SIGAR | SPECIAL INSPECTOR GENERAL FOR AFGHANISTAN RECONSTRUCTION

SIGAR Oral History Project (OHP)

Interview 18: Edited Transcript

Interview Date: 01/24/24

NAME/TITLE

INTERVIEWEE 18:
I am [NAME]. I'm a management analyst here at SIGAR.

JOB DESCRIPTION

INTERVIEWER:
What does that role entail? What's the job?

INTERVIEWEE 18:
The job here at SIGAR is – it's almost like a catch-all. I do some facilities. I do some logistics. I do some purchasing. I do maybe some contracting. It all kind of more support rolled into one.
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I've been at SIGAR since 2008. I came on as a contractor. In 2010, I believe, I became a government employee. So, since 2008, I've been here with SIGAR.

INTERVIEWER:
So that was the year that SIGAR was created. So you've been here since the beginning.

INTERVIEWEE 18:
I've been here since the beginning, yes.

INTERVIEWER:
So you've seen a lot over the sweep of that time. Different leadership, different conditions in Afghanistan.

INTERVIEWEE 18:
Yes.

INTERVIEWER:

I understand that you spent a fair amount of time in Afghanistan for this agency. How often were you deployed? For how long? When?
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INTERVIEWEE 18:
So I went there the first time in-- for a year, between the year 2012, 2013, and then spent some time there again in 2014 and 2015.

INTERVIEWER:
So three different times--

INTERVIEWEE 18:
Three different times. Correct.

INTERVIEWER:
--you went?

INTERVIEWEE 18:
Correct.

INTERVIEWER:
Were the conditions the same each time you went? You were working essentially in the "Green Zone"--

INTERVIEWEE 18:
Yes.

INTERVIEWER:
Primarily?

INTERVIEWEE 18:
Yes. So each time I spent-- I-- because I was at the [U.S.] Embassy in Kabul, in the "Green Zone." The conditions were-- yeah, every time I went there, it was the same thing. I was always in the Embassy in the Green Zone.

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CAREER HISTORY

INTERVIEWER:
I'm interested in the trajectory of how you came to work for this agency. So back to your school days, what did you study? And then after school, how did you get from there to here?

INTERVIEWEE 18:
O.K. So, joined the military first.

INTERVIEWER:
What branch?

INTERVIEWEE 18:
Army. Joined the Army—

INTERVIEWER:
Enlisted?

INTERVIEWEE 18:
Enlisted full-time.
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INTERVIEWER:
What did you do in the Army? What was your path in the Army?

INTERVIEWEE 18:
I was-- they call it a "92 Yankee." I was a logistics specialist. They call it "supply property officer," "supply clerk" – different terms they had for it. But pretty much, I worked logistics in the Army.

INTERVIEWER:
And where were you based?

INTERVIEWEE 18:
I spent three years in Alaska. So, I'm originally from New York. Spent three years in Alaska. Left Alaska, came here at-- Fort Myer, Virginia, which is down the road in Arlington. I ended up getting out of active duty here in Arlington, and just stayed in the area.
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Did six years active, got out, joined the National Guard-- National Guard of Virginia, Virginia National Guard. During that time, I had got a job at SIGIR, the Special IG for Iraq. Worked there for a couple years.

INTERVIEWER:
What capacity?

INTERVIEWEE 18:
Same job. Management analyst. So worked there for a couple years. Then I got deployed to Kuwait with the National Guard. So that led to my departure of SIGIR. Did my year and a half in Kuwait. Came

back to the States. The same contractor I worked for at SIGIR was-- told me about this job here at SIGAR. So that's how I got in with SIGAR.
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Got back from Kuwait after my deployment with the National Guard. I worked-- I continued to work with the Guard, like, full-time during that time. So I was probably home about a couple months, and I got a phone call from the contractor at the time that I worked with at SIGIR, and asked me would I be interested in something similar called SIGAR. I said, "Absolutely." Then I came in for an interview, and it was me and probably one other person. So, when I say I really started, I was here at the beginning, I was-- there was three of us at the time that worked here.

INTERVIEWER:
Why were you interested in working in Afghanistan after you had a similar kind of role in Iraq?

INTERVIEWEE 18:
So I never was-- I never deployed with SIGIR to Iraq. But throughout the military, I have deployed multiple times. So the-- when people say, "You've got an opportunity to go to Afghanistan," it wasn't foreign to me. It wasn't-- I've been places before. I didn't mind going. I thought it'd be a good opportunity to go as a civilian, versus going as a soldier. So I wanted to experience that, and a chance to just get away. You know, see a different country, experience different people.

SIGAR DEPLOYMENT TO AFGHANISTAN

INTERVIEWER:
So what were your first impressions of Afghanistan when you arrived there?

INTERVIEWEE 18:
Oh, the-- the air. So it was really thick. It was kind of a lot of smog and-- just, like-- I guess just the dust and just the air. It's real gloomy. It gave you this gloomy feel, like, coming off the plane and when you initially walked into the country.

INTERVIEWER:
And did you go directly from the airport to the Embassy compound?

INTERVIEWEE 18:
Yes. So it definitely hit you that you were in combat zone. So, coming off, you go through all the-- coming off the helicopter, you get picked up. You go through all the barriers. You're going through-- going through the city, and just—the traffic and the people.

There are so many people everywhere. Lot of people walking, a lot of people riding bikes, lot of little cars. It just-- it was a lot at once. And you're just kind of in the car, kind of just taking it all in. But yeah, it definitely-- like I say, I've seen it before, but it's always new when you go to a new country.

