SIGAR | SPECIAL INSPECTOR GENERAL FOR AFGHANISTAN RECONSTRUCTION

SIGAR Oral History Project (OHP)

Interview 32: Edited Transcript

Interview Date: 03/20/25

NAME/TITLE

INTERVIEWEE 32:
My name is [NAME]. I'm a special agent with the Special Inspector General for Afghan reconstruction.

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JOB DESCRIPTION

INTERVIEWER:
What does that job entail?

INTERVIEWEE 32:
Well, the SIGAR agent-- and what we're employed to do is to investigate cases that concern corruption – specifically, more or less, contract corruption, and those types of cases.

INTERVIEWER:
And for this agency, obviously focused exclusively on U.S. activities having to do with Afghanistan?

INTERVIEWEE 32:
Yes. Yes, exclusively U.S. activities focused on Afghanistan. Yeah.

CAREER HISTORY

INTERVIEWER:
So, if you could, I'd like you to give me a little bit of some notes on your background.

INTERVIEWEE 32:
Sure. Sure. Sure.

INTERVIEWER:

How did you come to work for this agency? But if you could, start all the way back at, you know, what did you study in school? What did you want to be when you grew up? How did you embark on a path that brought you into law enforcement and brought you into this agency?

INTERVIEWEE 32:
O.K. Great. How much time do we have?

INTERVIEWER:
As much as you want.

INTERVIEWEE 32:
Well, I studied electrical engineering at North Carolina A&T [Agricultural and Technical] State University in Greensboro, North Carolina, which prepared me for a career in that field, but to which I had no interest in upon graduation. I was fortunate enough to get employed with the Naval Intelligence Support Center in Suitland, Maryland as an analyst.

And we were analyzing, at the time – this was before the downfall of the Soviet Union – we were analyzing Soviet naval warships and their electronic systems, and recommending countermeasures for those type systems. Now, as a kid, I didn't aspire to do that. I wanted to be a race car driver. But they didn't have many job openings in that field. So. And this paid the bills. But, ultimately, as an analyst with NISC – that was the acronym for the agency—

INTERVIEWER:
NIST, right?

INTERVIEWEE 32:
It was N-I-S-C.

INTERVIEWER:
N-I-S-C. I'm sorry.
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INTERVIEWEE 32:
Yeah. Yes. It no longer exists. // It supported the Navy's mission in a counterintelligence fashion, concerning-- at the time, our primary focus was China and Russia, and the electronic radar systems, and electronic countermeasure systems that were equipped-- that were aboard the Russian and Chinese naval fleet vessels.

INTERVIEWER:
And just so that I understand, your role with that entity, was that a civilian job or were you actually in the service?

INTERVIEWEE 32:
I was a civilian.

INTERVIEWER:
You were a civilian.

INTERVIEWEE 32:
Yeah, I was a civilian at that time.

INTERVIEWER:
So you were hired as a civilian to work for that entity because of your degree in electrical engineering?

INTERVIEWEE 32:
Exactly, yeah.

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You know, I was a bit restless, and a colleague of mine had an opportunity to join the FBI as a special agent. And it piqued my interest.
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After a conversation with him, I thought, "Wow. That would be great." I could get from behind my desk, and go out, and, you know, and do something that would be very interesting, dynamic, and, you know, unusual, to a certain degree, especially given my background.
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Lo and behold, I applied. And I was fortunate enough to get on board with the FBI as a special agent in September of 1988.
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INTERVIEWER:
So was there a specific opening, or did he bring you in, or how did it work out?

INTERVIEWEE 32:
Well, what happens is, each year, at least during that particular time, they have an allocation to fill vacancies. So they posted those positions. And I applied.

INTERVIEWER:
So there was a specific role, that role, that you applied for?

INTERVIEWEE 32:
Exactly, yes.

INTERVIEWER:
You got-- O.K., so when you got in there, what were you doing? What was the job?

INTERVIEWEE 32:
Yeah. So, interestingly enough, I went through Quantico. We had 16 weeks of training, which encompassed, you know, the firearms, and the legal training, and the physical training. And I was assigned-- my first office of assignment was the Philadelphia division.

And, lo and behold, in Philadelphia, they assigned me to work narcotics investigation, which I knew nothing about, and which was a challenge, to say the least. But, you know, it was a drink from a fire hose. I learned quickly. I mastered the violations that were being investigated.

And I managed to do pretty well, and to a point where they transferred me to, at my request, to corruption investigations – fraud against the government – and also bank fraud investigations. And that's where I specialized in terms of my investigative skills, in those areas.

INTERVIEWER:
How did a guy with an electrical engineering degree decide, "I want to work on corruption and fraud investigation?"

INTERVIEWEE 32:
Well, that's a good question. You know, I think what happens when you're a brand-new FBI agent, and you're in a big field division, what they do is, for your first year, year-and-a-half, they rotate you from squad, to squad, to squad. And I had an opportunity to rotate over to that side of the office. And I said, "Wow. This is pretty neat. And I'm really interested in, you know, pursuing this as opposed to working narcotics, which I don't know anything about. And I don't want to be, you know, in that lane." So that's how it worked out.

INTERVIEWER:
So what appealed to you about corruption and fraud?

INTERVIEWEE 32:
It was a challenge. The financial aspect, and the banking aspect, the sophisticated techniques necessary to investigate those type of crimes really piqued my interest. And so, yeah, you know, I pursued that track.
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INTERVIEWER:
How did engineering prepare you to tackle a role like that?

