Oral History interview with Chuck Soltys, retired DEA Special Agent

Interview conducted July 2nd, 2026

Question: Why is the global nature of DEA's mission important?

Chuck Soltys (00:06):

It's a worldwide problem. The drug issue is a worldwide problem, and DEA has always been the lead agency in investigating the traffickers, and it simply can't be done without a global effort because most of this stuff is produced in foreign countries. It's shipped to the United States and other places, and a global effort is absolutely necessary.

Question: How do DEA's international operations help improve the American people's safety and security?

Chuck Soltys (00:35):

The international effort by DEA helps provide additional safety to the United States because these global criminal enterprises are out there conducting their business, shipping illicit drugs to the United States and around the world, and addressing these issues in the United States domestically, but also internationally is seriously important.

Question: What was Snowcap?

Chuck Soltys (01:07):

Operation Snowcap was the DEA's jungle operations effort to address cocaine production at its source in the source countries in South and Central America.

Question: Tell us about the regions where Snowcap operated.

Chuck Soltys (01:23):

Snowcap operated all throughout South and Central America, but primarily we operated in Bolivia and Peru and South America, a little bit in Columbia and Ecuador. Central America was Guatemala, El Salvador, Honduras, Belize, and a touch of Mexico.

Question: Who were DEA's partners in Snowcap?

Chuck Soltys (01:49):

Domestic partners are our US partners we had. We aligned with SEAL teams, SEAL teams, US Army Special Forces, and Border Patrol. We operated directly with the Border Patrol Tactical, the BORTAC unit. Internationally, we had host national partners. Then Bolivia was the UMOPAR, which was their basic police. And then the special operations group within them was the GECHAs, Grupo Especial, Choque De Anti-Narcotical. It was basically their special forces and anti-narcotics unit. Peru had the... We had special police that worked with us as well there too that were specially vetted by the United States, past security clearances so that we knew we could trust them. And we operated directly with those. The national police, the Peruvian National Police, the Columbian National Police, all of them had contingencies that worked with

us and they had special operations teams that were specially trained often by the United States, but also by their own people. And they operated alongside of us or assisted us in our missions.

Question: What were DEA's greatest assets in Snowcap?

Chuck Soltys (03:07):

DEA's greatest assets in Snowcap was the ability for us to deploy skilled teams that were specifically designed and trained to address the issues in the jungle environment. We had in-country agents that were there that were the full-time investigators that were initiating the cases, but they oftentimes were so busy on putting the investigations together, they didn't have the time or the ability to train to do the jungle operations. So DEA Snowcap was a special operation that we specially trained people to go down there and assist the in-country offices with their investigations by conducting those jungle operations to locate and destroy clandestine labs, clandestine airstrips, and identify their transshipment routes and try to interrupt those.

Question: What were DEA's greatest challenges in Snowcap?

Chuck Soltys (04:01):

Operation Snowcap's greatest challenges were the simple fact that all of us were assigned to domestic field divisions where we were responsible for conducting investigations in our field offices. Then we would deploy to Snowcap so they could provide us a little bit of training and we could get the missions done. Then we would come back to our offices and try to initiate cases. So it was a strain on the domestic field divisions and it didn't give us the time that we necessarily needed to build the teams into what we could have been if we had a full-time assignment on something like that. Also was the compromise to our missions and the corruption that we dealt with. Some of it was covert that we knew was going on, but we didn't really see it. Other times the corruption was right out in the open where people were asking for a payout before they gave us anything. So we always had to worry about that. We always had to worry about whether somebody was going to compromise our mission while we were in the middle of it.

Question: Did you receive any special training for the operations?

Chuck Soltys (05:01):

Operation Snowcap did provide us additional training, specialized training for the mission. When the program initially started, they did a very short jungle school in Panama and then they deployed to South America, Central America, the places they needed to go. But Frank White was one of my first supervisors. He was the associate special agent in charge of the Chicago Field Division at the time. So I worked for him and he was one of the ones that started the program. Mr. White was a Ranger in Vietnam, so he had the Ranger mentality. So he was able to negotiate with the US Army to allow civilian law enforcement people into the Army Ranger School to receive the training that the Rangers get. So we did a seven day assessment selection that was used for selection to Ranger school. Those who made it through that assessment and selection would then be sent back to Fort Benning for eight weeks of a modified Ranger School that was most of the skills that the Rangers received in Ranger School, but it was geared a little

bit more towards our international enforcement operations that we'd be conducting in the jungle.

