off every possible scenario – even though they may never happen. But it happened often enough where you needed to be cognizant of it. So, that was the last thing I thought every night when I went to sleep.

Or wherever I might be. I might be at my base. I might be out in the field somewhere, which is even more challenging because you're in a foreign place and it's a whole new set of circumstances in a different environment. So that was-- it was challenging, you know? That kind of added to the-- you know, we call it stress – it was stress – but we never used that term there because that was just the norm. That's what you had to do.

You signed up to be there. Nobody sugarcoated it when you were hired and you were told to go over there. That was it. There was no secr-- you knew what you were getting into when you went. So, me personally, there was no point in complaining. I signed up for that. That's-- I knew that, you know, that that's what the job was going to be about, so just do it. Do the best you can do.

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INTERVIEWER:
What kind of burden was this for your family?

INTERVIEWEE 05:
Very, very tough – because, you know, you're away, people are alone at home, they don't know what you're doing. They-- all they see is the news, you know, "This explosion in Afghanistan today." "This per-- these people were killed today." You know, "This happened."

I mean, the news always shows the worst of what's going on. So-- and I tried not to bring it home when I went home. I tried not to talk about it too much, because, you know, what good is that, just getting my loved ones and family just all worried about what I'm doing? So I tried not to talk too much about it.

But-- you know, they just assumed the worst when they watched the news. And they're like, "Oh, my God. // Is-- is he O.K.? Is he involved? Is this what he-- is this what he's doing, day-to-day?"

So really, it wreaks havoc on the family. It's very, very tough. I think it's worse because they-- at least-- we're over there, we're in the middle of it, but we know what we're-- we kind of know what we're dealing with, every day. I mean, there's a lot of unknowns. But the poor family's here, and they have no idea.

And not knowing is sometimes the worst thing, like, not knowing what's going on. So I-- you know, it's very, very difficult, very stressful for the family. And they gave me a lot of support. And I-- you know, I mean, I can't say enough.

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The really important characteristic over there is to have the work ethic and determination – to really push through, when the conditions are really against you and everything is against you. And it's easy [to]-- like, an average person would probably fold up, and not be able to do it.

But you really have to have that stick-to-it-iveness to be successful there – because, for every success you have there, you probably have-- you know, out of 100, if you have, like, five successes, you have 95 failures. It's-- it was all about failures.

So, you get beaten down. You know, if you're-- everything you're trying-- "This isn't working, that's not working, you know, there's a security issue, there was an attack there, we can't go here, we can't travel there, this guy is lying to us, this guy's no good, this guy thought-- we thought he was a good informant and he's a bad guy, we can't get the records from this place, the prosecutors are corrupt, the police chiefs are all crooks, they're all lying to us--" I mean, it was just-- it was one thing after another, every day.

Every day was-- it was, you know, like, one negative thing after another. So, it would beat down even the-- you know, the most-- some of the toughest people. So it's really easy to just through your hands up in the air and say, "I'm done. I've had it."
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It was just daily-- day, after day, after day, it would just really knock-- it would knock you down. Like, if you-- if you weren't a fighter, you weren't gonna-- [LAUGHS] you weren't going to succeed there.
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But, if you have that quality – like, some of the agents did – you know, that real determination, like, in the face of the constant failures and constant setbacks. And they were constant. Not to mention, I mean, that all these things we've talked about, there's a war going on, too, and I didn't really even touch on that.

I mean, I talked on the terrorism activity, but you got a war around, all over you. They were all around you. There's fighting everywhere. So you have all that to contend with, too. So, I mean, your really important quality – and they-- and you'll see it, the successful agents have that quality. Like, in the face of the biggest problems and challenges, they don't quit. They keep pushing, pushing, pushing – until they succeed.

And they do it for the right reason, you know? And they're doing it-- you know, they're over there for a reason. They're over there for a mission. And they're doing it in support of the mission. And our agency had a mission, and they're, you know, doing fighting, and doing whatever they can – to make sure that mission succeeds

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I worked my ass off. And I-- you know, I would always go the extra mile. So I would have to, you know, push, push, push, push hard. That's how I succeeded – because I would work, you know, 20 hours a day. And I wouldn't pack it in after eight hours, or 10 hours, and say, you know, "All right. That's enough for today. Let's pick it up tomor--" No.

