



# **SIGAR** | SPECIAL INSPECTOR GENERAL FOR AFGHANISTAN RECONSTRUCTION

## **SIGAR Oral History Project (OHP)**

### **Interview 23: Edited Transcript**

**Interview Date: 03/11/24**

#### **NAME/TITLE**

**INTERVIEWEE 23:**

My name is [NAME]. I am currently a human resources specialist.

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#### **JOB DESCRIPTION**

**INTERVIEWEE 23:**

My portion of HR mostly deals with the fun part in HR. I deal with benefits. // Especially health insurance, life insurance, flexible spending account. I assist people with their retirement. I also am in charge of performance management. So I make sure that, you know, all employees receive appraisals and that reflect their performance and also might help them, looking for jobs in the future, after they leave SIGAR.

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Before being a human resource specialist, I was a management analyst.

**INTERVIEWER:**

And in that capacity, what was your job?

**INTERVIEWEE 23:**

Well, I was actually-- it's how I started in Afghanistan. I was the operations or the admin person in-- Afghanistan for SIGAR.

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#### **CAREER HISTORY**

**INTERVIEWER:**

How did you come to work for an oversight agency like this one? What did you study in school? What previous jobs did you have? What circumstances brought you here?

**INTERVIEWEE 23:**



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I suppose I was in the right place in the right time. When SIGAR came to life in late 2008, I had been on the compound in Kabul-- at the [U.S.] Embassy compound for a year and a half, almost two years then. So I knew my ways. I knew the Embassy well. And I was familiar with the military side too. So when--

**INTERVIEWER:**

But tell me about that. So how did-- we've picked up the story already in progress. How did you get to be working at the [U.S.] Embassy in Kabul?

**INTERVIEWEE 23:**

O.K. So, in 2006 or in 2005 or '06, I had got-- I had-- my first job in human resources with the Department of State. And I was on track for a promotion, was very happy. But then my husband who is a [U.S.] Foreign Service officer -- or was, in those days -- he said, "Oh, I have good news. We are going to Afghanistan."

So I had to give up my job, with the Department of State in Washington D.C., and move to Kabul. And it was actually the first group of spouses allowed on the [U.S. Embassy] compound. It was the first year. They were trying that. So me, along with other six or seven spouses, we were allowed on the compound as long as we had jobs. So, because I had the human resources background, I joined human resources in Kabul.

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**INTERVIEWER:**

Government service isn't for everyone. How did you get into government service? Was that something you always had an interest in? Or was it partly because of your husband's career as a State Department Foreign Service officer that you brought you into that? Was that your first experience with it?

**INTERVIEWEE 23:**

I came into the federal government initially because of my husband. He worked for the [U.S.] Government. And his job took him to places. And I wanted to be doing something too. So that's why I started working as a community liaison officer.

And it was fun, interesting. But it was not the job I was-- I saw myself doing for the rest of my life. So when we came to Washington D.C., when he was posted in D.C., I applied for a job with the Department of State, in human resources, which is an area that I fell in love and I like and I had done before.

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Before that, I was in several U.S. Embassy missions because of my husband. So I had had jobs helping with-- community liaison officer-- helping the community, you know, and sponsoring visitors. So I had that kind of experience.



Coming to Washington D.C., when he was posted there, then I applied for the Department of State and I was approved to work in human resources. Because at that point I already have a security clearance. And that makes a big difference. It helps you a lot to get a job as long as, you know, you have the-- what it takes for the job.

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I joined [the] Department of State as a civilian. And from that point on, [NAME] and I never worked in the same place again, until in 2015 when he retired from the [U.S.] Foreign Service. And then he joined SIGAR. And he went to Afghanistan. He had a long, long experience with Afghanistan. And he became the head of the [SIGAR] Forward Operations office there. And, for three years, he was in Afghanistan, leading the SIGAR [office and operations] there.

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So we were together [in Afghanistan] for four years there. And then he went back for three more years.

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INTERVIEWER:

So when SIGAR came into being, you were already in Afghanistan.

INTERVIEWEE 23:

Yes.

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INTERVIEWER:

How long were you in Afghanistan for this agency? And how many different times did you go? How long were you there?

INTERVIEWEE 23:

In total I was in Kabul for four years – almost two of that with the Department of State and two with the Special Inspector General for Afghanistan Reconstruction.

INTERVIEWER:

And what were the dates that you were in Afghanistan for this agency?

INTERVIEWEE 23:

For this agency?

INTERVIEWER:



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Not exact dates, but just the years.

**INTERVIEWEE 23:**

Early 2009 until 2011.

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**INTERVIEWER:**

What things did you realize about Afghanistan when you were based there, both with State and then with this agency? What were your first impressions?

**INTERVIEWEE 23:**

My first impression was that-- how very little I knew about the place. When I first arrived in-country, with this person that had been there before, gave me this vest and helmet. And I freaked out, just said, "Well, this is really the-- you know, the war zone."

At that moment I realized, yeah, this is a war zone. So that was my idea of events. And then working on the [U.S. Embassy] compound, getting to know the Afghan people, you realize, you know, they are just people like you and me, going through this tough time. So that was my impression. First, that there was really danger out there, and then, second, that people there were actually good people.

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**INTERVIEWER:**

How did it come to be that you ended up working for this new oversight agency?

**INTERVIEWEE 23:**

Yeah, that's a great story. When the first time the IG\* then, [NAME:] General Fields, came to the compound in late 2008, I think he had been just appointed, by the president.\*\* It was a brand-new agency. So he came to see the spaces and negotiate with the Department of State and-- Department of Defense on space and-- actually start the agency, in Kabul in Afghanistan.

