SIGAR | SPECIAL INSPECTOR GENERAL FOR AFGHANISTAN RECONSTRUCTION

SIGAR Oral History Project (OHP)

Interview 19: Edited Transcript

Interview Date: 01/25/24

NAME/TITLE

INTERVIEWEE 19:
My name is [NAME]. I am a management specialist with Special Inspector General for Afghanistan Reconstruction.

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JOB DESCRIPTION

I kind of wear a lot of hats at the agency. So, I do a little bit of admin. assistant. And I also, I'm in procurement. And I also assist in security. Like, we're all part of security daily operations at SIGAR.

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CAREER HISTORY

I was born and raised in Maryland, graduated high school in Maryland. Went to University of Maryland. Studied to be in psychology. I was going to go into counseling, but I never finished school. I then moved on to a catering job where I-- we catered private jets and corporate planes outside of Dulles.

And, I worked there for 10 years, made it to the general manager. And then I just knew that I needed to make a change. So it was nothing like the federal government at all. And then I decided to just quit. And then, this opportunity came up and I joined Special Inspector General for Afghanistan Reconstruction.
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The job opportunity was just the front desk. So I knew that it was entry-level. I knew I had a shot, because I didn't have any-- I mean, I know I made it to general manager for a catering company. But it was very intimidating to, you know, go from something completely non-office-like to join the federal government. So I just went and applied.

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It took about a year to just get through e-QIP, which is the security background. And then there was a job freeze. This was all, like, in 2011. So I didn't know that I was going to get the job at all. It took a long time. And I guess I was just patient enough that I actually went back to the catering company for a few months. And then I got the call. And then I-- and then they hired me.

INTERVIEWER:
And so when you took the opportunity, what kind of things were you hoping would come from this new path?

INTERVIEWEE 19:
Exactly what ended up happening. I knew if I could just get my foot in the door, join the federal government, you know, go through all the security background, and work my way up. So I started as front desk, completely just as an admin. assistant. And then I think as I was there, I, you know, showed my talents, I guess, and worked my way up. And now I'm a management specialist. And I am not on my-- I started in 2012.

INTERVIEWER:
Here at this agency?

INTERVIEWEE 19:
Yes.

INTERVIEWER:
So when you joined, did you believe, know, hope that you would get deployed to Afghanistan?

INTERVIEWEE 19:
I think it was funny, because in the job interview at the time, // I think they were-- they're told to ask us if they-- "If you are called upon to go to Afghanistan, are you willing to go?" And I answered, "Yes."

But in my mind, I did not know that would ever be asked, or that would even be an option. So I don't really think I thought about it. I'm just glad I answered the correct way to get hired. And then I didn't know that the opportunity would come up. And so when it did, I was excited to do it.

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SIGAR DEPLOYMENT TO AFGHANISTAN

INTERVIEWER:
So how soon after you joined in 2012 did the opportunity to go to Afghanistan happen?

INTERVIEWEE 19:
Not until 2017. So I was working at the front desk. I think around 2016, people were being asked to go to help support [SIGAR] Forward Operations in Afghanistan. At the time, people were being-- they were going on for a year. And then at the time that my opportunity came up, I was just going there to support for a few months while-- I was giving the Forward Operations team time so that they can do their R&Rs. They needed coverage. And that's why I was asked to do it. So I was only going-- I was supposed to go to Afghanistan for three months or two months. But it turned out to be a lot more, that year.

INTERVIEWER:
So how many times did you go, and for how much total time?

INTERVIEWEE 19:
So I've gone on four trips to Afghanistan. I believe each time was at least minimum of three months. Three trips in 2017 and one trip in 2020.

INTERVIEWER:
So when you first arrived in Afghanistan the first time, what was your initial reaction?

INTERVIEWEE 19:
I don't think anyone can really fully prepare you for what you're going to see in Afghanistan.
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I think you just-- they-- everyone tries to tell you what to do or what you're going to expect. But once you go there, it's completely different. It-- it's a culture shock. At first you think-- you just don't know what you're-- you know you're going into a war zone, but you know you're fully safe and on the U.S. Embassy [grounds] in Kabul.

However, you just don't know what that means. And it starts from the very beginning, once you're on the plane. I mean, you are-- we never stepped foot at the airport in Afghanistan. I mean, we are picked up off a tarmac. There's a person at the clipboard that gets you right off of the plane.

The-- everyone who's going to the U.S. Embassy gets escorted right off of the plane, and helo-ed-- helicoptered from Camp Alvarado* to U.S. Embassy Kabul. So just that alone was a culture shock.
[* former U.S. flight facility in Kabul, Afghanistan]
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At the time, and this is funny, I hadn't really traveled abroad outside of, like, the Caribbean, and Mexico, and, you know, the-- so I haven't really gone to Europe, or Asia, or anything. So Afghanistan was my first trip overseas. So I guess I didn't really prepare. And the decision was made really quickly, in that I was going there to help out forward operations and R&R. So I really didn't digest it well.
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I don't think anything really fully prepares you to when you get to Afghanistan. Everything that they've told you, and taught you, or everything that you read, or went to your safety briefings doesn't really sink in until you're actually in it.