INTERVIEWER:
So you were arriving with what personal, professional mission as part of SIGAR? What was your job going to be once you arrived at—

INTERVIEWEE 18:
So I was going there to be a similar position. I was there to support. During the time there-- there was only two of us that worked on the support side. We kind of managed a lot of the travel in-country – a lot of the travel with people coming to visit to either do an investigation or an audit.

We kind of helped them with their travel and wherever they had to go in-country. Obviously, it was a combat zone, so a lot of movement was limited. So, you know, everything had to be planned out and, you know, down to the minute, and what you were doing at the time.

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INTERVIEWER:
And was there a name for your group over there within SIGAR?

INTERVIEWEE 18:
They called us "Ops." I think we were the Ops at the time. The Ops Section. There was three of-- three of us at the time. And everybody kind of worked to their strengths, you know? Somebody-- if you liked doing more administrative stuff-- I really didn't like doing administrative stuff, so I was more so the guy who gets up and moves around a lot more. I was always up early in the morning, anyway. Always been an early bird. So I would be the guy who travels early in the morning, or whatever the case may be.

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INTERVIEWER:
And so you'd had pretty significant logistics experience. So it wasn't new to you to have a list of, "I've got to get all this stuff done--"

INTERVIEWEE 18:
No.

INTERVIEWER:

--I'm assuming. But, because you were there early on, you were helping to, I would assume, build the SIGAR presence in that country--

INTERVIEWEE 18:
Yes.

INTERVIEWER:
--is that right?

INTERVIEWEE 18:
Yes.

CONDUCTING OVERSIGHT AGENCY MANAGEMENT IN A WAR ZONE: AFGHANISTAN

INTERVIEWER:
So tell me about that.

INTERVIEWEE 18:
So outside, like, so, our day-to-day work-- like I told you, we did a lot of, like, in-country travel. I was there when we bought our first up-armored vehicles, you know? So, I was part of that. I was part of when they got stuck in Customs, and I had to go out into the city, and sign them off, and help them get pulled out of Customs.
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A lot of stuff early on. So, even in 2012, during that time, things had changed. At one point, they were allowed to kind of leave the [U.S.] Embassy. You can go to maybe a local restaurant with no-- you know, drive your own vehicle, or drive one of our up-armored vehicles. So, by the time I actually got there, they stopped doing that. They weren't allowing people to go off-base anymore. So these vehicles we just ended up buying, we couldn't even get out and use them the way we initially wanted to, so.
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I think there was just a rocket attack months previously before I got there, which in turn shut down a whole lot of the travel.

INTERVIEWER:
So when you joined SIGAR, you did not immediately get deployed to go there? It was four years between when you started at SIGAR—

INTERVIEWEE 18:
Yeah.

INTERVIEWER:
--and when you went?

INTERVIEWEE 18:
Yes.

INTERVIEWER:
So what were you doing in the years before you went over there, in terms of supporting SIGAR from here?

INTERVIEWEE 18:
I worked in the front office, for a couple years. And then, from there, I got moved to where I'm currently at right now, the management analyst position. I worked with budget for a little while. I worked with-- like I say, I did a lot of facility stuff, more logistics.

Now I do more so, like, projects. Obviously, we got a lot of-- they range from building this ballistic lobby we have in here, to turning in space, or acquiring a new space, and purchasing equipment. So it just ranges. Whatever they need me to do-- has been-- I try to help.

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INTERVIEWER:
What are the challenges of conducting oversight in a conflict zone, a war zone? What did you experience as challenges in your position when you went over there?

INTERVIEWEE 18:
It was just-- really, it was just being away from your family. So you always have that. It is a combat zone, so you do hear the rockets. You do see-- and [you see it in] the media. So when you watch TV, you say "Afghanistan," you think bombs, and this war-- a war-torn country.

So when you're over there, you see it-- kind of see it for yourself, you do see buildings. You see rubbles of rocks stacked up and—so, yeah. It's that initial shock that you are in a war zone. When you-- when you're sleeping by yourself, staring at the ceiling, realizing, "What did-- what did I get myself into," you know?

INTERVIEWER:
So what were some of the most challenging things that you had to do in that job while you were there?

INTERVIEWEE 18:

I wouldn't say challenging. I mean, I had some experiences. Even when I told you I got the-- I had to get vehicles out of Customs one time. I had to leave post for that. Now obviously, everybody knew I was off-post. But during that time, like, our alarm went off.

There was, like-- an attack in the vicinity of the Embassy, not necessarily on the Embassy itself, but. So just realizing, "Hey, I'm out here in this city, and there's actually, you know, bombs going off." So that feeling of I had to rush back, you know, get back to the safety of the Embassy.

Lot of times, I have traveled a lot in-country. So, during that time, I think we had five or six-- four operating bases that we worked out of. I did a lot of travel in between Kabul, and Bagram*, and Kandahar, and Mazar [Mazār-e Sharīf]. And so I've been to all of them. And, same capacity.
[* 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 ranges from, "We've got to buy these guys a car battery and bring [it] over there" to, they have IT issues. They may have housing issues or, you know, so they'll send me over there to help them whatever-- get through whatever their issue was at the time.

INTERVIEWER:
So you would end up getting in a vehicle and traveling by road to get to these forward operating bases?

INTERVIEWEE 18:
No. So actually, you get in a vehicle. It was a long process. Flights left early in the morning. So you take a vehicle to the airport.

INTERVIEWER:
You'd go to the airport?