[\* Major General Arnold Fields, USMC (Ret.), former Special Inspector General for Afghanistan Reconstruction, 2008-2011]

[\*\* President George W. Bush appointed Major General Arnold Fields as the first Special Inspector General for Afghanistan Reconstruction in June 2008.]

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[NAME] and-- came together with [NAME] who became my boss later-- [NAME] and-- [NAME] I'm not not mistaken. The four came to see the place. And I was in the-- on the team that kind of sponsored them and showed them around. And I would say I think 2008.

Then, in 2009, I understand that [NAME] was sent back to Afghanistan to actually start the office there. Meanwhile, [NAME:] General Fields and the rest of the team were in Crystal City\*, setting up office and hiring people for here-- for the [Special] Inspector General office.

[\* SIGAR's offices in Crystal City, a commercial/residential neighborhood in Arlington, VA]



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Then, I was still Department of State then. But then comes January – [NAME] is there. And he needs help in the office. Mostly admin, mostly people who knew housing, how to get to people-- to get housing for the staff that was coming. Travel-- we-- in those days, we didn't have a travel specialist. We didn't have a human resources office then.

So that's what I was doing, assisting [NAME] and-- kind of detailed from Department of State. At that point [NAME] and I had a good rapport. So, he said, "Yeah, you should come join SIGAR." So he sent me back to the States to convert to SIGAR.

And that was May, 2009. At that point, there was an office here, although I was still hired through SIGIR, the Special Inspector General for Iraq Reconstruction. Because our HR office still, there was one person there. And she couldn't yet act by herself. So I was hired through SIGIR for SIGAR.

**INTERVIEWER:**

How interesting. So at the beginning SIGAR relied very much on the previous Special Inspector General office for Iraq Reconstruction--

**INTERVIEWEE 23:**

That's--

**INTERVIEWER:**

--in part because that agency existed and had processes in place that allowed the creation of SIGAR to go more quickly, I assume.

**INTERVIEWEE 23:**

Yeah, we relied a lot on SIGIR in the beginning. Because they had the knowledge. They knew how to get things, how to hire through DoD.\* They knew the steps. They-- so we learned a lot from them. And they were very supportive in the beginning.

[\* U.S. Department of Defense]

**INTERVIEWER:**

So what were those early days with this agency like in Afghanistan?

**INTERVIEWEE 23:**

Well, I remember the very-- my first day in the office.\* I thought, "My goodness, this is what they call 'hooch.'" It was containers.\*\* This is what-- this is where the office was.

[\* SIGAR office at the U.S. Embassy compound in Kabul Afghanistan]

[\*\* metal shipping containers used as offices and housing at the U.S. Embassy compound]

The big, nice Embassy building was not big enough for everybody – and wasn't actually, you know? So the [U.S.] Ambassador [to Afghanistan] stayed there, and mostly [U.S.] Foreign Service officers stayed there. But the local staff and the smaller agencies had to stay in trailers outside, which they called "hooches." And we actually shared this long hooch with some local staff on the other side.



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But, my first day in the office, I see this pile of boxes in really truly a storage room. I said, "What am I going to do here?" But then, when I came back in May, as a SIGAR employee then, [NAME] was there.

[NAME] was a sergeant major, a former sergeant major, and a man that [NAME] trusted a lot, and for good reason. He was really good at what he did. And in a few months, he put together the office and, you know, set up the rules, and kept the place going nicely. And I was actually working with him.

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[NAME] was the [SIGAR] Deputy Inspector General. He was the IG's right arm, let's put it this way.

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And he helped build the agency from the start and was actually-- he was actually the head of the office in Kabul.

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### **CONDUCTING OVERSIGHT AGENCY MANAGEMENT IN A WAR ZONE: AFGHANISTAN SIGAR WORK ROLE IN AFGHANISTAN**

**INTERVIEWER:**

Were the realities of working for this agency in Kabul different than when you were previously working for the State Department in that place? Was it more primitive? Was it-- was there less equipment? You said you were in these container units instead of in the main Embassy. What other things were different in this just-starting-out agency and its employees?

**INTERVIEWEE 23:**

For me starting-- moving from Department of State to SIGAR was actually very exciting.

**INTERVIEWER:**

Why?

**INTERVIEWEE 23:**

Because, working for the Department of State, the things that I could do in human resources were very limited. The HR office, the Department of State office in Afghanistan relied mostly for-- for the American staff, they relied on the staff in the U.S.

The local staff took care of their own people. So there wasn't much left for me to be excited [about]. And I need excitement in my work. I need to be involved. And moving to SIGAR, our new office, there was so much to do, there was so much to learn.

And we had to interact so much with-- other offices. I was constantly talking to the General Services [Administration] office to negotiate how to-- the travel agent, to-- specialists to try to get our people on the flights going to far away provinces. It was really exciting. It was a great time to be working for SIGAR.

**INTERVIEWER:**



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So what was a typical day or week for you like? Give me an example of the kind of things that you were doing? And I assume that part of that would be, you know, working on travel for criminal investigative agents who had to go and do interviews in a remote part of the country. Just give me a sense of the things that you had to do during those early days?

**INTERVIEWEE 23:**

Most of the time we were involved in-- me and [NAME] -- were involved in getting housing ready for staff that would come from headquarters.

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[NAME], we called him, [NAME], was the operations officer. He was the one who set up the office. And even the offices that were in the different provinces, not just the one in Kabul, but also the one in Jalalabad and [in] Kandahar, [and in] Camp Eggers. We had an office there. So [NAME] would go to those places and make sure that computers were in the right place.

