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Oral Histories of U.S. Diplomacy in Afghanistan, 2001-2024

SEAN SIRKER

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INTERVIEW

Introduction and Pre-State Department Experience

Q: It is February 16, 2024. Today I am interviewing Sean Sirker as part of our Afghanistan Project. Sean, welcome. Please start off by telling us where and when you were born and a little bit about your life before you joined the U.S. State Department.

SIRKER: I was born in New Orleans, Louisiana on July 19, 1965. My parents were from Nicaragua but immigrated to the United States. My father was a seaman, which led to me being born in the port city of New Orleans, which is where I grew to adulthood. In my 20s, I joined the military. I was a Marine reservist, a scout sniper and ultimately was called to duty for the first Gulf War. I served in Desert Storm, Desert Shield and Desert Defender.

Q: How many years or how many months was that?

SIRKER: My total reserve service time was six years, but my service during the Gulf War was several months. It was a short war as wars go.

Q: And you were in combat in Iraq?

SIRKER: Yes, actually in Kuwait. When I came back to the States, I finished my contract with the Marines. But about a week later, I received a phone call from an officer in Special Forces who was putting together a reserve team in the National Guard. He had gotten my name from a mutual friend who was a Marine buddy of mine, who he had called first. He was looking for people with combat experience to try out for this special operations forces team. Initially I wasn't interested, but he said, "Just come out." I went and watched and saw that they did everything I had hoped to do in the Marines but didn't.

So, I reenlisted and went through Special Forces training. It took about a year and a half. I earned a Green Beret, and Special Forces tabs, and that sort of thing, and was looking at an active career in Special Forces. But right about then the President and Congress had

decided upon military budget cuts. When I went to speak with a recruiter about transitioning to an active-duty unit, he said, "No, we're making cuts."

Right about then I received an offer from the U.S. Border Patrol. In my uniform, I flew to Texas and interviewed with the Border Patrol and got the job. I worked on the southwest border for almost three years. I was briefly able to shift to the Immigration and Naturalization Service as a special agent in San Francisco. It was a step up with regards to federal law enforcement, but I hated the job. INS was a terrible outfit, at least my office was. That was prior to the merger between Customs and INS, which formed what today is Immigration and Customs Enforcement, ICE. I wasn't with INS very long, thankfully, when I was contacted about the job I really wanted. The Diplomatic Security Service gave me a call.

Joining the State Department

Q: That's in the State Department?

SIRKER: Yes, State Department's Bureau of Diplomatic Security, Diplomatic Security Service. That was the job I had wanted, but DS had gone through a five-year hiring freeze. So, I was doing other things in the interim.

I left INS and I joined the State Department, Diplomatic Security Service (DSS) in September 1997.

Q: They usually start security officers in domestic assignments. Is that correct?

SIRKER: Yes. Diplomatic Security Service agents are actually federal agents. They're special agents like FBI, Secret Service, DEA or others. Within the Department, we often are referred to as security officers, because when we're assigned at an embassy or consulate, we receive the title of regional security officer (RSO) or assistant regional security officer (ARSO). Similarly, an FBI agent assigned to an embassy or consulate is the legal attaché, the LEGAT or the A/LAT. Everybody gets these titles. But RSOs are actually DSS special agents, working for the Diplomatic Security (DS) bureau.

So, I became a special agent of the Diplomatic Security Service. Domestically, DS has offices from LA to New York. DS has the longest initial training of any federal law enforcement agency. I went through that, and because of my special operations background and military experience, they asked me to go directly to our global tactical team, like a global SWAT team. Back then, it was called the mobile security division (MSD).

I graduated from the basic special agent course with a badge and a gun on a Friday, and on Monday, I started training again for MSD. That was six more months of training. So, I pretty much spent the first year plus of my career just training.

Two weeks before the end of my six-month training for MSD was the bombing of American Embassies Tanzania and Kenya. Foregoing those last two weeks of training, I, along with a few other MSD agents, was put on the FEST, the federal emergency support team, that flew to Nairobi, Kenya in response to the attack. That was my first taste of the overseas environment and terrorism. That event defined my career. Not only that deployment, but the fact that it marked the beginning of a change in the U.S. Government's focus on what would eventually become the war on terrorism. Shortly after the Africa bombings was the USS Cole incident and 9/11. So, my career was dominated by counterterrorism around the globe, primarily in the Middle East and South-Central Asia.

Q: It makes a lot of sense. Your background is a bit different than the DS agents from law enforcement. It's a different background and a different focus.

SIRKER: DS has a mixture. There are some from law enforcement, some from our military and some with other backgrounds.

Afghanistan – President Karzai Protective Detail

Q: Today, we are going to be focusing on the periods of time, which are several, during which you were in Afghanistan. You went to an assignment where you were Washington-based and then you were sent out to hot spots.

SIRKER: Yes. Just to finish up the lead-in to my time in Afghanistan, I went to work in MSD, that was three years of tactical and counter-terrorism activity around the world. I left that assignment in May of 2001 and was assigned to an office in my hometown of New Orleans. DS has a criminal investigation office in New Orleans.

In New Orleans, in August 2001, about a month before 9/11, I received a phone call from headquarters saying we're hearing a lot of white noise, which is intelligence lingo meaning there is a threat in the intelligence channels. They said, "We don't know exactly what's going to happen. It looks like something terror-related. Can you go to Indonesia? A safe house was raided, and we found plans for attacking the embassy. We need you to go to Indonesia and take care of things there until we can get an MSD team there in about two weeks." They said, "We know you're assigned domestically and you're not in MSD anymore, but we need you for two weeks and then we'll send you back home." So, I ended up going.

I landed in Jakarta, Indonesia on September 1, 2001. I was supposed to be returning September 14th, 2001, but 9/11 happened and I ended up stuck there, with no flights or anything, and dealing with horrendous terrorist threats in the most populated Muslim country in the world—Indonesia—until around November.

I was only home for a couple of months—into 2002— when I was called once again. This time the call was about going into Afghanistan for the first time. Others had been in

there already, a few State Department folks with DS agents and MSD. But they needed people to go in to reestablish the old embassy. I landed in Kabul in March 2002.

Q: Ambassador Dobbins and Ambassador Crocker had gone to help set up the embassy. And then Ambassador Finn arrived.

SIRKER: Yes, ambassadors and other officers and support personnel.

I arrived around March 2002 to help reopen the old embassy building. It was bare bones. There was no lodging, so we slept in the old chancery on the floors. I don't remember where we got them from, but we had a couple of mattresses we put in closets or storage rooms and that's where we slept. An engineer converted a urinal into a shower and that's what 32 of us shared. And we had no food. Three FSN's [Foreign Service Nationals or local employees] would bring food in a wheelbarrow down the street to us, twice a day, at lunch and dinner, no breakfast. It was horrible and we were all sick. People were tampering with the food. It was obvious. But that's all we had. That was my first time in Afghanistan—to help open and reestablish the old chancery, which was partially shot up and burned, and poorly protected. Unprotected, basically.