INTERVIEWEE 32:
Well, that's interesting. You know, I've always been pretty meticulous. And I paid a lot of attention to detail. So that skill set translated very well to that profession and those types of violations. So it worked out very well. Even though I wasn't, you know, pursuing purely what my education called for, it was a great opportunity. And if not for the FBI, I wouldn't have been there. So.
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INTERVIEWER:
How long were you in that role?

INTERVIEWEE 32:
Oh, O.K. So, yeah, so what happens with the FBI, I was in Philadelphia working bank fraud, and corruption investigations, and the narcotics up until 2000, right after 9/11. And right after 9/11, I was

promoted to a supervisor position at the FBI headquarters where I worked in the FBI's 24/7 watch center.

It's called SIOC, Strategic Operations Intelligence Center. And that was due in part because of the, you know, the events concerning 9/11. They were, you know, beefing up in terms of the staffing there. And I applied. And I was accepted to that position as a manager in SIOC.

INTERVIEWER:
And so what appealed to you about that role?

INTERVIEWEE 32:
Well, at the time, you know, we were all on that tidal wave concerning what had happened on 9/11. And it-- I felt it was my duty to make myself available in any means and way possible to support the FBI's mission, and also the country's mission in terms of to thwart further attacks, and also to investigate the attacks that happened on that perilous date.

INTERVIEWER:
And so what kind of things did you do in that role?

INTERVIEWEE 32:
Oh, yeah. So that was a pretty interesting job in that we fielded calls from all over the FBI. And we kind of-- we put together puzzles. For example, there was a pipe bomber in the middle of the United States. I forget what state. But he was going from state to state, and he was igniting these pipe bombs in mailboxes, just for an example.

And because we were the hub of the wheel, we got all the information, and we were able to, you know piece it together and then inform the field offices, "Hey, this is all connected. You guys are working the same case." And we also were a mechanism that we could transfer all this information up to the executive managers of the FBI. So it went from the field office, to SIOC, to the executive managers of the FBI.

INTERVIEWER:
So how long did you work in that position?

INTERVIEWEE 32:
It was about a year. And after a year, I-- and this is what kind of starts to lead to my tenure at SIGAR, is that I was promoted to the Inspection Division. And in the Inspection Division of the FBI, we audit programs and investigations in offices internally of the FBI.

It's like a peer review almost, but an internal peer review – of our assets, and our capabilities, and our performance. So I became a manager in the Inspection Division. And I did that for a year. And that was very interesting, because it allowed me to witness what other offices were doing, and how they were doing it, and good practices, and also not-so-good practices. And it helped me, you know, fine-tune my skill set as an investigator.

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INTERVIEWER:
You were in that position for how long? What did that lead to?

INTERVIEWEE 32:
Well, as an inspector, I was in that position about a year or so, a little bit over a year. And, I mean, that equipped me very well to understand all the intricacies of the FBI – with good practices and also bad practices, though. And that prepared me to, you know, to make the next step. And that-- my next position was I was the field supervisor for the Baltimore office. But my specific oversight was all of Prince George's County. I was the manager of the FBI for Prince George's County essentially.
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That job, I was the-- they call it the "supervisory resident agency-- resident agent." And I was over Prince George's County. And that covered pretty much every-- all the violations for the FBI. So it was, like, you know, everything, you know, the whole kitchen soup.

And I was, you know, I was kind of ready for that job, because I had done-- I served as one of the inspectors for the FBI. So I saw a lot of programs. And so I was prepared to do that. And that was an interesting job. But that kind of prepared me for my next position, which was in Afghanistan for the FBI.

INTERVIEWER:
How did you finally get an assignment that took you there?

INTERVIEWEE 32:
Well, what happened is, after 9/11, in addition to working in the 24/7 operations center, I took-- I was fortunate enough to take a lot of TDY assignments.
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"TDY" means "temporary duty assignment."
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I was in Ottawa post-9/11, working terrorism leads out there. I was in Lagos, Nigeria working terrorism leads there.

I was in Budapest for a while. I was in El Salvador for a while. And because of my international experience, I was qualified, based with the Bureau qualifications, to do an overseas, long-term assignment. And so I put in for the position of legal attaché for Afghanistan, which is the special agent in charge for that country.
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The position of LEGAT, or legal attaché, rotates every year. And a vacancy arose, because obviously the end of the tour of my predecessor. Interestingly enough, my predecessor was the very first legal attaché for Afghanistan. I was the second legal attaché for Afghanistan, you know, after 9/11. So it was a very interesting time when that occurred.

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INTERVIEWER:
How did you come to know about the position? Was it one that you'd been aware of? Had you—

INTERVIEWEE 32:
Well, you know, what happens with the FBI, at the time, I think we operated about 58 legal attaché offices throughout the world. And I'd always had an interest in that type position, after my TDY assignments. It caught me-- you know, I got the bug to travel.

And especially, you know, given Afghanistan was a high-profile job, I looked forward to that type of challenge. And I thought that, based on my experience, and I knew that, you know, I could-- I would fit the bill and do-- I thought that I would do a pretty good job in that, and take those responsibilities, and accomplish the mission for the FBI.

One of the things I wasn't prepared for is that Afghanistan and that legal office, I'd never experienced anything to that degree. It wasn't a typical legal attaché office at all. And before I accepted the assignment, you know, I knew what I was walking into, in that I went over there TDY for, like, three or four weeks, to kind of get a sense of the playing field. And it was different. It was a challenge. And-- but I was excited about the opportunity. And, you know, therefore, I accepted the position. And then-- and I served there from 2007 to about the middle of 2008, about a year and a half.