[NAME] would go to the provinces -- in the offices in the provinces like Jalalabad, Helmand, Kandahar, Camp Eggers. He would go to places and set up the offices and ensure that computers were installed and auditors and investigators needed all that they-- had all that they needed to do their jobs. So that was [NAME].

**INTERVIEWER:**

And the general category of all of this comes under, I'm assuming, Forward Operations for this agency, for SIGAR.

**INTERVIEWEE 23:**

Exactly. // There was, in those days, a big flow of people coming and going from headquarters to Kabul.

And we had to worry about things like cell phones, their housing and how they would eat, where would they go. And then most importantly, how they would get to the other provinces -- especially, the auditors and criminal investigators.

They had to go to places. In those days, that was my day-to-day job. But then one of my main roles there was to be focused and prepare the IG's\* trips. Those in those days were crazy. I shouldn't be saying that. And those were very intense.

[\* Major General Arnold Fields, USMC (Ret.), former Special Inspector General for Afghanistan Reconstruction, 2008-2011]

Because [NAME:] General Fields had a different style. He proposed to go to places in Afghanistan. He wanted to go everywhere. And we were a new agency. So I had to work hard with the [U.S.] military and Department of State. Because Department of State would provide transportation and security for the IG.



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But then, so-- and the military had to approve the trips and allow them to go in certain places. And sometimes even provide transportation because there were places the IG wanted to go that the [U.S.] Embassy didn't go. So he didn't just want to stay in Kabul or go to the common places, the regular routes like Helmand or Kandahar.

This IG wanted to go to Kunduz. He wanted to go to Wardak. He wanted to go to the border with Iran. And those trips were hard to work on. So [NAME] and I had a deal. When the IG was in town, I worked for the IG. [NAME] -- we called him [NAME] -- [NAME] would take care of everybody else. And I would focus on the IG. So working with Department of State and the military, I got him to go to places that people didn't go before. And that was exciting, you know, to get results.

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**INTERVIEWER:**

What kind of reception did you get from these other departments, the State Department, the Defense Department, when you, representing this new independent oversight agency, would come calling, saying, "We need this. And we need this. Because we've got to go out there and be present in all these different places"?

Were they cooperative? Were they less than cooperative? Were they irritated that they had to staff these sort of extra -- to them, in some cases -- "mission-things," that were not a part of their own department's activities?

**INTERVIEWEE 23:**

Well, there was a lot of suspicion, because "There's a bunch of auditors that come here to look what we are doing." And there was also some not knowing who we were, and why were we there. DoD had their IGs. The State Department had their IGs. So who were we?

So there was that part. As far as the cooperation, I like to think that there were two levels of interaction. There was the level of [NAME], who was an amazing diplomat. And he had very good relationships and was very respected by the [U.S.] Embassy and also the military, despite some sour situations, because of what we were doing there.

But they respected [NAME]. But then, at my level, I knew people. So, I knew the people on the base. I knew who did the job. So it was not always easy or simple. But it was always done. It was always a matter of, you know, developing strong, good relationships with people who did the work. And they trust me. And they knew I wouldn't be asking for anything that was not important. So [NAME] did his job and his-- at his level. And I did mine at my level. And we were able to get stuff done.

**INTERVIEWER:**

Did you ever have to field an answer to the question, "Who are you all? What are you doing here?"

**INTERVIEWEE 23:**





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Oh, oftentimes, oftentimes, people'd say, "SIGAR, what is SIGAR." So we had to actually spell out the name and say we are here to, you know, audit and investigate the taxpayers' money, using the reconstruction of Afghanistan.

**INTERVIEWER:**

So you would have to give that answer.

**INTERVIEWEE 23:**

I guess all of us. People would ask us, "What is SIGAR?"

**INTERVIEWER:**

And so--

**INTERVIEWEE 23:**

Although at a higher level, people knew it, right? Obviously, at the [U.S.] Embassy, the higher-level people would know – or should know – who we were.

**INTERVIEWER:**

But what-- do you remember any interesting reactions to your explanation of who SIGAR was and what its job was?

**INTERVIEWEE 23:**

No, I don't remember, like, that. But I do remember my sense of-- and my shock, when-- in the beginning I was kind of innocent, didn't really realize what our job was there, right? So it was a shock to me when // people whom I talked friendly to would come to me and say, "Yeah, your agency--" and criticized the agency and be angry. And I said, "Why are they angry?" Yeah, I don't understand. So there was this thing that in the beginning to me was a reality shock. So, "Oh, that's we are doing."

**INTERVIEWER:**

And how would you deal with that?

**INTERVIEWEE 23:**

Well, just-- you know, it's their job. You know, I'm operations.

**INTERVIEWER:**

How would that go over? Would people accept that? You mentioned a few minutes ago that people had a sense of you from your dealings with them. And you said that they knew that if you were asking for something, it wasn't frivolous. It wasn't--

**INTERVIEWEE 23:**

Yeah.

**INTERVIEWER:**



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So you developed these relationships in which you were able to command some respect from the people you were dealing with.

**INTERVIEWEE 23:**

Yeah.

**INTERVIEWER:**

And so that's how you navigated that, I'm assuming.