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INTERVIEWER:
So you talked about assisting forward operations. What did that entail? What were you going there to do?

INTERVIEWEE 19:
So I didn't know what I was going there to do. All they told me was I was going there to help out, so that they can have an R&R. So they didn't really explain. And they said, "Don't worry about it. It's easy once you're there. It's not a big deal."

And it wasn't. It was-- it's basically doing logistics. And, so I didn't do anything that I did here. At the time, I was-- I think I was a management specialist, but I didn't do anything that I learned from here-- nothing brought.

Everything I would have to learn, because we [SIGAR in Washington, DC] do everything [various administrative and logistical processes] for [U.S.] Army. And everything is done by the State Department abroad [including administrative and logistical processes in Afghanistan]. Yeah, they were going to teach me everything that they needed me to do.

So what does logistics mean? Basically, I was make-- I was in charge of if you were to come and be asked to go to Afghanistan for our agency, I'm the person that does all the paperwork, gets you your CHU. A CHU is a closed-- it's a crate that is made into an apartment that people live in.

INTERVIEWER:
It's a storage compartment?

INTERVIEWEE 19:
Correct. And, [SIGAR] Forward Operations was in charge of making sure everything that you need to be allowed to come into Afghanistan prior to that, and then everything that once you're in Afghanistan, we make sure that you have your meal card, and your CHU, and, you know, all the paperwork, and your badging. And we pick you up from the helicopter. So literally anything and everything logistically was all done by Forward Operations.

INTERVIEWER:
And just out of curiosity, that nickname for the storage container, CHU, stands for what?

INTERVIEWEE 19:
"Contained Housing Unit," I think. I think.

INTERVIEWER:
And it's sometimes also called-- was that called a "hooch"?

INTERVIEWEE 19:
Yes, that's-- I think the "old school" teams called it the 'hooch.' And we called it the CHU.
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INTERVIEWER:
Were you living in one of those units as well?

INTERVIEWEE 19:
Yes, I was living in a CHU. I had a "wet" CHU. A wet CHU means that there is a shower or a bathroom inside the CHU, versus a "dry" CHU, which is you would have-- everyone on that floor would go to a communal bathroom.
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It wasn't bad. I mean, I had a TV. I had a bathroom. I had a microwave. I had a fridge. I was fine.

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CONDUCTING OVERSIGHT AGENCY MANAGEMENT IN A WAR ZONE: AFGHANISTAN

INTERVIEWER:
So, when you first arrived, you got settled, you know, what were your typical duties, you know, a typical day for you, as you got settled and started doing the work that you were there to do?

INTERVIEWEE 19:
I mean, every day, you know, you'd wake up – just like a typical day that you would have here. You would check your emails and then-- at the time, in 2017, and I would say years previously, and a few years after I left, we were having people from our agency come [on] temporary duty to Afghanistan, pretty-- like, at least we would have visitors two or three times a month. So we were busy. You always had someone coming and going. And the IG* would also come about once every quarter or every half year. So those trips were also-- all fell on our shoulders as well.
[* John Sopko, former Special Inspector General for Afghanistan Reconstruction, 2012-2025]
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I think in my very first week of being in Afghanistan, we had-- man, I already forget the term, but the alarm went off in the middle of the night. And, like, you-- when you're on your first week, you follow all the rules. And I was in my bathroom.

I was texting the person I came with. And we were doing our "cascade tree." A cascade tree is all the phone numbers that-- who are in your column. That's how we did accountability for everyone when there is an alarm. Yeah, it was pretty scary the very first time. And-- it wasn't bad at that time. Later on, we did find out the next day, there was a bombing at a hospital that was nearby.
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INTERVIEWER:
Did you have to make any psychological adjustment to being in a place where those kind of security threats in your environment?

INTERVIEWEE 19:
I actually felt very safe on [the grounds of the U.S.] Embassy Kabul. I know that's very strange, because it's in a war zone. But very fortified. We're very far away. There's a lot of checkpoints before anything can even reach us.

I think going in there before you actually get to Afghanistan was the adjustment. Like I had to say, "Dude, you're actually going to a war zone. You already committed to it. So you're going." And, you know, and then once we were getting closer to leaving, and seeing your friends, and seeing your family, and seeing how concerned they are-- because I think when you're going through it, if you were concerned about it, you wouldn't have gone, unless you were being forced to go.

And, you know, so it-- I wasn't being forced to go. I was volunteering to go. But, you know, when you start to see your family, your friends, I mean, like, really concerned and like, "Really? Are you doing this, [NAME]?" And-- that's when it started kind of sinking in.

But once you're there, it's just hard to explain. Like, you kind of feel-- you're just, like, you feel like you're on a college campus. It's just in a war zone. But, you know, you have drills. You have to do things. You have to-- there are things that you can't do in a normal-- you can't leave. But aside from that, if you didn't know better, the things that you hear, like, you know, you can hear bullets. You can hear the gunshots, the bombs. But unless it's close by, you don't even get the alarms.

