

By John A. Tirpak, Editorial Director

THE AIR FORCE INVESTIGATORS



Special agents Martha Ward (r) and Bryan Schmelzer, both forensic consultants, tote equipment from a house used as a training facility.

USAF photo by SrA. Renae L. Kleckner

CRIME SCENE

They catch spies and are in charge of keeping the Air Force's secrets. Their biggest job is to investigate crimes involving the Air Force and its people. They're the guys with the big duffel bags of guns, traveling with and protecting the Secretary of the Air Force. They are the people without rank on their battle uniforms, collecting intelligence in Afghan villages. They figure out who's hacking into Air Force and contractor networks and develop defenses against cyber intrusions.

All these roles belong to the Air Force Office of Special Investigations, whose 3,000 people have perhaps the most diverse

portfolio of any USAF agency. The bulk of OSI's mission is criminal investigations: solving or preventing crimes ranging from travel voucher fraud all the way up to murder. Other principal missions involve cybercrime and cyber war detection—it is the Defense Department's executive agent for cyber forensics—as well as counterespionage, security for senior USAF leaders and their foreign visitors, and supervising the Air Force's most classified, special-access programs.

If it all sounds like the Federal Bureau of Investigation, that's because OSI was born in the FBI's image. In 1948—in the wake of a profiteering scandal involving a general officer—Air Force Secretary Stuart Symington asked J. Edgar Hoover to help him set up an FBI-like organization within the service to perform myriad law enforcement functions. Hoover sent his lieutenant, Joseph F. Carroll, to help USAF set up the agency. Carroll received a direct commission as a brigadier general and was OSI's first commander.

Symington had to give something for Carroll, and did: The FBI got the Air Force-owned armory in the District of Columbia, to house the FBI's burgeoning collection of fingerprints.

It was typical Washington horse-trading, said OSI Commander Brig. Gen. Kevin J. Jacobsen in an April interview. "That's how things get done," he said.

Jacobsen, who had led OSI since 2010 and retired in May, presided over its military and civilian special agents, analysts, and reservists in a brand-new headquarters located on Marine Corps Base Quantico in Virginia, not far from some of the FBI's own facilities. OSI moved there from JB Andrews, Md., in 2012, as a result of 2005 Base Realignment and Closure changes. Those changes also co-located the Naval Criminal Investigative Service (NCIS) and the Army's Criminal Investigation Command (CID) at the site (the acronym CID is a vestigial reminder of when that



USAF's OSI agents stay out of the limelight working to prevent and resolve all sorts of problems

organization was a division; the initials persist). NCIS is downstairs from OSI. CID is down the hall.

Practically the whole building, with the exception of the gym and cafeteria, is a sensitive compartmented information facility (SCIF), meaning the rooms are sound- and electromagnetically sealed to prevent eavesdropping. Common areas not so protected, such as the cafeteria, are used as meeting areas with NCIS and CID. They collaborate but not under a single command authority. The agencies all derive their legal authority from the Pentagon's inspector general and their respective service Secretaries, but operationally, they only share space. OSI is unique, however, in that it is a mix of civilians and uniformed personnel and that it has both a law enforcement and intelligence mission, giving it some special capabilities.

Of the 3,000 or so people in OSI, 1,800 are special agents who conduct investigations. Nearly 800 are professional staff ranging from analysts to logisticians, and at any given time, some 400 reservists who are individual mobilization augmentees, or IMAs, are also investigators. On top of that, there are usually about 300 contractors who help with analysis and preparing special studies.

The largest group of agents performs investigations of criminal activity and fraud, OSI's "bread and butter," Jacobsen said. Almost as large is counterintelligence. Next is cyber.

CRIMINAL

USAF photo



OSI never recruits first-term airmen. They must first “learn to be airmen”—and good ones—Jacobsen said. Agents recruit on bases from among airmen who are “award winners ... rising on their own” and who show interest in the OSI mission. It’s a popular career field and “we have the luxury to be very selective,” Jacobsen said. Many agents have advanced degrees, and many are multilingual. OSI recruits civilian agents, as well, but looks for people who already have done some law enforcement work or have useful special skills.

“We’re looking for staff sergeants ... at about the six-to-10-year” point in their careers, Jacobsen said. This guarantees an experienced and mature cadre but one still young enough to justify the considerable investment of training, he said.

