

EPISODE 484

[INTRODUCTION]

[00:00:00] AH: If there's ever anything that you think, here's an important ingredient in the dish that makes up Karen Schaefer that I haven't been cooking with Just let me know of and I'm happy to include it.

[00:00:08] KS: That you haven't. Yes. That you haven't managed to and missed it. I will flag you down. Yes, absolutely.

[00:00:16] AH: I wonder, just to start, could you tell us how you got into the world of intelligence?

[00:00:20] KS: Sure, sure. I actually, as I say, in Spanish, I, isetrampa. I grew up overseas. I cheated. I grew up overseas, and learned at a very young age that I loved being overseas. I loved learning about new cultures. I love meeting new people, learning their history, their literature. I knew coming out of that experience, that I wanted to study something that would allow me to continue to live in the world more broadly. I also had grown up with a father who was in public service, and so serving our country was important to me.

He was a incredible role model for me. To put it bluntly, I followed in his footsteps, I suppose. I did dabble a little bit. Did some paralegal training, thinking maybe I would go to law school and do international law. It was pretty evident to me very early on, that what really inspired me and made me happiest was the international affairs world. As I said, following the intrigues in the politics that drive the international world order.

[00:01:41] AH: Your father was in the military, or the –

[00:01:43] KS: No, no. He was Department of State. Spent his career, we grew up in Latin America. I have four brothers and sisters. My mom, God bless her, dragged us all over the South American continent, but it was a great experience. It's an incredible way to grow up. We grew up learning Spanish, so it was also hugely useful in my future career. It was great. I mean,

it's one of those experiences that as a child, you don't appreciate, because you're getting dragged from country to country.

Back then, there was no Internet. You barely had phone calls with family. You'd pass around the Miami Herald, around the embassy, like it was practically wrapped in cellophane, so that no one would rip it. This was not a time when you could really stay connected to people. When you moved, you knew you weren't going to see those people again. As a kid, that's hard to process. At the end of the day, it made us all so much more, I think, resilient, probably so much more inclusive. We were the minority in a lot of these places, where we were the ones that stuck out. Didn't quite fit in. It was a great experience. I think, it forever shaped me in so many ways that I probably can't even count all the different ways.

[00:03:08] AH: Why intelligence then? Why not the department of state, if you're following on your father's footsteps, or the military?

[00:03:16] KS: Well, I think it was a good fit for me. I really liked the idea of – I have to say, I have a bit of an adventurous streak. I definitely liked the idea of being on the frontlines and contributing in a way that I felt played to my strengths. That just seemed like the best fit for my skill set in terms of I'm a very, very much a people person. I'm more extroverted. I love to have new experiences. I in particular, like to be places where I know that what I'm doing is meaningful, which, of course, has driven me to some of the less glamorous locations in the world to serve.

I remember my mother lamenting, "Why couldn't you get posted just once to somewhere where I would actually be able, or want to visit you?" I finally got there, but it took a while. She was not happy that her daughter was getting sent to places less than desirable, that required a lot of intensive training to get there. That's okay. It made me a better person, certainly a much stronger person.

[00:04:28] AH: You said paralegal pinning, but did you join the agency out of college?

[00:04:34] KS: Pretty much. Yeah. I graduated in the 90s. It was probably the worst economic, at least during my lifetime, until the more recent recession, but when I graduated, it was a really

tough job market. I was looking for anything. I did everything from wait tables, to temp work, and then, as I said, explored the possibility of going back to grad school.

I had applied to the agency while I was in college. As people may have told you in the past, the agency, the selection process is very rigorous, and can take sometimes upwards of two years. Certainly, in my case, it took that long. I was doing a lot of soul searching and exploration and dabbling in other things. Now, we actually have trended away from hiring people straight out of college. I frankly think that that's generally a good thing. We look for people who have had a bit more work experience, because I think it does – When I look back at myself, and my first tour, I think, “Oh, my goodness. Did they really have that much confidence in this 22-year-old young woman who could barely balance her checkbook?”