**INTERVIEWEE 23:**

Yeah, absolutely. So [NAME]'s job was to convince the [U.S.] Ambassador [to Afghanistan] that it was legit-- that the IG needed to go to Wardak, places that very few people went. But [NAME] convinced the Ambassador. And then it's my job to convince, you know, DS,\* and convince, you know, the-- Embassy-- that, "Listen, we have to figure out how. "The IG is-- the ambassador is on board. The IG needs to go there. You have to help me figure out how." "Oh, but it's impossible." I said, "Well, there's no impossible. Let's figure out how we are going to do it."

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"DS" stands for Diplomatic Security.\*

[\* Diplomatic Security Service, Bureau of Diplomatic Security, U.S. Department of State]

**INTERVIEWER:**

And that's part of the Department of State.

**INTERVIEWEE 23:**

Correct.

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**INTERVIEWER:**

What do you see as some of the biggest challenges, given all your experience, your perspective, to conducting oversight in a war zone?

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**INTERVIEWEE 23:**

I think it depends the country you are in and who is supporting you. In our case, we had Department of State and Department of Defense supporting us. [PAUSE] But I guess the biggest challenge is to put the right team together. And I think this is one thing that, you know, our agency has been successful in doing.

**INTERVIEWER:**

What were some of the biggest obstacles to getting work done in Afghanistan?

**INTERVIEWEE 23:**

Well, the biggest obstacles-- I think one was to convince the [U.S.] Embassy that it was O.K. for us to go to certain places. Because either for security reasons, or, for the reasons that I don't know about,



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they didn't want us to go to certain places. So I think that was the biggest challenge. But our auditors and investigators were always willing to go to places far away, and did go places. And, you know, they sleep under difficult conditions and-- to get the job done.

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**INTERVIEWER:**

What are some of the stories that, you know, you tell about your time there?

**INTERVIEWEE 23:**

Well, there is this one story that I tell people. It's a long story. Are you sure you want to hear?

**INTERVIEWER:**

Yes, I do.

**INTERVIEWEE 23:**

Getting to and from the [U.S. Embassy] compound was very stressful. In the more recent days, people flew from the Embassy to the airport. But, during the time I was there, there weren't sufficient helos – so, helicopters. So what we did-- an armored car would take us from the Embassy to the airport, a straight line, but very stressful drive.

Because you were right there with people looking at you. And you don't-- and they know who you are. You're in-- you know, in armored cars going on a convoy. So people knew who you were. And among all those good people there were the bad guys. So we were always tense.

And then, in the beginning, it was, like, February, a scarf covering my head. I said, "Who am I fooling with this scarf covering my hair in an armored car from the U.S. Embassy?" So, but-- so it was stressful to get to the airport. Now, that alone was stressful.

But there was this one trip. And we did it three, four times a year, right? So there was this one trip. We were going back from Washington D.C. to Kabul. So the first flight was a mess because we were flying over New York. And we hear this [IMITATES SOUND] big boom.

"[NAME], what's going on?" And then the pilot says two of the hydraulics broke. And I'm like, "Well, what does that mean?" So we are flying very low over New York and back to the airport. It was very stressful. We get on another plane and go.

We get to Dubai. And in Dubai, we get on this very old United Nations plane. They had this-- it was a family business. The father, the grandfather was the steward, and the young son. So we got on this UN plane. And we are flying towards Kabul.

When we are almost there, they divert to Kandahar. And we are like, "That never happened before. What's going on?" Well, it was a problem with the airplane, the second airplane, right, with a problem. So they fix the problem. And we fly to Kabul.



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Well, we never landed after dark in Kabul, because they wouldn't allow any staff to arrive after dark. But that day, because of all the delays, we got there after dark. When get to the airport we were always received by what they call-- I forget the word now, but the Embassy staff.

There were always two local [U.S. Embassy] staff that would be waiting for us, put us in the armored car, and take [us] to the Embassy. I knew everybody. I had been there for four years. So we got to the airport. And there are these two new faces. And I say, "[NAME], I don't know these people."

And they say, "No, come here to the car." It's after dark. Two people I don't know. They take us to the car. Stressful enough. So they get on the road to go to-- the straight road, to get to the Embassy. And, they divert. And they go into a village, no asphalt, just compounds, houses, and people looking inside the car.

And this guy is on this, you know, dirt road. And I say, "[NAME] we are being kidnapped." And I'm getting more and more anxious. And [NAME] says, "Calm down. It's O.K." And I say, "Why are we here?" And he says, "Because there was a threat, that something would happen on the road to the Embassy. So we are taking the back roads."

And sure thing, it was a real thing. He drove us the longest way, and dropped us at the Embassy. And when we got there, we had to go through security, be scanned and all. So when we get there, I get out of the car, say, "[NAME], please take care of our luggage. I have to run to the apartment." I opened the door to the apartment and start crying and say, "Oh, my God, I thought we were being kidnapped."

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INTERVIEWER:

You're referring to [NAME], your husband.

INTERVIEWEE 23:

Yes.

INTERVIEWER:

So that release that you had to have once you were behind the closed door, a release of stress--

INTERVIEWEE 23:

Mmm-hmm.

INTERVIEWER:

--a release of fear.

INTERVIEWEE 23:

Yes, absolutely. So--

INTERVIEWER:



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And that's part of the reality of being in that war zone doing this kind of work. That is probably an ever-present threat, correct?

**INTERVIEWEE 23:**

Exactly. So, even though you get used to it, and especially living on the [U.S. Embassy] compound where it's kind of a bubble there, you kind of-- sometimes you forget where you are. But this moment when you travel outside the compound, it's usually very stressful for most of us, for all of us, I suppose.

We-- we felt vulnerable. So-- and when there was-- but if you follow the routine, go to the airport, after a while you're very used to that. And there's no issue. You-- it's just the way things are. But then when the guy-- when they decided to change the routine, it was a big stressful situation to me.