INTERVIEWEE 18:
Fly over. Get there early in the morning. You spend all day. So in theory, there's, like, one flight going out, and one flight coming back. So you're spending all-- spend the day there, if not two days. Then same process. Come on back, fl-- or drive to the airport, fly back to Kabul, take the van back to the Embassy.

INTERVIEWER:
So, most of the trips that you made to the forward operating bases were day trips?

INTERVIEWEE 18:
Yes. I spent-- I never stayed more than a week if I was out helping somebody else.

INTERVIEWER:
And how about the time that you did spend a week? What was that like? Where was that, and what were you doing there?

INTERVIEWEE 18:
So, definitely brought me back to my military days. More so the living conditions. I would say staying on the [U.S.] Embassy [compound] is definitely a perk. There's-- say, for example, Bagram's* like-- is a military base. So it definitely-- you have a lot of soldiers walking around.
[* 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]

And it feels like a military base. Like, the chow hall – the DFAC* – the way they operate. So definitely, it felt like I was kind of back in the military again. But also, they have bathrooms that you've got to walk to. So, sometimes you may sleep in one building, but you've got to walk 50 yards to go use the bathroom somewhere else.
[* dining facility]

So that-- that also can be a struggle. But like I say, it wasn't necessarily a struggle for me. It was something that I was kind of used to. It was actually what I expected coming in. So when I got to the Embassy, embassy life is a lot better. You know, I had my own bathroom inside of-- they call it my "hooch," so to say. And from a soldier perspective, I was happy. I mean, I couldn't really ask for anything more. I didn't have to-- food was good. And—

INTERVIEWER:
Describe the hooch.

INTERVIEWEE 18:
So pretty much, it was like a container, like, probably you would see in the back of a 18-wheeler type container. It probably is about 12 or probably about 20 feet long -- seven to 10 feet wide. Just enough room to have a bed. There was a bathroom in the back, a little desk you could sit down on in front. Very small. Had enough. Just had your little TV and-- mainly meant for sleeping. Sleeping and you go to the bathroom. Outside of that, you kind of get out-- get out of your hooch, and stretch your legs, and walk around.

INTERVIEWER:
And that's all within the Embassy—

INTERVIEWEE 18:
Yes.

INTERVIEWER:
--area?

INTERVIEWEE 18:
That's all on [U.S.] Embassy grounds.

INTERVIEWER:
So, how long did you spend living in that storage unit, all told, over your three different times that you were—

INTERVIEWEE 18:
So yeah. Every time I stayed in one of those-type units. They do have people there who-- when I was there for the year, I could have stayed somewhere bigger and better, more space. They have small apartments, they call them.

I chose not to. I was perfectly fine with the-- my living conditions at the time. Like I say-- I came at it also, I've been in combat zones as a soldier. So I've stayed in open bays of 40 people. And, you know, just so to have my own space and my own bathroom and own time, that-- I was perfectly fine with that.

INTERVIEWER:
So it wasn't as much of a shock to your system as it would be for a civilian who'd never served?

INTERVIEWEE 18:
Yes.

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INTERVIEWER:
What were some of the biggest issues that arose in trying to get your jobs done? I mean, it sounds like you were making various trips with various pieces of equipment. What were the-- what were the sort of sticking points, where things would get gunked-up, or would be difficult to manage?

INTERVIEWEE 18:
So definitely, the travel. I've definitely been on flights where, let's say, I make it to Herat, but I can't leave because there was a rocket attack. So things get canceled all the time without notice. So you may have heard the term "go-bag."

So you've always got to be prepared. So even if I had decided I'm going to go there for a day trip to help out with whatever issue, I would pack for, you know, multiple days – because, if an attack does happen, I have no-- I'm pretty much stuck there. So.

INTERVIEWER:
What would you put in your go-bag?

INTERVIEWEE 18:
So I always had snacks, maybe an extra pair of clothes. I was never on any type of medication or anything, so just kind of water. Always kept my passport on me. They issue you med kits and such like that. So-- I had a radio. I always kind of kept a radio on me.

INTERVIEWER:
So it sounds like you always had to be prepared for the unforeseen?

INTERVIEWEE 18:
Yes.

INTERVIEWER:
Things could change at a moment's notice?

INTERVIEWEE 18:
Yes. And that's not just traveling. Even when you get to the Embassy, you'll-- as you walk back and forth throughout the Embassy, you'll see everybody with a bag attached to them. Like, some type of backpack, or something, hoisted across their shoulder, some type of bag – because, at the same time, you are in a war zone. Things happen at any time.

And outside the attacks, one thing I remember was the earthquakes. There was a lot of earthquakes in Afghanistan. I remember being woken up, actually, like, shaken out of my bed. Like, it knocked me to the floor and just, like, an earthquake at the time that they had.

The weather is another thing. When they-- you know, like, it gets real cold and slushy. And, you know, you're talking about the dust in Afghanistan mixed with snow – it turns into mud. You just walk around in muddy slush all day, so.

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INTERVIEWER:
What types of attacks did you all have to be prepared for, even within the Embassy grounds?

INTERVIEWEE 18:

Your main attack was, I guess, RPGs [rocket-propelled grenades]. They're propelled rockets. So, I guess, if somebody that wanted to harm you had the high ground, or they would just-- you know, if they had some type of aim on type-- on the Embassy, they can shoot one of those.

Maybe some type of long-range missiles, like mortars or something, the sh-- but I always felt like they kind of-- when you did hear attacks, or when stuff did go off, I felt like no one-- nobody's really aiming. They're just aiming in the general direction.