I'm going to keep plugging. I'm gonna do what I gotta do. And I'm not going to sleep till I accomplish it. And that was my attitude. That was just me. That's how I had to work there. So the people-- and there were other very talented people who succeeded in other ways with their smarts and things like that. I just did-- mine was through working hard. But those attributes really contributed, O.K.? And you would see the difference, when you were there. It was very clear who was successful, and it was clear who wasn't. There was no doubt about that.

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SIGAR OVERSIGHT WORK: INVESTIGATIONS: SUCCESSES

I think as an investigator, a lot of successes-- your successes are often measured by, like, prosecutions and things like that. You know, successful criminal prosecutions.

Sometimes, it's other successes that have nothing to do with your criminal cases. But, you know, we had a lot of very successful criminal cases. I think it was-- particularly satisfying when people would tell me, "You're wasting your time," or, "You can't do that." And I would push through – because I was a bit stubborn.

I'm a quiet guy, but I'm a stubborn guy, you know? I'm competitive, inside of myself, not outwardly like that, but, I always took a lot of pride in my work. And, we got paid to be there, to produce results. So, I never took it for granted, that-- you know, I'm here to do a job and somebody's paying me and treating me well to do a job, so do the best job that you can do. That's the least you can do. And that's how it works.

You know, I'm not entitled to anything, not entitled to be here and be paid or whatever. I'm being paid to do a job. So, anyway, a lot of the successes were those prosecutions, so to-- and those cases, there were several instances where people would say, "That's a waste of time. Don't do it." "Why are we doing this?" You know, "You're not gonna get anything out of this." And to push that through, and then to have a significant result, was very satisfying. So that did happen quite a bit.

INTERVIEWER:
Who would say that?

INTERVIEWEE 05:
Sometimes, it would be other agents. It would be, maybe military guys or-- I mean, generally, those people that didn't understand, you know, didn't understand what we're doing, or didn't have enough

experience to understand why this was a good place to put our resources. Because some people looked at it from the outside, and they didn't understand the underpinnings of what resources and assets we had, and how we could work them, and – they just didn't understand it.

So people who said that generally were inexperienced or weren't familiar with the terrain and the environment we were working in. Or sometimes, it was like everything else – sometimes you have lazy people, lazy people who would rather do something else than work, and bust your butt, and get something accomplished.

And so, you had all kinds that would say that. But me, I always tell-- I would always tell the guys, like, you know, "You're here, so we might as well try to make something happen. Don't be negative. Like, if you're gonna sit here and be negative, and just complain, and say, 'You know, this is a waste. We can't get this done. And why are we here? Why are we doing this,' well, maybe-- then, why are you here? Like, do the best you can do. Try to accomplish something. Yeah. It-- yeah, it sucks here."

And it did. There was a patch people wore. And it said, like, "Embrace the suck." There's, like, a patch that the pilots wore, like, a lot of the-- you know, the guys that work there. It was kind of like, "Yeah, it sucks. But embrace it." [LAUGHS] Like, "Don't fight it. Embrace it. Make the be-- make the most out of it." There's a popular patch over there.

So, to just complain and say, "This-- this is-- stinks. This is no good." Then what are you accomplishing?

So I took a lot of satisfaction in: Yeah, it was tough. It was challenging. And it sucked a lot of times. But, a lot of times, we accomplished things as a team. Some really significant prosecutions.

Sometimes, we helped out the intelligence community tremendously, with our information, and took a lot of really bad guys out that were killing soldiers and things like that. So, there were a lot of successes like that.

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You know, if we worked a case against an American person in Afghanistan, and it came to the point where we would arrest the person or, sometimes – more often than not, since they were in Afghanistan, in a war zone – we would approach them and tell them, you know, "You've been charged. You've been indicted. You need to go home. And you need to face this in court."