The only military in-country at that time were special operations forces who were elsewhere, chasing down Al-Qaeda and looking for Bin Laden. There was no significant military presence in Kabul at that time. We were on our own.

Q: How long were you there?

SIRKER: I think I was there, the first time, for 60 days.

Then I returned home to New Orleans. They called me again about returning to Afghanistan. The Navy SEALs were protecting President Karzai. They weren't trained for that mission, and they wanted out. They had terrorists to chase. DS was being asked to form a presidential protection detail and take over. There had already been two assassination attempts. The SEALs almost lost him.

Q: That was in 2002?

SIRKER: Yes. That was still in 2002. We went to Virginia. Remember, I had been assigned to New Orleans. Eight agents from different offices converged in Virginia and formed the core of the protective detail. We vetted over 90 contract personnel. We gave a one-month train-up to about something like 46 personnel and formed them into the Karzai protective detail to go to Afghanistan. I don't remember the exact dates, but I can tell you while we were training, the D.C. sniper was active. I remember that intimately because in New Orleans, one of my first cases—a guy I was tracking down and had last tracked to Washington State—turned out to be the D.C. sniper. Once the D.C. sniper task force knew his identity, the reason they had everything about his history overnight was that my case file was flown to them and hand-delivered by DS. I had been tracking him

for months. I knew everything there was to know about the guy, except that he was a sniper.

So, we were training up. Then we flew to Afghanistan, whatever that time was, in 2002. There were two types of tours at that time we were offered. You were either offered a one-year tour on the Karzai detail, living and working at the presidential palace, and taking him on moves and also out of the country. Or you did 60 days in-country and 60 days out. I opted for the latter. I went back into Afghanistan, in mid to late 2002, and was doing 60 days on, 60 days off.

Q: What was your role?

SIRKER: I was one of the agents who was a shift leader. There was an agent in charge, and then below the agent in charge were shift leaders and then contractors. There were eight direct hires. The rest were contractors. I was one of the shift leaders for the protective detail.

Q: Tell us about that experience. Did Karzai appreciate it? Was it hard because you didn't know the people and you didn't know where the threats came from? Or was it natural for you?

SIRKER: It was a lot of firsts. Diplomatic Security had never done anything like that before. Historically for the Department of State—if civil war, civil unrest, warfare, something broke out in the country, the Department evacuated. This was part of the new paradigm. The shift in paradigm, post-9/11 was that we no longer left in the face of unrest or war when it was terrorism related. We would go in with the military, side by side. That changed the mission of the Diplomatic Security Service, because we had to develop paramilitary capabilities we had never had before. Suddenly, DS agents were wartime officers with massive armed security forces and air wings, and all of these responsibilities. The organization changed. This was the beginning of that.

In another momentous first, the Karzai Protection Detail marked the first time the USG used security contractors. That had never been done before, not by DOD or anybody else to my knowledge. As I mentioned there were over forty security contractors that we had vetted, hired, and trained for protection. By the time Iraq kicked off a few years later, there were thousands of security contractors with all these companies from DOD and State, but we were the first. In fact, several of the original contractors from KPD left the detail and formed Triple Canopy. So, we set the precedent with the Karzai detail.

What was it like? It was interesting, it was challenging, it was educational and there were threats. The threats were real. President Karzai's enemies had tried to kill him twice while he was under the SEAL's protection. But as the SEAL commander told us after observing us conduct a live fire demonstration before deploying to Afghanistan, we were far better prepared for this than they had been. That wasn't their mission or area of expertise, and we had a lot more people.

While I was there, there were no assassination attempts against President Karzai, but we rolled around Afghanistan very heavily with a lot of fire power. We also protected the presidential compound where his administrative offices and his residence were.

It was well known that one of his two vice presidents had been involved in the murder of his father, Karzai's father, and was an enemy of President Karzai. He also had his own army of about 5,000 men with tanks, just outside of Kabul. That was the biggest threat we were concerned about, his own vice president. I recall his vice president rolling into the presidential compound with over a hundred men, forty vehicles, weapons, all this rolling onto the compound. I think there were thirteen of us one day standing in front of the administrative offices when this occurred.

Someone said "Sorry, apologies, Mr. Vice President." In English, since he spoke English. "But from now on, you may enter the compound and the presidential offices with one bodyguard, with concealed sidearms only. The rest of your men and vehicles must remain off the compound." He ranted and raved, and he said something to the effect of, "This is my country! You don't tell me what to do." And some of our contractors, most of the ones standing there, were former Delta Force. One of them, a former senior enlisted guy, stepped forward and said, perhaps not wisely, "We told you how it's going to be. Now make your move." And I was thinking, "or maybe he should talk some more."

The Vice President went and spoke with his men for a few minutes, and when he returned, he agreed with those terms. His little army left, except for one guy, this tall Caucasian-looking man who looked almost Russian and went by the name "Soldier." He escorted the VP into the presidential offices. There's a point to this story. We escorted the vice president in to see the president. A soldier came over to us and looked at us, and he said, "Now we can be friends." I learned something that day about respect and strength in Afghanistan. What is respected there is strength. Recognizing that we would lay down the law against tremendous odds, well, he respected that.

Q: They were coming out of the Taliban period, but before that, the warlords had been fighting among themselves. I imagine everybody was looking for a little bit of order. In the histories, there is a lot about how the northern tribes ended up in control of the military at first. And it took some time before constitutionally they were able to get the warlords under control of the Afghan government. You were seeing that at the very beginning.

SIRKER: I saw it at the beginning. I sat in several of the cabinet meetings with the president. They weren't speaking English, but sometimes the translators provided a general read-out. His cabinet basically were warlords, and they all owned their separate pieces of the country and the revenue therein. The real power that Karzai had was the money coming from the United States. They recognized that if he was not there, the money flow would stop. I think that was the main reason he remained in power. The only leverage he would have in these meetings, he would rant and rave every now and then, was when he would threaten to resign. The cabinet couldn't have that because it meant

the flow of U.S. dollars might stop. So, that was a primary source of his power, in those days.

Q: In other interviews with some of the ambassadors who served there over the years, we talked about whether this is tribalism or corruption.

SIRKER: It is both.

Q: From your perspective, it's all part of the culture that they're coming from, where power is equated to the flow of money?

SIRKER: That's right. Power, money, and tribe. Those were ruling factors in Afghanistan.

Q: There were elections for president during that period. At first, Karzai was interim president, but then there were elections for the first constitutional president. Do you remember anything about the elections?

SIRKER: Our involvement was limited. We moved the president here and there to shore up support prior to the elections. The way it worked there was that the tribes would vote for whomever the tribal leader or tribal elders told them to. It was a matter of the president visiting the right people and winning their support, which often had to do with U.S. dollars. In truth, I wasn't in those meetings. I understood what was going on and where we were going and who we were going to meet, but that was the extent of the detail I could give you.

Q: Is there anything else about that period that you think is important to mention?