(06:09):

After you finished Ranger school, you would go to language school. So they would send us to a language institute for 26 weeks for Spanish language training. Once we completed both phases of that, once you completed the jungle training and the language school training, then you were deployable. And then it was up to you to find a team leader that had an opening on his team that was willing to accept a new agent into the program who hadn't had any experience. And that was one of the toughest things for us new guys coming into the program was finding a team leader that would give us a chance.

Question: You volunteered for three Snowcap tours; did you see changes in international policy from the 1st tour to the 3rd tour?

Chuck Soltys (06:47):

I volunteered for three Snowcap deployments. I probably would have done more had the program continued, but I was able to do three deployments. There was a change between my first deployment to the last deployment in the sense that my first deployment, which was in Bolivia, it was still a fully functional, fully operational program. We had a lot of support from management all the way up through headquarters, and we were pretty well funded. As the program started to wind down after a series of incidents that took place, they started to cut back on the funding, they started to cut back on the support, and there were always people in the management chain, whether it was domestically in your field office, all the way into headquarters that just didn't believe in the program, and they didn't like losing people from their investigative roster to do investigations in the domestic field divisions.

(07:42):

Again, I worked for Frank White who was very pro Snowcap, so he was the one who recruited me to the program and he made sure that anybody who wanted to be in that program from the Chicago Division was going to get his full support. Towards the end of the program, we started to see a lot of things change and where there were restrictions on what we could do, the equipment that we could carry, the funding that we had, it made things a little bit more difficult to operate. But as we were all taught to do, we figure out ways to get it done just like any agent in the field. Oftentimes you don't have all the tools you need, you just have to find a way to get the work done.

Question: You survived a plane crash curing one of your Snowcap tours. When and where was this, and what happened?

(08:20):

On March 4th, 1995, we were getting ready to conduct an operation that was one of the first of its kind in DEA history and even in Snowcap history in that we had several facets of investigations coming together where we had targets of opportunity that we wanted to conduct raids on simultaneously, and they were in several different countries. That brings in a lot of political issues that initially when we started discussing the operational contingency plans.

We had large Mi-17 helicopters that were slated to be used that could carry full assault teams and had the fuel capacity to do the round trip mission to the objective and back. As politics got involved, countries start to feel like they should have more control and more say over what's going on and DEA always wanted to be the lead on that. So political moves were made where those aircraft were pulled from the mission, and the mission was scrapped at that time.

(09:22):

So DEA had, I'm sure probably still has a standing directive that no US personnel are allowed to fly in any aircraft that's not US piloted and US maintained. And that's for a lot of different reasons because we have standards that we have to uphold, and we know the training that our pilots have and our pilots are second to none. When you deal with foreign pilots, some of them are good, some of them not so much. A lot of times the maintenance isn't done on schedule, so you don't know the reliability of the aircraft.

(09:54):

We weren't allowed to fly in any aircraft that wasn't US piloted or US maintained. So when they still wanted to conduct the mission, the powers that be said we have UH-1 Huey helicopters, which were smaller and had less fuel capacity. So they decided to use those helicopters and continue with the mission. But what that required was to set up a refueling point where they could refuel the aircraft and bring the aircraft back. So my assignment that particular day on March 4th of 1995 was to go in a fixed wing aircraft that was piloted by Peruvian pilots and maintained by the Peruvian National Police. It was their aircraft. I was with one other DEA special agent, a US Army Special Forces soldier, and the flight crew from the Peruvian National Police, which was the pilot, the co-pilot, the crew chief, and the load master... or something. I believe there was eight people on board.