So depending on how the case was, if it was, like, an undercover operation, where we got 'em, they'd be shocked, stunned, you know, like, "Oh, my God. Who are you guys? How did this happen?" Like, I-- their head would be spinning. It would just-- like, they couldn't fathom that, you know, they got caught up in that. How did this happen? How did they get caught? So there was a lot of shock with that when that happened. Especially if it was an undercover op.

If it's an overt investigation, where you're out there talking to people, and you're getting records, and everybody knows the investigation's happening, well, it's no surprise. They know the investigation's ongoing and they may be charged at some point.

But if it's, like, a "sting" like that, you know, they're just-- they're, like, dumbfounded. How did they get caught? But they shouldn't be surprised. And especially, like-- somebody mentioned it-- the agency-- we're such a small agency, they'd be like, "Man, who-- who are you guys? How did you do this?" And then, they would learn quick, you know, "Oh, wow. Pretty impressive, that agency, that little agency doing all that you guys did."

Then, they would find out our backgrounds and everything, so they'd be very impressed. I mean, a lot of them would. They'd be angry. You know, they'd be upset that they got caught. Maybe they were remorseful that they made a mistake. But there was-- you know, that was kind of the reaction.

And then, as far as, once they were charged back home, and, what was their attitude after, I didn't get involved too much in the cases back at home, although I spent my last two years at headquarters.

But I talked with all the agents, because we would work the case in Afghanistan, pass it back to headquarters. And, you know, a lot of them – the feedback I got – a lot of the people, especially if they were military soldiers or contractors, they were very remorseful. And they were, like, you know, "I screwed up. I made a mistake. I'm really sorry I did this. I know it was wrong. It's disgraceful."

And a lot of them kind of fessed up to it, and took responsibility, I think, in the right way. So, I mean, some of them, to the bitter end, they'd be angry, and, you know, not remorseful, and not sorry, and they didn't learn any lessons from it.

But I think the large majority of them were very sorry that they got involved in it-- I mean, sorry they got caught, but some of them were legitimately ashamed and sorry that they, you know, took-- partook in that type of behavior, of criminal activity.

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SIGAR'S OVERSIGHT MODEL IN AFGHANISTAN

You were kind of all in this soup, you know? You were kind of all in that mess of a mix.

And, resources were very short there, you know? The-- it was always-- there was always a problem with not enough resou-- I mean, we talked-- we dumped in a ton-- the ton of money there, but, you know, resources and bodies were short a lot of times.

So we were kind of all in it together. And so it helped with the cooperation between agencies, because you could kind of pick each other up, you know? You could-- there was a force multiplier, you know, when you worked together more easily.

So generally speaking, it was pretty good. And that's not to say that there were some issues. You know, occasionally, it might be a little difficult, dealing with the military. Sometimes, they weren't always receptive to us. Sometimes on the intelligence side, it might be a little difficult, dealing with the people on the intelligence side – because they're always kind of guarded in how they deal with the people.

So we did have issues with that. I think what helped us, our agency, quite a bit was, in the early days when I was over there, my first few years, the-- I think the military didn't – the Army, you know, the U.S. military – didn't really know who we were, didn't know what we were all about. I mean, in a lot of ways, [they] were not very supportive of us. So it was difficult working with them.

A lot of times, depending on what region you were in, they had to move you around, they had to drive you around. You might need records or things from the U.S. military. And it was a little tougher in the early days. But then, we had a new leader, our inspector general changed, you know, in 2012 – [NAME:] Mr. Sopko*.
[* John Sopko, former Special Inspector General for Afghanistan Reconstruction, 2012-2025]
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He kind of brought a new-- I mean, he-- a new approach to the agency. And he really had a very good game plan, as far as, you know, how we would operate as an agency – through investigations, through our audits, through our special projects, through our quarterly reports.

And he really turned it around. So by the-- after he was in place for a year or two, our relationships with the U.S. military changed tremendously, too. Now, they were very receptive to us then, whereas before, they were kind of-- when you'd go see them, they'd be like, "Get out of here. Leave me alone."