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INTERVIEWER:
One of your colleagues was describing how, at some point, there were four missing armored Suburbans that had to be located. And I was thinking about that as an example. Do you have any recollections of things like that where you ended up being tasked with something specific that somehow illustrates part of the reality of, you know, working in a war zone for this kind of agency?

INTERVIEWEE 19:

I don't have any specific examples. But, I mean, I just know that it-- I got good at the job, at what I was doing that they started coming directly to me, even when the full-time staff came back from their R&R, and would prefer me to make the arrangements for the flights, and the helos*-- for the IG's trip, or for any VIP tr[ips]-- that were going to all the [former Afghanistan government] ministries, and dealing with the detail, the security detailees. So I kind of-- I thought that-- and, you know, you just don't know that you're doing a good job until you become the now expert, even though you had only been there for a short time.
[* helicopters]

INTERVIEWER:
And that happened to you?

INTERVIEWEE 19:
That definitely happened to me. And then I think that happened to me, because then I was asked multiple times to come back that year. Due to an employee's health issues, I was asked to come back twice that year. And they definitely wanted me.

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INTERVIEWER:
To what degree were the needs of the agency handled by you and the agency? And to what degree did other agencies like the State Department play a role?

INTERVIEWEE 19:
So the State Department, if you were in the State Department, they didn't have-- they have a travel and deployment department. And they kind of make-- they kind of just point you in the right direction. And then State Department employees, staff, they book all their stuff and do all their paperwork.

And then they follow their own things. Whereas we made sure that-- because we needed to make sure that they were going to be good to go once they were here, we didn't leave it up to our staff to do it. So we-- I guess if you want to say it, you could say we did hand-holding or VIP treatment for that-- every single [SIGAR] person that went over, so that we made sure that everything they needed was-- accounted for.
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They don't do that for the State Department. Like, they have locals who support them. We're the only agency that had internal people that were there, that were trying to help our staff.
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And, you know, I think other agencies were a little jealous that, you know, they sent people there. Now they would always have Americans running, you know, being in charge of all the locals for the State Department and all the other agencies. But they kind of had to do it on their own. And they

didn't really always know what to do. Where we made sure you got your pay, you got your hazard pay, you got your-- we did all of that for them. And we did all of the email-- the communication process for all of that, as well as if you needed to renew your visa and all that stuff.

Like, we did all of it. And I-- yeah, like I said, I felt that was-- it may not seem like it-- you needed it. But I think the people there that are there for a year, they knew – they were pros. But did they need to worry about that stuff? Like, I feel like you should give them the same exact resources and help that we've been giving to people here. So I thought it was very beneficial.

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I just know that when we do it, it's just so much smoother. And everything is easier. We don't want the people that are coming short-term to have to worry about all of these hoops and stuff. We just want them to come in and worry about their-- they have enough to worry about.
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I don't want them to worry about anything other than their meetings, their audits, their investigations. I don't want them to have to worry about any of the logistical stuff.

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INTERVIEWER:
It's surprising to me to hear that the other agencies did not have that kind of support. And it strikes me that, you know, if they, like this agency, had people coming for, you know, short tours of duty, periods of deployment, you wouldn't want to have to have individuals coming over and keep reinventing the same solutions. So I'm puzzled that they didn't have that.

INTERVIEWEE 19:
Yeah. It was strange to us-- well, at least strange to me. And, yeah, and I-- like I said, you would be in lunch and then they were like, "Yeah, I got to go down to travel and I have to go book my trip." And they have to go down there or go to DTS, which-- that's a travel thing. I forget the [acronym]-- what it stand[s for]-- but, yeah, they had to do it all on their own.

Now the ones that-- like I said, the ones that were deployed there, they knew what to do. And they could do all of the hard stuff. But, you know, we still did all the hand-holding as far as meeting you at the helicopter, making sure that you had everything.

And it just made their trip a lot easier and simpler, even when you're first coming on board, and you're going to be deployed there. We're the ones that meet you there. We're the ones that make sure you know where your-- we show-- we took-- we did a tour. We did everything. And I just thought that was helpful.

INTERVIEWER:
It sounds like it allowed the other people to do the work that they were sent there to do, rather than spending all their time on logistical matters.

INTERVIEWEE 19:
Yeah. I mean, in my opinion, I think so, yes. And we would do-- you know, we would give-- conduct a tour, rather than you wait until Saturday to do a tour, like, at the crack of dawn. And who wants to wait? You came in on Tuesday. Your tour of the campus is not till Saturday? I mean, I need to know where to eat. I need to know where the gym is. I need to know where to buy food.