Recruits take a basic 19-week law-enforcement training course along with new agents going into the FBI, CID, NCIS, and 77 other federal law enforcement organizations. An Air Force-specific basic course lasts another eight weeks. After further schooling and a probationary period, agents are fully trained after about a year. Almost everyone’s first assignment is as a criminal investigator.

Recruits must also be self-starters and able to function on their own without a lot of support, Jacobsen said. Many OSI shops are one- or two-person offices—the largest field office is about 35 people, at JBSA-Lackland, Texas—and some of these offices are in countries where the US doesn’t even have a formal military presence.

OSI, along with its NCIS, CID, and FBI brethren, divides up countries where the US military might transit and assigns agents there as force protection detachments. These agents keep in touch with local military and US Embassy personnel “to help determine the security of the local area” and warn of threats. There are 35 such locations around the world; OSI is executive agent for seven of them.

Despite the tremendous amount of training to get its people up to speed as fully capable federal agents, OSI moves them around from specialty to specialty. No one is allowed to select an area and stay put, Jacobsen said.

“They’ll get into a track and stay for an assignment or two,” he explained, “and then we’re going to bridge them out into something else.” He said, “We

expect that every agent, at the end of [his or her] career, to have experience in every one” of OSI’s mission areas. “What we don’t want to do,” he added, “is create an organization of silos.”

SEXUAL ASSAULT

In the US, OSI participates in the Joint Terrorism Task Force with the other alphabet-soup agencies, ferreting out those who are planning, conducting, or supporting terrorism against the US at home and abroad. As crime-fighters, OSI agents pick up where local security forces leave off. While the security forces handle traffic tickets, misdemeanor offenses, and first responder situations, OSI is brought in for the heavier stuff.

Most OSI leads actually come in from tip lines; someone calls in because he sees something that’s not right. It’s not a complaint-based system, Jacobsen said. OSI only needs “credible information” to open an investigation.

In 2012, DOD ordered that only the armed forces investigative services—OSI, NCIS, and CID—could investigate sex assault cases, to reduce subjectivity and increase rigor. Consequently, OSI’s case-load in sexual assaults jumped 55 percent. “That’s not to say that there’s much more sexual assault today than there was” two years ago, but now “it’s all coming” to OSI, Jacobsen said. The actual rates of sexual assaults hasn’t radically changed, he said.

Unless it takes place in a medical setting or under the care of a doctor, every airman’s death is investigated by OSI—even combat deaths and suicides. Sometimes, an apparent suicide is actually a murder “made to look like suicide,” Jacobsen said. “So we approach every suicide death as if it were a murder case.”

Fraud investigation is a significant and rising OSI activity. It can be as small as people lying on their travel vouchers



USAF photo

DO NOT CROSS

all the way up to “higher-end contract fraud,” Jacobsen said, including falsifying records, providing substandard parts, or fraud involving military construction or housing. “Just in the last year, there was an investigation that we were running on Pratt & Whitney [that] resulted in a judgment of \$664 million. ... It’s the largest recovery in OSI’s history, and this was pursuant to a false claims investigation.”

Contract fraud investigation requires more collaboration with the other services, too. Jacobsen said that earlier in his career, contracts tended to be service-specific. Today, “any one contract on any Air Force base might have eight or nine other agencies interested” as the services share and operate jointly. So “just about any investigation we’re conducting, whether it be fraud, counterintelligence, or criminal work, it’s involving some other agency or component,” such as the other tenants at Quantico.

The fraud work in a sense pays for OSI by itself. “Every year, we recover more money for the US Treasury than OSI’s budget,” Jacobsen asserted. Judgments totaled more than \$1.5 billion in recent years.

OSI is a battlefield agency, as well, performing an intelligence function. In fact, Jacobsen said, it’s DOD’s “agency of choice” for battlefield intelligence collection and is one of only a handful of Air Force entities routinely operating “outside the wire”—off base and in potentially hostile territory. In Afghanistan, OSI goes to villages, develops relationships with village elders and populations, and cultivates informants, a role it also performed in Iraq.