(10:56):

The weather was that bad that particular day. It was a brand new aircraft. We sat on the runway for hours in a blazing sun waiting to see if the mission was going to go or not, and this wasn't uncommon. The weather broke by satellite. They were able to see that the weather was breaking, so we went to conduct the mission. So we got in the aircraft. We were flying with the plane loaded up with the personnel, with the refueling bladders, fuel pumps, small inflatable boats and outboard motors that we were going to use for the operation. We were going to the refueling point that my mission was to set that up. As we came into the airstrip, the airstrip was one that was used by the traffickers. It was built originally in the middle of the jungle by an oil company that was doing seismographic testing for oil.

(11:44):

They didn't find what they were looking for, so they abandoned the airstrip and the traffickers took it over. But the flip side of that is that the traffickers don't maintain them as well either. So as we were approaching the airstrip, the pilot came in at an angle too high and too fast. We hit the airstrip. Once we hit the airstrip, it kind of bounced to the side. The wheels hit the side of the airstrip. The airstrip broke away. The clay broke away. We were paralleling the airstrip at well over a hundred miles an hour. The only way I could describe it is that it's extremely violent.

Stuff was flying all over, glass was breaking, wheels broke off, and we hit a berm. There was a dirt berm that stopped us right before we went into the trees. Had we gone into the trees, it would have been a much different situation.

(12:36):

But on impact, what had happened was all of the gear shifted forward and one of the agents that was sitting two seats away from me got pinned in. All the gear pinned in his legs. He broke both of his ankles. He was trying to free his legs. He was able to do that. The special forces soldier that was sitting next to me, so I'm in the left seat, the special forces soldier in the center seat, and the other agent was in the right seat. The special forces soldier hit the bulkhead that had buckled. All the radios were in a bank that separated the fuselage, the cargo compartment, and seating compartment of the aircraft from the cockpit. That had buckled. He hit his head on that and lacerated his head pretty significantly. I believe he took well over a hundred stitches to close his head up.

(13:25):

The agent got his feet freed and he was ready to climb out the window. One of the engines, it was a twin engine cargo plane, one of the engines had stopped from the accident itself. The other engine was still running. The emergency exit was right there where that prop was turning. So as the agent was going to climb out the emergency window, the special forces soldier knew the aircraft a little better, pulled him back in and saved him from possibly diving into a turning prop.

(13:54):

All things considered to what happened, the injuries were relatively minor. I remember sitting in my seat and grabbing my hand and looking down in my hand and seeing blood thinking, okay, that's not a good situation, but I think I'm okay. We just crashed. So now we're trying to figure out how to get off the aircraft and what we needed, head count, some of the other things. So once we got off the aircraft, the one engine was still turning. There was fuel leaking. They were worried that there could possibly be an explosion. So we left our medical gear on the plane. We left our SATCOM radio on the plane, and we were trying to figure things out at that point while that engine was still running. The special forces guy was able to get... We had an HF radio, so he was able to set up a hasty antenna and make contact with our people to let them know that the plane went down.

(14:45):

And then from that point, it was an area that was hostile, that was owned or that was occupied by the traffickers. The Peruvian government, the Brazilian government had sent in some people earlier, sent in a team to clear the airstrip for us to come in, and some of those people were there, but we didn't know any of them. And then when they made contact, a rescue helicopter came in. So a helicopter showed up. It didn't have the ability to extract all of us at the same time. So we made the decision that the ones that were most injured were going to go first. That was the pilot, the co-pilot, the special forces soldier and the agent were the ones that were going to go first. So all of the people were able to get on that aircraft with the exception of me

and one of the host national Peruvians that I was with, one of the Peruvian National Police officers.

(15:36):

So our mission was to stay bed down as tight as we could, wait for them to make contact with us again and send a rescue helicopter later on, probably the next day or so was what we were looking at. So as we prepared to do that, we were staying with the sensitive equipment and the weapons. Shortly thereafter, another similar aircraft showed up, which we thought was the original aircraft, just bringing us additional equipment or had some other information they wanted to give to us. And when that aircraft landed, people got off. It was a whole different group of people. It was Brazilian military that didn't know that we were operating in the area, and they weren't too happy to find out we were there. The person that was in charge that got off the aircraft approached us, was asking us... I didn't really understand exactly what he was saying because he spoke Portuguese, but my Peruvian counterpart understood a lot of it.