I think, what I will say is that the training is extraordinary. It served me well. They know what they're doing and they really prepared us. While they often had more confidence in me than I had in myself, they were right. They had prepared us and had given us the tools that we needed to be effective on the streets. I certainly found that that was my experience.

[00:06:09] AH: Can you set the scene for us where and when you were when you found out you're accepted?

[00:06:16] KS: Back then, they did stuff by mail. This was old school. Not email, but the snail mail. I had received a letter. Honestly, I was somewhat taken aback, because the process had taken so long. I had finally called my processor, and I had said, “Hey, listen. I'm about to drop several \$100 worth of applications for grad school and for law school.” When I do, I'll pull my application to the agency. She said, “Well, I can't guarantee that we can give you a response, but let me see what we can do.” I received a letter in the mail that next week, telling me to report within weeks.

It was the single most exciting day of my life, up until that point. It was so gratifying. Up until that point in time, I was only, I guess, 22 when I was finally accepted. Your experiences are limited, although you don't think they are at that age. You get a lot smart. The older you get, at least in my case, I feel like the older I get, the more I realized, I don't know. At the time, I thought I knew a lot more than I did.

Yeah, I think up until that point, it was everything that I had worked towards. I always had this idea that I would end up in this world. The fact that I was holding a letter that said, "Yup, we are going to." Not only that, but you're starting in a couple of weeks. It was extraordinary. Yeah, it's hard to put it to words. It's also hard, because you can't really tell anybody. I mean, fortunately, I had a few folks that I had confided in. Other than that, you immediately go into this role of managing how you're going to explain to people what you're doing, where you're working, when you start. All of these things. It has to jive with what your cover is supposed to be.

At the time, I was living with four other young women in a group house in North Arlington. Fortunately, they didn't know a lot about government. My department of state cover was not impossible to keep up. That was really helpful.

[00:08:41] AH: Do you still have the letter?

[00:08:43] KS: You know, I don't. I'm not sure. Honestly, of course, the communication is I'm not even sure that its letterhead, or I think it's very vanilla. Candidly, it's been so long that I cannot – I'm sure, I would have shredded it, or did something with it. Honestly, I can't even remember what it said, other than maybe what level they were hiring me at. No, I do not have it. I've been much better on the back-end to preserve a few momentos.

On the front-end, it's funny. You can tell most agency folks have very little, unlike the military, not a lot of paraphernalia to speak to their experiences. Because unless you roll back your cover, you don't take any of that stuff with you, especially if you spend most of your career overseas, which I certainly spent the first half of mine there. You travel light, as they say.

[00:09:43] AH: Did you always want to go into the ops side, or were you ecumenical? Would you have done other things?

[00:09:50] KS: No. I always knew I wanted to be on the operation side.

[00:09:53] AH: That's your personality?

[00:09:55] KS: Yeah. I joke all the time that my six-year-old son has a bias for action. I think, he comes by it, honestly. I think, I just was always someone who wanted to be out, wanted to be engaging with people, meeting new people, seeking out that opportunity. I don't have the patience, or attention span to do some of the extraordinary work that my companions in the analytical and technology sides of the house and our business. It just would never have played to my strengths. I have incredible respect for them, because they have skills that I – and patience and focus that I sadly lack. I think, this was ultimately a much better job choice for me.

[00:10:42] AH: What kind of agency did that 22-year-old Karen Schaefer feigned when you joined up?

[00:10:48] KS: I get so many questions about being a woman and joining an organization that was really known as a male-dominated occupation; typically white men. Not their fault. That's who was hired. I'm happy to say that when I stepped in, it was an organization in transition. There had just been a class action suit that some of the women in the Directorate of Operations, which is where I served, had successfully won. I was in a good period of transition when I stepped in. I think, there was a much more welcoming environment.