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INTERVIEWER:
So, as you were doing the work that you did, were there times that you had to do specific things in support of the oversight work of the agency, whether assisting investigators or assisting auditors, engineers, or other analysts who came over perhaps to do Lessons Learned-type* work?
[* SIGAR's Lessons Learned Program]

INTERVIEWEE 19:
Yeah. I often tell everyone, I don't do any of the fun stuff that SIGAR is known for. I always say I'm the back-of-the-house person. You know, I'm daily operations. We do nothing that's the sexy part of SIGAR – that we're known for, that we're publicized for, or-- and sometimes criticized for.
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INTERVIEWER:
Did you ever have to do any kind of procurement to assist something that they were doing, whether it was vehicular, or whether it was other resources, materials, supplies?

INTERVIEWEE 19:
Yeah, I mean, when you're in procurement, I was supporting both [the] United States and Afghanistan. So I did purchase things. But it was still part of my normal duties of that I would have here.

INTERVIEWER:
So nothing specific in Afghanistan that you did to, you know, either equip or otherwise--

INTERVIEWEE 19:
No. I mean, I think I was the one who purchased things like a cover for their Jeep. Like, it was, like, a retractable roof. And then some iPhone cases and anything that they'd ever need in supplies. Like, when I was there, that was the one thing that they did like.

They have-- the [U.S.] Embassy was-- has, like, their own supply agency in that you don't need to order things out or ask your agency to order. You just needed a sign-out for it. And I took an assessment of things that they didn't have. And while I was there, I made sure anything that they need, just let me know. And so I did buy things. But it was still more on the supply side, nothing-- nothing crazy.

INTERVIEWER:
Well, I think you're underplaying this. Because I will point out to you that the data card on which this video of you is being stored was procured by you.

INTERVIEWEE 19:
I did. I did.

INTERVIEWER:
As was the lighting that is lighting this interview, as is other equipment. So I think it's fair to say that without you in your role, some things wouldn't happen.

INTERVIEWEE 19:
Right. I mean, yes. I don't-- I didn't mean to downplay it. But, yeah, I guess I just look at things I need to purchase once a request is put in. I just buy it.

INTERVIEWER:
And you make it easy. I mean, you made it easy for this project. And I'm sort of thinking that maybe some of the things you were asked to get or do may have been a little challenging.

INTERVIEWEE 19:
Well, it was definitely challenging ordering it and getting it over-- you know, aside from that, you know, purchasing things are easy. Getting it over is the hard part, and making sure it's accountable, and it does actually get over, things that you purchase.

I mentioned the roof for the Gator. That's the outdoor vehicle that the base uses. Kind of like a golf cart, but I think it can go off-road. But that's what everyone uses in Afghanistan. And we happened to have one that didn't have closed doors, or-- it had a roof, but it was all wide open.

And Afghanistan is a very, very dusty place. And you literally had to bring a clean towel every single time you got into the Gator. So I helped them procure a door, a door that actually enclosed the Gator and make sure everything-- so that they can, you know, make it livable.

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INTERVIEWER:

When you were trying to procure things in this war zone, how much finagling, horse-trading, or creativity did you have to use to get what was needed?

INTERVIEWEE 19:
Luckily, because it's a government-issued purchase card, you couldn't do any finagling. I mean, it-- you literally are put through-- you have to follow all the necessary channels. I think what it does require is hand-holding to make sure that I can purchase it, it will be-- it will get delivered through the pouch, or through the post office that is provided for the base – the DPO* or the APO, which is a diplomatic pouch, I believe. And I forget what the APO stands for, but I think it's [U.S.] military base.**
[* U.S. Diplomatic Post Office]
[** U.S. Air/Army Post Office]

You just had to make sure things like that were-- not everything can get shipped. You can't just order through Best Buy and get things sent to you. You had to make sure everything can be sent. But aside from that, because we are limited on vendors that we can use, I didn't have to purchase anything locally, for the agency.

INTERVIEWER:
But it sounds like you kind of had to mind the process--

INTERVIEWEE 19:
Yes.

INTERVIEWER:
--from beginning to end, to make sure that at every step, the next step happened, and the one after that.

INTERVIEWEE 19:
It's very easy when you're purchasing and supporting the Afghanistan side, to just hope they let you know if the-- whenever it gets there and that it-- what you ordered will get there. It's way different than when you're there, and you're waiting for it, and expecting it, and, like, dude, it's been two weeks. And, you know, Amazon ruins everything for you, because you want everything as fast as can [be]. And you want it in two days. That's not the case in Afghanistan. And it does take some [PAUSE FOR THOUGHT] handling.
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Wearing a lot of hats at-- in CONUS, while here in the U.S.--

INTERVIEWER:
CONUS is continental United States?

INTERVIEWEE 19:

--yes, the continental United States – how it helps you be able to be flexible once you're in Afghanistan. And because you're only a team of three. And then when they're going on leave, you're really only a team of two. So you kind of have to do anything and everything that's up there.

And it required a lot of-- you're the third party between the person and the State Department as well as the person and travel deployment here in our agency.
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I think sometimes when you're here in the United States, and within your internal agency, you don't really have-- I don't-- I didn't have to work with a lot of other agencies or have any involvement or a meeting, other than if I happened to drive the IG to an event and I was there. But aside from that, I had no involvement outside of Army. And you don't really have any involvement. They just kind of tell you what to do here in the United States.