Protected by security forces tactical security elements, OSI teams “meet with the people ... to find out ... what’s going on. ‘Any strangers in town? Anything weird going on? Have you heard anything?’” Jacobsen said. Through this intelligence collection, agents develop not only the threat picture for nearby bases, but identify active or likely terrorists, bomb makers,

and insurgents, Jacobsen said. These OSI teams develop “target packages,” which amount to capture/kill lists, for special operations forces such as the Navy SEALs. After combat units “action the target”—meaning capture or kill the identified enemies—OSI goes into the scene to interrogate detainees and exploit what it can from leftover bomb-making equipment, hard drives, and other “pocket litter” to see if it can find out who was supporting the insurgents, who they associated with, or about any plans in the works.

Of the 10 OSI agents who have died in the line of duty, seven were killed in Iraq by roadside bombs and one died in Afghanistan as a result of an insider attack by an Afghan Army soldier.

Counterespionage is “big, big, even to the same degree as criminal investigations,” Jacobsen reported. It has two parts: stopping the adversary “from taking our secrets” and “finding out who within our own structure—either the Department of Defense or the Air Force—[is] committing espionage. So there’s a defensive part to it and an offensive part.” While OSI does not run agents or recruit agents overseas, it may turn a spy to become a double agent.

In criminal investigations, OSI uses informants. A spokeswoman said that

sometimes, there is no other way to gather information. The agency came under fire in 2013 for its handling of an informant: a cadet at the Air Force Academy. The former cadet told the *Colorado Springs Gazette* that OSI induced him to lie, spy on his fellow cadets and break academy rules in order to gather information—including which cadets were involved in drug dealing or sexual assault—then disavowed him and wouldn’t explain his informant activities at his expulsion hearing.

An Air Force inspector general investigation determined that the cadet had already earned enough demerits for expulsion before OSI recruited him as an informant, and his information-collecting activities—joining in with those who were breaking the rules on the agency’s behalf—after that point wouldn’t have changed the outcome of his case.

Even so, the case resulted in a unique special circumstance, wherein the superintendent of the academy, Lt. Gen.

Top left: Agents undergo weapons training. Bottom left: AFOSI agents train with a British police tactical boat unit in the UK. Below: Special agents conduct surveillance at Barksdale AFB, La. Training takes about a year, and after becoming an agent, airmen can expect to stay in an OSI mission area for an assignment or two, and then transfer to another area, ensuring well-rounded agents with a host of skills.

USAF photo by A1C Micaiah Anthony



Fallen Heroes

Ten OSI members have died in the more than 65-year history of the agency. Three were civilian agents, six were military agents, and one was a support staff member. They are memorialized in the OSI Hall of Heroes, located in the OSI headquarters building in Quantico, Va.



Capt. Lee Hitchcock
Died 1967
Vietnam



Special Agent Ray Round
Died 1970
Thailand



Special Agent Matthew Kuglics
Died 2007
Iraq



Special Agent Thomas Crowell
Died 2007
Iraq

Michelle D. Johnson, will now oversee OSI's use of informants at the school. That's unusual because, while the office counts the various major commands as its customers and organizes largely along majcom lines, OSI doesn't answer to their commanders. Indeed, other than being kept informed of the progress of investigations, commanders—up to and including the Chief of Staff—can't have a role in investigations, because command influence must be avoided.

Commanders can and do conduct their own probes into problems within their organizations—these are called CDIs, or commander-directed inquiries—but such investigations are largely administrative in nature and take place outside the legal arena. OSI has jurisdiction for any crimes.

OSI discovered a cheating ring at Malmstrom AFB, Mont., last year during a drug-related investigation, and passed what it discovered to Air Force headquarters. "I notified [Secretary Deborah Lee James] right away," Jacobsen said.

The cheating itself wasn't an OSI case because it wasn't technically criminal. Those cheating were doing so on a "locally developed proficiency test," a breach of discipline but not a crime, he explained. A CDI followed. "I kept the criminal investigation," Jacobsen said, as well as a related charge of disclosing classified information. Typically, OSI investigates

cheating when it involves testing affecting promotions and pay, such as the Weighted Airmen Promotion System, or WAPS, test. In such cases, cheating is a means to obtain money fraudulently, and becomes a crime.

OSI's cyber function is also multifaceted. "What we're not doing is information assurance," Jacobsen explained. "We work with 24th Air Force [Air Forces Cyber] ... investigating ... who got in and how did they get in. And then develop an investigation or operation to prove attribution. ... Who's on the other end of the keyboard typing in the codes and hacking in. And we've become very, very successful at identifying that and stopping that."