I would say, beyond that it was evolving culturally, also, that you just didn't have the tyrannical leadership that you would see male, or female in the organization. People were starting to get much smarter about having a healthy work environment. Not to suggest it's perfect. It's not. We still in our organization, my biggest lament is that we still struggle so much with hiring diverse candidates. Not just women, but also ethnic minorities.

Frankly, when you are going after an adversary, you want as many people who look and speak and act differently as possible. You want to be able to select from a menagerie of different people to go after, whoever your adversary is. We still are not checking the block when it comes to diversity. I mean, we have some extraordinary officers who have tried really hard to, and focused very specifically on this topic.

I was even part of what was called diversity leadership study in one of our DO representatives to that study a couple of years ago, where it was a compliment to. There had also been a woman, a similar study done on the female-male gap. This one focused on diversity in the

context – more specifically in the context of ethnic minorities. It's not as if people don't understand the challenges. It's just that we have not been creative enough, or consistent enough with solutions to get at the real problems.

I think, it also reflects a lot of what we're seeing now in the general population. I mean, I think there is institutional bias and there is discrimination that there's a lot of talk about unconscious bias. It's a very real thing. I saw it, and I know that I was probably party to it, unknowingly. I think, having said all of that, because I've gone off on a tangent. An important one, because I think it's an important topic and certainly, very relevant to what we're experiencing more broadly as a nation right now.

It's a good reckoning. Hopefully, the folks that are in positions of leadership now inside the agency will be a heck of a lot more successful than we were. I think, you've certainly seen from this administration, they've been very specific about choosing leaders that they felt were represented a more diverse composition of this melting pot, that is our country. I think that that promises good things, but it's always going to be a struggle. There's also just the challenge that our organization is misunderstood in many ways.

It also has a history that can be very complicated. There are a lot of ethnic minorities who we struggle to recruit, because they are very suspicious, or they come from countries that are authoritarian that view any association with the state as something bad. We struggle with a lot of those stereotypes and a lot of those cultural divides that again, we're working to try to address, but we're not there yet.

I did step into, as I said, a organization in transition. One that frankly, I found very welcoming. I think, also, I say all the time, I had this group, a cohort. You go through your training and trial by fire. It was mostly men. There were a handful of women, but mostly men. I joke that their women were the powerhouses at home. They tended to be the breadwinners, especially when we were all first starting out in government, that's for sure.

I think, that was changing in society more broadly. That obviously, affected their thinking and the importance of things, like going forward in an organization, the importance of things like, parental leave, tandem assignments, taking care of families, especially once we started to deploy to war zone. I think, it's changed the organization for the better in a lot of good ways.

Obviously, still there. You can never be satisfied. We have learned the important lesson that if your whole family isn't healthy and happy, then you're not going to be successful in the mission. From my optic, certainly a great place to be starting out. I still look back and find it remarkable, the opportunities that I was given, the time, energy and money that was invested in me. I feel really, really fortunate.

[00:16:25] AH: It's always struck me that with intelligence, or strategic intelligence, it's inherently outward-facing looking out into the world. As a relative outsider, it always seemed to me that one of the great strengths that America has as the – it's so diverse, compared to say, somewhere like China. Is the joke with a friend that they should set up, they should handout forums in Queens, New York. Used to live in New York. That was meant to be the most diverse place on the planet, like over a 100 languages. Just go to Queens, and hand out forums about them. Yeah, that's always struck me as a strength. If it's not being utilized, then it's a missed opportunity.

[00:17:10] KS: Yeah, absolutely, absolutely. As I said, I think we've tried a lot of different initiatives. I don't think you can put your finger on one specific problem that we've encountered that would solve – if we could only fix that, then the diversity problem wouldn't be a problem anymore. I think it's going to continue for all the reasons that I said before. That just means we double down, right? That means we have to really focus our efforts and provide additional rigor behind the efforts to not just identify potential candidates, but then also, which is another part of the process, get them through the screening process. Because we also lose a lot of folks that are incredible assets, but struggle to get – could be potentially incredible assets to the organization and to national security, that struggle to get through the security screening process.

