

EPISODE 482

[00:00:00] RD: I was deployed to Athens, Greece as an intelligence officer. And there were a group of us that were running around that area doing some operations. And we were supporting RC-135 flights over Southern Comfort for Turkey, for the part of the Gulf War. And there's a group of us that were hanging out together. We would run around Athens. We would do a lot of things. At that time frame, the terrorist group 17 November was hot and heavy in the area. And they had conducted several assassinations during those years, particularly the year that I was there. And I had a friend of mine, his name is Ronald Stewart. He lived there in the area, while the rest of us lived in a secure facility at a hotel that the Air Force had taken over, but lived on his own. And we'd hang out together. We'd go out to drinking and doing all kinds of stuff in the city at night.

But a week after I left in the first week of March, I got notified that he was killed by 17 November. Come to find out, they were tracking all of us at that time period. And he was the softest target. So he was picked, unfortunately. He was the one that was killed and not the rest of us. But that kind of gave me a wakeup call. And I became obsessed with the study of terrorism after that. And I became obsessed with figuring out what happened. I eventually did find out what happened once I got in the agency. And it was true. A lot of us were being tracked, but particularly detail on that. But that kind of a watershed moment kind of woke me up.

The second one was when I was working undercover in Turkey. I was working with the Office of Special Investigations going after the local Turkish mafia for the sale of black hash, and black market goods from the local base there. And I was working undercover. And unfortunately, my cover was blown by a corrupt Turkish official. And they ended up in the back room of a village of a store with eight Turkish mafia guys armed to the teeth and pretty pissed off at me about who I was. And I figured I had to talk my way out of the situation. I couldn't find my way out. I eventually got out. And I got an exiled job out of the country, my wife and I by the skin of our teeth. But again, another watershed moment that said, "Okay, this is what I get to do, because, hey, this is what I'm good at." And the third thing was my accident that pushed me in that direction.

[00:02:29] AH: You were on the OSI?

[00:02:30] RD: I was on a JDAP team, a Joint Drug Task Force with them. So I was assigned to them, but I was military police, but I was assigned to them. I've worked a lot with those guys. We did a lot of work. But that's where I learned tradecraft was working with them. I learned how to do card pick up meetings. I learned how to do asset meetings. And I learned how to run my own operations. And again, that really inspired me.

And the biggest thing is being able to work without a gun, and being able to talk my way out of situation, which helped me later on in the agency when we're operating with another war zone and we were in a truck. It's about three o'clock in the morning. There were three of us and I was in the backseat. I had a translator and two other folks in the car. And we pulled out of this compound. And a guy pulls up, or stepped out in front of us with an AK-47. And I had to make a decision in a moment's notice, one of three things, run the guy over. But we were on a thinned-skin vehicle. It wasn't armed. I knew that, for getting work, he could shoot right through the car. Number two was I had a pretty good shot at the time. My only mistake, two shots on target when I qualified. But it was pitch black dark. I would have to make a shot at about 60 yards. I wasn't taking the rest. The third item was the way to trust my translator. I talk her way out of the situation, which is that I remember back to when I was with the OSI when I got stuck in that back room and made the choice to talk her way out of it. And we were able to do it. I trusted the translator. And he talked us out of the situation. And we got out of there.

[00:04:07] AH: So one of the things that I find quite interesting, and you've overcome all of these obstacles. But after your accident and the death of your father, there was another law that you went through, right? I'm speaking specifically to mental health. Could you just tell our listeners a little bit more about some of those struggles and challenges that you faced on that level?

[00:04:30] RD: I mean, when you get in a situation like I had and you had unemployment, the loss of your arm, the loss of my father. And then I had my son to take care of and my wife to take care of. I figured out how I was going to do that. I mean, that takes you into depression pretty fast. I remember we moved to Johnstown, Pennsylvania. And I've gotten a job, but I lost it pretty quickly because of the contract fell through. And I found ourselves unemployed up in

Johnstown, Pennsylvania. Just sitting in this little house with no money coming in, trying to figure out what we were going to do.

My wife really saved my life. I mean, she was the one that got me off the ground, made me go buy a computer and started putting in for jobs for me to get work to really pushed really hard, and really getting through that. And I was also on some medication for the pain in my arm, because it's also up in your day. That was really messing up my mind. And all that combined together was not good. But we eventually got work. And I eventually got where I was. But the other aspect to this is sometimes you can have one side of depression, where, "Okay, I'm going to do this. I'm going to overcome it." But then you go too far the other way. And I went too far the other way trying to prove myself. People always told me, "No, you can't do this, because you're disabled." And I fought back. And I deployed, and it was gone more than I was home, which I missed my family growing up. Caused depression at home, because I was trying so hard to push myself. And I think, finally, decided to retire to find that counterbalance where I'm right where I need to be. But I made a lot of mistakes and knew that because I pushed too hard the other way with depression, trying to overcome it, and then prove myself. And then I totally forgot about the family that I left behind.