So it was-- it was just kind of, like, they were just trying to get lucky. But you've only got to be, you know, lucky once. There was a lot of rumors about-- at the time – of, let's say, 50 Taliban members are going to blow up the front gate and all rush in at one time.

It was just kind of different stuff you hear about, you know, I guess, though I'm not sure if it was real intel, or just rumors. But there was always that feeling of something could happen, or you're almost waiting for something to happen. So when alarms do go off – and they do go off a lot – the first initial maybe three, four times, there is that kind of feeling like, "What's going on? What's going on?"

But you are trained well. They do train you and tell you what to do, and do prepare you. Just listen to their instructions. Luckily where I lived at was right next to the DFAC, which was one of the areas you run to when-- if something did happen, because it was a hardened area. So I never had far to go. And I always had food, so that was my go-to.

INTERVIEWER:
And just define "DFAC."

INTERVIEWEE 18:
Oh, the DFAC is the-- always where I lived at was close to the cafeteria. The cafeteria was one of the hardened buildings that you would try to get to if there was a rocket attack, or any type of attack, in general. So luckily, I was within 100 yards of the cafeteria.

INTERVIEWER:
What does "DFAC" stand for?

INTERVIEWEE 18:
Think it stands for defense-- actually, I think it stands for "Dining Facility," just the D, you know, the first three letters of "facility."

INTERVIEWER:
So having to be on alert, having to anticipate these different kinds of attacks, what kind of psychological space do you have to be in to do that, if you're working on oversight? Now, you were a

trained soldier, and then you worked for SIGAR and got additional training. But psychologically, what kind of space do you have to be in – to deal with the uncertainty of those possibilities every day?

INTERVIEWEE 18:
Yeah. So I-- for me, I definitely-- from all my deployments, I learned to get into a routine early. I like to work out and go to the gym. So, when-- because it was hard to sleep. So you do get this feeling of-- it's that initial time change, number one.

But then when you had this feeling of, "O.K., what's going on out there? Did I hear something?" So for me, it was-- it was work out, clear my mind. I worked out early in the morning, I went to work all day.

I was on a real strict routine. I ate pretty much dinner at the same time. I ate breakfast. I ate lunch at the same time. And I worked out in the evening. So by the time 8:00 in the evening, 8:00 p.m., I was exhausted, so which helped me fall back to sleep, not necessarily up thinking all night, or-- and my family was very supportive too.

I made my phone call, same routine. I made my phone calls around the same time. So they already know what to expect, you know, what time to be home. And they knew I was going to call at a certain time, so. And I say they were very helpful. I didn't-- it is hard when you have a family that's, you know, if they're, "Oh, I'm worried about you," or, you know, [are] crying – [that] makes you want to go back [home]. But yeah. They knew I was only over there for, you know, however amount of time, so I would be back.
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INTERVIEWER:
Did you make a conscious decision to set a routine, or did you get guidance that setting a routine was a really good idea?

INTERVIEWEE 18:
No, actually, I consciously decided to, you know, have a routine. I mean, it's helped in the past in other deployments that I've been on. So I knew once I got there – setting a routine would be helpful for me.

INTERVIEWER:
What's the benefit of having a routine?

INTERVIEWEE 18:
It takes the thinking out of it. And it kind of just-- sometimes you get-- you get in your own head. So I think setting a routine is, like, I knew exactly at 5:30 I was going to get up and go to the gym. And it's, like, I had to be to work by 8:00 – so literally, go to gym.

I'd try to be one of the first people in the cafeteria, get my food, shower. And I—and by 8:00. And I don't-- it makes time go by a lot faster too. Sometimes, you-- because you are going for a extended amount of time. What you don't want to do is think about how much time you've got left or the whole-- or be planning your next R&R, because, if you do that, then your time will go by very slow.

And it'll seem like you're always thinking about what you're going to do next. So that was helpful for me – even with R&Rs. I didn't plan my first R&R till I think, like, eight months in, before I finally, you know. Because I didn't want that feeling of having to come home, and then turn back around and come back to Afghanistan, so.

INTERVIEWER:
So it sounds like you had a pretty good handle on how to make yourself as comfortable as you could be psychologically, in that setting, under those circumstances. Did you observe other people who had a harder time? And if you did, what did you observe?

INTERVIEWEE 18:
I did. I do feel like the-- so you are allowed to have alcohol on the Embassy [grounds]. I felt like there were some people that probably abused that.

INTERVIEWER:
As a means of coping?

INTERVIEWEE 18:
As a means of coping. Yes. Like, some people just-- yeah. I think, I do think Afghanistan is a-- I mean, yeah. I guess I can't really-- I feel like some people just definitely abused alcohol over there. But I also feel like a lot of people did the other side.

A lot more people in the gym. I would say they have a lot of-- when you do get deployed, they have a lot of, like, activities. So there's always-- there's an MWR. I'm not sure what it stands for. I think morale and some s-- or I don't know what it stand-- moral welfare, something like that.

So there's a lot of activities to do. There's-- I mean, we had guys playing Dungeons & Dragons to-- you know, they had, like, spin classes that would last, like, six hours, that were-- that would, like, resemble-- we had CrossFit games at one point. They'll kind of run around the Embassy.

So there was definitely a lot of stuff to do. So if you did get into, like-- you know, I guess a depression or want to be by yourself, you did that by choice -- because I would say the [U.S.] Embassy and-- not just the Embassy, when you go to the other operating bases, there are a definitely a lot of activities to keep you busy.