Over there, you're on-- you dealt with a lot of agencies daily. And, hello, you'd have to have lunch and dinner. And you see them at the gym or the movies. So it-- you had a lot of involvement. And it was just impossible not to, you know, talk about work here and there.

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INTERVIEWER:
What was it like for this agency to conduct oversight under the conditions of Afghanistan as a conflict zone?

INTERVIEWEE 19:
I think-- and I-- when you are sharing the dining hall and all of the communal spaces outside of your office space, and you actually have to see the people that we're auditing, it's very unique. You know, USAID was there.

And at the time that I was there, there were many audits in us-- with USAID. And that was always interesting dynamics when you met them outside, and they're like, "Oh, [NAME: [he]]'s from SIGAR." What does that mean? You know?

And that-- I think that I-- that's why I did say that a lot: "I don't do any of the sexy stuff. I work in the back of the house." "I don't know anything about a lot of these audits, and inspections, and investigations. So I-- sorry that you feel that way." You know?

I didn't-- I didn't always have to explain. I didn't feel the need to always explain. But I always wanted to make sure that they understood I wasn't an auditor or investigator. I support my agency, but I have nothing to do with that. I do logistics.

INTERVIEWER:

So you said, "What does that mean?" Well, what did you think it meant?

INTERVIEWEE 19:
Well, I mean, it was always-- anytime you were in a circle and you got introduced, it was always said in a sarcastic tone, "Oh, [NAME: [he]]'s from SIGAR." "Oh." You see eyebrows raised.

And I-- you know, a lot of it, you didn't know. And no one ever says, "[NAME], you know, they don't like us." They don't say stuff like that. And it was uncomfortable sometimes. But, I mean, I always made my stance of, you know, "I don't-- I have no idea. I-- I'm-- I don't do any of that stuff."
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Like, the comment had to be said, "Oh, be careful what you say." It was a very common joke around the Embassy, that, you know, that they were, you know, these audits had already existed. And, so, it left an interesting dynamic.

And I-- you know, it just always had to be said. But I think, you know, like, when you're at lunch or you're at The Duck and Cover – which was the bar there – you just-- after a few minutes, after it's, like, been solved, you know, I think they just felt the need to dig.

But they didn't-- they weren't going to hold it against you or really not talk about anything. No one wants to talk about work when you're in those environments anyway. And let's be clear, I don't think anyone in our agency was looking for evidence, or any ammunition, or anything like that. So, I think it was they just felt the need to throw that jab.

INTERVIEWER:
Did you in your position ever notice any lack of cooperation or even, more actively, obstacling of things you were trying to do?

INTERVIEWEE 19:
No, I never noticed it, because I didn't have to do any of that stuff.

INTERVIEWER:
But even with your logistical stuff, if you had to interact with agencies that were within the purview of oversight of this agency, did you ever notice either of those things?

INTERVIEWEE 19:
I mean, I've always heard stories, but I never had to deal with it myself. I mean, I dealt with basically the State Department and, you know, the same type of people that do the same job that I do. So I never had any hiccups. I never had any obstacles that really led, and I would think that we wouldn't have anyone pushing back on stuff that we do just because I'm, you know, like I said, doing more of logistical management-and-support-type stuff.

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INTERVIEWER:
What were the biggest challenges, from your perspective, just observing everything around you, hearing, you know, from your colleagues, what were the biggest challenges in your opinion to conducting oversight in a conflict zone like Afghanistan?

INTERVIEWEE 19:
Like I said, I mean, I think from a logistical side-- you know, I never got to experience any setbacks or anyone holding me up. But you heard a lot of stories. You heard of our colleagues that, you know, they were trying to get interviews, or they're trying to get meetings with people, and, you know, they only have a short window of when they're in Afghanistan with boots on the ground.

And [with] things that they thought they were going to have scheduled, and going to meet, or these people that they were going to meet, they dealt with hiccups. I, again, like, I don't get to do-- at most-- I know about them, because I'm the one setting up the meeting rooms.

I'm the one that's setting up the visitation requests for these people to come on board. And then you would see the colleagues, where like, "Well, they didn't show up. They didn't meet. We thought we had this interview." And-- and that-- so you're aware of it. You're not blind.

And you hear things. And, a lot of times, you're there because the people who are there on short-term TDY,* they're venting, because they came here for, like-- and they're only there for a week or two. They have a very limited window. And they think they have an agenda – like, ready to a T" – every hour. And, when they get there, it's, you know, it's not exactly that way.
[* temporary duty]

INTERVIEWER:
It's not happening.

INTERVIEWEE 19:
Correct.

INTERVIEWER:
And it's easier to make those adjustments if you're there for a longer period of time?

INTERVIEWEE 19:
I do think that the [SIGAR] investigations [and] audit team[s], whenever they needed to have meetings and stuff, they dealt with hiccups. But you-- like you said, because they don't have a short window, they'll brush it off and say, "Oh, we'll do it next week," or, "You tell me when you're comfortable."