This is not unique to the agency. This is across the intelligence community, finding that right balance between vetting, and making sure that you're being conscientious about CI concerns, but also, allowing for those more diverse candidates to be able to make it through the screening process. It's a work in progress to be sure.

[00:18:32] AH: I'm going to ask a super unfair question.

[00:18:35] KS: Okay. Have at it.

[00:18:39] AH: What did you prefer? Did you prefer it when you are in your 20s, and you are in the early stages, and it was all new, and you were out in the field? Or did you prefer it when you were towards the end of your career and managing strategic change, and responsible for much more? Or they're just both equally enjoyable in different ways?

[00:19:01] KS: Yeah. I would say, not a terribly unfair question. I will say that all of the above. I mean, I can honestly say, and I think most people who have had, or have had wonderful careers can point to this, that I am a tapestry of all of my experiences, good and bad. I would say that certainly, my time in the field was the most adventurous. I mean, that is when you absolutely feel you are at the pointy end of the spear. There's nothing. It's hard to imagine anything that gives you more of an adrenaline boost than doing your first recruitment, or doing an operation successfully that you know could potentially impact national security. That's a pretty heady experience.

To your point, as a young person, everything was so new, and I at the time, happened to be single, so I was completely unencumbered. I could focus on work with very little else to really hinder me. It was an incredible run of I would say, almost 10 years straight, serving overseas. Having said all of that, I feel like all those experiences, ultimately led me back to some headquarters positions, where towards the end of my career, if I had to value, or assess where I felt I had most impact, was the latter part of my career, in some of those unexpected jobs that I would say, where I was really focused on collaboration, whether it was my time at the NSC, or my time as the deputy in our military affairs office, or even my time on rotation to the FBI.

Those are assignments where I felt they really played to my strengths. The serial collaborator. Having spent so much time overseas, learning about other cultures, learning to be a student of people in a way. Really observing and learning from people. That was, I think, the talent that I honed and acquired, and I was good at building teams and bringing people together to the table to have difficult conversations about really important things.

Yeah, it's hard to say. Honestly, I say this all the time that I feel like every job, and some of them I – we joke, it's you're voluntold to take an assignment. Several of my latter assignments were those types of jobs. I had an amazing sponsor in the organization, who was the extra at the

time. She often saw ways in which I could contribute to the mission more meaningfully, than I even saw myself. She was thoughtful enough to direct me towards some of those assignments to say, "Hey, you need to be thinking about this." Which is why I always tell young women, that's always my big advice, that when people tell you that you're ready for something, believe them. They won't, smart people will not invest in you, and they won't offer you something, unless they know you're up to that challenge. It was something that I didn't always appreciate at the time. Boy, in hindsight, I'm such a bay, which is why I spend so much time now mentoring and trying from the outside to look for ways to give back.

[00:22:39] AH: You mentioned there the tapestry of your experiences, good and bad. Could you give us another unfair question?

[00:22:46] KS: Sure.

[00:22:48] AH: What was like, if you could look back on one thing. It doesn't have to be the definitive thing, but what one thing stands out as being that was one of my fondest memories for recruitment and collaboration, whatever? What would be the worst there? What was the low point of your career?

[00:23:06] KS: I would say, let's see. I'll start with the positive, just because. I will say, this is an unfair one, because I feel there are so many extraordinary moments. I would say, just if I had to pick an assignment that I felt pulled me out of my comfort zone, but where I saw the best in people and in my colleagues at work and just even in myself, tapping into reservoirs of courage and patience that I didn't even think I had, would be helping to set up one of our first bases in Afghanistan.

It was such an extraordinary experience. I was the only woman on the team. It was a small group of us. Just a handful of us. We were literally out there on our own. It was building something from scratch was really – just an extraordinary experience. Then also, dealing with the locals, because we were in that honeymoon period, where there was such a sense of hope. I remember meeting women who had been on the Loya Jirga, and just talking to them about all that they wanted to try to accomplish in the country now that the Taliban was gone, and having

that opportunity. Working with the Karzai government to try to build up, create that sense of nationhood and pride in Afghanistan again.