INTERVIEWER:

So you were there with this agency, but those kind of activities were managed by, I would assume, the State Department and its Embassy staff. Is that—

INTERVIEWEE 18:
Yes.

INTERVIEWER:
--correct?

INTERVIEWEE 18:
Yes.

INTERVIEWER:
So it was really like you were one community, even though, you know, you were working on oversight, and other people were working on, you know, State-related activities—

INTERVIEWEE 18:
Yes.

INTERVIEWER:
How was it, do you think, to be in the same space as some of the people that you're overseeing?

INTERVIEWEE 18:
Definitely helpful. And like I say, I think it definitely was more so like a community. So, for example, my neighbor-- I say "neighbor." We all lived in a row of CONEXes [CONEX boxes] side by side. But, like, your neighbor could be, you know, some high-ranking State Department official.

Like, so it doesn't really-- but you say "good morning" to him every single day. You see him every day. You see certain people at the gym every single day. You go to the cafeteria certain times, you see them every day. And you do get to know different people.

And you fast forward. Once I got-- once I came home from Afghanistan, and just being in this D.C. area, I come across people that I've known from my time in Afghanistan. When I went back to Afghanistan for, you know, short-term, I've seen people, "Hey, where you been at?" [LAUGHS]

Sometime—sometime people leave, and they just-- they disappear for a little while, and come back. But-- it definitely is a community feel-- I'd say even from the top to the bottom. Like, I've had lunch with the Ambassador before, or certain-- different people, so.

INTERVIEWER:

So do you think-- given everything that you observed, do you think that it's easier or harder to do oversight when you're in such close proximity with some of the people that work for the agencies that you're overseeing?

INTERVIEWEE 18:
It's definitely harder – because you do build-- not just friendships, but it-- it's-- the Embassy's small. So there's a lot of-- big rumor mill. People talk a lot. People do understand what you're over there doing. There was a time I remember when it was like, "Don't talk to no SIGAR people."

So even some time I remember even though I didn't-- I wasn't involved in audits or investigations, I was associated with SIGAR. So there is a feeling of, "Watch what you say when you're around these certain people" or, you know. But it was-- it wasn't-- it didn't get me down any.

But, it's definitely harder, I think, being so close to some of the people you see every single day, and the fact that everybody knows who you are. It's not a secret who we are. And, if you're in the Embassy more than three days, your name-- people already know and have a idea who you are – and what you actually are there doing, so.
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INTERVIEWER:
Are there any examples that you can think of that illustrate the difficulty of overseeing the people that you're in close proximity to?

INTERVIEWEE 18:
For me, no – because obviously, I didn't-- and so you do-- I mean, I've heard stories where, you know-- actually, I have seen to where-- we were at a table, maybe, like, a little outside picnic table area, just having general conversation. And you'll hear, like, the joke. "Oh, watch what you say around SIGAR," you know? Kind of like little jabs like that.
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So there were times when-- probably in a picnic area or sometime in the cafeteria, you sit down, meet somebody, you know, just general conversation. They find out who you work for. And it's the-- you know, kind of like little jabs here and there. "Oh, oh. Let me watch out what I say, because SIGAR's around."

Or, "Oh, I don't want to sit next to you, because you may audit me!" Or, you know, kind of little statements like that. Now, were they serious? I don't know. It just-- it comes across as a joke, but you do hear it a lot. You hear it a lot – to the point of you get tired of hearing it, you know? So.

INTERVIEWER:
What about from colleagues? Did you hear from colleagues that that made it harder or easier, the people—

INTERVIEWEE 18:
Yes.

INTERVIEWER:
--who did the work?

INTERVIEWEE 18:
So I've heard from colleagues the same thing. Just constantly-- some people put a wall up. Not necessarily that they're always hiding something, but there is this feeling of, "Maybe, if I say the wrong thing, it's going to be taken out of context," or-- which was never the case. I think if people got to know most SIGAR employees, that was never the case. But people were on defense, I feel, a lot.

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INTERVIEWER:
So I'm assuming that when you had to do any kind of movement or effort, you had to do so in contact with, in cooperation with, the military—

INTERVIEWEE 18:
Yes.

INTERVIEWER:
--the U.S. military. What was that relationship like when you, as a part of this agency, had to raise your hand and say, "Hey, you know, we need your help with X, Y, or Z"? Was it cooperative? Describe the relationship.

INTERVIEWEE 18:
It depends. It was almost like how they felt-- whatever's going on in the news or media at that time-- they felt like the IG* wasn't saying stuff they wanted him to say, then the support was lacking. If there was nothing really going on, then for the most part, the support was-- you know, they were willing to help us do, you know, whatever it was.
[* John Sopko, former Special Inspector General for Afghanistan Reconstruction, 2012-2025]

INTERVIEWER:
So you actually noticed a correlation between SIGAR's work output, at times critical of what the U.S. military was doing, and how cooperative they were with the agency's requests?

INTERVIEWEE 18:
Yes. I definitely noticed that. I've been in meetings before where nobody would clearly come and say it, but meetings go a lot smoother when people's-- when they feel like they're not being mentioned in the media. But there was a time I think when we were scheduling, like, an IG* visit, and he* wasn't

necessarily the most popular person at the time. And I felt like planning his movements was a lot more difficult than what it should've been. Yeah.
[* John Sopko, former Special Inspector General for Afghanistan Reconstruction, 2012-2025]

Like, you get passed around. Like, nobody would come out and clearly say, "We're not going to do it." But they'll just pass you to the next person, and pass you to the next person till, you know, you have no choice but to fulfill our request type-thing.