SIRKER: There is one small anecdote that I think sheds light on the situation in Afghanistan. The intention of DS was to provide one year of protection for the President. Meanwhile, we would create a presidential protective detail consisting of Afghans. That experience—you can extrapolate out into the entire war effort—because the one year turned into nine years before we could accomplish it. The young men that were provided for the protective detail were all provided by the warlords and their loyalty was not to the president, but to the warlords and their clans, their tribes. That was a problem. In the United States, whether it's a protective detail from Diplomatic Security or the Secret Service, or something else, the loyalty is to the country. They didn't recognize country. They recognized tribes and tribal lands.

Then there was the problem of “*who are they?*” Who are these people we are vetting? If you're protecting the U.S. president and you're in the Secret Service, there is vetting and there are polygraphs and background checks to ensure they are trustworthy when guarding national leaders. The Afghans had no IDs, no birth certificates. We would interview them. “When were you born?” “In the summer.” “Where are your parents?” “They died in the war.” “Where are you from?” “The south.” That was about as specific as it got. We had no real way to vet them and no idea if they were trustworthy.

Q: And it was true.

SIRKER: Yes, it was all true. Where were their loyalties? The tribal leader and the tribe, and the one who nominated them. I began to understand back then, in 2002, how this war effort was going to go. Because our intent in the broader war effort was to train the Afghans up to have their own forces, military and security forces, and deal with things on their own. But based upon our experience with the Karzai protection detail, I knew it wasn't going to be easy or quick. Ultimately, it took 20 years.

Working in Afghanistan on Security for Field Operations

Q: Then you left and when did you come back to Afghanistan?

SIRKER: My next tour in Afghanistan was 2011. I arrived in October of 2011, but I ended up doing two tours. I did two back-to-back one-year tours. I was promoted and given a new position the first year, so I stayed for a second year.

I was initially the division chief for regional operations the first year. I was the Deputy RSO for Regional Operations, the second year. I was responsible for twenty-one DS agents and about 500 other security personnel assigned in teams across Afghanistan who in turn protected hundreds of chief of mission personnel [personnel under the Ambassador's authority] assigned to ninety-nine locations in the field.

Q: Can you talk a little about these field operations that U.S. civilians were undertaking all over the country?

SIRKER: The civilians, primarily DOS and USAID personnel, were more or less provincial reconstruction teams. At that time, there were huge U.S. and allied operations in Afghanistan. There were over six-hundred coalition military bases with chief of mission personnel embedded in ninety- nine locations including coalition military bases and enduring presence posts.

Q: Fighting the Taliban?

SIRKER: Fighting the Taliban and non-Taliban insurgencies, but mostly the Taliban.

Q: This was the end of the surge?

SIRKER: That is correct.

Q: The end of the military surge. There was also a diplomatic surge.

SIRKER: There was a military and diplomatic surge. This was the end of the surge. While I was there, we managed the course reversal, because the administration came in and reversed course from what the previous one had been doing, which is how it works with our government. We went from a massive surge to a drawdown, which was referred

to as “the Transition.” We were going to transition away from coalition military lead to diplomatic lead.

My second year, I was one of the key planners for the Transition because security was going to fall to us—to DS—after the military departed. During my first year overseeing regional operations, there were over one hundred thousand coalition troops, at over six hundred bases. There were plans for five regional enduring presence posts, two of which were designated to be consulates. The rest were military bases outside of Kabul. My responsibilities extended to chief of mission personnel in the field outside of Kabul. There were others who dealt with the stuff happening in Kabul. My team, the Regional Operations Division, was focused outward.

Q: That's a major responsibility.

SIRKER: It was huge. Two officers died in the field in each of my two years there. One USAID officer and one from the State Department. However, both of them were embedded with the military and died while under military protection. The Congress and others tended to treat deaths under military protection very differently. If someone died under DS protection, you might have the Secretary of State being interviewed and asked, “why did this happen?” But under military protection you hardly heard a peep. Things happen. I personally attribute that to the constituency that the military has with the American public, whereas not one of them can tell you what the Department of State does or what an embassy or consulate is.

Because of that, there were two different standards for protection. I will say—and I still believe this—the Diplomatic Security Service had the gold standard in the field because we had to. We couldn't afford to lose anybody. The military on the other hand lost troops all the time and on occasion one of ours under their protection, but nothing ever came of it.

Q: What made the difference?

SIRKER: What made the difference is that our people, when I say our people, State Department and USAID had to be protected at a higher level than the military would have otherwise protected them. What I mean by that is: both officers who died, died during walking moves with the military. I wrote a policy that was then reviewed and vetted by the Emergency Action Committee and approved by the Ambassador, Ambassador Crocker, I believe. The policy said, if the military wants to take our personnel on walking moves, here is what has to be in place first. You have to close the road. You have to have escort vehicles. You have to put this in the front, that in the back, and all these protections in place, which they wouldn't do normally. So, we said, we can't tell you what to do. We can only tell you this. Our people will only be going with you if you're doing these things. And those things were the steps we would automatically take to protect our people because of the different standard DOS was held to with regards to loss of personnel. There was simply no tolerance for it from the highest levels of government.

Q: This was in response to the two deaths?

SIRKER: The walking move part was in response to the two deaths, but that was just an example of the difference in standards. Our job was making sure that, no matter what, our people were being protected at the level that was appropriate for State Department personnel, which is very different than the military standard. The military has acceptable loss. There is no such thing as acceptable loss in the State Department.

Q: We saw that a year later when Benghazi happened.

SIRKER: Exactly. That's exactly right. It just goes to show you. What I point out to people—this is on a tangent, is that two days after Benghazi—a joint U.S.-British military base in Helmand Province in Afghanistan was overrun. A wing commander was killed, and several aircraft were destroyed. No Washington-led investigations or hearings ever happened. That was the difference. With DOD something like that could happen with nobody saying a word or batting an eye. But with us, well you saw what happened with Benghazi. There was no room for error. That was the pressure of our work in Afghanistan—and also in Iraq—we had a very high standard to maintain which in turn made it more difficult for DOS and USAID personnel to engage across the country.

As I said, I had a team of agents who assisted me with this. The way we did that was that the ninety-nine locations in the field were divided into regions. I would have pairs of agents in most of the regions assigned to cover any of the bases housing chief of mission personnel in their region. Their job was to visit those bases routinely and periodically check on the protection and security of the bases, give them briefings, give them training, give them education, speak with the military commands and so on. My teams were also the approvers, the local approvers for any off-base movements that included U.S. direct hired personnel under the State umbrella. If USAID or DOS officers wanted to go on a movement with the military, they had to submit a request to my team of agents in their region. The agents would vet the requests ensuring that appropriate security was in place. They could push it up to me if they didn't support the movement, but I tried to give them a lot of latitude.

That is how we managed all of that. There were something like a thousand movements a month at that time. It was a lot. They were moving all over the country. It was a lot to manage and maintain.

Q: By and large, were the State Department folks and the USAID folks appreciative and understanding? Did it work well?