(16:30):

He was basically asking us why special forces were in his country invading without them, and they had no knowledge of it because we had sterile uniforms, which meant we had no markings on them, no names, no markings, nothing for anybody to know who we were. So at that point, the team that he had at gunpoint took us, took all our guns and weapons, explosives, everything from us and ordered us onto the aircraft. This was very nerve wracking to say the least. Obviously, situation was going downhill rapidly. We didn't know what was going to happen, where they were going to take us. I know we just crashed in a plane. It was now getting dark. We were in a mountainous region. The thought of getting in another aircraft, especially under these conditions, didn't sit real well, but we didn't have a lot of options at that time.

(17:19):

So we got onto the aircraft, started making peace with your maker, things that were going through your head. I know I looked at my Peruvian counterpart. He understood a lot more than I did and what was going on in the conversation, and I could tell by the look on his face that it wasn't good. So unbeknownst to us while we were in that aircraft heading out to wherever they were taking us, our people that knew about the crash contacted those people, let them know that they were Americans on board and they better bring them back to this military base that they wanted us to be taken to. So when the helicopter that we were on actually landed and the doors opened up, and we were wondering what was going to happen to us, we saw familiar faces, and it was just the best feeling in the world at that point to know that for the most part we were safe.

(18:08):

There was more to the story later. Once we got to that base, we knew we were safe. They were talking about things that were going on. We were trying to figure out how to handle a lot of the different things. We had to get everybody to the hospital. All of us needed medical treatment, so they got us to a hospital there. It was an eye-opening experience for me going into a hospital

in the mid '90s, and seeing that they still had glass IV bottles and glass syringes. And just thankfully I was in a condition where I could refuse a lot of the treatment. I didn't really need any of the treatment that they were providing and that was a good thing. Some of the other people weren't so fortunate. There's kind of an ironic twist to the story that while we were in the hospital, we spent a couple days in that Peruvian hospital, the investigative team from in-country went to the crash site to recover any of the equipment that they could recover that hadn't been taken by the traffickers or anything else.

(19:02):

So they brought back some pieces of the aircraft and brought them to us at the hospital. I got one of the gauges and one of the warning signs from inside the aircraft. I had a pin that my sister gave me, a guardian angel pin that I always had pinned on the inside of the flap of my uniform shirt. I would always rub that pin and say a prayer before I went on a mission. I remember rubbing that pin again and saying thanks that I was still alive and had another chance. I said if I ever got out of this alive, I was going to not take ill advantage of the opportunities that I had. I thought it'd be nice to have a shadow box with those parts in there. I took a couple of the pictures that I had of the aircraft before and the aircraft after with the parts of the aircraft and I took them to a gallery to have them mounted in a shadow box.

(19:54):

When they were mounting this stuff, the person that worked at the gallery wanted to fit it in a certain way, so they took this warning sign and they were grinding it off so it would fit a certain way to shape it a certain way. Well, that's got radioactive material in it that allows that warning sign to fluoresce in the dark. So this particular person's full-time job was working at a nuclear power plant. Well, when they went into the nuclear power plant the next day, they have to go through a scanner. The scanner showed that they were covered in radioactive material. So they had to do a backtrack on that to figure out where they were. They went into the gallery and the gallery was completely full of this radioactive dust from doing the grinding. So then the special agent in charge at the time in Chicago got a call saying that DEA owed them thousands and thousands of dollars to the nuclear regulatory committee or commission to do the cleanup at this particular place.

(20:55):

And my boss called me in and said, "This is the case that just never ends." He's like, "I'm just telling you right now, DEA's not going to support that. We didn't authorize that stuff to be taken in to be mounted, so you're on your own on this one." And fortunately for me, nuclear regulatory just kind of wrote it off as it was an unfortunate situation, and it is what it is, but just kind of an ironic twist on that story at the end. But the mission never did get completed. All of the people on our team were injured, so most of us probably could have operated further, but some of them not. Obviously the agent that had both ankles broken could no longer operate. It was kind of the final straw as well too, because just six months prior to that was when the CASA plane crash crashed in Peru.