INTERVIEWER:
You said it was different and it was a challenge. Can you give me a little more sense of what you mean by that?

INTERVIEWEE 32:
Yeah. Well, it's a lot of not-so-subtle differences and some subtle differences for Afghanistan. One of the-- well, at that particular time, you know, everyone-- this was 2007 time-frame. And the U.S. was focused mostly on Iraq.

And Iraq's not Afghanistan. But the folks at home didn't know that. And one of the differences, for example, Iraq had a "Green Village," which is enormous. Whereas, Afghanistan had no Green Village. We just had a small [U.S.] embassy compound. And conveying that – those restrictions that are caused by that small compound versus a Green Village – it's hard to articulate that. And people just didn't get it.

INTERVIEWER:
So a Green Zone in Iraq is a much larger area with a lot more security?

INTERVIEWEE 32:
Absolutely. The Green Zone in Iraq was about the size of the District of Columbia.

INTERVIEWER:
And people don't realize that?

INTERVIEWEE 32:
Exactly. Yeah. Versus the compound in Afghanistan was a couple buildings. And, you know, and--

INTERVIEWER:
A lot less security.

INTERVIEWEE 32:
A lot less secure. And also it causes a lot more work in terms of trying to conduct liaison. Like, in a normal LEGAT office, liaison is easy, because, you know, you jump in your Embassy vehicle, and go see your counterpart at the [former government of Afghanistan's] Ministry of Interior, or what have you, and, you know, you arrange meetings, or they come see you, and it's not such a big deal. It's a huge undertaking to conduct liaison in Afghanistan. Huge. And it--

INTERVIEWER:
Involves the U.S. military.

INTERVIEWEE 32:
It involves the U.S. military, and, you know, obviously translators, and such. And it's a huge undertaking to say the least. Now one thing I'd like to note is that when I was in Afghanistan, one of the benefits was that if we didn't-- all eyes weren't on Afghanistan.

All eyes were on Iraq. So we had a lot more freedom to leave and go to and from the compound. But as things transitioned from Iraq to Afghanistan, that changed dramatically. By the end of my tour, we were completely locked down. So it was the, you know, it was an interesting way to see the change in the dynamic of how we conducted business there. It just evolved.

INTERVIEWER:
And you were there for, you said, a year-and-a-half?

INTERVIEWEE 32:
About a year-and-a-half, yeah.

INTERVIEWER:
And, in the course of that time, did you spend the bulk of your time doing corruption and fraud investigations, or did you spend your time doing other things?

INTERVIEWEE 32:
Yeah. So this is-- see, what happens when I was there is we were extremely focused on things like kidnappings of American citizens and also our counter-IED effort. IED is improvised explosive devices. And that was a big thing, because there was a rash of IED explosions in Afghanistan. It was infectious.

And that was our primary responsibility. And we didn't have corruption or contract fraud on the radar. We didn't have the capacity to do it. And, honestly, we didn't care about it at all. Only because we just didn't have the staffing, the manpower, and it was a very low priority for us.

Because we-- our high priority was keeping our Americans citizens safe, and also counterterrorism, and counter-IED incidents that we, you know, almost exclusively worked.
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INTERVIEWER:
You're in that role for a year and a half. What did that lead to?

INTERVIEWEE 32:
Well, you know, interestingly enough, well, I was there at the time when SIGAR was being stood up. And it led to my current employment with SIGAR. Because what happened was I met the original inspector general for this agency and also his deputy.
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So they came over. And I liaisoned with them. I set them up with the [former government of Afghanistan's] Ministry of Interior, with the NDS, I think it's the Natio-- NDS? National Defense Service. And they explained their role and what they wanted to do.

And I was like, "Have at it, guys. We don't have the manpower or staffing. We're really happy if you guys are being stood up to take care of that, and to handle those type investigations. Because we have no equity in that arena at all." So, yeah.

INTERVIEWER:
That's come up in other interviews. So the FBI, large and massive, didn't have the manpower or the equity in that situation? Why was that?

INTERVIEWEE 32:
Well, all because in terms of our priorities. Our priority was counterterrorism, you know, counterintelligence, and the safety and well-being of American cits [=citizens]. And, in other countries, it would've, you know, risen to the top. But in Afghanistan, it was just not-- we weren't prepared for that.

You know, I had probably, during my time, on-and-off, 30-to-50 "TDY-ers" – temporary duty agents and staff – come over. And they always allocated one or two of those slots for fraud or corruption. But those bodies were never used for that, because we just couldn't afford to have those folks work that at the time, due to the other ongoing activity.
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It was a void that needed to be filled. And we, you know, at the time, you know, I was scratching my head and wondering how these guys are going to, you know, accomplish this mission when I can hardly, you know, accomplish mine. And dealing with [former government of Afghanistan's] Ministry of Interior, who, you know, they're unlike any other national police agency that I've dealt with. They're archaic and, you know, they have a long way to go in terms of the learning curve.

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SIGAR HIRING

INTERVIEWER:
Your response to the first SIGAR teams coming over and working on this stuff, as an FBI agent, that was something that you thought was a good idea. How did you end up coming to work for this agency?

INTERVIEWEE 32:
Yeah. So after my tour in Afghanistan, I was reassigned. I was the assistant special agent for the North Carolina division of the FBI for a while. Then I was reassigned back to FBI headquarters. And while I was back at FBI headquarters, I was conducting-- I was in charge of our security clearance program.

And a colleague who knew I had been in Afghanistan, [NAME:], had been hired by SIGAR. And he came to me. And he said, "Man, don't you know about this?" And I said, "Oh, yeah, I know about those guys." He said, "Well, aren't you ready to retire?"