SIRKER: Yes. By and large, yes, but always a mixed bag. We had some coming back disgruntled. It was typically people who were not actually State Department or USAID employees. But as you know, in an embassy or a consulate you have a whole host of people from Treasury, from Justice, and from across the government. There were people who believed they didn't need all of the protection, so there would be complaints. But at

the end of the day, Washington leadership was interested in keeping the people alive, so those complaints fell on deaf ears.

Due to the nature of my position there, especially from 2012 to 2013, I was able to travel. I went to visit all of my agents in the field. I went to the various regions. I visited the regional presence posts. I was able to really see the country, whereas most people in Kabul never left the embassy compound. That gave me a lot of insight into how the country worked.

Also, back in 2002 and 2003, there were no real restrictions on travel. I got in a car with another agent, and we drove to Jalalabad. We didn't have emergency kits or communications gear, or anything. We drove all over the country. I was able to see the country in a way that I'd say 99.9% of the people who served there could not.

Q: 2002-2003, the Taliban was still underground. They went back in force in 2006.

SIRKER: That is correct. Their absence in those early years made travel more palatable. Myself and three other agents in two vehicles—we were divided in two per vehicle—drove from the Embassy in Kabul to Jalalabad, in 2002. This was during my first tour while helping to reestablish the old embassy. Two of the agents were DEA guys assigned in the counternarcotics program. They wanted to meet with a source in Jalalabad, so we went with them in two vehicles. We spent the night with a Special Forces team in Jalalabad. The SF guys asked us, "How did you get here?" We said, "We just took the main road to Jalalabad." They said, "You did? We got hit there yesterday. We've been hit on that twice this week." It just seemed scenic to us.

We were naïve then. We were naïve about the threats as well because they weren't as obvious. Jumping to 2011 to 2013, there was a lot of active combat going on including, like I said, we lost a couple of officers.

Q: When you moved up a level, the work was pretty much the same with more responsibility?

SIRKER: That's right. It was the same, but in the second year I was in charge of the entire operation. I went from the deputy to the senior position overseeing regional operations.

Q: Did people working in the field—these provincial reconstruction teams and other kinds of off-site teams—did people feel that they were being effective? That it was an effective strategy to have the assistance spread around the country?

SIRKER: That's a good question and I have an anecdote that will answer that, and it's from Ambassador Crocker.

Ambassador Crocker called a meeting at one point with the more than thirty different entities that made up the embassy. It was a full conference room with representatives from all the offices having regional operations. And he told a story. I forget the province,

but he told the story about what was happening in a province, and he was showing a map. He said, "Up here, DOD went in and built a well. This other agency went in and built a school. USAID also built a well not too far from the one DOD put in. The locals never used any of it. They didn't ask for a well or a school. The school was converted to a flower shop or something, some kind of a shop. The Taliban went in and asked, what is it you need? They said, we don't have an adjudicator for the law here. So, the Taliban would go in every couple of weeks and hold court, and the people showed up. So, who won them over? Who gave them what they needed? The Taliban."

Ambassador Crocker told that story. That was the gist of it, anyway. He said, "All of you stop." He used the term "COIN" a lot, referring to counter insurgency. He said, "This is a counter insurgency operation. What you all are doing is deciding what you would want if you were Afghans and going out and spending millions and millions, building it. What none of you were doing is the simple thing the Taliban is doing, is asking the locals what they want or need, and you're not coordinating with each other. So, you're duplicating efforts." He said, "That stops now. This is a counter insurgency. Nothing will be built or created, or established or changed unless we decide here in this room, collectively and have deconflicted. And you will approach the Afghan people and discuss what it is that they need, not what you think they need. You decided upon an electricity project in a place that in their entire 2000-year history has never had it. They're not looking for electricity because they don't know that they need it. So, stop."

I learned a lot from Ambassador Crocker, including how to manage a COIN operation. He was the first one I saw who got it and was actually saying, here's the effort. This is how we're going to work together to achieve the goals. Here are the goals. Before that, it really didn't exist. And frankly, there was never any clear guidance, except monetary guidance, coming from Washington in any of my tours. The only thing we ever heard from Washington was how much we could spend. A constant behind-the-closed-doors complaint of the Ambassador's was that there was no guidance on what they were supposed to be accomplishing in Afghanistan, except for Ambassador Crocker, who said, this is what we're going to accomplish in Afghanistan.

Q: I think he had already been in Iraq.

SIRKER: Yes. I worked with him in Iraq as well. I was his RSO in Basrah when he was the ambassador in Iraq and we both went to Afghanistan.

Q: You were there with another ambassador, too.

SIRKER: Yes. James Cunningham who had been his Deputy. That was the other odd thing there. There were five ambassadors.

Q: They were trying to match the military.

SIRKER: Right. And the country director for the USAID mission, was ambassador ranked.

Q: Was it a quiet time during the transition or was there warfare?

SIRKER: It was more dangerous because as the military footprint was shrinking due to the transition, the insurgency was reacquiring strength and coming back into the country in force. Where the military left the void, they filled it, getting increasingly dangerous.

There's something notable I should say about 2013. We began to see the effects of the transition. I raised it with my boss, the RSO, who took it to Ambassador Cunningham. What I was seeing, being the one focused on the field, was that as the military footprint was diminishing, the security at the bases was deteriorating. They started pulling troops off the walls and dismantling the security. I pointed out that, at a certain point, the bases wouldn't meet the security standard for our chief of mission personnel to continue to live there, so we would have to start pulling them back.

I pointed out a bigger problem. At that time, the Embassy's management office ran an air wing that travelled the country and deposited our people around the country. I said, "All of the aviation we have requires secure refueling and secure airfields that the military was in the process of abandoning. Additionally, the military bases that were closing down housed our secure motorcades. This begged the question, where were we going to park our cars and motorcades as these bases went away? Where were our people going to live?"

I said, "even if you had a place to live, our helicopters, for instance, could only get so far without a refueling point that the military was in the process of dismantling. Even if the helicopters only went as far as their fuel could take them and they set down, there wouldn't be any cars there waiting for them." I said, "what we're doing is we're building an island in Kabul through this transition. We're going to become an island in Kabul unless we establish enduring presence posts. Even if we established those posts, we would have to figure out how we were going to get people to them because we would have fixed winged aircraft but no secure landing fields, motorcades, support personnel etc. The helicopters can't go far, and we don't have refueling points for them. Basically, the necessary infrastructure to make this sustainable was departing with the military.

For all of 2013, that was the focus of my job other than securing the people—I represented the security team in interagency meetings trying to figure out how we were going to work together to establish a post-military enduring presence in the field. And every day it looked increasingly as though it just couldn't happen, and it didn't.

Ambassador Crocker's vision was to have enduring regional presence posts. I think it made sense—to engage with the major tribes, so you have a post in each of the major tribal areas.

The way Afghanistan governed itself before we got there was through the Jirgas or Loya Jirgas. The tribal elders come together periodically under a big tent. They each ran their region, and they made decisions sort of like our Congress. That was the form of

government that most Afghanistan recognized. They never really recognized the Marshall Plan we instituted or implemented with the Kabul-based centralized federal government made in our image. It brought money, but otherwise they didn't recognize it outside of Kabul in my opinion.