(21:46):

That was on my second deployment. I was in Guatemala at the time on that one. That plane crashed killing five agents. I knew three of those agents really well. We went down on the plane to our respective locations with them. So I remember getting the call telling me to rally up the team and stay put because we had an aircraft that was missing. We were trying to figure it out. So when you had that one happen, and then shortly after that, a border patrol guy on my team was hit by a car and critically injured, and then the plane crash that I was involved in, headquarters at that point in time said, "This program's done, shut it down." So there was only one more deployment after that deployment that I was on in Peru, and that was basically just to recover equipment and shut everything down.

Question: In your opinion, what was the most significant Snowcap operation you participated in?

Chuck Soltys (22:35):

I would say that one was one of the most significant operations I participated in. We did so many. Our operational tempo was really quick. We did a lot of missions in a short period of time, but that was a big one. That was one that all of the people involved wanted to see through because it was going to be doing multiple raids in different countries all at the same time. It took a lot of planning and coordinating, and unfortunately we were never able to finish that one. But one of the other ones I was involved in that, again, it's an issue with aircraft, was that we had... When Bolivia started the policy that the Bolivian government was going to start eradicating the coca crops so that they couldn't even harvest the cocoa leaves to manufacture cocaine, the US said, "We're not going to be involved in that physically because it's just too dangerous to do. We're not going to put our people in for that."

So the Bolivian government at the time said, "Okay, we're going to send our people." So they sent their police officers with machetes to go cut down the coca plants in the field. Well, they were out in the field one time, and we got a distress call on the radio that they had been surrounded by hundreds of the Campesinos, which were the farmers that were coming at them with machetes that were looking to kill them. So we were told to board an aircraft. We always, again, had a policy that you had to have at least two aircraft in the air at all times so that you had a backup aircraft. Well, the distress call was so significant that the decision was made at that point in time to get that one aircraft that we had in the air with team of people that could go assist them, and then they would bring in other aircraft.

(24:18):

We were in Chimore, which is the southern portion of Bolivia. They were bringing aircraft from a little further north from Trinidad to rendezvous with us along the way. So we went out in that aircraft, myself and a border patrol guy, and our job was to try and give that ground patrol the ability to extract themselves. They had vehicles to get out of there, but they were so surrounded by all these Campesinos, we had to figure out how to be able to get them out of there. So when we flew in with the original aircraft, the idea was to deploy tear gas, to get them to at least break off a little bit and give them some time. So that's what we were doing. We were both sides of the helicopter. We were deploying gas on this crowd of hostels that were pinning down our ground patrol so that we kept circling around.

(25:06):

We had deployed so much gas to try and get these people to break loose so that our patrol could get out, that the pilots were starting to get gassed and we were coming through. So that was an issue as well too, but we were able to get them to back away enough that our ground patrol could get out, but they had some pretty significant injuries. They had a couple of their people that were missing that they found later on, and then there were people that were significantly injured that had been hit with machetes and stuff like that, that our special forces medics had to treat them and then get them to a hospital. So missions like that, we had stuff like that going on all the time.

(25:45):

My first tour in Bolivia, that 90-day deployment, we did almost 80 missions, 75 or 80 missions in the 90 days that we were there. So we were doing all kinds of stuff, but every country is a little different in how the missions are conducted. Bolivia is very mountainous, so there was a lot of hiking into the mountains. You would take ground vehicles to a certain area and then you would hump into the mountains and then bed down if you needed to bed down until you could conduct the mission and complete it. Peru, the terrorist threat was too high, so they couldn't leave you out there if they didn't have to. So we would helicopter in and then conduct the mission and they would helicopter us out. If for some reason they couldn't get us out, then we would have to bed down until they could get a helicopter in.

(26:31):

But generally speaking, it was an in and out mission as far as aircraft in, get the mission done, aircraft out. Guatemala and Central America, that was small boat operations, interdicting boats on the water or border patrol doing interdiction stops on the road and finding the traffickers on the road. So there was a variety of different things that we did, but the potential for problems was always there. That one particular time we were trying to get that ground patrol out, it wasn't unusual for hundreds and hundreds and hundreds of these hostile farmers that didn't like the fact that we were there start to surround us and cause problems. But the one thing that those farmers did know was that the Americans didn't play around. They could mess with their own people a little bit, but when they knew the Americans were there, they knew they took us seriously.