And I said, "Yeah." And he said, "You should come here." And, lo and behold, you know, he put in a word for me, which, you know, may have helped or may not have helped. And I put in my application, and was interviewed, and I accepted the position.

INTERVIEWER:
And what role did you accept with this agency? What was the-- you know, obviously, criminal investigative agent. But it was intended to be within the domestic U.S.?

INTERVIEWEE 32:
Yes. So, you know, when I was interviewed, they were interviewing for criminal investigators for Afghanistan, and for the U.S. And at that time, I specified that I wanted to stay in the U.S., based on my previous experience. I've already been over there. I don't-- but I don't want to go back at this particular time. But I was open to it if the needs of the agency dictated that. So.
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INTERVIEWER:
How was it conveyed to you what the responsibilities would be of a criminal investigator for this agency, working in the U.S.?

INTERVIEWEE 32:
Sure. So, for one, my colleague, [NAME:], he explained what the job entailed. But then I did my own research, went onto SIGAR's webpage at the time. And, you know, so I did my own little investigation. SIGAR was created and stood up to – which I already knew – [identify and report] waste, fraud, and abuse, and corruption.

And I was well-aware and familiar with SIGAR from my tenure in Afghanistan. So I said, "Oh, this is a great opportunity. It's a great fit." And so that's how I was aware of it, and was excited to take the

position. And I came on board in-- I think it was, like, a month after I retired in June, retired from the FBI. And I came on board in June of 2012.

INTERVIEWER:
So that would've been the year that the second person to hold the title of special inspector general, [NAME:] John Sopko*, took over the agency?
[* John Sopko, former Special Inspector General for Afghanistan Reconstruction, 2012-2025]

INTERVIEWEE 32:
Yes. Yes, [NAME:] Mr. Sopko, he wasn't on board when I got here. But during that year, he came on board, he came on board.

INTERVIEWER:
So this was a return for you, to corruption and fraud investigation?

INTERVIEWEE 32:
Yeah. Yeah. Yeah.

INTERVIEWER:
You're smiling, because it was something that pleased you. You wanted to do that?

INTERVIEWEE 32:
Oh, yeah. So what happens is, you know, one of the best jobs that you can have at the FBI is being a criminal investigator, a special agent. You don't-- you know, you're your own boss, so to speak. You get to work some great cases. And you work with prosecutors.

One of the worst jobs in my opinion now is a manager, because you get it both ways. You have to deal with the people above you and the ones below you. And sometimes it could be taxing. It's just no fun at times. And so I was really excited to kind of come full circle, and actually, you know, get my hands dirty, and work cases again. And when I came on board with SIGAR, you know, it was an interesting time. You know, we were transitioning from, I think, the acting IG into [NAME:] Mr. John Sopko. And there's a lot of opportunity there, put it that way.

CONDUCTING OVERSIGHT INVESTIGATIONS RELATING TO A WAR ZONE: AFGHANISTAN

INTERVIEWER:
So what kinds of cases did you get to work on?

INTERVIEWEE 32:
With SIGAR? Yeah, so what happens is, with SIGAR, one of the first cases that I worked, I kind of carved out a niche – in that I formed a partnership with the agents from various agencies who worked in the Southern District of Illinois at U.S. Trans Com, which is U.S. Transportation Command.

And those agents were trying to stand up a task force concerned with all the cargo that was going to and from Afghanistan, and those contractors who were responsible for transporting that cargo in and out of Afghanistan. Because what they were finding was it was wrought with fraud.

And they were excited to have me on board, because of my prior experience in Afghanistan. In addition to that, SIGAR had agents, you know, on the ground, who weren't just there for a few months. So we had a presence there that they could rely on to cover those leads and get things done.

So it was a win-win situation. An interesting time for me and an interesting time in general in that what I did to really help form the partnership. Essentially, I went out to St. Louis for TDY*. And I was there on and off for, like, a year, year-and-a-half with SIGAR.
[* temporary duty]

And we formed a really strong partnership. We worked some great cases against some of the major transporters that transport cargo in and out of, you know, everywhere in the world. And we were able to recover, over that time period – actually over about three years – between $200 million and $300 million, which was substantial. And it really made a difference, in my opinion, in terms of our effort to thwart fraud, and contract corruption.
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INTERVIEWER:
So you've been with SIGAR now, this is probably year 13 – 12 years, 13 years. Did you do that work all the way through your time at SIGAR or did you move onto other areas?

INTERVIEWEE 32:
Yeah. Well, what happens is, those cases, because some of them were complex, and for them to come to fruition, some of them took, you know, three to four years. So actually I was involved in those type cases, more or less, until the big pull-out, the big retrograde started.
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INTERVIEWER:
How did you find working on those types of cases in the context of a war spending environment, as Afghanistan was to the United States? Were there things about that type of case that the wartime context made more challenging, more difficult, or not?

INTERVIEWEE 32:
Oh, yeah. You know, one of the things that I understood, and also most of my counterparts understood, the difficulties of travel within Afghanistan. You know, those cargo carriers had, you know, insurmountable circumstances at times, given the Pak-G lock.

And I don't know what the "Pak-G lock"-- it's the transportation route that goes from Pakistan up through Afghanistan, throughout Afghanistan. It was the northern distribution route. There were issues there as well, because you had the Taliban.

And the Taliban were, you know, known to, you know, request bribes and attack cargo caravans. So it was a really, really, really tough environment. But also, one of the challenges we found that-- there was very little oversight in terms of these cargo carriers.