It was just an incredibly heady experience. I also happened at the time, the chief of the base was wonderful. I always questioned my ability as a woman to be able to operate in an environment like that. I'll never forget, we were meeting with one of our assets, and he was so fantastic. He sat down with the guy and basically said through our translator, "Hey, you're going to be dealing with Karen from now on. She is going to be your point. Anything you need, resources, she'll work with you on plans, etc., provide you the resources you need." He got up and left.

It seems like a small thing when I tell the story, but it was such an extraordinary move on his part that showed so much trust in me and confidence in me as a young officer. This person sitting across from me then realized, "Well, I've got no choice but to deal with this woman. I guess, I will have to deal with this woman." We were very successful in working through multiple programs out there.

That's when you really feel you have an opportunity to do that work and have that direct and oftentimes, immediate impact. It's a pretty extraordinary experience. I will say that it makes seeing what's happening in Afghanistan now fairly torturous, because I look at where it – as we start to draw down and well, we've already drawn down, essentially, but as we pull out the last, I'm somewhat skeptical that the Taliban will hold to any of its promises. I think, it's going to be in particular for the women of that country. I think, it's going to be bleak for the foreseeable future.

I certainly hope that I am wrong, but I don't think I'm probably wrong on this front. It was nevertheless feeling at that time, that you could be a part of something so meaningful, was really a great experience.

[00:26:59] AH: This was what? December 2001, or something?

[00:27:02] KS: No. This was after the paramilitary and the military had gone through. This was later. This would have been in mid-2002. We were starting to build out a footprint in different regions. We were helping to set up one of the important bases to work with our military, but also

more importantly, with the locals on building out programs that would help, as I said, help to try to cement the defeat of the Taliban. Yes, and ensure the propagation of democracy.

Anyway, as with all things, you can't always anticipate how things will turn out, but you still got to fight the fight every day, right? You got to get up and, and in that respect, you have to be indefatigable. That can be hard, but it's important. You got to stay true to the fight, even when it's sometimes feels like you're Cepheus.

[00:28:08] AH: Pushing it back up the hill.

[00:28:09] KS: Yeah. Pushing the rock back up the hill. Yes, exactly.

[00:28:13] AH: A low point. Was there a particular –

[00:28:15] KS: A low point. Let's see. I would say, that's hard. I'm struggling a little. I think, my challenges inside the organization. I never had any challenge with the mission, or I loved everywhere that I lived and I served. I think, if I had challenges, they were usually personality-based managers, things like that. I think, I would say, the toughest period may have been when I came back from the field and realized just for personal reasons, family mostly, eldercare issues. Then I also ended up getting married and had a child that some of my desire to be out in the field – It was a lot tougher. The husband who was in the military, and finding places that we could both serve together was exceedingly difficult.

When we finally did, we realized that it wasn't the right time for personal reasons. I guess, career-wise, that would probably be a low point in terms of not being able to necessarily continue being out in the field, where really, it's the hardest work, but it's also the most invigorating, the most rewarding in many ways. I say that, and yet, as I alluded to earlier, I really feel where I ultimately had the greatest impact was not out in the field, where I served multiple tours, but really was back at headquarters when I could really grow my understanding of not just our organization, but the intelligence community and then the national security apparatus more broadly. While I say that was a low point, I think it was short-lived in the sense that I really did enjoy a lot of the more strategic and we are prescribed from policy-making, but you do have to understand the policy process.

Certainly, when I was down at the NSC, that you take a buy on that, because you are helping to develop, or at least align the data point, so that the policymakers can make informed decisions. I thrived on that, and I enjoyed even some of the long, dark hours in the salt mines of the NSC, were some of the most extraordinary. Had the good fortune to be there when they did the UBL operation. My girlfriend and I joke that we were both read in, because they needed glorified staplers and copiers to build the books for all of the principals and to take notes during the meetings.