(27:20):

What's really interesting too is the fact that I came from a 30 person police department before I came to DEA. We had five square miles to patrol, and that was my life as a police officer. When I got to DEA and then into Snowcap, I was going from country to country and we were doing missions like this, coming out of helicopters, doing all this different stuff, sending me to language school, sending me to Ranger School, working with and for some of the best people I've ever met in my life. A lot of people warned me against the Snowcap program that it was going to tank my career because you're going to be gone too long, you're not going to learn to do the job, whatever. I went on to have a very productive career, and those years that I spent in Snowcap were some of the best memories that I have to this day and still some of my best friends.

(28:08):

These are the guys that literally I would go to battle with that I knew I could trust anytime. My supervisors were solid, the guys I operated with were solid. We did good work. We worked hard, oftentimes seven days a week, sometimes around the clock, but I also had a team leader that understood that and anytime he could give us a break and let us experience something throughout that, see some places in some of these countries, he was all for that as well too.

(28:40):

Well, when I got into Snowcap, Pablo Escobar had just been killed, so there was a huge power struggle between the Cali Cartel, the Medellin Cartel, some of the other families that were out there trying to take over the organizations and get the stronghold on things. So there was a lot of internal conflict between those people that we were kind of in the middle of. So those were the basic cartels that we were investigating, but the investigative part was basically handled by the in-country offices, those agents that were assigned to Santa Cruz, Bolivia, Cochabamba, Bolivia, ones that came down to Chimore, whether they're in Lima, Peru, some of the other outposts, they did the majority of the investigation. We were there solely to do the jungle operations. So they would provide us the information that they were able to accumulate through the investigations and then we would conduct the missions. So that was our job was to plan the mission, get the assets we needed, the resources available, conduct the missions, and then report back to the in-country office.

Question: Tell us about the drugs and other items you seized.

Chuck Soltys (29:46):

At that time, Snowcap was primarily focused on cocaine. That was the big thing that was going on. Fentanyl hadn't even... I don't even know if it had been invented yet. It certainly wasn't on anybody's radar. It was all cocaine. Marijuana a little bit, but we didn't deal with that. It was all precursor chemicals. It was the coca fields. It was the coca leaf. But then you had that problem that you have like we have in the United States now between the legal market and the illegal market. We have states that it's legal to use marijuana medicinally, sometimes recreationally, some states not at all. That was the problem we had there too, is that they had a legal coca market that these farmers could sell the coca leaf legally, but 80 to 90% of the legal coca leaf was diverted to the illegal market to produce cocaine. Our mission was to locate the coca fields, the labs where they were converting the leaves into cocaine, how they shipped it, the shipping routes, the airstrips they used to bring it out. That was what our function was, to locate and destroy those so we could disrupt their enterprise.

Question: Tell us about your Snowcap team.

Chuck Soltys (31:04):

Oh, I had the best team ever. Every team was different. My first deployment was... Our team was the Scorpion Team, and I had my roommate from Basic Agent School. I don't know if you want names of anybody, but my roommate from Agent School, we got to be good friends in agents training. And I remembered calling him, asking him if he wanted to sign up for the program, and he was on board right away. So he signed up. We went to training together. I met

other guys through training, but then I had to get onto a team. So you start calling team leaders and asking them if they have an opening. Jim Mavermatis was my first team leader. Jim was the consummate professional. He was very diplomatic. He could get things done in headquarters. He knew how to work that, but he also took very good care of his people.