And because of that, you know, the fraud was rampant in terms of what they-- some of the pricing and the overcharging for the U.S. government. And also just some of the circumstances were, for example, you know, the contract called for refrigerated containers, and because they were refrigerated containers, the U.S. government was, you know, paying a certain denomination for those containers. But, lo and behold, we got evidence that none of the containers were refrigerated. And those circumstances were pretty prevalent.

INTERVIEWER:
Can you give me a sense of sort of the flowchart of the beginning of a case like that, step-by-step, how it progresses? Did it start with tips from people working in the U.S. military?

INTERVIEWEE 32:
Yeah. Yeah. Yeah, what happens, often, it was we got a whistleblower that would come in who was an insider that worked for those companies. The JAG – the judge advocate general's office – would get a tip. And they'd contact us. And that would cause us to initiate the investigation.

And once we initiate the investigation, you know, generally speaking, we issued subpoenas to the company to gather all the, you know, documents and evidence, to identify witnesses that were privy to those circumstances. And we interview those witnesses.

And when we're comfortable that we have some evidence, we go to the, you know, to DOJ and present our case to the prosecutors. And the prosecutors, if they felt it warrants prosecution, would go from that point. Most of these cases end up in the civil realm.

And then, in that sense, the prosecutors at that point contact counsel for the company-- for the carrier, and present the facts and the evidence. And 99% of the cases, because the evidence was so strong, the carriers agree to reconcile with the U.S. government.
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INTERVIEWER:
In the course of your time with this agency, was a majority, of the things that you worked on, cases that had to do with fraud relating to transportation of cargo into Afghanistan?

INTERVIEWEE 32:
I'd say in my tenure, about 60%. But also-- in addition to those types of cargo cases, I start-- I carved out a niche also with the-- out of Huntsville, Alabama, there's a Non-Standard Rotary Wing. // Redstone Arsenal is the base where a lot of contracts concerning the U.S. equipping countries with foreign-- with U.S. and foreign aircraft – funding those aircraft for a variety of missions, for counternarcotics, counterterrorism.

And one of the circumstances that was under investigation, or they initiated – the agents in Redstone Arsenal – concerned the MI-17 helicopters that were being used in Afghanistan for the war effort. And the concern was that those contracts concerning those helicopters were wrought with, you know, fraud, waste, and abuse.
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INTERVIEWER:
So you carved out a second niche?

INTERVIEWEE 32:
Yeah, I was fortunate enough to carve out a second niche. And it concerned the contracts that were being managed out of the Redstone Arsenal, which was in Huntsville, Alabama. And these contracts specifically concerned aircraft that were being used overseas, including the Mi-17 helicopter, which is a Russian-made helicopter, which was being used in the war effort in Afghanistan.

The allegations concerned that those contracts that the U.S. was supporting were wrought with, you know, fraud, and waste, and abuse. Interestingly enough, that kind of morphed – in that, when we started peeling back the layers of those contracts, we found that the contracts had problems.

But the contract programming office had problems. And fraud was endemic in the program office, in addition to the contracts, and that, sadly, we found that one of the colonels who was over the program office had an inappropriate relationship with one of the foreign contractors, in that he had received gratuities and bribes from the foreign contractor. And he had subsequently, after he retired, went to work for one of the contractors who he had, you know, managed the contract for.

So, you know, it was a very interesting investigation in that we started investigating the aspect of the contract corruption, but it turned. And we ended up focusing our investigation on the contract programming office. And as a result, the former colonel was charged and several members of the program office were charged also with fraud.

INTERVIEWER:
And did that affect the ongoing effort to do that kind of contracting for that particular program involving that craft?

INTERVIEWEE 32:
Oh, absolutely. The Department of Defense Inspector General's Office, they assisted us in this effort. They did several reports on this activity. And they made several recommendations and findings, which were implemented at Redstone Arsenal, to change their practices, to help resolve this issue, and prevent it from occurring in future circumstances. Absolutely.

INTERVIEWER:
Was it this agency that had detected the problem to begin with?

INTERVIEWEE 32:

The problem was originally detected by our sister agency, the Defense [Criminal] Investigative Service in Huntsville, Alabama.

INTERVIEWER:
DCIS?

INTERVIEWEE 32:
DCIS. And it was picked up by DoD, Department of Defense Inspector General's Office, subsequent to that. And then, we got wind of it and were called into the investigation. I'm not sure, quite frankly, how we were called into it at this point. I think because of the Afghanistan aspect.

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SIGAR OVERSIGHT INVESTIGATIONS: SUCCESSES?

INTERVIEWER:
Over the course of your time here at this agency, what were the biggest successes that you got to work on?

INTERVIEWEE 32:
Undoubtedly, I'd say the cases that I worked with U.S. Trans Com, U.S. Transportation Command, concerning the cargo in and out of Afghanistan. That was a tremendous effort. And we recovered, again, between $200 million to $300 million for the U.S. taxpayers.

I thought that was tremendous. It made a big difference. It moved the needle some. In addition to that, one of the challenging cases that I worked was the circumstances of the program office at the Redstone Arsenal in Huntsville, Alabama concerning the MI-17 contracts and the helicopters being deployed to Afghanistan.

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INTERVIEWER:
In the time that you worked for this agency on these various cases, what was the batting average in terms of seeing them through?

INTERVIEWEE 32:
I was very fortunate. When you say seeing them through, you mean from inception to a result?

INTERVIEWER:
Yes, sir.

INTERVIEWEE 32:
Out of-- I would say, you know, nine out of 10. So my, you know, batting average in my circumstance was pretty high.