[00:06:24] AH: And your wife was a CIA officer as well. Is that correct?

[00:06:27] RD: She has. She's also a retired officer as well. And they're really good, because before I could go out and go somewhere, and she wouldn't know what was going on. But it also made it harder for me, because anytime I go somewhere, and I tell her where I'm at, she'll look it up and said, "Ah, well, now you didn't really go there. Here's what you did." So kind of funny, but it was good because she understood. And that was really important.

[00:06:51] AH: Just to clarify parts of the story. So you were in the Air Force when the accident happened, or you were just leaving the Air Force when the accident –

[00:07:01] RD: I was in the Air Force. And I was about two weeks away from the FBI Academy. And then all that got turned around after the accident.

[00:07:09] AH: And the FBI told you that they weren't interested after your accident, right?

[00:07:14] RD: Exactly, because I couldn't shoot a gun. And then the Air Force said the same thing. But I've been in more warzone since then and firing more weapons since then that I had in my entire life, even in the military.

[00:07:27] AH: Walk us up to the period when you end up joining. So you said you wanted to prove yourself. You joined the Inspector General's Office? Did you join the Inspector General always with an eye towards becoming a case officer?

[00:07:43] RD: Exactly. In fact, I remember the head of the Inspector General's Office where I told him I was leaving. He looked at me, he goes, "This is what you were always gunning for, isn't it?" He said, "You got what you wanted." He wasn't very happy about it. But I did what I had to do. And that was my way to get there. And I did.

[00:08:02] AH: And how did you meet Cofer Black?

[00:08:05] RD: It was in inspection with the Inspector General's Office. And I was in charge of doing an evaluation of CTC. It was more of see how things were going and make sure everything was going okay, any problems or issues. And he and I sat down and had some long conversation. I mean, I had it in my blood. And I said, "This is what I want. This is my way in." And that was it. I eventually able to get in, but I still ran into a lot of obstacles after that.

[00:08:30] AH: Tell us a little bit more about some of those obstacles, because I know it wasn't – It was very far from plain sailing for you to become a case of officer.

[00:08:39] RD: Oh my God, it was difficult as hell. First problem was getting the weapons qualifications. I called down where they did the weapons qualifications. I had somebody called out for me. And I kept getting pushed back and pushed back because they said – This was after 9/11. They had plenty of people going out to war zones. And there was no time to accommodate somebody with a disability at this time. And they kept pushing back, pushing back. And I finally found somebody at headquarters in office there that was willing to qualify me locally up in the headquarters area.

And the first big problem with that is figuring out, “Okay, how's this guy going to shoot a gun with one arm? What was he going to have to do?” So I always say necessity is the mother of invention. And I figured it out. I was able to put my holster on my left side and I was able to reverse my magazines behind the holster. And I set up a system where I could draw a gun, shoot, and clear my weapon, and reload all in less than three seconds. And fire off like four shots in four seconds or something like that. I was able to fix jams as well. Because I was able to use that adaptation to figure it out, I only missed two shots on target when I qualified during that period. But then I ran into another obstacle when I tried to become a case officer, which took me another – About four years of being denied, denied, denied. I finally got in, but I had to do the weapons course there. And I got a phone call from one of the guys on the reins. And he told me, “I know about you.” And he said, “Your first qualification was illegal. You shouldn't have been qualified. And that there's no way in hell you're going to fire my range.” And I said, “Okay.” And I pushed.

And one of the few times in my career where I actually got a hold of somebody, a contact that I had that kind of supported my career. And two days later, I was on the range firing. And I only missed two shots. And I remember I deployed to a warzone after that. And I saw the guy as I was going to the cleaner barrel. I turned around. I looked at him. And he started stuttering and said, “I didn't realize you qualified. I said.” “I told you, I'm not going anywhere. And we're not going anywhere.” I mean, those that are disabled.

But again, I knew the problems was to join the qualification to become a case officer, of course, because there were a lot of folks that believed that I was going to put other people in danger because of my disability. I remember I had an exercise when the instructor actually told me. He stopped the exercise and said – Asked me what the hell I was doing. That I was only going to serve to get people killed and that I should walk away from the class. And I looked at him. Again, I said, “I'm not going anywhere.” And I graduated, and I finished without a single adaptation.