Ambassador Crocker's idea was that we need to have that direct presence with each of the tribes. One hundred percent, I agreed with that. As a matter of fact, we could have avoided everything we did in Afghanistan, simply by embedding civ-mil teams with the major tribes from the outset, whispering in their ears and giving them money. We could have accomplished the same thing without spending two trillion dollars and sending hundreds of thousands of troops. In hindsight, that's what I believe we should have done. Just embed with the tribes and support their Jirgas.

I read a thesis from a Special Forces officer who served there who said much the same thing. But I don't think our government to this day has learned that lesson.

Q: We were doing development rather than COIN, and then eventually we centered on the goal of transforming Afghanistan into a modern nation state.

SIRKER: Right. It was impossible. All of that was a waste. My boss, my RSO when I was there, his favorite mantra in the big meetings was, "I want you all to know this is all going away." People would poo-poo him and say "no". He would say "You don't understand. This is not sustainable. They don't want it. It all collapses."

Q: What was his name?

SIRKER: Fred Ketchum. He was prophetic in that. He was Ambassador Crocker's hand pick to be the RSO. He had worked for Crocker in Iraq as a deputy.

I think it was important that we began to see clearly that as the military coalition shrank the enduring presence posts concept wasn't going to work and we were going to become an island in Kabul with limited impact.

Q: Was there a transition from Karzai to Ghani when you were there or was that after?

SIRKER: There was a transition to Ghani around that time. I don't recall exactly when that was or if I was still there.

Preparation in Case of Complete U.S. Military Withdrawal

Q: What brought you back in 2019?

SIRKER: In 2018, I was in Iraq going through a divorce and it was a very expensive divorce. I asked if I could stay out because we earn more money in those locations, not that I wanted any more of the war zones. By the way, I also had two Iraq tours under my belt besides the Afghan tours. DS didn't have a position for me in Iraq in 2019, but the

DAS had a vacancy he needed filled in Afghanistan. So, I was allowed to remain out as long as I agreed to shift over to Afghanistan. So, I did. That was 2019 to 2020.

Q: John Bass was the ambassador?

SIRKER: That's correct, John Bass was the Ambassador when I arrived. I want to say he left at the end of 2019. We didn't have much of an overlap. I arrived in August of 2019 and was there until July 2020.

Q: Now we're in the Trump Administration.

SIRKER: Yes.

Q: Have they already negotiated the changed relationship?

SIRKER: That was going on in the background. It hadn't been completed yet. In January of 2020, I was the senior deputy for RSO for the mission making me the number two for RSO. I ran the day-to-day operations. RSO had over 2,000 security personnel working and living at the Embassy.

Q: Were there a lot less State and AID and other people out in the field?

SIRKER: We were mostly in Kabul. Primarily, the footprint was in Kabul as predicted.

When I first arrived in Kabul back in 2002, the streets were empty. You'd see maybe one or two cars drive by in an hour. I remember the western part of the capital being completely destroyed. I had never seen anything like it.

Jump forward to 2020, there were traffic jams. That's good. That's what you want. That's progress. There was commerce and there was nightlife. I went out at night to see my surveillance detection team to meet with them because their locations, their offices, were secret. So, we would go out and we would see people in the streets, and nightlife, and having tea, and there would be music. It was working. It took 20 years, and it was not necessarily the right way to do it, but at least in Kabul things were okay. There was also stability in the field.

Q: The Afghan military had become a unified military.

SIRKER: They had, as well as elements of their police. Their best special operations forces were actually police units that for all intents and purposes were military. They looked like military. They were triple units. There was 222, 333, and 777. Triple 2 was the one assigned to Kabul, and we supported them through anti-terrorism assistance programs. We provided weapons, training, and the resources they needed.

There was still an insurgency, but the situation was stable. It was the most stable I had seen it, and things were going well. At that point, we hadn't lost a U.S. service member in

two years because we weren't doing the fighting. The Afghans were. But they needed our support. The U.S. provided intelligence, surveillance, reconnaissance, and airlift. So, if they needed to get to the fight, we flew them there.

Q: Who was the "we"? The U.S. military or contractors?

SIRKER: The U.S. military was directly providing the intelligence, surveillance, reconnaissance platforms and doing aviation support for the Afghans. They weren't doing the actual fighting, except on occasion if the Air Force dropped some bombs, but we weren't doing much of that either. Our military was locating the enemy and transporting the Afghans to the fight.

Q: You also airlifted food?

SIRKER: Resolute Support provided logistics and other support but the Afghans were doing the fight, which is contrary to popular belief. Americans have somehow come to the conclusion that the Afghans weren't fighting. That's not true. They were fighting their own fight.

You asked me about the Trump Administration's dealings with the Taliban.

Q: Yes, the negotiations.

SIRKER: That was going on behind the scenes. In January 2020, I found out the U.S. military was planning a zero option. What does it look like? How do we get to zero? At the Embassy we had no idea those plans were in the works. I raised that with the Embassy leadership and informed DS through my desk officer in Washington. He in turn raised it with the Assistant Secretary for DS, who contacted the Pentagon and asked, "Is this true? DS also reached out to CENTCOM. They confirmed that the military had begun planning for a complete drawdown at least as an option, unbeknownst to us. That would have a major impact on us.

Unfortunately, I witnessed that sort of lack of coordination throughout my career. In Washington they would talk about the "whole of government" approach to addressing issues in the field, but in my experience that rarely happened. We did our best to corral the cats in the field and get them to work together.

Anyway, I raised the alarm in January when I learned of the military's drawdown to zero planning. I wrote an email and listed the defensive capabilities we stood to lose at the Embassy if the military departed and the Embassy remained, as occurred in Iraq under the Obama Administration. I let them know that we needed to either mitigate or duplicate those capabilities that the military would take with them. For instance, our major ability to see around Kabul was a camera hanging from a blimp that could see for many kilometers in any direction. It was run by contractors, but the military owned it and paid for it. And I was pointing out, if that goes away we lose our primary ISR [Intelligence, Surveillance, and Reconnaissance] resource.

In the same email to my desk officer, at the bottom, I wrote a paragraph entitled, "Sean's Thoughts." I wrote that if the military draws to zero, and I'm the Taliban, I'd march on Kabul. I'd been there long enough to understand that's how it works. I said, "I think that this is a policy decision that our leadership needs to make." And I put this in writing, I summarized it.

"They need to either:

- A. Draw down the embassy before the military leaves, because you can't do it at the same time, or:
- B. Decide that we're staying like we did in Iraq. We're still there."

I said, "If we're staying, then we need to duplicate these military capabilities, but if we're leaving, that is a six-month to twelve-month operation that we need to accomplish in advance of the military departing."

I was the only one in Diplomatic Security who had done that kind of evacuation up to that point. I evacuated Consulate General Basrah, Iraq, in 2018. We had never before evacuated a special incentive post (SIP), which is a self-contained city. We had our own fire department, our own hospital—all this stuff you have to take with you. Most embassies and consulates around the world consist of a building or two that's dependent on the host government for support. If you evacuate a normal post like that you destroy some communication equipment, you destroy some documents, and you walk out of the building. It usually takes a day or two. An SIP is very different.