INTERVIEWER:
That seems pretty good.

INTERVIEWEE 32:
I was pretty fortunate. Now I was here. I was in the United States. I was domestic. So I had those tools and, you know, resources that those guys who are on the ground in Afghanistan did not have. They were in much more difficult circumstances trying to put a case together. And I can't-- I don't envy that task. So.

INTERVIEWER:
And the subjects of your investigation in general were based here?

INTERVIEWEE 32:
All of my subjects in general were based here, yeah, with few exceptions. And most of-- none of my subjects were Afghans. Well, we had a few Afghans. But we weren't-- we understood the dynamics of trying to prosecute somebody in Afghan[istan] and bring them to the United States. So we didn't pursue those avenues, because it's, you know, [a] dead deal.

INTERVIEWER:
So one of the things that's come up in the other interviews that we've done is that it's much easier to do this work inside the United States, because of all the tools at your disposal, because it's a modern country with a rule of law. And it sounds as if you're very conscious of the difference for you and your colleagues who were over in Afghanistan with a completely different set of circumstances.

INTERVIEWEE 32:
Absolutely. // During my 10 years as a legal attaché for the FBI, I got to witness and experience our colleagues at the [former government of Afghanistan's] Ministry of Interior, which was the FBI equivalent, and also the [former government of Afghanistan's] attorney general's office.

The shortcomings there were tremendous. And it was ever-changing. I can recall one instance where I had formed a pretty good relationship with the Minister of Interior. His last name was [NAME]. And I can't think of his first name. [NAME], I think.

Anyway, he subsequently ran for president. But Minister [NAME] called me at 10:00 one night. And he's just like, "Sir, sir, can you help me? We are trying to record a conversation. Do you have a recorder we can use?" And this is the equivalent to the director of the FBI on the Afghan side. I was stunned. I was like, "Well--" – this is early in my tenure – and I said, "Well, we got--" and I said to myself at the time, "We have a long way to go."

INTERVIEWER:
That's some anecdote. So, it strikes me that your previous experience in Afghanistan working for the FBI gave you a much better understanding of what your SIGAR colleagues were up against as they tried to do investigation work in-country.

INTERVIEWEE 32:
Absolutely. You know, I had-- because I had been there, and had boots on the ground, and had-- most of my experience was in Kabul and at Bagram Air Force Base. I knew what they were experiencing. I knew what they were up against.

And I knew what challenges they had before them to conduct investigations, to interview witnesses, to collect evidence, to get cases prosecuted. I knew that it was a very difficult dynamic. And also, to convey our investigative standards to, you know, to those individuals in Afghanistan who were tasked with conducting the same jobs. Very hard task. Culturally, you know, it's extremely different and challenging to kind of convey our standards to folks who've, you know, been in the same circumstances for hundreds and hundreds of years.

INTERVIEWER:
Did you feel that this agency in general – particularly the people based here in the United States, here in Washington, the Washington area – did they understand the predicament of the criminal investigative agents who were based in Afghanistan?

INTERVIEWEE 32:
Well, you know, that's an interesting question. I'd say, no. Unless they had experienced it personally. I'd say definitely, no, unless they experienced it personally. Yeah.

INTERVIEWER:
Did that lead to some difficulty?

INTERVIEWEE 32:
Yeah. Because it's just like having a conversation where, you know, "Hey, [NAME], why don't you go to the store, and get me, you know, a couple of Coca-Colas?" "Well, [NAME], what do you mean you can't go to the store? The store's right there. It's only a half mile away."

"Well, I'm sorry. I can't go because I have to go, you know, with a whole convoy." We'd have to call the RSO office. You know, we'd have to put on our protective vests and have our long gun. It's just a conversation that people just don't understand. Unless you've experienced it.

Because we've had-- in this country, we've been fortunate to have so much freedom. And we don't understand life otherwise, to a certain degree. And even, like, when I explained the difference between Afghanistan and Iraq and the Green Zone being the size of the District of Columbia, that was even hard to convey to some of our counterparts who had been in a war zone, but not this war zone.

INTERVIEWER:
They didn't understand the--

INTERVIEWEE 32:
They didn't understand. Yeah.

INTERVIEWER:
Very interesting. Were you ever called upon to explain that, internally, given that you'd had experience with that?

INTERVIEWEE 32:
Oh, yeah, absolutely, especially during my tenure with the FBI. I had an opportunity to-- at the time, it was [FBI] Director [NAME:] Robert Mueller*. He came over. And he visited firsthand. And he had boots on the ground. And he saw. And he understood. Because in my prior conversations with him and also with the executives, they didn't quite understand the dynamics. Because in their vision they had Iraq and not Afghanistan. And sometimes it's just better to-- it's easier to see something in terms of establishing a vision as opposed to, you know, just imagining it.
[* former Director of the Federal Bureau of Investigation (FBI), 2001-2013]

INTERVIEWER:
Were you ever called upon to explain the difference here at this agency?

INTERVIEWEE 32:
No. I was-- at this agenc-- at SIGAR-- you know, no, I've never been called upon to explain the difference.

INTERVIEWER:
Did you feel that maybe people should have had a better understanding of the difference?

INTERVIEWEE 32:
You know, I'll say this. SIGAR came to Afghanistan during my tenure. And because they came early on, and that was around the 2008 [time]frame, they had a sense of the dynamics that were occurring in-country in Afghanistan, in addition to the fact that the personnel assigned to SIGAR weren't temporary-duty persons.

They were tenured persons who stayed in-country for at least a year. So the-- it was easier to con-- they understood-- the personnel at SIGAR understood and conveyed that message better to the folks here at headquarters, much better than my experience with the FBI.