INTERVIEWER:
And when you encountered that, what would you do?

INTERVIEWEE 18:
So not much you can do. We kind of just-- we recognized it between me and my colleagues. And at the end of the day, some of the stuff was their job. So just keep pushing, keep pushing. Eventually, you got them to, you know, do what they-- whatever they were supposed to do at the time.

Now, granted, if you have-- if it's mission, or there's a danger, or it's safety concerns, that's different. That's-- you know, we can't argue with that. But, like I say, it was never clearly said. Nobody outright just said, "We're not going to do this." But it was definitely a lot more pushback than what it needed to be.

INTERVIEWER:
So that sounds like that was a sticking point from time to time.

INTERVIEWEE 18:
Yes.

INTERVIEWER:
Were there others-- different kinds [of sticking points] that you can think of that kind of characterized the types of things you can encounter if you're doing this kind of work in a war zone?

INTERVIEWEE 18:
So that was more so from the actual your fellow, you know, [U.S.] Embassy civilian Americans that you see every single day. The other-- you know, outside of that, you have the-- even the locals. Some of the locals that's working day to day with them, you have a culture.

The-- culturally, they do things differently. They probably don't move as fast as you're used to somebody's moving, you know? So when you say, "I need something Monday," their Monday may be, you know, when they'll get to it-- when they get to it.

So-- and it's not in a disrespectful way. Just, I guess, they just don't move at the same pace that you're probably used to when you're working in the States. The responses are different. Not necessarily here, but I've been-- not in Afghanistan, but I've-- for example, I was in the Philippines, and a guy-- he turned his phone off. Like, unplugged it – because he said people were calling him too much. That was just something that you don't necessarily see in America. But it's, like, different countries, their-- the way they operate is just a little bit different.

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INTERVIEWER:
If you're thinking about the kind of people who might want to do the same work in the future in some other place, some other conflict zone, what other things would you describe about what it was like?
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INTERVIEWEE 18:
Definitely, so another part is just the family. Like I mentioned before, my family's very supportive. But you are missing birthdays. You are missing holidays. You are-- if you have children, you're missing your kids. If you're married, boyfriend, girlfriend, you're missing them. And your daily luxuries that you have in the U.S. Like I remember-- I watched the Super Bowl at 3:00 in the morning. So, with the certain things we kind of take for granted, you know. But I did watch it, though, so.

INTERVIEWER:
Were there any surprises that, you know, you, as someone who had been deployed as a soldier, have worked for other agencies, encountered – and you weren't prepared for, that you wished you had been prepared for? Or was it pretty much all what you expected?

INTERVIEWEE 18:
I would say it was pretty much what I expected. I came in expecting worse, and it actually was better. So.

INTERVIEWER:
What were you expecting?

INTERVIEWEE 18:
I was expecting-- so obviously, like I say-- my-- I have a military [background], so I'm thinking, "I'm about to go over here. And I'm [going to] be in a tent, sleeping on a cot with 40 other people. Can't move around, can't--" you know, just really structured.

And-- the living conditions, like I say, and the food, and the Embassy has a pool. They had a pretty-- really nice gym. Like I say, they have the activities. So there was a lot of stuff to do – laundromats, you name it. I think they pretty much covered everything. If they didn't have it, you can order-- you could

order stuff from, like, Walmart.com and stuff will get delivered to Afghanistan. So, you know, previously, you couldn't do stuff like that.

INTERVIEWER:
So the way the United States does this kind of work, it sounds like the logistics and the planning and the infrastructure was in place in Afghanistan to make this not so difficult a tour of duty for most people coming in to do this type of work for this type of agency.

INTERVIEWEE 18:
Yes. I definitely felt they try to make you more comfortable. They can't control who's going to attack you, or can't control the weather, or the-- you know, but the things they can control. So they try to give you-- I remember even, like, on Thanksgiving, I think they had, like, steak and lobster. Or they had a duck or, you know? So they just-- they do a lot, the Embassy as a whole, to make your time there easier.

INTERVIEWER:
And SIGAR got served the steak and lobster?

INTERVIEWEE 18:
Yes.

INTERVIEWER:
So it's interesting that, you know, you're an oversight agency, but you're really benefiting in some ways from the planning and extension of amenities that, you know, these agencies that you're overseeing are putting together in part for you.

INTERVIEWEE 18:
Yes.

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INTERVIEWER:
Did you have any special training that prepared and equipped you to do what was part of your job here? And that can include the military training that you've had. But what would that be?
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INTERVIEWEE 18:
So the-- my military experience working with logistics and planning, that was definitely helpful, working here, from the work side. From the preparing you [to go to] Afghanistan, we did-- do they call it, "FACT" training. I'm not sure what it stands for, the acronym.

You know, but you get into Humvees.* You get into-- they-- if the building caught on fire, you kind of go through drills or what to do if there was an actual mass attack and, you know, different stuff like

that, which I think was very helpful, preparing you-- not only preparing you physically, but just mentally. It-- it's kind of getting dialed in. This is the place you're going to. So I think that definitely was helpful.

[* High Mobility Multipurpose Wheeled Vehicles (HMMWVs)]

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INTERVIEWER:

Do you think that military training is-- you said it's helpful. Is it a must for being deployed to a place like this to do this kind of work? Or do you think civilians can manage it just as well?