He explained that what makes OSI different from other cyber-oriented agencies is it views the activity as a counterintelligence issue. Even unclassified information, taken in large enough quantities, can provide an ability to reverse engineer technologies.

OSI is the executive agent for the Defense Cybercrime Center in Linthicum, Md. Once it characterizes a threat and identifies weaknesses, it tells 24th Air Force how it can better defend the network architecture. It's an endless cycle, Jacobsen said, but the more time enemies are spending trying get around

the new defenses, the less time they have to commit other crimes.

It is useful for OSI to act as an investigative agency and an intelligence agency in these pursuits, because OSI can use its federal investigative authorities to get warrants, do searches, and collect information while working with other intelligence agencies when attacks come from overseas. Like the National Security Agency, OSI gets its warrants from FISA (Foreign Intelligence Surveillance Act) courts and judges.

TRUST THE SECRETARY—ONLY

That's not OSI listening in on base phone calls, though. Jacobsen said while OSI does get court orders for electronic eavesdropping, it must be as a result of probable cause that a crime has taken place. Base operational security (OPSEC) teams, however, do listen in on random base phone calls, checking for people discussing secrets. They are the people who put the stickers on base phones, saying a call may be monitored, he said.

The Office of Special Projects, out of JB Anacostia-Bolling, D.C., is the hub for OSI's work to protect the secrets of special-access programs and investigate any leaks. OSI develops the security



Special Agent Rick Ulbright
Died 2004
Iraq



Special Agent Dan Kuhlmeier
Died 2006
Iraq



Special Agent Ryan Balmer
Died 2007
Iraq



Special Agent Nate Schuldheiss
Died 2007
Iraq



Special Agent Dave Wieger
Died 2007
Iraq



MSgt. Tara Brown
Died 2011
Afghanistan

systems to keep USAF's most precious technology secrets hidden. Jacobsen didn't talk much about this activity, but said his people are not the so-called "camo dudes" who patrol the perimeter of USAF's classified Groom Lake facility in Nevada. Because they are part of the national law enforcement community, OSI agents also play a role in the shipment of nuclear materials. Though not in charge of the shipments, OSI agents will ride along and keep in constant touch with local sheriffs and state police to ensure the shipments aren't stopped or threatened en route.

The OSI commander works for many people. His direct rater is the Air Force inspector general, who provides oversight programmatically and for criminal investigative standards. The commander works directly for the Secretary of the Air Force, but OSI's intelligence work routes up through the undersecretary of defense for intelligence and the Defense Intelligence Agency. "I've got a lot of bosses," Jacobsen observed.

No one is above OSI's purview. In recent years, even a Chief of Staff came under investigation, when Gen. T. Michael

Moseley was the subject of a probe of command influence in the choice of a contractor for a Thunderbirds show audiovisual system. There's "always someone" higher up who is the overseeing authority in such cases, Jacobsen said.

"You have to trust somebody. The system says the Secretary is the trustworthy one," he noted. "Only the Secretary of the Air Force, ... can tell me to stop an investigation that has already been initiated or tell me not to investigate something." The OSI commander typically briefs the Secretary every quarter about ongoing investigations—more frequently on topics of high-level interest. If there are bad guys in OSI, like most law enforcement agencies, it has an internal affairs division for self-policing. Such a case was pending in May, "and I keep the senior leadership informed of those, as well," Jacobsen said.

OSI is affected by sequestration, just like the rest of the service. That's problematic, because where an OSI location is a one-or-two-man shop, "that could be a 50 percent or in some cases a 100 percent capability that we lost" due to personnel reductions, Jacobsen said. During civilian

furloughs last year, "the military [agents] stood up and worked extra hard."

Limited resources mean choices. Jacobsen showed a chart tracking the number of criminal investigations pursued from 2005 to 2013. During the times when OSI agents were heavily deployed to Southwest Asia—many at a "one-to-one dwell," or a year at home station for every year deployed—criminal investigations Stateside dipped. By the numbers, the majority of those not pursued during that time were drug cases and sexual assaults.

"Something always has to give," Jacobsen said. During that period, "our folks were either in training, on the battlefield, or just coming back," and investigations back home "really did take a hit." Crime, he said, "doesn't stop just because there's no money."

Reflecting on a 30-year career with OSI, Jacobsen said the organization has really evolved. "Although we bring bad news, we at least bring a suggestion, in context," as to how and why someone went wrong and how to keep it from happening again. ■