Let me tell you, I would have picked the coffee beans, ground the coffee and made the coffee to do that. It was again, talk about an extraordinary and humbling experience was to sit in those meetings and hear the very thoughtful deliberations about that operation, and to have so much pride in how that decision-making was undertaken, and how we got to that point, understanding the interagency collaboration.

That's why I'm such a huge believer in interagency collaboration, because I've actually – I've witnessed firsthand how extraordinarily powerful. By powerful, I don't mean, necessarily guns. Of course, everybody knows the Navy SEALs are fabulous. I get it. My husband's a Navy SEAL. I think he's fabulous. That's not the powerful part. The powerful part are the 10 years that these agency analysts, these NGA analysts, these NSA **[inaudible 00:32:19]**, I mean, these young people, they're kids, they're young people who are so passionate about this, that they spent literally decades, tracking the smallest leads to ultimately culminate in this operation.

Yeah, it's extraordinary. It's extraordinary. To even be the copier, and stapler. I'm totally self-actualized with that role. I can honestly say, I was so fortunate and so grateful to be a witness. Also, just the pride in, as I said, the policymaking and the decision-making and just the rigor that was put into how that was executed was really, our government doesn't always work really effectively, but I think that's an example of one where all the synapses were firing at once and everything. It was the perfect alignment. As evidence, was proved to be very successful.

[00:33:23] AH: You were in the room for the planning stage, or the execution stage, or both?

[00:33:27] KS: I was brought in late, because it was extraordinarily compartmented. I was really there at that phase where they were. Now they were at that phase where they were asking

around the room, what percent confidence do you have. They had already red-celled the heck out of it. I actually love your exhibit that that the spy museum has here. If folks haven't seen it, you should come see it, because it's pretty marvelous. It's Michael Morell. He was deputy director at the time. He's also a former – he was Chief of Analysis for years and years.

He does this great walkthrough of the red selling that was done about who could this guy be. Basically, throwing everything, but the kitchen sink at it. Having multiple different and all sorts of folks with different backgrounds looking at this and saying, “If it's not him, then who?” Again, it's the way government should work. It also, demonstrates, I think, or underscores that, despite how the movies may capture things, our government, the agency in particular is not this rogue organization that's just running out and taking people out.

There is an incredible process of oversight. There's an incredible, both from the policy side of the house, but then also congressional oversight, which controls the money, which as we know where everything starts and stops. I think, it really, again, just demonstrates the best from that perspective as well. Very thoughtful, thoughtful planning and execution. I was definitely on the latter part of that. It was still, as I said, pretty extraordinary to witness.

[00:35:19] AH: Did you get to patch on what percentage you thought it was to succeed?

[00:35:24] KS: I was the note taker. There were a lot. Just about everybody in the room was more important than I was. Andrew, let me be clear. Everybody in the room. I don't know why I said just about everybody. Everybody in the room was – No. I mean, it was a very thoughtful and deliberate process. They did have the experts come in regularly to brief on day-to-day changes. They were hearing from the closest we had to real intelligence day-to-day, what was changing. They had plenty of smart people weighing in. They didn't need my thoughts on that.

[00:36:04] AH: Even though they never thought to ask. I would like to ask, and say to yourself, did you think this is a slam dunk? Or this is about, I'm not sure? Or were you like Mike Morell, does this 50-50?

[00:36:18] KS: Yeah. Surprisingly, I was more confident. Probably, because Michael's a lot smarter than I am, and I'm just the case officer with the bias for action. I was more confident. I

had worked in the CT world for quite a while. I think people, understandably, especially given some past missteps with things, like the Iraq WMD issue, people were being very cautious to measure expectations, which I think is a very wise thing. I think it's really smart to say what you don't know, not just what you do know. I think, they did that really exceptionally well.

For me, what won me over was the red selling. Again, when you start to go through it, who else would it be and who else could it be? The actual execution of the operation, I had spent an entire year in the war zone with Joint Special Operations Command. I have to admit, I never was concerned about the execution piece, just because I had seen them so many times in action. I thought, wow, if anybody is going to pull it off, it is this group of guys, because they are the elite of the elite. They're extraordinary and they have all of these resources available to them.