(31:55):

He made sure we had the resources we needed. He made sure that we could conduct operations as safe as possible. He made sure that we got some decompression time, and he was the overall person in charge of our team. My first two deployments, that was Bolivia was Scorpion Team and Guatemala, my second deployment was Wolf Team. His assistant team leader was Blue Richards. Blue was a completely different personality. Blue was a former Marine, very tough, very capable, very loyal and expected loyalty. He expected you to work hard. He didn't want excuses, and he would be loyal to you. He made sure that we were taken care of. We always knew he had our back. So between guys like him, Jim Mavermatis is the team leader. Blue is the assistant team leader. We had LD Matthews was the guy who kind of ran operations from the base camp when we were in Chimore. Kevin Quinn, Nick Colin, Kez Jode Wallace. These were all guys that I either went through Basic Agent Training with, went through all my Snowcap training with, and deployed with. These were guys that I knew I could trust with anything.

(33:07):

When you're living in such close quarters in very primitive situation like that where you don't have the best running water, you don't have the best food, you may not be eating on a regular schedule, you're not sleeping normal or you're sleeping out in the field, those things all start to weigh on people. So if you don't have personalities that can get together, cabin fever can be a real problem. The first deployment in Bolivia was during the rainy season. So anybody who's not familiar with how it rains in South America during rainy season, you can almost set your watch by it. About seven o'clock at night, it's like they open up the faucets and the rain comes down so hard you can barely see your hand in front of your face out there. And then it rains for 12 hours straight. Seven o'clock in the morning, you can almost set your watch by it. The faucets get shut off, the rain stops, the sun comes out, the steam rises, it gets hot and humid for the next 12 hours and it starts all over again. So you're miserable all the time. There's no way to stay dry. You don't even try to stay dry. If you're out in the field, you're sweating during the day and you're getting poured on at night. We would say travel light and freeze at night. So you can only carry so much gear. We did the best we could, but I always knew that I could trust the guys that I was with. We didn't get in those petty arguments and fights. Well, not very often, every once in a while, but not to where it affected our operational capabilities. So having that chemistry of people and having supervisors that back you in those extreme circumstances, that's what it's all about.

(34:38):

And then having somebody like Frank White who was running the Chicago office at the time, so I knew he was always going to make sure that he had my back, and I had everything that I needed. He was an answer to headquarters as well too. He was the liaison and headquarters for

the program, which at one point in time, Snowcap was actually designated as the 20th division. It was going to be a full-time assignment where Frank White was going to be the special agent in charge of Snowcap. It was going to be based out of Quantico, and we would either deploy or train. If you weren't deployed, you'd be training. If you weren't training, you'd deploy. And that's the way it should have worked. Ultimately, that's what the FAST program became later on that operated in Afghanistan and some of the other places where you now had dedicated agents that didn't get sidetracked by investigations in their field divisions.

(35:28):

They weren't negatively affecting their management that needed to get work done in the field and they were down a head count. That's the way it was supposed to work. But before it could even be launched as a division, the program was disbanded. The Administrator at the time didn't like the program. After those couple of accidents, he didn't want to deal with it anymore. So he disbanded the program and then he started his own program, which was his signature program, which was the MET team and the RET team, the Mobile Enforcement Team and the Regional Enforcement Teams that operated domestically. But personnel are so important, and I was fortunate to work with some really great guys. My last tour, I worked for Pat Valentine. Pat was the team leader. He was a relatively inexperienced guy as far as jungle operations went. He really didn't want to do stuff like that, but because he was in charge of the office in Peru, they put him in charge.

(36:24):

But man, when it came down to the plane crash and some of the other stuff, he was solid across the board. He retired shortly after that, and I've never been in touch with him since then, but I would want to shake the man's hand and thank him for making sure that he looked out for all of us, that he wasn't as concerned about sensitive equipment as he was about his personnel. He wanted to get his personnel safe first and then he could worry about the other stuff later. That's all any operator can ask for is that they've got the backing from the people that are in charge making those decisions. I was fortunate to work with great guys who are still my best friends in the world today that we joke about stuff, we laugh about it, and it's still... Those five years that I was involved with Snowcap, those were the best years of my career. You kind of chase that excitement the rest of your career, but life moves on and you do the job domestically. But what an experience that was for the five years that I was fortunate enough to be involved in that.

Question: What do you think were the major victories of Snowcap?