In fact, almost 90% of the instructors that I went up against for the exercise had no idea I was disabled, because I was able to develop my own type of disguises to disguise my arm when I needed to. I was able to figure out how to take notes with one arm while I was driving. Use Velcro on a dashboard with a notepad. I was able to do a lot of things. But I was able to overcome it, and I graduated.

[00:11:58] AH: Which arm did you lose? And which arm were you predominant with at the time of the accident?

[00:12:04] RD: It wasn't my right arm. But I was primarily left handed. So I was very fortunate.

[00:12:09] AH: For our listeners who have never been in the CIA, help us understand some of those terms that you use. So case officer. You left the IG. You're in the CIA, but you're not a case officer. What are you before you're a case officer? And what actually is a case officer?

[00:12:28] RD: Sure. I was basically a support operations officer, which you kind of support operations. But a case officer is an individual that actually runs operations. They actually run spies or run assets. There's a big misnomer out there when they use the term spy. We're not spies. We're the guys that recruit spies. We're the guys that spot has developed, and we handle spies. But we are not spies ourselves. But a lot of people use that concurrently together. But it's not. Two totally different things. And we are case officers. We handle cases. We handle operations. We manage things, whereas the spies are the guys that are out there taking the risk. They're the ones that are getting themselves deep into enemy territory, collecting information.

[00:13:17] AH: Operations support people. That's not a group of people that we hear much about. Are they part of the director of operations?

[00:13:24] RD: These are the people that help support the operation. It could be anywhere from, say, a case management officer, to just a regular support. All these are all the people in the background to help make things go. And we can't do our jobs without them. They're very integral and very important. These are the people that work at the desk. These are the people that support everything that we did. And we can't do anything without them. Because they are the integral part of making things go. They're the ones who put the oil in the machine.

[00:13:53] AH: Tell us a little bit more about the experience of becoming a case officer. What kind of things were you up to after that?

[00:14:01] RD: I mean, the biggest thing for doing that is being able to go out there and being able to look at what priorities are important to our government. And they're given to ask, "Here's what we're looking for." And then find the right people that can answer those questions. It could be a terrorist. It could be a scientist. It can be whatever it can be. It can be almost anything, as long as they can get that information. But it's up to us to manipulate those people's spots as develop and eventually recruit those people. It's like human dynamics. I think we're an expert in human dynamics. Understand how people operate. How to get people to do things they wouldn't normally do.

Again, but the important part of that is not just be able to do that, but to look at these people as human. To be able to understand the language, culture, all that is extremely important in order to make this work.

[00:14:54] AH: Can you tell us what goes into the makings of a case officer?

[00:14:59] RD: The biggest thing is that we're probably pretty much all type A personalities. We can talk about ourselves all day. Being able to put a reign on that sometimes is a problem. And that's the whole thing, because those are the type of people you need to go out to be able to do this type of work to put the risk out there. But again, it just takes a lot of patience. So we have a lot of patience, understanding, somebody that understands human dynamics, somebody that has empathy. Empathy is probably one of the most important things in the world to be able to accomplish these missions.

[00:15:33] AH: You mentioned at the beginning of our chat about being the son of migrants. Did you ever experience any prejudice or any other animus towards you because of your background?

[00:15:46] RD: I have in certain aspects. But I'll give you a good example. Living in Northern Virginia, where the agency is at, I remember the day that I got accepted into the agency. I had my best suit on. And we went up to Lansdowne to a restaurant there in Virginia. It was a country club. I had my family with me, and I was all proud walking in the front door with my suit up. And this older white lady throws her keys at me and asked me not to scratch her car. And I'm just

looking in shock. And my kids can figure out what was going on. And after I explained to her that I don't work there, she just started laughing and kind of walked away. That's after, again, after all the hard work getting in there, getting in the agency. Not letting that happen. I mean, other occasions where I was at Lowe's with my daughter a couple of weeks later and some guy asked me to load up his truck.

[00:16:41] AH: That was more being part of the general culture. It wasn't necessarily something that you encountered in the agency?

[00:16:48] RD: Not really within the agency as much. I mean, right now, I mean, it's unfortunate, but there aren't a lot of very senior Hispanics or senior people of minority within the agency in very senior levels. It's unfortunate. I'm hoping someday that's going to change. But it's tough to move up. And that's kind of the whole sort of politics involved and so forth. And hoping someday there's going to be a Hispanic head of the agency. But who knows if that's ever going to happen?

[00:17:18] AH: One of the things that I find quite interesting with your story, as well as you've just had so many barriers and obstacles to overcome. An obvious question, or a question that many people will think of is how do you keep going? What are some of the inspirations that you had? I know that your father in particular was quite an important one.