**INTERVIEWER:**

So when there's a deviation from the norm, different people escorting you that aren't familiar, a route that changes and takes you off the main route and into-- your immediate first thought is suspicion that something negative is occurring. And in the case of that one incident, it was actually something positive intended to protect you.

**INTERVIEWEE 23:**

Uh-huh (AFFIRM). Absolutely.

**INTERVIEWER:**

But you don't know that when it's happening.

**INTERVIEWEE 23:**

Exactly. So for at least 30, 40 minutes, I thought we were being kidnapped.

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### **CONDUCTING OVERSIGHT AGENCY MANAGEMENT IN A WAR ZONE: AFGHANISTAN (cont'd) SIGAR WORK ROLE IN U.S.**

**INTERVIEWER:**

Following your assignment to Afghanistan for this agency, you came back to the United States and you've worked for the agency since that time here in Virginia?

**INTERVIEWEE 23:**

Yes. So when my assignment ended there, the IG then asked me-- well, actually not the IG. When [I was] returning from Afghanistan, the [SIGAR] Assistant Inspector General for Management and Support asked me if I'd like to stay at the agency. There was an opening in human resources. And I said, "Yeah, absolutely. I like the agency. I like human resources. So, yeah."

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**INTERVIEWER:**



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So you said you liked this agency.

**INTERVIEWEE 23:**

Yeah.

**INTERVIEWER:**

What did you like about it?

**INTERVIEWEE 23:**

What I liked the most about it is the size of it, honestly. In 2011, I knew everybody – first and last name, I knew what everybody did and where they were. And, by then, I had enough knowledge to also be helpful to our people in Afghanistan.

So I had this both sides. I knew what life was like in Afghanistan and all the hurdles that people had to go through and all the difficulties. And now I'm in headquarters trying to be their voice here. And I knew everybody.

So what's not to like? I had come from Department of State, in this big organization, [where] you knew people that sat next to you, but you didn't really know – face-to-face – people you were helping. Whereas here, you know, [NAME:] calls me and I know who you are, you know?

It's-- it becomes personal. I want to help you because I know, right, you're [NAME]. It's not like receiving an email saying, "Person X needs something." So that's the part that I like best. And that's the part that made me stay.

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**INTERVIEWER:**

You were talking about how you had become once you returned to the United States, the voice of this agency's people continuing to work in the war zone, and trying to represent to senior leadership the kind of hurdles that they faced. Can you give me a sense of what hurdles did they face trying to do their various jobs – in a conflict zone, in a war zone?

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**INTERVIEWEE 23:**

Life itself could be very challenging in Afghanistan. And, for people on the [U.S. Embassy] compound, it was like being in a huge-- you know, small prison because you were confined. And there were guns everywhere protecting you. But it was kind of difficult. You couldn't move. You couldn't go to places.

But, you had a lot of comfort, you are surrounded by, a nice restaurant inside. You had a swimming pool. And, you know, life was easy but confined. But then we had staff that was in Jalalabad, staff that was in Kandahar. And those were not easy places to be.

And some of our investigators and auditors were going out there to places that were, you know-- and putting their lives at risk and doing a very important but difficult job. So I had a lot of respect for



them. So when I came to headquarters, I thought it was my job to, in my small way, do whatever I could to assist them, even if it's only with admin staff, but important stuff for them.

So that's what I did. Now, it was-- there was a time when [SIGAR] headquarters staff [in Virginia], at least the ones who hadn't been there, they didn't have this understanding of the situation. And some might even be a little jealous of the extra money people were [getting] there [working for SIGAR in Afghanistan].

So they say, "Well, you know, they're all [getting] all this money. Why would they need this or that?" And I say, "Well, it's-- they're making more money because they are in the war zone. And they are putting their lives at risk. And they are, you know, leaving their families."

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#### GUIDANCE FOR FUTURE OVERSIGHT-IN-A-WAR-ZONE HUMAN RESOURCES PERSONNEL

INTERVIEWER:

If you were advising someone in your role in a future oversight mission to a war zone, [on] how to set up the things that were set up for this agency – that you've helped with – what kind of advice would you give that person or persons?

INTERVIEWEE 23:

In terms of?

INTERVIEWER:

How to conduct themselves. You know, they're in a war zone and they're to do the same jobs that you would do not in a war zone. But you're in a war zone. What kind of advice would you give if somebody were setting up a new--

INTERVIEWEE 23:

Office--

INTERVIEWER:

--entity like this, or a future reconstruction mission in another war zone. What advice would you give, as someone who's worked in this agency for all the years that you have, having seen everything that you've seen?

INTERVIEWEE 23:

Well, the first advice I would give with the agency [would be] to try to send at least some people who have done it before, that will help acclimate the others, that are new to the war zone. And to people who are new to this kind of situation, I would say, "Don't commit for a long term. Go first for one month. See if you can take it. It's completely different environment. If you can take it for one month, then maybe you're ready to commit for one year. Or maybe you just want to commit to another three months and see how things go."



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**INTERVIEWER:**

Why do you think that it's a good idea for someone who's interested in doing this work in a war zone, for an agency that is newly doing this work in a war zone, to encourage people to go first just to experience a taste of it? Why is that important?

**INTERVIEWEE 23:**

I think people handle stress differently. And I don't think it's for everyone. Some people go there and they thrive. Some people like, you know, adrenaline or-- but some other people really have a hard time.