But, that relationship changed. So that was super helpful. And, you know, we grew into the-- we were the largest investigative agency over there. And we were highly respected, even on the Afghan side. The Afghan government had a great deal of respect for our agency because of what we did, because of the reports we wrote. And, people didn't want to be caught being embarrassed in some report for something that they did wrong. So they were very-- they worked with us very well.

And I think a lot of that was because of our leader, the way he kind of changed things. And he kind of made our agency the big gorilla in the room, where we were kind of an afterthought in the early days. So, that was very helpful, too, with our relationships.
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It changed, in particular, on the Afghan side, as well. The Afghan government, in the early days, would not deal with us. There was a very-- we had little interaction with the Afghan government. We did in, you know, here and there. But, it changed quite a bit – when we became more prominent.

Even though we were a small agency, we were one of the most prominent agencies over there, very well-recognized and respected. And that really facilitated us getting information, and evidence, and cooperation that we really needed to have any success at all, in particular with the Afghan government.

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Our agency, our agents and our people, tended to be there much longer than the average agency person would be. // Most people went there for 12 months, most of the other agencies. And then, they'd be gone. But our agency, people stayed – two years, three years, four years. So the institutional knowledge that our agents or our personnel had – because we had other people there, too: auditors, and engineers, and things – was really some of the best.

So people looked to our agency, when we were there, for that institutional knowledge – which kind of set us apart, I think, and was really helpful because it-- as a new employee of our agency, we'd be hitting the ground, and we'd be teamed up with somebody who'd been there for several years already. So right away, you'd be getting all of the information and training you would need.

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Support for our personnel on the ground was excellent. And, you know, spared no expense – I don't mean monetary – but just supported us in any way we needed it. And our headquarters was very supportive. I think our leader, our IG, was-- you know, he was, like, the best IG out there.

And I think he set the tone. He got the respect of Congress, and everyone else on the Hill. He got the funding for us. He kind of dictated the direction of a lot of our reports, reporting. I think the SIGAR reporting – the agency reporting – was excellent.

Like, the products that they put out, and the topics that they addressed, and the problems they identified were second-to-none. So I think it's-- they did that better than anybody. There were all the different reports, lessons learned. They were-- they were the best, you know, in that environment, I mean, without a doubt.

And, I think, from a law enforcement perspective – because I was on the law enforcement side – we had the-- we would-- did it very well, because we had a large team. You know, in the early days, we had people all over the country in all of the different larger bases, which other agencies did not. You know, we had the largest team. We did source development very well. Our institutional knowledge was excellent and probably better than most over there because we stayed there for so long.

So I-- in our interaction with the Afghan government, we probably had some of the best relations with the government itself, compared to a lot of the other agencies because we were there for so long, the officials and their list-- at the highest levels, you know, they knew us – you know, the president, the different ministers – they knew us. You know, we had relationships there.

Now, ultimately, there were a lot of problems with that government. It collapsed. Look what happened. It was a failure. But, you know, at the time, you know, getting things we needed from the government, we probably did it better than anybody.

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The heartbeat of the-- you know, the agency-- was all those reports.

And I think our public affairs shop, getting the message out, was great. I mean, our message about the successes we had as an agency and as a small agency, the press we got, and the-- you know, the acknowledgment from a lot of people in high places, you know, in the U.S. government and the Afghan government, it was tremendous. I mean, that's what gave us the influence we had was that getting our message out, getting our successes out. And a lot of that was due to the-- our public affairs shop, too.

So it was really a good combination of a lot of things that made a relatively small agency very successful. It was, like, a little agency that was a big goril-- like I say, always say, "It was a big gorilla in the room" – even though it was just a small entity.

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AFTER U.S. WITHDRAWAL / AUGUST 2021

Seeing the way things ended up, like, ultimately with the government collapsing-- the Afghan government collapsed, Taliban took over-- and, you know, they're actually stronger than they ever were. Now, they're this well-equipped-- you know, they had total control of the country.

The country's been modernized, to some extent. I mean, it's still way behind, but, you have a lot of structures built, and equipment, and, I mean, they're much better off than they were – or they're much more advanced than they were before.