[00:17:42] RD: Yeah, my father and my mother both. I mean, they inspired me growing up and not to quit. We had a lot of things that happened to us growing up. I remember my father being kicked out of the store because they thought we were suspicious out of a grocery store. I remember not being served, actually not been served at a restaurant with my family when I was younger. My father never gave up. My father could have stayed down in the valley in Texas and continued being like a worker. But he chose to move us out of that, and put us up in Illinois, where he eventually became a manager and look-up sales. But he ended up moving up and finished his college. But that inspired me a lot. My mother as well. My mother's been through a lot, the loss of my father, and everything that's happened to her. Right now, she's on dialysis, and she's older. But she's pushing forward and she's not giving up. He's had a tough life. But they both have inspired me to push on. And then my wife, especially, has been there for me, to support me and help me get through a lot of the hard times. She's kind of my cheerleader.

[00:18:45] AH: I know that Virginia Hall has also been an inspiration for you. We've spoken about this at length, right? Could you just give our listeners a brief refresher? Who is Virginia Hall? And why are you inspired by her story?

[00:19:00] RD: Virginia Hall, they call her the one-legged lady. She operated in World War II. She worked for the SOE and for the OS as well. She ran a lot of operations behind enemy territory. She never gave up. She learned how to parachute with one leg. She operated behind warzone. She ran operations, all with a disability. And that really was a big inspiration for me. There are a lot of things that we both – It's kind of funny. There are a lot of similarities that we have. We both lost our fathers at the same age. We both were injured at the same age. We both ran some similar operations, not exactly the same. But there are a lot of similarities between both of us. And I thought that was kind of unique. Like I was able to find 13 or 14 different things that were very similar or not identical to our lives kind of in parallel, and really inspiration to me. There's no way I'm going to be able to fill her shoes, or I did, but I couldn't. But she definitely was my biggest inspiration to continue on.

[00:20:01] AH: After you became a case officer, how much longer were you in the CIA?

[00:20:06] RD: I was in eight years to become a case officer. I was in another 12 years and I retired. That's a 20-year point.

[00:20:12] AH: Did you see any changes in the way that people with disabilities or people that were differently abled were treated in the intelligence community and the agency and the Clandestine Service? Tell us about did you see other people coming through? Were there other people that you met? Or were you really are sort of one-off?

[00:20:33] RD: Yeah, that's a good question. When I was in, I knew at that time that there was nobody else that was doing what I was doing or done what I had done. And I tried to set up a program in the agency to bring in disabled that they were disabled to combat and basically do the same thing I was doing. And I remember I talked to every single Division Chief, almost every single Division Chief, and said, "Here's what I want to do. I'm bringing these guys in." And it's funny that the biggest story response I was always get, "Yes, we're very supportive of the

disabled. They'd make a great support opposite." I'm like, "No. No. That's not what I'm saying. I want them to be a case officer." No. No. They'll make a great support officer." And that's all I kept getting. And I tried to fight that. And I think it's starting to change a bit now. I think they're working on some guys that come through with some lost limbs and so forth. But we're still not where we need to be. And I think a lot of it people don't understand or believe that we can do the same job. And that's kind of the reason why I try to tell my story, because those people that are disabled out there, there's a chance for you to do anything you want to do. Don't let anything stop you. I mean, Virginia Hall proved that. I proved that. But, again, not to give up. If you have a dream, go for and don't let a disability stop you from doing that.

[00:21:57] AH: Is that part of the reason why you share your story to inspire people that may think that things like the CIA are not for them?

[00:22:05] RD: Yeah. No. Definitely, people can do whatever they want to do. And that's a big reason why I do talk about it, is because I really believe hard that you can do whatever you want to do. And you shouldn't let a disability hold you back from accomplishing what you want to do. I mean, it was a hard fight. And there were a lot of challenges. But there were also a lot of casualties with my family because of what I did. And I have a lot of regrets on that side of it. I don't regret what I accomplished. But I do regret the challenges. And what happened with my family is very difficult. But I was able to do it.

I mean, the biggest thing is just time away, being away from the family trying to prove myself. Every time that something came up, there's this assignment. You don't want somebody to go there. Boom! I was there. I never said no, because I was afraid if I did say no. I wouldn't get that chance again. And that was always volunteered. And I was always gone, TTY quite a bit overseas to do a bunch of stuff. But because I felt like I always had to prove myself. And now that after all these years, I realized I never really had to prove myself, because I was doing it. And there was no reason for me to have to be gone. Before I retired, I was gone TTY almost a year, gone before I retired. And I didn't have to do that. Now that I realize it and seeing back, I was like, "Okay. I really proved myself. Why do I have to keep proving myself over and over again?" And it cost a lot. My family, it was really tough, especially my wife me being gone.