//

It's not for everybody. Some people can't get used to the confinement. Some other people don't get used to the rules. Some people can't handle, you know, the explosions going around. And even though we were very lucky there-- we were not--[we were] never directly affected by the explosions.

But you have to learn to live with the-- you know, the sirens and the duck-and-cover announcements. And it's not for everyone. It depends on how you can handle this kind of stress. So that's why I would recommend that people go there first to see what it really is like. And--

**INTERVIEWER:**

And see how they're going to be in those conditions.

**INTERVIEWEE 23:**

Exactly. Now, the other thing in those days, and it's different-- every situation is different. But in those days, for our agency, I had so much respect for the-- you know, all the short-term TDY\* auditors, especially, and investigators.

[\* TDY = temporary duty]

Because housing was very plain, very basic. It was some-- some of senior auditors, they shared hooches with four or five other people. // And there was no space on the floor for their suitcases, so small they were. They shared one bathroom per container, with several other people, including the local staff that came to wash their feet, to pray. So, it was very-- nothing that they were-- they would experience in the U.S., I think.

**INTERVIEWER:**

And all of these unfamiliar -- and let's say, you know, denser -- living conditions were a part of the challenge, part of the burden that people had to bear.

**INTERVIEWEE 23:**

Absolutely. So, if you can't handle, you know, living with, sleeping with a lot of strangers, or-- people who are there with the same mission you are, but people you don't know. But you have to share the same bedroom. And you have to accept the rules of the [U.S. Embassy] compound. Then it's not for you.





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**INTERVIEWER:**

And let's say that people couldn't handle it. Were they then recognized as having "washed out"? Was it a failure on their part that they couldn't handle those conditions? Or was there, you know, a sensibility that it just wasn't-- some people weren't suited for it?

**INTERVIEWEE 23:**

I think they were just seen as people who were not suited for that. And people left for different reasons. There was once this officer that was having [a] mental breakdown. So he had to go back. I remember somebody else who was over-drinking. So they sent the person back.

People who were excessively partying -- that was not a place for that. So they were sent back to the States. Because people, I guess, they react differently under stress. So those didn't fit.

//

**INTERVIEWER:**

In general, is there more of a tolerance for certain--

**INTERVIEWEE 23:**

Behaviors?

**INTERVIEWER:**

--behaviors, given the stresses of a war zone environment?

**INTERVIEWEE 23:**

I think there was tolerance for certain behaviors, as long as you didn't put in risk yourself, others, or the mission. So there was, to a certain extent, some tolerance. But, certain things weren't acceptable.

**INTERVIEWER:**

So there was a tolerance with an understanding that these stresses could cause--

**INTERVIEWEE 23:**

Mm-hmm. [AFFIRMATIVELY]

**INTERVIEWER:**

--a wider range of and perhaps a greater frequency of problems in people. But, always with a very strong focus on—

**INTERVIEWEE 23:**

On the risk, mm-hmm—

**INTERVIEWER:**

--any risk to oneself or one's colleagues as part of the mission.

**INTERVIEWEE 23:**

Absolutely.



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

#### **INTERVIEWER:**

You have a long now career in human resources. What is your now-expert opinion about the types of characteristics, skills, talents, abilities that make the best candidates for oversight work in a war zone? To do this kind of work, what kind of person, does one need to be?

#### **INTERVIEWEE 23:**

I think you have to-- obviously, have to have the tactical base. You have to know the job. But then I'll go back to one-- expression that [NAME:] Mr. Sopko\* created with the agency. "You have to have a fire in the belly." It was a common thing that he said when he came here in 2012.

[\* John Sopko, former Special Inspector General for Afghanistan Reconstruction, 2012-2025]

He said, "I want you guys to have fire in the belly." So, if you-- if you are doing this kind of work – as important as it, the technical formation, is – to really want to get the job done and have that curiosity and desire and drive to get the job done. Because it can be very difficult and, again, be very frustrating at times. But I think it's-- the results pay off.

//

#### **INTERVIEWER:**

You got a lot of thank-you emails from people.

#### **INTERVIEWEE 23:**

Oh, yeah. Oh, I made friends.

#### **INTERVIEWER:**

Why?

#### **INTERVIEWEE 23:**

Because I like what I do, and I like people.

#### **INTERVIEWER:**

Why did you get thank-you email?

#### **INTERVIEWEE 23:**

Oh, oh, more objectively, O.K. Let me think. So many different things. When I was in Afghanistan, because I really helped people get to places where they wanted to go. It was not an easy task. In [the] early days, we used MILAIR.\* So people went to the airport, sat there. If there was space on the plane, they would go. If not, they would not go. They would come back to the compound.

[\* MILAIR or "Mil-Air" = U.S. Military Aircraft, via requests to the U.S. Department of Defense; U.S. Air Mobility Command]



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**INTERVIEWER:**

MILAIR is U.S. military [aircraft] operations?

**INTERVIEWEE 23:**

It's the [U.S.] military air--

[OVERTALK]

**INTERVIEWEE 23:**

--air operations.

**INTERVIEWER:**

U.S. military air operations.

**INTERVIEWEE 23:**

Yes. And, you know, the civilians would be added to the flights if there was space, obviously. If not, they would come back to the compound. So it was not the easiest thing. It didn't go-- always go smoothly. So when I--

**INTERVIEWER:**

So you had to "bird-dog" that to make sure that it went.

**INTERVIEWEE 23:**

Yeah. So that is when we went to Department of State who had the Embassy Air. They had a plane here and a helo or two. We had to go there and say, "Listen," and we paid for that, right, through-- I forget the-- ICAS (PH). And don't ask me to explain the acronym, because I don't remember anymore.