INTERVIEWEE 18:

I think civilians could manage it just as well. Obviously, I think soldiers and-- when you're talking about combat, you really think soldiers, and soldiers get a lot of the credit and the "welcome back home," and the high-fives. But, you know, working with majority civilians this time around, yeah, civilians do just as much, if not more than their average soldier does.

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SIGAR OVERSIGHT MANAGEMENT & SUPPORT: SUCCESSES?

INTERVIEWER:

Were there some projects that you undertook as part of your role, when you were over there, that you felt were real accomplishments like, "Wow, we got that done"? Can you think of any that stand out?

INTERVIEWEE 18:

Well, definitely the vehicles.

INTERVIEWER:

How many did you--

INTERVIEWEE 18:

So we had 10 total. So I actually helped purchase the vehicles here at headquarters in Virginia.

INTERVIEWER:

What kind of-- what kind of—

INTERVIEWEE 18:

They were armored Suburbans, so 10 large trucks. So by the time I got there-- so maybe two years had passed. By the time I got there, one of the things they asked me to do is like, "Hey, what's going on with our vehicles" – because out of the 10, we only had six.

Nobody knew where the other four were. So, one of the things when I first got there, I was able to find the vehicles. I actually found-- they were actually parked in the airport, and they were stuck in the mud, because they were so heavy, over all the seasons changing, they-- they sunk into the mud. But nobody knew who the vehicles belonged to. I was actually able to find those.

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INTERVIEWER:
How did you do that?

INTERVIEWEE 18:
Just kind of going, just talking to different people. Just kind of went there with the intent of, you know, we bought these vehicles so long ago. And part of it was the experience. I think my logistical experience kind of was helpful, where I may talk to people that your normal person will never even thought to ask, you know, ask this department, or ask this person.

INTERVIEWER:
Give me a sense of how you did that.

INTERVIEWEE 18:
I'm trying to think exactly who I-- how I did it. But, I just remember going to-- I went to Customs. I think I contacted the Customs people, and I brought it up. And, somehow, State Department thought that they paid for them, and that they [were] their vehicles.

And I had to show them our titles, and they said, "Oh yeah. We have those vehicles. They've been sitting over here in, you know, the airport," where they couldn't get to them, for whatever reason, so. But yeah, once we figured it out, it was pretty, you know, straightforward of getting them back to where they belong.

But then at that point, we didn't need them anymore, so we was actually able to give them back to the [U.S.] Embassy so they can actually use them -- because, at the time, SIGAR didn't have a need for 10 vehicles. So we just kept the six that we had, gave them back to somebody that can have better use of them. So I kind of feel like I repurposed something that wasn't being used.

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WHAT DID SIGAR DO WELL?
BEST QUALITIES FOR OVERSIGHT-IN-A-WAR-ZONE PERSONNEL

INTERVIEWER:

What do you think this agency, SIGAR, did well, from your vantage point, doing this kind of work under those circumstances in that place?
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INTERVIEWEE 18:
It was really good to see people who had a genuine compassion for what they're over here doing. So, despite the politics, or despite policy-- like, I've seen 5', 100-pound women going to bad places to do a inspection, or to do, you know, some type of investigation. So it's not what you think. It's not like, you know, you got Navy SEALs for protection.

It's not that type of a place. But it's a dangerous place. And I-- see, I feel like you do have to have a real genuine care or compassion for what you're actually doing, a belief in what you're doing, to get the actual mission completed and job done.

And I definitely think SIGAR employees, both on the investigation end, the audits and inspection side, from what I've seen, they all have had that. There was never a time where I ever felt like where people, like-- "Oh, I'm not going to go to Kandahar because it's dangerous over there."

Like, Afghanistan as a whole is dangerous. I've never seen nobody try to get out of doing something or, you know, push it off, for whatever reason, so. If anything, we had to hold some of them back and tell them, "Hey, you know, cancel your trip because you can't go," so.

INTERVIEWER:
And how did that go over when you had to do that?

INTERVIEWEE 18:
So, a lot of times, if it did happen, it happened before they got in-country. So it was just a matter of planning, you know, making changes before they actually got here. Now obviously, when you get in-country, and if something happens and the whole Embassy is locked down, there's not much you could do about it.

But yeah, I definitely think SIGAR did a really good job of just caring about what they did – which I think also is helpful when you're in a place like that. You've got to almost believe in what you're doing. Not go in there with the attitude of, "I'm just here, because they told me to be here." Or, "I'm here because they're giving me some money to be here." So I think that's important also.

INTERVIEWER:
Did you feel that your group, your role, you were able to deliver on pretty much all the things that you were asked to do, in that capacity?

INTERVIEWEE 18:
Yes. Yeah.

INTERVIEWER:
And was that because of-- what would you credit that to, other than your own competence and ability?

INTERVIEWEE 18:
I think-- so we had a good team. For my section that we worked in-- we worked well together. It was definitely a situation where we both knew what was going on with each other. So one person wasn't there, I could fill in. If I wasn't there, he or she can fill in – which was very helpful, because there is a lot going on in [the] Embassy.

And we all kind of just-- like, mainly I did a lot more of the traveling. I just-- you know, because it was easier for me, maybe a little bit easier for me. I'm a bigger guy. So yeah, if I had to pick something up and trav[el], I'd be the guy to do it.

It was never, like, an issue of I'm not trying to do it, or somebody else was trying to get out of it. So we all just kind of worked well together. I think we all kind of understood this is where we're at. We are the community. We are the team. And we just kind of worked together, to get whatever done.

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WHAT COULD/SHOULD SIGAR HAVE DONE BETTER/DIFFERENTLY?