But the people who were there for short-term, they needed to do it while they're there, or at least they were hoping to do it when they're there. We did have the ability to video-conference and do meetings then as well. But at that time, in 2017, it was very limited. It had gotten a lot better by 2020. And definitely now it's-- it got way better since the pandemic, and Zoom, and Teams, and all of that stuff.

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FACT training, I forget what it stands for, but it's kind of like your anti-terrorism training to kind of get you prepared to going into these hardships or war zones. So it's run by the State Department. And everyone has to take it. It's mandatory if you're going to go for anything longer than 30 days.

I think some aspects of FACT training [are] helpful. It kind of gives you an idea. But it doesn't prepare you in any way. Some of the things that they teach you [are] a little extreme. I don't find myself ever going to get in a vehicle and ram another vehicle, because we can't even get in a car.

But I think they wanted to expose you to as much as they can and make you-- again, they gave you the most extreme cases. But I just-- a lot of it didn't really apply once you were there. I-- again, I do stand by that you felt like you were more like at a small college campus, versus in a war zone when you're on [the grounds of the U.S. Embassy in] Kabul.

So I don't think FACT training really applied. I don't really know much that I used, other than some of the preparation trip stuff that they wanted you to do, like creating a will, having-- you know, having these talks, having all of your paperwork in line, and that type of stuff.

That was very helpful. FAM training, and I forget, I think that's Familiar-- Familiarization-- for whatever country that you're going to. And that was very beneficial. Unfortunately, it's a little boring as well. But it is beneficial, because they brought in speakers.

And they kind of get-- so when they did the historical part, it is helpful. But I don't think I utilized it or applied it while in my job. Like, when I'm talking to a local, I didn't use anything I learned from FAM and wasn't going to talk about the government or how Russia was, back-- you know, like, you didn't utilize it.

It-- I think it was more maybe for sensitivity training and stuff like that, so that, you know, you didn't say anything bad. But I do think, when the guest speakers that came in, and they did their part, and people who have been there, or who were stationed there, that was very beneficial, and it did help, yeah.

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I think I was spoiled here in the United States. I think us being in an IG* – and we're a little bit separate, but we follow the guidelines of [the U.S.] Army.
[* Inspector General's office]

And then when you're actually over there and you have to deal with the State Department's hoops and red tape. You've always heard story about government red tape, but you never had to deal with it, because we're very isolated here. And Army pretty much does have red tape, but I didn't-- at the time, I didn't have a lot of that type of interaction.

Yeah, State Department really doesn't do a lot of things smoothly at all. It-- there's a lot of steps. I mean, a simple request may take five different signatures, and five different memos that needed to be done and approved. And it has to be approved by certain template.

And if you didn't do the template correctly, it would bounce back, which may set you back a few weeks. It was just bizarre to me, because I felt like it was not helpful. I think that was a little hard to deal with. But I-- you heard stories about the State Department being that rigid, and had that many hoops. So, I didn't know until I actually got there and they [those stories] were accurate.
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I'm fine with paperwork. I'm fine with paper trail. However, I think it made things a lot harder. Like I said, you know, meetings, doing anything, it just took way more effort. And I think they could've streamlined that a lot more.

And I think I heard that, you know, they were-- when I went back in 2020, they were getting better, and making things more electronic, and trying to fix things. And, unfortunately, you know, we withdrew. And so I don't know how well those steps were. But they were getting there.

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BEST QUALITIES FOR OVERSIGHT-IN-A-WAR-ZONE PERSONNEL

INTERVIEWER:
So I want to ask you, what characteristics, personality traits, skills, talents makes somebody a good candidate to do this category of work in a conflict zone like Afghanistan?

INTERVIEWEE 19:
You've got to be flexible. You've got to be a good-- you just have to-- you have to be quick and fast when you're in Afghanistan. And you have to just adjust. So, I would think being very, very flexible. I-- and I think that's some of the downfalls of, you know, the-- when they're there for only two weeks, and they have a short period of time, and they've lined up seven meetings on each day.

And then say there was a bombing that's not far away, about two miles away, that just completely messes up your whole day. And you just have to adjust.

And then there-- what if there's a VIP person that comes onto the [U.S.] Embassy, and they take all of the [security] detailees, and you can no longer go [out] to the [former Afghanistan government] ministries. You thought you had it set up. I've-- you know, logistics did everything they could. But-- the day that, you know, if the vice president comes, then everything gets canceled. The vice president takes priority. And everything gets canceled.

So that was, like, a common, common thing. And you just have to adjust. And then the way you adjust is either tell the people that are there and going to be there for a year to have these meetings, and trust them to be able to carry out your meeting for you, or figure out video-conferencing through, you know, PC or whatever.

INTERVIEWER:
So flexibility, ability to adjust, quickness. Any other characteristics come to mind?

INTERVIEWEE 19:
Patience. I mean, I think one of the drawbacks, and this is more for dealing with the Afghan locals, or the people that, you know, are-- time wasn't the exact-- being punctual to a meeting wasn't a normal thing. It's normal here in the United States. It's not normal in Afghanistan.