But we paid our share to use it. But in those days, there was so much disinformation -- or people didn't really know what we could or couldn't do. So I had to actually put people on Embassy Air. When that didn't work, move to MILAIR and do all this challenge.

So people were grateful. They were grateful that, you know, they were never forgotten at the airport. I always would-- you know, the Embassy car would be there waiting for them. Because I knew how important it was. So there was no room for mistakes. You didn't want your people to be stranded at an airport in Afghanistan. So, there, people were always very appreciative, very much. There is this // camaraderie in the war zone. We all worked very well together. And we were always appreciative of each other.

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**INTERVIEWER:**

It seems fair to say that helping people is something that you really enjoyed doing over the course of your entire time at this agency and your other government jobs.

**INTERVIEWEE 23:**



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I think so. But it's not helping people. Like, I'm not Mother Teresa. It's helping people, doing what you're being paid to do.

//

I like to do everything I can following the rules, but do anything you can to say "yes" to the employee, you know? Again, abiding to the rules, but trying to find a way to do things and make them happen fast.

//

To facilitate their work. And, you know, and to let them focus on what their job is, what their mission is, not if their family will have health insurance or not.

So I think that's my contribution to the agency, to provide service that will allow the technical staff to focus on what they have to-- the mission that they have to accomplish.

//

### **WHAT DID SIGAR DO WELL?**

**INTERVIEWER:**

What did this agency do well?

**INTERVIEWEE 23:**

I think this agency did well to not just write the right reports and good reports, but to put that in front of the right people, and make sure that it was out there for people to know – what was going on with all the taxpayers' money going to Afghanistan, all the loads of money leaving Afghanistan and going to Dubai, or wherever it went. So I think the agency had a very important role – letting American people know where their money was going.

//

### **WHAT COULD/SHOULD SIGAR HAVE DONE BETTER/DIFFERENTLY?**

**INTERVIEWER:**

What should this agency have done differently or better?

**INTERVIEWEE 23:**

I don't know what could have been done better, because honestly I think we were pretty good. But maybe-- in the small-- with, like, five cents-- two cents, my two c[ents]-- in my humble opinion, maybe we could have-- in the early days, we could-- we should have exposed people in [SIGAR] headq[arters], [SIGAR] people in Crystal City-- send them more often to Kabul to experience life there to have a better understanding of, one, what they were doing here and what their colleagues were doing there – to work better together and to have more appreciation of what they were doing in the war zone.

**INTERVIEWER:**



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And what made you think of that as an issue? Were there occasions in which you felt that there were things that didn't work out as well, because there wasn't as much familiarity of folks working here with what was going on over there?

**INTERVIEWEE 23:**

I think there were situations when people didn't have a very realistic understanding of what was going [on] there [in Afghanistan]. And, I said, "Well, they travel a lot. They have a lot of, you know, leave time."

So, yeah – but the rest of the time they're not enjoying their families. They're not, you know, watching their kids go up. So this is-- that's where I felt-- mostly, you know, that people here didn't have a real understanding of the challenges.

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There was this disconnect between headquarters and there. There was there. Here was here.

//

**INTERVIEWER:**

"There was there. Here was here." Would that come under the category of things that you think an agency like this – or this agency, specifically – could have done better, you know, could be done better in the future--

**INTERVIEWEE 23:**

Absolutely.

**INTERVIEWER:**

--had it been done differently? Explain that to me.

**INTERVIEWEE 23:**

Absolutely. I don't know how, honestly. I think, like I said before, maybe--

**INTERVIEWER:**

But what's the problem? What's the basic problem that is resonating with you, with that phrase, "Here was here, there was there"?

**INTERVIEWEE 23:**

Oh, my. Now I got emotional. // We didn't have-- in the early days, we didn't have the best support from [SIGAR] headquarters. You would send emails that wouldn't be replied [to], especially from the admin side-- wouldn't be replied quickly, or [there would be] questions. There was so much confusion.

There were no policies in place. So, very often I imagine people wouldn't respond because they didn't have the answer. It was not in a mean way. They just don't. "So how do I do this?" "Can I do that?" And, crickets. And of nobody would write back and say, "I don't know." They just wouldn't answer.



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So there was that. And that created some friction sometime. So it was like people here thought people there were too demanding, or they were stars. They were this and that. And people there thought, "Oh, people in the U.S., they are dragging their feet," which was not true, either.

You see, so there was this disconnection. So when I came back to the U.S., and the agency [SIGAR], I was one of the first ones to come back and be observed by the agency here. There had been, I guess, one or two other cases. I don't remember. But I certainly was among the first ones.

//

From that point on, I had to really carve my way. // Because it's not like everybody had an open arm.

//

**INTERVIEWER:**

When a U.S. government agency is doing oversight work, and some of its people go to the war zone, and some people remain behind doing work in the United States, is there sometimes the development of a cultural divide – that perhaps people in the war zone don't feel understood, responded to by people who remain back in the States? Is that something that you experienced? And when you don't get responses, do you feel that you weren't heard?

**INTERVIEWEE 23:**

Mm-hmm [AFFIRMATIVELY]. Yes, that happened a lot to us in early days. I think later, right before Afghanistan fell, things were much better. There was, at least on the service side, we had a better understanding of how difficult things were there for them. So I think service was better. But I think, in the early days, there was this clear divide.

**INTERVIEWER:**

Do you think that that's inevitable – in any agency that will in the future be set up to do a similar job in a similar place?