INTERVIEWER:
From your vantage point, what things do you think this agency could've done better or differently?

INTERVIEWEE 18:
I felt it could have had more people possibly in-country. I have noticed to where-- and sometimes, the-- now, see, I'm on the outside looking in. But the way the structure of it-- so I didn't-- for example, you may have an auditor who works in Afghanistan, but his supervisor is in Arlington, or he doesn't necessarily report to somebody here in-country.

So it was-- you may have a little pushback or, you know, people kind of going back and forth like, "Oh, you don't understand what I'm going through." And, I've seen that in small cases here and there. But I do think the beneficial part for SIGAR is mostly everybody in SIGAR has been through or passed through Afghanistan at some point.

So there is a general understanding of, you know, time difference or a person probably can't get it to you the way, you know, that you want things done at the time, so. But, yeah, if-- far as doing better at that time, have more people, actually. The bulk of people be in Afghanistan, versus the bulk of people being back here at-- D.C.

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WHAT ARE YOUR OWN LESSONS LEARNED?

INTERVIEWER:
So big picture, what are your own lessons learned from this experience? What did you learn about Afghanistan?

INTERVIEWEE 18:
So I learned a lot about the people. So even with my job, I worked with a lot of the locals. So that's also a benefit, just getting to know different people, different culture. Same thing. The same people I used to go to the gym with-- the funny part is, I used to-- when I used to get little workout supplements, I'll hand them out to some of the locals.

So every time they see me, they thought I was the guy with the protein bars or, you know, stuff like that. But, I definitely learned just talking to different-- the locals and the Afghan people – realizing they all want the same thing that, you know, we want as Americans, you know?

Lot of them just talk about their family. They want their family's safety, and they want to be able to get their family health insurance, or just different stuff like that, without having to deal with the threat of, you know, the Taliban or, you know, just threats to their safety in general.

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INTERVIEWER:
What did you learn about oversight?

INTERVIEWEE 18:
Firsthand, I guess being in Afghanistan, I've seen firsthand-- and what fraud, waste, and abuse is – and that it is a big problem. I think from the outside looking in, you, like, you just wait to see the big articles. But, there definitely is a lot of fraud, waste, and abuse. And there are a lot of people-- and, like I said, it could be on purpose, it could be culture, but that mindset of taking a little bit off of the top for some people is just-- it's a natural feeling.

They don't see anything wrong with it. But when you are spending money, and billions, and billions of dollars into a country, you do want to see where these dollars are going to. So, definitely, being over in Afghanistan, I see, you know, some of the stuff that the money is going towards, and—

INTERVIEWER:

So you said that very emphatically, that you saw waste, fraud, and abuse. Can you expand on that? What did you see?

INTERVIEWEE 18:
So just working-- so some of the places I've been, you know, talking to so many investigators, talking to some of the auditors, obviously, like I said, we work together. And so I hear about some of the cases that they're working on and such like that.

I think there was a case-- you know, where you're spending-- you know, and they took some-- it was one of the fuel cases or, you know, people were stealing trucks, or writing bad bills of lading, or just corruptness. Even on the military side, on the U.S. military side, you started to see some of this-- some of the greed.

I think some of these people might've would have got away with it, but the greed kept them doing it long enough to get caught. So even that just kind of-- just kind of eye-opening. You assume everybody over there is doing what their job-- what they're supposed to be doing, but that's not always the case.

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INTERVIEWER:
What do you wish the public could better understand about what this agency is and what it does?

INTERVIEWEE 18:
I think that we're here to save taxpayers money. Like I say, I go back to when I was talking about-- I feel like SIGAR employees have a real genuine compassion for the work that they do, and they care about the work that they do. So I think if people really had seen that firsthand, and understood it's not just, you know, get on-- get a newspaper article or, you know, finding big, massive fraud, waste abuse cases. But there is-- you know, people really want to help the Afghan people. They really do want to help with reconstruction.

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AFTER U.S. WITHDRAWAL / AUGUST 2021

INTERVIEWER:
You've been at this agency since the beginning of its work in Afghanistan. August, 2021, everything changed. How did you personally feel when that happened? How did it affect how you thought about the time you spent over there? How did it affect how you thought about the kind of work that the agency had been doing?

INTERVIEWEE 18:

Personally-- so from my personal perspective, I was just kind of like, uh, yes. We spent a lot of time and money in Afghanistan, just for this to almost come full-circle. Like, what was the reasoning just for the Taliban to take back over? But from a work perspective, like, I think we did what we were supposed to do.

You're supposed to do oversight. I'm not in charge of who comes in. I'm not a warfighter or whatever, you know. They do oversight, and I did my part that went towards the oversight. Like I say, personally, I kind of felt defeated as an American, I guess – you know, just personal. But workwise, I think we did what we were supposed to do.

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WHAT DID SIGAR ACCOMPLISH IN AFGHANISTAN?

INTERVIEWER:
Bottom line: what do you feel that this agency got to accomplish in Afghanistan?

INTERVIEWEE 18:
I guess from an oversight perspective, they accomplished oversight. They went in there and did what they asked them to do. You hear the IG* talks a lot about how he doesn't write policy. So we're not necessarily there to change the hearts and minds of people, why we're there, and everything else.
[* John Sopko, former Special Inspector General for Afghanistan Reconstruction, 2012-2025]

We're there to, you know, oversight over the money that's being spent over there. And I think, just from the time I been here, and the amount of reports that we've put out, it shows that they've done exactly what it was that they were supposed to do, or what we were supposed to do.

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