And-- but there [are] hiccups on why that's the case. You're going through six checkpoints. They have to walk there. And they have to take different routes. But sometimes it's just not their culture. And their culture is to-- if there's something else going on or if something else takes precedent, then that's what happens. Again, it's frustrating – if you're there for a short period of time, and you had everything ready, and then they're two hours late or something like that. It was a very common one.

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SIGAR OVERSIGHT AGENCY MANAGEMENT IN A WAR ZONE: SUCCESSES?

INTERVIEWER:
If you look back on your trips to Afghanistan, in your mind, do you have any incidents, events, projects, tasks that remain in your head as accomplishments, successes where, "Well, that went really well?"

INTERVIEWEE 19:
I mean, it was all just daily operations. And, again, I just really like that they kept asking for me. I mean, I-- after three trips in one year, I felt like I did a whole year. But I had to, like, cut them off. I was like, "No, you've got to find someone else."

And then that's why I was willing to do it again, in 2020, when they did ask me, I didn't mind being the one. But, it was starting to, "O.K., well, you guys, you've got to find someone else, as well, to help out." But as far as accomplishments, it just-- it was awesome to work with the people there and the locals that were there. And I had a good experience the whole time. Otherwise, I wouldn't keep coming back.

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WHAT DID SIGAR DO WELL?

INTERVIEWER:
What do you think this agency did well doing this work in a war zone?

INTERVIEWEE 19:
I think we adjusted and knew how to get the work that we needed for Congress and getting the investigations and inspections that we needed. But it-- you know, I don't have a lot of experience. And I haven't read every single report. But I-- what I do know is the people – that weren't being persnickety or, you know, doing the tongue-in-cheek – they actually applauded our work there in Afghanistan a lot. And definitely the locals really liked us being there. So I always-- I did have a sense of pride being part of SIGAR – without, like I said, outside of the tongue-in-cheek comments that we would get from certain agencies.

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WHAT COULD/SHOULD SIGAR HAVE DONE BETTER/DIFFERENTLY?

INTERVIEWER:
What things do you think this agency could've, should've done better or differently, if anything?

INTERVIEWEE 19:
I think we could've probably did better with bridging those relationships with those outside agencies that didn't-- were being investigated and didn't like-- weren't appreciative of the work that we were doing. I felt like sometimes we would do our work and do the right thing, and-- look, if you didn't do your job, and you're being audited, and we're going to put out our work, there's a reason for it.

And but I also think we were stuck there on an island. And we share CHUs or apartments – literally could be next door.

And, you know, I do think that we could've maybe helped bridge that a little bit and just go, "Look, we're only investigating these people and on this time, this year of these agency. It's-- it's not-- not in-- we don't hate you guys."

And I think we could've bridged the relationships a little bit better. But I think we felt, "Well, we're an auditing agency. We're not here to make friends." But that doesn't help the people that live there, and are there for a year, or in my case, four trips going back to Afghanistan.

So you do feel the hostility sometimes. But, like I said, I think the cool thing is I'm a pretty cool guy. And when they got to meet me, I kind of helped myself, and anyone with the-- with me.

When-- in my time there, I didn't just stay with-- hang out with only SIGAR people. I tried to meet everyone and everyone. And I think I did a pretty decent job of being-- mingling and stuff. Whether-- was it social? Sure. But I just felt like it was something that you needed to do. And it's very easy to just stay within your agency. And then, if you do that, then everyone's just going to sneer, and look, and say stories. So I thought there was a little bit that could've been done better.

INTERVIEWER:
Well, it sounds like what you're saying is that you felt like there could've been more proactive social engagement with the people at the other agencies that were living right there with you, to talk about the elephant in the room, "We're here doing oversight."

INTERVIEWEE 19:
Right.

INTERVIEWER:
“That's our job.”

INTERVIEWEE 19:
I think there just was no bridging it. There [was] not-- no fixing the relationship. I think that it was-- they just kind of-- I think we could've done that a little bit better. And, because, unfortunately, whatever you-- the repercussions of actions that are done on the United States will have repercussions in-- for the people that are there in Afghanistan.

And I don't think that was brought up enough. So because it-- the-- I mean, I got to keep going back home every, like, three months. But what about the people that are there for four straight years, you know, and have to deal with these people, and see these people? I mean, you didn't want to isolate them if you could.
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I just think, you know, it's a difference once you're there. You know? It's not as simple. But I just thought something-- you know, that could've been something that we could've done better.

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AFTER U.S. WITHDRAWAL / AUGUST 2021

INTERVIEWER:
You were there-- what was your-- the date of your last trip was what year?

INTERVIEWEE 19:
I was there from January of 2020 to March 2020. And I got back right as the pandemic hit.

INTERVIEWER:
So a year and a half after you left there for the last time, August 2021, things changed in Afghanistan. After the U.S. withdrew, after the Taliban took over, what were your feelings – having been there, having done this work there?

