



(U) The 'Regruntlement' of a SIGINT Collector

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A veteran collector finds an exciting new job (U)

(U//FOUO) By 2001, after thirty years in collection and collection-related fields, I found myself turning into a "SIGINT Curmudgeon." I was convinced that collection was a dying career field and that NSA management was hastening its demise through neglect. I came to believe that the only people who recognized the importance of the art of collection management were collectors, and there were very few of us left. No one else seemed to appreciate the benefits of collection management done correctly. It seemed that everyone thought they could be a collection manager just by tasking something to site! I was not feeling the SIGINT "love" and I was disgruntled!

(U//FOUO) Whether I was right or wrong, that is how I felt. As time and 9/11 passed I became more and more frustrated because there were too few of us to get everything done that needed doing. On top of that we were being asked to do a lot of web "window dressing" that, in my opinion, was nice to have but not critical to the mission. After a particularly long and loud disagreement with my bosses in the middle of the office, I realized that it was probably time to retire! Unfortunately, I still had over a year to go before I turned 55. Although I thought about an early out, the penalty meant my family and I would have to take turns eating, because there wouldn't be enough money to buy food for all us at the same time. That idea was not a hit at home!

(S//SI) Finally, in January 2002, I spotted an urgent request for Senior Collection Officers in [NSOC](#). There were no applicants for the positions and they were so desperate they would accept people for six-month temporary tours, even a disgruntled old curmudgeon like me. It looked like it was tailor-made for me! I even promised myself to the SCO desk for a year instead of six months, so it would take me past my 55th birthday by three months! I was feeling generous! The only thing that worried me was I would be working for a Navy [O-6](#). I've never been very good with authority, especially the military type, and I projected all sorts of problems, but I took the job anyway. I had no doubt, with 20 years of FORNSAT experience and 10 years of HF collection that I would have no problems fitting into NSOC and handling the SCO duties. Combined with 15 years in field assignments, and a working knowledge of the Overhead and SCS disciplines I thought I had it made. I was just a little bit cocky!

(U//FOUO) Well, it turned out the SCO desk was the single most demanding job I've ever had at NSA! It didn't take me long to realize what I didn't know outweighed what I did know by at least a factor of ten! I learned about collection resources that I could only guess at before this tour. The first few months were difficult while I learned what I needed and made the necessary ego adjustments! Then, just before we invaded Iraq I noticed something strange. I was enjoying myself! I was challenged, meeting those challenges, and I enjoyed working with people again. As the end of my year approached I negotiated with other desk officers to work out the ends of their tours so they could leave the desk early. I had no pride when I begged! I was a silver-tongued Devil, and it worked, because I left the desk only one month shy of a full 18-month tour. My projected problems with Military authority did not materialize. Indeed, I worked for two Navy Captains and they are among the best bosses I've ever had!

(TS//SI) During my tour in NSOC I supported Afghan military operations, Iraqi military operations, numerous CSAR (Combat Search and Rescue) missions, downed aircraft, hostage situations, and a myriad of other tasks. I helped track Al Qaeda operatives, Taliban members, members of the former Iraqi regime, and aircraft and ships carrying weapons to/from proscribed nations. Sometimes all at once! I was on duty the night we went into Iraq and I went home that

night feeling wrung-out, but with a feeling of accomplishment. When I think back on all of the history to which I had a ringside seat during that tour, it's almost overwhelming! That was some tour! I have to believe that the SCO tour would have to be the highlight of most collectors' careers. It's the culmination of everything a collector or collection manager has worked for and dreamed of. That was true for me.

(S//SI) Since I got off the SCO Desk I didn't cut my ties with it or NSOC. My official title is Senior Collection Officer Desk Coordinator but I prefer my nickname, "Papa SCO"! I now support the five sitting SCOs with operational and administrative help. My job is to see that the SCOs are trained, have the skills necessary to do the job, have the tools they require, and aren't bothered by extraneous issues. It's almost as much fun as being on the desk itself -- almost! I could have retired a couple of years ago but I have too much to do: I have SCO conferences to arrange, outreach to the RSOCs, and I hope I'm helping (even a little bit) to re-invigorate the collection field. Who knew?

(U//FOUO) I encourage senior collectors out there to think about a tour on the SCO desk. If you have given up on the collection field, this will help to open your eyes to the challenges we still face. You can still make a difference. Look us up on the [NSOC web page](#) ("go nsoc"). It might be the best move you've ever made.

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