I told them, "We'll need six months to a year to do this right, to evacuate an SIP properly. SIPs are self-contained cities with hundreds of tons of sensitive or expensive logistical equipment across hundreds of acres. You need time to decommission it properly. Consequently, you need a policy decision to initiate that process well in advance to allow yourself the months that you would need to do it right.

So, I went to the management counselor. I explained not only that situation, but what I had learned while evacuating Basrah. I had drafted a 29-page classified after-action on our horrible experience evacuating Consulate Basrah, and the lessons learned from it. I briefed those lessons learned to Embassy Baghdad in Iraq. They suddenly realized they weren't ready for an Embassy evacuation. In truth the SIP facilities weren't built to be evacuated. So, when I told them this is what I learned in Basrah, they were like, oh my gosh, we are so unprepared. So, they began preparing.

In Afghanistan, I did the same thing. I told the management counselor, I showed him my presentation, an unclassified version, and I said, "This is what we have to do to prepare for evacuation and by the way, we now know that the military is planning for a drawdown to zero. It will take months. And by the way, I just found out that the military is planning a zero option." He was stunned, but ready to take action. So, we formed a multi-disciplinary planning team that met every week, and we started pulling in the

military, too. Our focus was to get ready for the potential of a drawdown of the Embassy to zero.

A self-contained city like that was large, even after the 40 percent staff reduction we went through in 2019. When I was there in 2020, we had three thousand people living on the compound. We had our own hospital, our own fire department, our own dining facilities, swimming pools, all this stuff, there was tremendous security infrastructure, radar systems, defensive systems, all manner of capabilities that normal facilities don't have. DS even considers our armored cars sensitive, and we had hundreds of those that would need to be transported or properly destroyed.

When we were evacuating Basrah, we took thirty-six perfectly good armored cars, burned them and buried them. In Afghanistan I pointed out that we didn't even have the mechanisms to burn 400 armored cars at Embassy Kabul, much less any place to bury them. We had no place to transport them to either. That was just an example of the massive undertaking that would be required to properly decommission the Embassy for evacuation. We weren't ready.

So, we started planning. I drafted a three-phased plan. The plan followed what I saw as the three steps one would take when packing out to prepare for a permanent change of station. The first thing you have to do is take stock of what you have. Then determine the disposition of everything you have inventoried, i.e. leave it, destroy it, donate it, or ship it. Finally, execute the disposition plans. We didn't even know what we had on the massive Kabul compound. We had 40-foot shipping containers sitting around and nobody knew what was in them. I said to the planning team, "the first thing we have to do is inventory the entire compound and build a master list of significant holdings. Once the entire facility and sister facilities were inventoried then you have to make a disposition plan. In other words, what will we do with everything we inventoried? Some things will be left behind, some things will be destroyed, some may be donated, and the remainder will be shipped. The stuff that's getting shipped, where is it getting shipped to? Does the receiving party have the ability to receive it and the capacity to store it? Have they agreed to receive it?" You can see that there is a lot of planning involved in that.

I learned all that in Basrah. When I arrived in Basrah, our emergency action plan said, just take everything to Kuwait if you have to leave. So, when we were ordered to evacuate (shortly after my arrival), I contacted Kuwait to confirm that they would receive everything and they said "we can't take anything. They won't allow it across the border." That was a hard lesson to learn. The emergency plans had not been validated. There is a massive logistical problem associated with decommissioning an SIP. In Basrah, I looked around when we got the order to evacuate. We had, I think, more than four hundred and sixty 40-foot shipping containers filled with supplies that had accumulated over the years and had not been inventoried. The first thing we had to do was open every one of them, pull everything out, and inventory it. That had to be done before determining the disposition of the contents and determining if we would destroy it, take it, donate it, or leave it behind.

The problem was an order of magnitude larger at Embassy Kabul, which was about five times larger than Basrah. I said, "if we're going to do this it's going to take many months. We can cut that down by doing the planning, the inventorying, and the disposition planning in advance of any evacuation order. Establish the inventory then determine the disposition." That is the hard part. If you have that done, and receive an evacuation order, then you simply execute the plans; pack things up, destroy them, ship them etc. That can still take weeks or months in a place as large as Embassy Kabul. We started that planning and preparation in 2020, the first half of 2020.

Q: As context, in February 2020, the U.S. reached an agreement with the Taliban that the U.S. would withdraw all remaining troops within 14 months, i.e., by May of 2021, although it was condition based.

SIRKER: But if I'm not mistaken, President Trump had initially said we would bring our troops home by Christmas of 2020. But under pressure from his generals and advisors, had, correctly I think, gone back and said, "Okay, we'll go down to only 2,500." In any event, was the Biden Administration bound by informal talks between the Taliban and the Trump Administration? I don't see how that would be the case. I also do not believe that there was ever a finalized agreement.

When I had raised that point, some people have asked me, "what were we going to do, have people there indefinitely?" I usually point out to them that we've had no less than 38,000 troops on the North Korean border since 1953. Yes, we could have kept 2,500 troops in Afghanistan. I think the commander of Resolute Support saw that as a viable option, but he should speak to that, not me.

Q: When did you leave?

SIRKER: I departed in July of 2020.

Q: July 2020, so Covid had just broken out.

SIRKER: Covid hit the compound in early 2020 and caused a twist of fate. I think I mentioned that military drawdown planning had gained senior level attention in DS with the Assistant Secretary for DS contacting the Pentagon about it. Well, after COVID overtook the world, I think the entire drawdown conversation was dropped and forgotten.

They also forgot about planning for an Embassy evacuation. Then a new Administration came in and a new DS Assistant Secretary and I don't think that the ongoing move towards military drawdown and evacuation in Afghanistan was passed on to the new leadership. It set the stage for the Department, DS, and Embassy Kabul to be blindsided and caught unprepared when the evacuation order was issued by the President.

Q: There's Covid and there's the change of administration.

SIRKER: Yes, the change of administration. So, all of that knowledge is lost, which is a constant problem with our system—the turnovers. One year in the war zone, and you get a new embassy team. Then the entire administration rolls over and the knowledge and ongoing issues are not always transmitted to the incoming team so there is the potential to lose sight of important future events.

Q: But while you were there—and this was already 2020—and once you rang the alarm, they did start the planning process.

SIRKER: Yes. There was a planning team at Embassy Kabul, but even that team was disrupted by COVID. We couldn't meet to continue planning because of COVID rules.

The Evacuation in 2021

SIRKER: My next assignment, after Afghanistan, was to be the Director of the Foreign Affairs Security Training Center. That was my last assignment before retiring.

I can tell you, I think it was the Deputy Assistant Secretary for South Central Asia who came through my training facility. The evacuation had occurred by then, We met and he said, "You know what, Sean, as messy as this was, the planning that you guys did beforehand made a difference." Only so much of a difference though because they didn't leave in the months it was going to take, they left in days.