It was one of those things that, overseas with SIGAR, I think that was maybe-- could've been better managed. Some of the folks, the investigators that went over there, weren't necessarily equipped to work those type cases. And I think that what-- I think we could've done a better job at getting guys in-- investigators who had those types of experiences domestically to work those types of cases there.

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

INTERVIEWER:

What types of professional qualities, personal qualities, characteristics, skill sets, traits equip somebody to do this kind of work well?

INTERVIEWEE 32:
When you say, "this kind of work"--

INTERVIEWER:
Criminal investigative work, particularly having to do with large systems that might be involved in U.S. wartime/war zone spending, funding, programs, activities.

INTERVIEWEE 32:
Yeah. Well, one of the skill sets that I would recommend is someone being familiar with the structures, the contracting offices – how that works, the players, and understanding those entities that are within those offices, and who wears what hats within those programming and contracting offices.

That helps tremendously. In addition to that, just personally, you know, you need to have attention to detail, be pretty meticulous, also have, you know, persons who are subject-matter experts that can-- you know, former contract officers, KOs, who can explain the nuances of these contracts.

Because some of them are extremely complex. And they're voluminous, in terms of the materials that they encompass. So having somebody who's a subject-matter expert on hand to help you discern those details is extremely helpful. And having, you know, a team that includes an analyst or someone who has tremendous forensic capabilities to look through financial data and understand and interpret it, where it can be interpreted to a layman.

Because, ultimately, when these cases are presented to a jury or to a prosecutor, they're not those-- they don't have that expertise. And that's a skill set that makes somebody-- that's certainly a skill set that's necessary to convey that conversation and make sure they understand what you're presenting them with.

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WHAT DID SIGAR DO WELL?

INTERVIEWER:
So what things do you think that this particular agency did well in conducting oversight in a war zone?

INTERVIEWEE 32:
Hmm. Well, one of the things I think that we did extremely well – and I'll restate this – is that we had people on the ground in Afghanistan for not just 60, 90 days, but people there for extended periods of time. One of the shortcomings that I saw in terms of the activities, investigations and the training of Afghans is that the rotation, the cycle of folks in for 90 days, in for 60 days, in for even six months, and out. And then it's this constant recreating the wheel.

Whereas with SIGAR, one of the biggest benefits that I saw – that we had folks there for an extended period of time – that helped tremendously, because it helped form the liaison necessary to get things done. And, you know, it meant a lot, in my opinion, to the Afghans and also, you know, to our partners there at the [U.S.] Embassy, that they knew that we were more of a permanent fixture as opposed to a temporary one.

INTERVIEWER:
There was institutional memory.

INTERVIEWEE 32:
Exactly. Yup.

WHAT COULD/SHOULD SIGAR HAVE DONE BETTER/DIFFERENTLY?

INTERVIEWER:
What are some things, if anything, that you think that this agency could have done differently or better?

INTERVIEWEE 32:
Differently or better? Hmm. I'd have to think about that one, [NAME]. What comes to mind? Early on, one of the things that-- you know, we weren't very coordinated early on. And that's in my early years with SIGAR, concerning our Investigative Directorate – where we had the investigative entity in Afghanistan appearing to be in competition with the domestic entity here in D.C.

And we weren't working very well together. And I think that was in part due to some unsettling rotation or upheaval in the management structure. And once that settled down, we got that figured out. And it was a much more-- it was a better operation that yielded better results once we got that worked out.

INTERVIEWER:
And you're referring to a transition from the first leadership?

INTERVIEWEE 32:
Yeah, the first leadership. Yeah. Exactly. Because, you know, I experienced that transition. And I don't know if this'll make the tape or not, but when I signed up, and I finally got here, I was excited. But I was dumbfounded after I got on board and sat in the chair, because it was chaotic, and it seemed like there was no sense of direction – for that first six months to eight months. It was-- we were a rudderless ship.

INTERVIEWER:
You weren't expecting that?

INTERVIEWEE 32:

I wasn't expecting that.

INTERVIEWER:
And to an engineer, that's not a good thing.

INTERVIEWEE 32:
No, that is especially not for me and my, you know, my aspirations. I didn't sign up for a rudderless ship – where there's no sense of purpose or direction. And that changed once [NAME:] Mr. Sopko* came on board. And he brought in [NAME:] Mr. Domin. They came up with a pretty good game plan.**
[* John Sopko, former Special Inspector General for Afghanistan Reconstruction, 2012-2025]
[** Doug Domin, SIGAR Assistant Inspector General for Investigations]
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INTERVIEWER:
The head of the Investigative Directorate--

INTERVIEWEE 32:
Yeah, they kind of stabilized the patient. And then we started forming a direction. And I'm sure that hopefully was conveyed to all the other directorates within the agency as well. But I definitely felt it within our Directorate.

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AFTER U.S. WITHDRAWAL / AUGUST 2021

INTERVIEWER:
In 2021, in August, the situation in Afghanistan changed. The Taliban took power. How did the events of that time affect how you think about the work that you did, what this agency did to try to combat waste, fraud, and abuse, and U.S. spending in that war zone?

INTERVIEWEE 32:
Well, I mean, I was disappointed, I mean, like everyone else, that it came to that point.
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Yeah, we were pretty disappointed in that all the, you know, U.S. efforts that, you know, resulted in nil. But at the same time, you know, it didn't negate and dull the mission that SIGAR accomplished.