[00:23:38] AH: Tell us a little bit more about the career of a case officer. Is most of that spent overseas? Is some of it spent out in Langley? Give us an idea of like the kinds of things that you were doing during the course of your career.

[00:23:53] RD: I mean, the biggest thing is getting out there and doing the mission. Getting out there on assignments, spot sets, and developing, and recruiting. And then from there, your career goes into management. How to run operations? Managing people that do it. Then eventually back to headquarters, where you can be managing a group, managing a division, or managing a section of people that are supporting those operations. So you have to have headquarters time and time in the field, and going back in training. Those are the three biggest things.

[00:24:25] AH: I know that you've got some quite interesting stories surrounding how you adapted to various environments.

[00:24:33] RD: It was really an anomaly when it came to looking for disguises from it, because the folks that can handle that really never had anybody come with a disability. They really needed to know how to figure it out. For example, in dress and clothes, how was I going to be able to change outfits? How was I going to be able to come up with something? And, again, necessity is the mother of invention. I ended up kind of doing my own disguise. If you look back in the room, there's a saw back there with a vest. Okay? That's something that I invented. It has Velcro all the way down the back. And I was able to have my black vest underneath there. And I set it up so that when I had to do something, I had to switch clothes, I was able to grab that and just pull it off with one hand. And I put it into a bag and change the way I look, changed my disguise. But I came up with a black vest, which is also there over the drape over there on the bottom that I've also sawed in one side of it, one ballistic vest, so I could slip on and off in about two seconds and be able to – If suddenly happened. Boom! Able to grab it. Throw it on and go, because nobody else can figure out how to do it. So I had that one specially designed.

But yeah, I have a variety of things I've done with clothes, Velcro. I use Velcro a lot to hold my arm in place when I'm doing an operation. Or I use a modified strap to hold my arm up, or if I need to hide it inside of my clothes, and so forth. But yeah, I come up – There are a variety of different things that I came up with that hopefully somebody will be able to use it after me.

[00:26:06] AH: If you were to look back on your time in the agency, what's the one story that you would see this exemplifies my team in the Central Intelligence Agency?

[00:26:19] RD: A lot of times, within the agency, you have to make conscious decisions. A lot of them are ethical decisions. And I remember I was working on this case where I was dealing with this guy who was an alcoholic. He loved Johnnie Walker Blue Label. And yeah, that was the biggest thing is him drinking and going out and me having discussions with him. I spent about a year with this guy. And then finally, at the end, I remember his daughter came up to me, because we're good friends with their family. He said, "Please stop giving my dad drinks, because it's not good at home." So I had to make a conscious decision, "Do I continue with that? Or do I walk away from the case?" Ethically, it could get worse at home for them. Or do I want to get this head on the wall. And this is something I got for the agency? I made a conscious decision not to do it. I stopped the case there. And I got in some trouble for it. But it's there that I made the conscious decision not to do it, because it just wasn't right. And I don't regret it till today, because it's the right thing to do. But a lot of times in our careers, I mean, we have a lot of ethical decisions to make. But I actually have taught a class on making ethical decisions. And I do have a large collection of things and collected over the years. I use that as examples and kind of talk to the class, "Here's what's going on. You're the case officer. What are you going to do?" And then they decide what they're going to do. And then we talk about it. But to me, yeah, that's the biggest thing for me was making that decision.

[00:27:57] AH: I was just wondering, in terms of this interview, in terms of just introducing the SpyCast audience to Rick Diaz, is there any other parts of your story that you think is important that we haven't touched on?

[00:28:10] RD: The biggest part of the thing is being able to do things despite any type of disability you might have, or whether it is that not to give up on what you're trying to do. That the job that we did and do is very difficult because, again, you're dealing with human dynamics, which you don't always know how people are going to react to different things. But to be able to figure that out and work without a net and to be successful at it.

[00:28:39] AH: Is there anything that you would like our listeners to walk away with? We've got the Coronavirus. We've got a lot of people furloughed. We've got a lot of problems in the world, but your story is quite an uplifting one. What words of wisdom would you give to our listeners?

[00:28:53] RD: Well, the biggest thing is to never give up. I know there are a lot of people that are out of work right now, a lot of problems or issues. But the key to success is not giving up and working as hard as you can to get what you want. And I know it's not easy. I mean, I've been unemployed myself, but I had a lot of issues. The key is not to give up, and not to give up hope, and to keep fighting hard no matter what, because there's always light at the end of the tunnel.

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