As a matter of fact, one of my deputies from the Foreign Affairs Security Training Center had transferred to Afghanistan in 2021 and he was there for the evacuation. He came back and we sat down and talked, and he said it was so fast that a military officer came to them and said, "What are you guys doing?" The officer was talking to the embassy leadership. I said, "What do you mean?" He said, "The planes are waiting." I said, "What planes?" "They have to go now." They literally had like an hour to pack up and get to the airport.

Q: One of the triggers, the final triggers, was President Ghani just leaving the country, right?

SIRKER: As I recall, in Ukraine, President Zelinski was offered an out, a ride as he put it. He said, "I don't need a ride. I need ammunition." I think if Ghani had said that it might have been a different story, a different outcome. I don't know.

I do think you are right. That was the final trigger. Once he left, the Afghan military was saying, what are we fighting for? Who are we fighting for? We have no leadership. We don't have supplies. The U.S. military is gone. We don't have airlift or ISR. They were collapsing. I do want to point out that some Afghan units did fight and fought to the end, running out of ammunition and supplies.

For the Embassy, as I discussed earlier, a policy decision should have been made ahead of time regarding whether we were remaining post-military or departing. There was a clear

choice there but there was no clear policy guidance. Additionally, I don't think there was a sense on the ground that the Taliban would attack the Embassy if we had remained. As I recall, the Taliban offered to remain outside of Kabul to give us time to do what we needed to do. We didn't take them up on it. I don't know who decided not to take them up on that, but that was the decision. Afterwards the Taliban were asking us to return. They seemed to be okay with the Embassy remaining but not the U.S. military.

I think the real problem was that from the White House, the order was given to the military. What we had been planning for was a State Department-led, military assisted evacuation. Those were the plans we had been building. However, the military came in and weren't aware of our plans or requirements. They came and they said, get on the planes, let's go. So now all the high value and sensitive infrastructure is left behind and it's a mess.

Q: You had an incredible career. It sounds like you were the right man at the right time.

SIRKER: Honestly, I wish I had been there during the evacuation of Afghanistan. At least in some small way I was able to help them by initiating planning for it in 2020. Although, honestly, they didn't have time to implement those plans.

Q: You don't think anything had been taken out during the year?

SIRKER: Again, I wasn't there. I think they had drawn down a little bit, but I imagine it was mostly people rather than equipment. When they finally did leave, they left, on very short notice, according to a DS colleague who spoke with me about it later. They left everything.

[Editorial Note: Other interviewees for this project confirmed that in fact work was undertaken at the embassy during 2020-2021 to withdraw equipment and take other steps in the plan Sean had developed. The process was fraught with problems and complicated by the lack of a definitive decision to shut-down the Embassy until mid-August. But the work likely resulted in less equipment and sensitive paperwork being left in place in August 2021 than would have been the case otherwise.]

Q: Then over those years, you must have worked with a lot of Afghan people, interpreters, of all types. Did you start getting a lot of calls for help, pleas for help, when the evacuation happened?

SIRKER: No. They wouldn't have had my contact information in the U.S. at that point. When I was in Afghanistan, 2011 to 2013, somewhere in there, I met with, I think he was the head of presidential protection who had been working as the deputy of one of the ministries or something. I didn't remember him when I went to meet with him to discuss security. And he said, "Sean, hello, my friend." As it turns out, he had been one of the young Afghan men that I was coaching to be on the presidential protection detail in 2002-2003.

During that training, I realized that it was not about skills training. It was about teaching them, the Afghans, about nationalism and country. I was telling them stories of America and the creation of our nation. I was trying to teach them about nation and responsibilities, and patriotism. They didn't have any of that. I was saying this is your president, your government, this is your country but all they understood was tribe. I didn't believe that they would be ready to begin dignitary protection training until they understood the motivation and importance of their work. So the deputy minister I was meeting with turned out to be one of the men I had attempted to coach in that manner. He apparently went up the ranks and became a senior member of the government. So, I guess there were a few people in the government who would have known me, but not to the point of calling me to ask me for help during the evacuation. Nobody had my number in the States.

I did have a nexus to Afghan evacuees. I mentioned that my last assignment was as the Director of the Foreign Affairs Security Training Center or FASTC. FASTC is a 1,350-acre state-of-the-art training center in Blackstone, Virginia within a 40,000-acre military base. I think the largest portion of the evacuees, about ten thousand of them, were brought to the base and temporarily housed next to FASTC. There were a couple of people there that I knew including the former senior Foreign Service National Investigator for the RSO's office at the Embassy.

Q: How long were they there?

SIRKER: They were there for a few months, but some left earlier. They were free to depart if they had somewhere to go.

Final Thoughts

Q: One thing that always struck me was that with our Vietnam background, that there would have been a lot of planning to avoid the hanging from the helicopters, that people would have remembered that and not wanted to see it again.

SIRKER: In Kabul, people were hanging from cargo planes, literally. Hanging from them. There were people on the landing gear of one of the C-17s, when it took off, who were falling from the sky to their death. Unfortunately, I have seen videos of it. One of those early flights had to make an emergency landing because the body of an Afghan was stuck in their landing gear and they couldn't close the landing gear doors.

Q: One of the things you're saying is that once we knew the military was going to be departing, Washington should have assumed that the embassy had to leave and planned accordingly?

SIRKER: What I'm saying is there should have been a policy decision well ahead of time with regards to the Embassy and other entities in-country. Are you leaving or are you staying? And if you're leaving, there needs to be recognition that it would have been a six to twelve-month operation to decommission the Embassy. Six months doing it in haste.

Conversely, if you leave a massive facility like in a rush, in a couple of days or a couple of hours, you are not getting anything out or doing a proper decommissioning. It's a big problem. Even more troublesome, the State Department, the consular officers, didn't have the opportunity to get as many American citizens and other civilians out as they might have if there had been sufficient time.

As a matter of fact, I was told that the RSO's Afghan Guard Force got left behind. I don't know what happened with them, but they were likely killed. Those guys worked for us and they were going to get killed! That is what happens when you don't allow the experts to plan and do things deliberately.

Q: Sounds like a lot got lost in the change of administrations.

SIRKER: What's worse is I don't think any lessons have been learned. I could see us doing exactly the same thing again with people hanging from the airplanes because we haven't learned anything. We haven't codified any of those lessons.

Q: With all those years in Diplomatic Security, from the beginning to the end, you were given a lot of responsibility. Did you feel like the State Department supported you?

SIRKER: Absolutely. It was a tremendous responsibility. There wasn't a lack of responsibility. If anything, the intolerance for risk in State Department is a problem. But people blamed DS for that. It's not DS's fault or really the Department's fault. If you look at what happened after Benghazi. When State Department personnel die in the field you end up with the Secretary of State getting grilled by Congress. If someone in the military is killed, which happened two days after Benghazi, the Secretary of Defense is not getting grilled. Congress looks the other way.