INTERVIEWEE 19:
I mean, it was shocking. It was sad to see, to see that the Embassy was-- it was just sad to see everyone trying to get on the plane. It was sad to see that all the work that we've done at the U.S. Embassy was pretty much disintegrated within hours or days.

It-- it was tough. And then I think immediately everyone here at this agency who had-- at any minute in Afghanistan, we were worried about all the locals, all the people. Once we knew that we got all of our staff over, back into the United States safely, immediately you thought about every single local that you worked with – FSN, which is a foreign service national.

You immediately thought about them. And we worked with many. Whether you created a relationship with someone at the gym, or someone you worked with daily, you worked-- you had to work with locals pretty often. And you immediately thought about them and their families.
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In [SIGAR] Forward Operations, we always had either one or two FSNs – foreign service nationals that we worked with. They were part of our Forward Ops team. And they literally worked-- worked with me more sometimes than the Forward Ops teams that-- because I was-- I was covering for them.
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So I had to work with foreign service nationals pretty often. And, yeah, you create a relationship. It's impossible not to. And, you know, while you're there, you talk about their family. And, they ask about us. I mean, it's just like any other coworker. So.

But the difference is, they go home every day. And they have to take many, many measurements, different types of tactics to get on base. And they were educated. And if anything, they were probably more educated than me. And, you know, they were very integral for Forward Operations to succeed. So then I'd-- so it was very clear that once that happened, you immediately were concerned. And so we had FSNs, and Forward Ops audits, and investigations at [U.S. Embassy] Kabul.

INTERVIEWER:
Have you heard from any of them or been in contact with any of them, know about their circumstances today?

INTERVIEWEE 19:
Some because of Facebook. And, you know, you're able to keep track of them. Some of them, I don't. From what I hear, everyone that we worked with has been-- at least been relocated. But I don't know the-- how they are now.

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WHAT ARE YOUR OWN LESSONS LEARNED?

INTERVIEWER:
What did you learn about Afghanistan, bottom line?

INTERVIEWEE 19:
I-- going in there, I didn't know anything. Like, I was a lump of clay. And I had been with the agency for five years. I think meeting the people, because I don't-- I didn't get to meet many Afghans here in the United States, was the biggest takeaway for me.

You know, it's-- I'm a guy that prides hims-- that watches lots of TV and movies. And you can be completely brainwashed, if you will. And it's completely different. I mean, when you go there, the Afghan people were probably the-- some of the sweetest people I've ever met.

Definitely one of the biggest takeaways was that. And they're finding a way to be happy in a war zone, and coming into work, and to U.S. [Embassy] Kabul, and knowing that they're not really liked for doing that, and helping us, and working with us, or being educated, being a female, and helping us. But they still do it. And they still have really, really-- a good outlook. And that-- that's pretty inspirational.

INTERVIEWER:
And what about the things that you learned about conducting oversight in a war zone?

INTERVIEWEE 19:
It's challenging, because you are limited on what you're allowed to do, and what you-- who you're able to meet, and whenever you're able to get off the [U.S.] Embassy [grounds]. It's not as simple as it is here, or going to the meeting, and having a meeting at the State Department, or the Pentagon, or the CIA.

Going over there, and-- it's just harder. Everything is harder. Everything requires way more effort. And a meeting isn't the same like having a meeting here. I mean, it takes a week's worth of planning. And just going to the ministry [a former Afghanistan government ministry], a weekly meeting that you're planned to do, requires four trucks, and 12 [security] detailees. And, you know, you have to submit paperwork well in advance. Things like that. You know? So it's just not as easy as it is here.
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The same type of support that you get here, they're going to need there.

And I think it's very hard-- it's very easy to forget, because of the timeframe, and because they're not-- out-of-sight, out-of-mind, to know that they're only a team of two or three people, and we're asking them to do what over here in the United States we have an entire management and support, which is probably 30 to three. Now, they don't have the same amount of people there. But they have the same hoops that we're going to have to deal with – and, if anything, deal with more obstacles. So it does require a lot more support there. And it doesn't mean manpower. It just means you just have to provide all of the resources that you can.

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WHAT DID SIGAR AND YOU ACCOMPLISH IN AFGHANISTAN?

INTERVIEWER:
What do you think that this agency and you got to accomplish by the work that you did over there?

INTERVIEWEE 19:
I mean, I helped our agency. And I helped our team. And I alway-- I think one of the things we always prided ourselves [on] is customer service. And I felt like while I was there, anyone-- I helped the loc[als]-- I helped the SIGAR staff that was there, as well as the people that were coming to visit.

I felt like I was doing a really good service for them. As far as the agency as a whole, I think a lot of that money that was being audited needed to be – the reconstruction money was very ample. And it needed to be audited. And it needed to – we needed to do oversight on it.

And the life, while I was there, and then ever since, I do follow it a lot more. I would say prior to my trip in 2017, I didn't really pay that much attention to a lot of stuff that we were doing. And then, once you were there, you have a bigger understanding of what we do and why we do it.

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