Because we weren't those agencies out there, and military entities, trying to, you know, rescue Afghanistan. We were there for a different-- our mission was to curb waste, fraud, and abuse. And, you know, we did that. So I think our mission was accomplished even though the U.S. mission as a whole was, you know, less than optimal. But our mission was accomplished as an entity with SIGAR.

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WHAT ARE YOUR OWN LESSONS LEARNED?

INTERVIEWER:
So what are you lessons learned – you know, writ large, big-picture, about doing oversight that has to do with a war zone – about Afghanistan, and about oversight in general?
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INTERVIEWEE 32:
Well, sometimes I think this-- our country, the U.S. government tries to make problems go away by just throwing money at it. And, you know, that's not always the-- you've got to have some oversight with that money. It's just not always a solution.

And I think especially in Afghanistan, that was pretty prevalent early on. We were throwing money at the problem without any oversight. And it wasn't solving the problem. And I'm not saying at the end of the day the problem was solved. But it was, uh-- through SIGAR, [that] we had eyes on and we were at least, to a certain degree, stopping the spigot concerning the money that was just going to places they weren't designated to go to.
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INTERVIEWER:
So what you're saying is that, without an agency like this one, with eyes on trying to stop waste, fraud, and abuse, the amounts of monies that would have been wasted, the fraud – it would've been worse?

INTERVIEWEE 32:
Absolutely. And I think that we-- SIGAR did a tremendous job in curbing some of that waste, fraud, and abuse. But I think that we're, you know-- I don't know the percentage that we stopped. But I'd venture to say that, you know, we probably only scratched the surface, to say the least, in that regard.

And, you know, the other aspect that I think that we don't do a good job-- or we didn't do a good job for Afghanistan – is trying to impose our culture on the Afghans. And also [that involved] monies too, with what we tried to accomplish – which was, you know, a circumstance where it didn't work out very well, in trying to make them emulate what we do in the United States, with our law enforcement and with our oversight.

You know, and it's kind of hard to convey that circumstance, because we think if you only have lived in the United States, that it's everywhere-- everything-- everybody else is like us. Well, that's not true. And sometimes it takes a lot of learning to understand that, you know, it's going to be different.
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INTERVIEWER:
What are your impressions about the value of the special inspector general model – an inspector general that's independent, that doesn't report to a parent agency or entity, and is really only responsible to the Congress and to the President, in the end?

INTERVIEWEE 32:
Well, you know, I'm a big advocate. I saw it as a tremendous benefit, in that other inspectors general have competing interests. And, you know, they can't have a special focus on Afghanistan like DoDIG*. They've got the whole world, for example.
[* Department of Defense Inspector General]

And, you know, State OIG, same thing. They've got the whole world. Whereas with the Special Inspector General, we can hone in and focus on Afghanistan – and all the fraud, waste, and abuse that concerns all the contracts and monies that we're sending over there.

And there's really not much of a downside, from my perspective. And also, from an investigative perspective, I saw that, you know, firsthand – in that, you know, being an FBI investigator in Afghanistan, you know, had competing priorities. And I could never dedicate that resource to work on this aspect.

Because the FBI is so huge and that we have more important priorities. And that was the low-hanging fruit. So, and the same thing with DCIS* and NCIS, all those other acronyms, that they have competing interests. Whereas, with SIGAR, you know, we're honed in on Afghanistan. We're a resource for the U.S. government that focuses on Afghanistan. And that's the biggest benefit to the U.S. taxpayers, that we're hyper-focused on Afghanistan.**
[* Defense Criminal Investigative Service]
[** Naval Criminal Investigative Service]

INTERVIEWER:
If you were to create a system for another set of circumstances similar to this one in the future, would you do anything differently in terms of how criminal investigative work was set up to go after this kind of stuff in a place like Afghanistan?

INTERVIEWEE 32:
Uh-huh (AFFIRM). Yeah. What comes to mind is that I would ensure that each criminal investigator, and also each criminal investigator manager, spent time and boots on the ground. Experience it firsthand. And not just for, you know, a day or a week. For, you know, at least a period of time where they can understand, and have a vision, and understand that-- how things work in that circumstance versus being behind a desk in D.C. and thinking things are the same here as they are there.

That'd be my biggest recommendation is that to have those folks that you hire spend some time in Afghan[istan]. Make sure they've been there. Make sure they know the culture, they know the situation, they know the-- what challenges are there for the folks on that side.

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WHAT DID SIGAR AND YOU ACCOMPLISH IN AFGHANISTAN?

INTERVIEWER:
What do you wish that the public, the American public, could understand about this agency that they may not know?

INTERVIEWEE 32:

I would say that the-- you know, the public thinks the government's big. And the government is big. But SIGAR is-- it's a very small entity that made a big difference. I think the public would, you know, be astonished to know that SIGAR constitutes a couple hundred people.

And this is our mission. And this is what the result was in terms of all the directorates and the lessons learned. I think the public would be, you know, impressed that this is a very efficient operation, that yielded a lot of results. They got their benefit out of SIGAR.

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INTERVIEWER:
What do you think that you and this agency accomplished for the American people?

INTERVIEWEE 32:
At the end of the day, I think that SIGAR did a tremendous job in accomplishing its mission. We were created to monitor and curb waste, fraud, and abuse, and corruption concerning U.S. dollars going abroad. We did it. We did a tremendous job. I saw this agency transition from its earlier days when I first came on board into its final form – efficient, well-managed, put out great product.

And we had the ears of Congress listening to what was reported. And it made a difference. And I think that, moving forward, those circumstances that we witnessed and caused with SIGAR will translate to other agencies, of other special inspectors general, down the road, hopefully.

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