Of course, like everyone else you do worry about, and this is the part that is the much more strategic piece, because what you can't anticipate is the fallout. What does this mean for our relationship with Pakistan, when they find out? Will they feel so humiliated that they shut down the supply lines to Afghanistan, because we were still in the middle of that? That's huge implications. I think, that was certainly driving some of the – well, I know it was driving the reservations that folks, like Gates had about doing the operation.

I always like Panetta's assessment of this, which was his advice. I remember hearing in it, we did this interview in honor of the anniversary. He said, "My advice to the President was simple. What would my constituents back home say if they knew we had a shot to get this guy?" Wasn't a 100% it was him. There could be fall out. I don't know. That's what guided most of his decision-making when he was in Congress. That what guided his advice to the President. I think that's just very well said.

I think, my view was, you cannot not take the chance, the opportunity. Because as evidenced, it took us 10 years to get to that point. There's nothing to say that we would ever had an opportunity like that again. Interestingly enough, we found out after we went through much of the SSC that he was still much more involved in the day-to-day operations and running of the organization than most of us had thought. We thought he had hunkered down, gone under and yeah, I think, I don't know that I would quantify exactly, but mine was probably more than 50.

I was probably more in the 60-40 range, maybe even higher, 70-30. I was more confident. That was just probably influenced by my desire for it to be true. Michael is probably much more – his approach was much more methodical than mine was, I will say. Mine was tinged to probably with a lot of emotional components. That's why he was in charge and I was taking notes.

[00:40:10] AH: Speaking about that red, let's do a jump cut back in time to 9/11. Where were you in that day? How did you find out the news?

[00:40:19] KS: Yeah. I mean, like so many people, I watched the second plane hit on television. Initially I was hearing the buzz, I was literally checking in to – Remember, I had told you that my mother was so upset that I never got posted anywhere nice. I was finally in my very first nice posting. I was literally in the RSO's office, which is the Regional Security Officer, checking in, getting my badge for the embassy. I watched the second plane hit. I knew immediately that everything was going to change.

I mean, I knew. I knew that I probably wasn't going to be spending much time in the post I was at. That's actually, shortly thereafter, about a year later, is when I volunteered for one of the early surges. Because I had spent several years prior to that, in our highest threat posts, I had already had a lot of the defensive, all of the personal training, defensive driving, firearms training. I was someone that could pretty easily deploy fairly quickly. I immediately threw my name into the hat and said – Again, as I mentioned before, at the time, I was unencumbered. It was so much easier for someone like me to deploy, than folks that had family and whatnot. I certainly felt like most other Americans and not just Americans. There were lots of folks that were lost that weren't – it was a hit on the whole world, I think.

I just think that, like so many others, I wanted to do anything that I could to try to help. As I said, it ended up being one of the really, a transformation. It was transformational in terms of my career as well, because from that point on, I really did focus heavily on that near east region, as well as counterterrorism for the rest of my career. That's where I spent a lot of time working with the military, which started my serial collaborator trajectory, where I started to really like to work more with the other agencies and find ways that we could problem solve jointly, as opposed to independently.

[00:42:41] AH: How long had you been? By that point, did you say mid-90s?

[00:42:45] KS: Yeah. I had been in, I guess, by 9/11, it would have been almost short of a decade. Yeah. I was going on my third tour. I had been in for about seven, or eight years.

[00:43:00] AH: That switch over to counterterrorism and serial collaboration. Help us understand that more. I'm always reminded of this person who was on the Afghan desk at the State Department, way back when the Soviets invaded. They said, "No one was more surprised than me to find themselves at the center of all these events," because the Afghan desk is where your career went to die. I've heard other people say that at the agency, counterterrorism is also – that's where your career goes to die, or stall, or when you get put out to pasture. Help us understand that part of that, the counterterrorism after 9/11 just for you.