So to see the collapse and the way it happened so fast – it's disappointing. I mean, it has to be, like, putting in all that time over there, and-- you know, when you're working, you're hoping for the best. You want to see the government succeed. That's part of the mission, like what we did.

Part of our oversight-- well, the purpose was to identify problems. But you want it-- you want the mission to succeed. It's trying to help it succeed. So, to see the complete collapse and failure, it kind of-- it's disappointing. But it's not surprising.

I mean, anybody that was there, for any period of time, knew it was kind of a "cluster" – as the saying goes. Like, it was-- knew it was a little bit of a mess there. So it's-- the fact that it collapsed the way it did, it shouldn't be a total surprise. You know, we knew there were a lot of issues there.

Our agency identified a lot of those issues – for years – in our reports. We said, "These are problems, A, B, C, D, E, F, G. These are the things you should be looking for. These are the things that should be corrected." And, ultimately, that's-- they were spot-on. You know, that's why it collapsed.

So, yep, seeing it, being over there all those years, definitely disappointing. I would have loved to see it work out better. A lot of people got hurt. There's a lot of people trapped over there, you know, that worked with us – and that are stuck there now. I mean, you've got to feel bad for them.

People that grew up under the U.S. -- like, you have a 20-year-old, they know nothing but the U.S. And then, all of a sudden, it's all gone and the Taliban takes over? What-- you could imagine the shock to-- like, say a young girl, college girl, or something – to be thrust into that new environment.

So you feel bad for the people. I feel bad for a lot of the Afghan people over there, but, again, not surprising either. Nobody should be surprised that that happened, because there were enough warnings. There were enough red flags. And we – you know, our agency, not me – our agency and our great report writers, and everybody else-- there were plenty of warnings, saw it coming. And we told people till the cows came home. And unfortunately, it happened anyway.

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WHAT DID SIGAR ACCOMPLISH IN AFGHANISTAN?

You know, I was part of a good team, a really good team effort there. We had our little victories here and there. I think we contributed to the mission, to the-- to a successful mission. Part of it was – our mission wasn't building the rule of law, but what we did kind of helped build those institutions.

I think we set good examples for a lot of the Afghans and what they were trying to accomplish. We had a little victories here and there. I mean, I think if everybody had the successes we had, maybe the thing would have succeeded. But it didn't.

I mean, we did our part. That all you can do, you know? You were-- we were given a mission. It was to-- it was part of the U.S. strategy. It was what the U.S. was trying to accomplish. And we supported that as best we could. And we had our little victories.

So, I mean, personally, I feel good about what we did there. Like, we did the best we could do. We did a pretty good job within the little space that we were operating.

I mean, I always think of-- one time, I was up in-- up north, and I was on a helo [helicopter] or-- well, I jumped on a helo. I was in Kunduz Province. And there was a Marine there. And he was covered in dirt, you know? You could tell he was-- he was in the field for a while. And he was-- well, he was a mess, you know? He's-- but he was going home.

And I was just B.S.-ing with the guy on the helo. I said, "Where were you?" And he said, "I was--" you know, he was coming from Helmand. He was flying-- somehow, he ended up through Kunduz, and then he was going to Kabul. So he said he was going home.

So I said, "That's great." I said, "I'm here another eight months." I was in my-- middle of my tour – of, like, my second year, I think. And I said, "Oh, good luck. Glad you're going home." I said, "That's really cool." I said, "That's awesome."

And he said to me-- you know, he said, "I did--" he said, "I feel good." This Marine said, "I did my part." He said, "I did my little part." He said, "I feel good. I go home. I did what I can do. I did the best I could do." And he said, "I feel good about it."

So I always think about that guy – like, everybody does their little part. And if everyone works together, we can accomplish things, right? But, nobody changes everything by themselves. But-- so, I look at it that way. Like, I feel that-- like I said, I'm not a star. I'm just another guy working out there.

But I can go home. I look myself in the mirror. And I feel good about what I did – because I know I did the right thing. And I know I busted my hump there. I worked hard. And, I-- we had some successes. So, I put my head on the pillow every night. And I feel O.K. about that. It's sad to see what happened, but it-- I mean, you can't control things sometimes, the way things turn out.

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