There's a dynamic with the State Department that is largely due, in my opinion, to not having a public constituency. The American public won't allow Congress to go after the military when they make mistakes, and the Congress is typically reluctant to even admit when the military makes mistakes, but State is fair game. There is no public constituency. Also, traditionally the Office of the Secretary of State has been seen as a political post. The incumbent was frequently seen as a candidate for the presidency. When there are issues involving State like Benghazi for instance, political rivals may perceive that as an opportunity to attack the Secretary of State and possibly derail a future presidential run. I haven't seen the same dynamic with the Secretary of Defense or the other Secretaries. This dynamic combined with a lack of a public constituency creates an atmosphere in which State needs to be risk averse. In turn, DS is required to have this impossible gold standard for protection and security of our diplomats. As a consequence, it is often made clear that DS cannot lose anyone any day at any time. That policy comes down from the top.

Final Posting at the DS Training Center

Q: After you left Afghanistan and you went to the Training Center, did you also tell me that you had started an oral history program there for DS?

SIRKER: That is correct. I learned as a young Marine the importance of knowing your history. The Marine Corps was really good about teaching you your history and your lineage. You had to learn it, study it, pass tests on it in boot camp, because this is your identity. They'd say, "this is the lineage you're attempting to join and here is what we've done in the past, and here are the expectations for how you will carry that out in the future." That was really important to defining what it is you are doing, what it meant to be a Marine. I learned that lesson well. That's why you never hear people say they're ex-Marines. They're former Marines. They're still a part of the lineage.

One of my criticisms of Diplomatic Security is that it had a great story, but didn't tell it. It had a lineage, but it wasn't taught to anyone. I learned most of it from an amateur historian DS agent early in my career who had done some research himself. Eventually they did come out with a written history of Diplomatic Security.

The Foreign Affairs Security Training Center was established to be a huge state-of-the-art 1,400-acre hard skills training facility. I said, we need to be much more than that. We need to be a professional development facility. I said, we're going to build online coursework. We're going to talk about leadership. I spoke with FSI about that. I basically said, "you guys teach general leadership, we'll teach tactical leadership." We created a multimedia center at FASTC because you need that to build online content, classes, and all that stuff. None of that was part of the original plan for FASTC.

I went to my newly formed multimedia team and said, "I want you to build our (DS) history but I want it in virtual format. I want it in a format to which the current generations can relate. I want a virtual museum that you can walk through." They built it and it was beautiful. It takes you decade by decade through the DS history. It starts in the 1910s because DS traces its roots to 1916—the first DS special agent in charge of the Secret Intelligence Bureau—all the way up to the present. I gave the team the resources to build it and they spent 7,000-man hours on it.

The result was phenomenal, just beautiful. It was just what I asked for. You go into this lobby, virtually. Eventually they are going to have an avatar that greets you. That part wasn't ready yet when I took the first tour. Then you go down a hallway, and you can skip from hallway to hallway. You can skip to a particular decade, or you can just walk through them chronologically. The museum is also virtual reality capable, VR capable, so you can put on a headset and actually be in the museum and interact with it directly.

Each decade has its own room. Each room has everything that was relevant about that decade, whether it was the beginnings of the Bureau of Secret Intelligence and biographical information about the first chief special agent, or which Secretary authorized this, or even the establishment of the Marine Security Guard program. There are interactive videos and interviews embedded with historical information.

We initially focused on the history of DS agents because I wanted that to be a mandatory part of basic agent training for new hires. Here is who you are going to join. Here's our history. Here's our lineage. Here are the expectations for you to carry it forward. Later we were going to add the extended histories of the Couriers, MSGs, security engineers and so on. It's important. What is America but our history?

Q: You left in 2023. What happened to the virtual museum?

SIRKER: Yes. Every few years DS has a global leadership conference in Washington, and there was one a few months before I retired. I went and did the reveal there. Because they didn't have the equipment for me to show the presentation on a stage, I described it and let them know that they would have the opportunity to sit at a computer terminal and go through it at DS headquarters the next day. You put your headsets on, you sit at a terminal, and you can go through it. We had a big turnout. We were able to do the reveal in that way.

The final product was still being built when I departed but it will never be finished because it is a historical repository that will add new significant events as they occur.

Q: Is it being used for training?

SIRKER: I don't know. I know that when I left, and one of my deputies took over my job, his plan was to continue the work, so I'm assuming so. When I left, the instructional designers in charge of building the curriculum for the DS agents in training were adding that into the required curriculum.

Q: And with this course work, were you also recommending changes in what DS does or this is mostly on the training side?

SIRKER: My theory was we could change the entire organization through training. That's why I thought FASTC should be more than a hard skills training facility. It needs to be an institute for professional development. The history project was just a small part of a bigger picture. What I envisioned and laid out to my team there, we were building a professional development training continuum.

DS has the longest initial training of any federal law enforcement agency. But it's all front loaded. You get all this great training at the beginning of your career and then not much of anything for the remainder of your career, except maybe a couple of in-service courses. The only exception is FSI's leadership courses that are mandatory when you're promoted. That's it. Nothing else.

Those initial DS courses teach basic skills every agent needs and indoctrinates them into the organization. But across a career, how does one become an effective mid-level or senior level manager, or supervisor, or leader? The training is not there. I saw that it was missing. It's very important. What FSI is doing is important with their leadership training, but it doesn't transmit directly to armed law enforcement leadership. A DS agent in

Afghanistan with an armed group of agents must lead in a way that's very different from a consular officer in London with their teams. It's not the same thing.

So my senior team and I began building a leadership curriculum and the instructional designers began building it from the bottom up. We planned to meet in the middle with a completed draft educational curriculum that spanned the career of an agent. It included advanced operational skills that were not previously offered. In Afghanistan and Iraq when I was senior agent, we would get attacked and I would lead our defenses from our embassy operation center. Well, there wasn't any training for that. There was no familiarization with operations centers or mock scenarios to build confidence in decision making. There was just that expectation that you would know how to do it.

FASTC has an operations center. I told the team to help me build training, mock operations center scenarios so that we could train mid-level and senior agents to lead defensive operations and emergency response in the future.

I called the career-long training we were building the Professional Development Training Continuum. A small part of that was starting our new agents out with their history, "Who are we? Who is it you're joining? What are the expectations around your career?" And then building from there, here's your mid-level mandatory manager/supervisor, here's your senior level leadership and operations training. Parallel to that I insisted that we also build mandatory annual continuing educational requirements. Laws change, rules change, especially in law enforcement, and there is all kinds of scrutiny these days. So, you need to know, "what are the rules, what are the changes?" That training should be on an annual basis. We were building that in parallel to the Professional Development Training Continuum.

I spoke with DS leaders before taking the job at FASTC. "I said I'll only take the job if you allow me to do this," and I laid it all out as I'm telling you. "I let the PDAS and DASes know that if FASTC was allowed to build this and we finished it, we'd see a different organization in a generation, one that has a sense of itself, its lineage, its history, and one that has been thoroughly professionalized."

Q: And they agreed?

SIRKER: They agreed. I did as much as I could do in three years but building all of that is a multi-year effort that continues.

Q: Congratulations on quite a set of accomplishments. Thank you.

End of Interview