**INTERVIEWEE 23:**

I don't think it's inevitable. I think, again, people in headquarters should be exposed to that to understand. And whenever our investigators who would thank me and send emails, and called to say, "Thank you for doing this for me," I said, "I don't have-- you don't have to thank me. "I'm doing my job for you to do yours." But it was, like, before people here didn't have that understanding. "Oh, so here he wants to go to that province again." Well, not to have fun.

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### **AFTER U.S. WITHDRAWAL / AUGUST 2021**

**INTERVIEWER:**

In August 2021, when the U.S. withdrew, and the Taliban assumed control of the government, the developments were covered widely in the news, [with] many videos and accounts of what happened. How did that affect you?



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### **INTERVIEWEE 23:**

I was extremely sad. My first thought was to those women, those Afghan women that I knew on the [U.S. Embassy] compound – the ones that I knew, that once they were back in their villages, they would be not only stripped from their rights, but some would be, you know, // they would be punished for being a woman, for working, and for helping the outsiders more than anything else. So I felt really sorry, not just for the women, but especially for the women.

### **INTERVIEWER:**

Does that affect how you look back and think about all the work that you did while you were there, all the work that this agency did in that country? Does it affect your recollections about that work or your sense of what the work accomplished?

### **INTERVIEWEE 23:**

I think we did important work, when it was necessary. And despite the country not being in a good place right now, I think I did what had to be done. And people know what's going on there also, because of our work.

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### **WHAT ARE YOUR OWN LESSONS LEARNED?**

### **INTERVIEWER:**

As you know, this agency does “Lessons Learned” reports. What were your lessons learned about Afghanistan, about oversight, about an agency of this type, doing oversight? What did you learn?

### **INTERVIEWEE 23:**

I learned that it's wonderful that the U.S. helps so many countries, so many other people. But I learned how important it is to have an entity that will watch how this help is being used. Because so much money and so many lives and so much effort has been put to help, you know, the world to be safer and better.

But there's a lot of work to be done within the U.S. too. So I think these inspector generals are important so the money we spend is used well. And we honor the sacrifice of those who not just give the money, but, you know, put their lives in risk.

//

### **INTERVIEWER:**

How did the agency change over time? You described in the early days it was exciting. There was so much to do, so much to build and set up. // You were one of the few people who has been here since the beginning. And so you've seen the agency change and evolve. What are your-- what's your perspective on all the change that you've seen?

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## **SIGAR | SPECIAL INSPECTOR GENERAL FOR AFGHANISTAN RECONSTRUCTION**

### **INTERVIEWEE 23:**

To me there is SIGAR before and after [NAME:] John Sopko.\* Before [NAME:] John Sopko, the agency was very much criticized.

[\* John Sopko, former Special Inspector General for Afghanistan Reconstruction, 2012-2025]

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I have to say in favor of the-- that the first IG,\* he was very committed. He was very much into it. But there was so much confusion. And he was setting up office. So I think to his credit, he put together the agency.

[\* Major General Arnold Fields, USMC (Ret.), former Special Inspector General for Afghanistan Reconstruction, 2008-2011]

Now, then there is the agency after [NAME] John Sopko. [NAME:] John Sopko put us on the map. He-- the previous leadership was afraid of the media. They didn't use the media much becau[se]-- I guess maybe because they were so much criticized, they went with caution.

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[NAME:] John Sopko, the current inspector general,\* he wanted wanted results. He wanted good reports. And he was not afraid of going out there and putting the reports out there, and putting his face out there. So that was the big divider, in my opinion – was-- and there were previ-- between the two, the were a few temporary IGs. But when you think of SIGAR, and I don't want to be unfair to the other IGs, but when you think of SIGAR, you think [NAME:] General Fields. And then you think [NAME:] John Sopko.

[\* John Sopko, former Special Inspector General for Afghanistan Reconstruction, 2012-2025 – Sopko was the “current” IG as of the date of this interview.]

### **INTERVIEWER:**

And so why do you think that getting attention helped to put the agency on the map? Do you think that that is a necessary part of the function of an independent inspector general's office?

### **INTERVIEWEE 23:**

Absolutely. Because you can have the best report in the world, but if nobody's reading it, if the public doesn't know about it, I don't see the point of doing long, beautiful reports. So I think it's really important. But that's a good question for the auditors and investigators.

//

## **WHAT DID SIGAR AND YOU ACCOMPLISH IN AFGHANISTAN?**

### **INTERVIEWER:**

Bottom line, what do you feel that SIGAR, and you helping SIGAR, were able to accomplish during all the years that this agency was doing oversight work in Afghanistan?

### **INTERVIEWEE 23:**

I think the most important accomplishment was to produce quality reports, but not only that, putting them out there and making [the] American people aware of what was going on in Afghanistan – and how their money was being used in the reconstruction.





But showing real pictures, showing how the hospitals that were not there before were there now, and how the money was invested in that, and what was done right, and what could have been done differently. SIGAR went to faraway provinces to actually walk over bridges that we knew on paper.

But they went there to see, "Well, let's see if the-- what is on paper matches reality." And this was extremely important. I mean, the American people wouldn't have a way of going there and checking the-- you know, "Is the bridge there?" "How was it built?"

So it was SIGAR's job to fly there, you know, risking their lives to go to that faraway place. "Yeah, yeah, the bridge is here. But wait a minute. This is not what I see on paper. This should have been done like this, or that. Or this doesn't justify all the money that was spent. So someone has to explain where this money went."

So I think SIGAR's job was extremely important. And I have a lot of respect for that. And I'm-- again, I'm proud for being part, playing a small role and being part of this agency.

###