Chuck Soltys (37:24):

The major victories of Snowcap were the simple fact that we could hit the cartel and the traffickers at their source. So even before they could get anything packaged up and shipped out, we were on top of that. Or we destroyed their airstrips, we destroyed their labs so they didn't have the ability to produce it at the same rate. They didn't have the ability to get it out of there, and it really disrupts operations. Once they get it out of the jungle and it starts making it to the United States and other countries, then it becomes more about taking the finances away from them. Taking the supply away from them is one thing, but taking their financial resources

away from them is what really, really impacts them. They want the money. When you get to the money, they've done all the work already. They want to get paid and when you take that money, it makes them very unhappy.

(38:17):

But for us, we were able to provide that ability for the domestic enforcement teams and even the overseas enforcement teams to provide that mission capability where we were hitting these cartels right at their source so that they couldn't even get operations off the ground at times. The amount of drugs that we were able to disrupt or prevent from being produced and the stuff we were able to seize, I think that was a great success for DEA. Although I think the program at certain points in time, any program needs to be looked at and restructured, I think Snowcap was due for some restructuring, but I think it still was a good program and could have continued to do a lot of good. But everybody that gets into that big seat in headquarters has their own vision, and they do things their own way. But I just feel fortunate that I put my name in for that opportunity and that I had the opportunity to participate in what I feel was history making. It was a history making mission, and the young agents now have never even heard of Snowcap before. That's incumbent upon us as older agents to educate them.

(39:27):

I've always said we have that little meeting room at the academy in Quantico called the Eagle, and it's nice that they've got autographed guitars by country singers, and I think there's some stuff in there by racecar drivers and things. All that stuff's nice, but that should be our space where with all the incredible stuff that DEA has accomplished domestically and internationally through investigations, through programs like Snowcap, through some of these other things, that should be on the walls of that Eagle room so that when the young agents come in there during their basic agent training, they see the history that they're involved in and what a storied agency that DEA is. I'm just so fortunate to have had so much time to be involved in that, to get 30 years to be involved in all kinds of stuff like this. Those five years in Snowcap were five of the best years in my 30 years in DEA.

(40:19):

I was able to go on and do a lot of great things. I was able to help form the special response teams that are the domestic tactical teams now and be the first commander and senior team leader of the team in the Chicago Field Division. We did some wonderful stuff with that, but Snowcap is still where my heart was and I still love getting on the phone and calling Kevin Quinn who we call Q or Nick Colin or Mav or Blue, calling any of these guys up and talking to them and trying to get together periodically to just talk about the old days when the team was together and the missions we accomplished.

Question: How did Snowcap help advance DEA's mission?

Chuck Soltys (40:58):

Snowcap helped advance the mission because it freed up a lot of investigators to do the investigative work. Either the in-country agents either wouldn't have been able to conduct the jungle operations or it would have been far more dangerous for them to conduct them, and it

would have taken their time away from the investigations. So having those deployable teams that would come down for three months at a time to conduct those operations for the international offices, it freed those people up to do the heavy lifting as far as the investigative work did. They had to put a lot of the pieces of the puzzle together to identify the organizations and where the stuff was going and how it was being produced and where it was going to go after it was produced. They would provide us with that information and we were able to intercept those productions or those transshipment routes and we were able to disrupt their operations, which was significant for those guys.

(41:52):

So in the overall picture for DEA, it was a huge advantage that it was a whole ‘nother capability that was there that was our specific function. We weren't required or tasked with doing the investigative part of it. Our job was to go do those tactical missions that the in-country offices weren't prepared to do at the time. That was kind of tasked to us. And truth be told, many of those guys that took those overseas jobs didn't want to go out in the jungle. They wanted to be investigators. They wanted to do these high level investigations, investigating the largest drug cartels in the world and disrupt those and dismantle those organizations. So they were able to put their focus where they wanted it to be for why they put in for that office and us that signed up for Snowcap, we didn't really want to be in the office doing that work.

(42:37):

We wanted to be jumping out of helicopters doing the tactical mission. So it was kind of a win-win for everybody, but when you couple those pieces together, it was a significant impact on the enforcement operations and the production operations disrupting these organizations and making it much more difficult for them to get their product to the United States.