[00:43:43] KS: Yeah. I mean, for me personally, interestingly enough, I started my career in Latin America. People won't remember them in this generation. So many of them have been born post-9/11. They don't even remember 9/11. Before 9/11, before the war on terror, there was something called the war on drugs. I was pretty intimately familiar with that.

I spent a lot of time in the region focused on that. I had a similar pedigree, but it was just focused. A lot of the effort and a lot of the very early tools that we used in the war on terror to try to figure out who these groups were and who all these people were and the analytical tools, the targeting tools, very similar. There was a way to translate that. Not surprisingly, a lot of the people that had previously worked in counter-narcotics were an easy fit to transition to counterterrorism, because they understood that you have to look at – You can't just look at a terror organization and look at a leadership. You have to understand the whole organization to know how to go after it most effectively.

For me personally, the transition was really – I mean, it was that initial, what we call, temporary deployment to help start that base. Then after that, most of my subsequent assignments, as I said, were in that region, because quite a bit of the resources, the agency had were shifted in a pretty meaningful way to focus on building our relationships with countries in the region that could help us thwart future attacks against the homeland, as well as against American citizens overseas.

Not surprisingly, the Near East Division at the time, and now the mission center, Near East Mission Center, had an outsized role in that, as did Counterterrorism Center. Counterterrorism Center, you're exactly right. I mean, there was a handful of folks. It had been up and running for quite a while. I'm not sure I would characterize it necessarily as the place that people go to die, but it certainly wasn't where you're getting a lot of face time.

I think, they first came on the scene in the 90s under Clinton, when we were first realizing who this Osama bin Laden character was. We were starting to see things the coal bomb, the bombings in Africa, and we were thinking, "Okay. What is this?" Fortunately, there was something that existed called CTC. Candidly, I spent no time focused on counterterrorism, until 9/11. It was, we were all learning as we went. We were absolutely, we had a handful of arabists and linguists and some folks, again, that had built up much more of a knowledge base on counterterrorism. For most of us, this was all very new.

It was like building a 747 in flight. I have to say that one of the things that I love about our organization is that we never let the difficult states stand in the way of the possible. I swear to you, our support people were out on the ground, setting up bases before you knew it. I mean, it was unbelievable. We had our paramilitary officers, their partnership with the military, they built that out. They were on the frontlines, and they were immediately, immediately an integral factor in success, in the initial success in Afghanistan.

When you look back on your career, and even though I look at Afghanistan now, and I'm traumatized, it's impossible not to take pride in our ability to turn on a dime, and to be that responsive, given most people couldn't find as you joked. Most people wouldn't be able to find Afghanistan on a map, myself included, probably until we actually went there. If I could find it on a map, I probably couldn't tell you much more than that. The fact that its state capital – I mean, the capital was Kabul.

Yeah. I mean, that's a point of pride. I think, when I think about the agency, it's one of the best descriptors is that agility, that ability for our officers to get very smart very quickly. The other beauty is that for a lot of us, the country is less relevant than the tradecraft, even though, again, this was different tradecraft, because you had so many, just personal security threats, not just counterintelligence threats. We got very smart about training our people at a really rigorous pipeline set up within I would say, less than a year. Initially, it was more sporadic. Within a year,

we had training set up, we had a whole process in place. We were making sure people knew when they were being hired.

Guess what? Your first stop is probably, can be a warzone. Keep that in mind before you sign on the dotted line. Yeah, it was really impressive. I think, it's that agility that makes the agency such a valuable resource to policymakers, because we really – we can even in some ways, we're so much more agile than the military, just because of its sheer size. We can do things very quickly, which is why our guys were the first in Afghanistan and not the military. That's not a criticism, it's just a fact. It's why we exist.

[00:49:52] AH: For the war on drugs, are we talking like the Colombian cartels, the Mexican cartels, all of the above?

[00:49:58] KS: Yes. All of the above. Yeah. It's a fascinating time.

[END]