Oral History Interview with Principal Deputy Administrator Dan Salter

Interview conducted July 1st, 2026

Question: Why is DEA's international mission important?

Dan Salter (00:05):

DEA's global nature is critical in the security and safety of America. We're not a source country. So when you look at the harm, the drugs that are coming in and killing Americans, they're sourced in other countries. So our foreign footprint is valuable with our counterparts to ensure that we can stop the flow of those narcotics coming into this country. Americans are safer because of our foreign footprint and how we worked to stop the flow, slow down the flow of narcotics coming into this country. And it's critical to think about when you're talking about the narcotics coming into this country, you have to think about our borders and keeping our borders secure. So our partnership with the foreign counterparts along the US border and across the nation or across the world is critical.

Question: What was Operation Snowcap?

Dan Salter (00:57):

Operation Snowcap was a program back in the... Started in the, I guess it was probably the early 80s, that was in the Andean region of the world that were source countries for cocaine. And DEA established Snowcap program to combat and work with our foreign counterparts to combat the manufacturing and distribution and selling of cocaine into this country.

Where did Snowcap operate?

Dan Salter (01:28):

The regions where Snowcap operated were primarily in Central and South America. Obviously we focused on the source countries of Columbia and Peru and Bolivia. Those were the three source countries that grew their cocaine and then cultivated to ship to the US.

Question: What was your role in Snowcap?

Dan Salter (01:50):

In my role in Snowcap, I was just a regular worker bee with a team of generally about eight agents. We would go down for 90 days, three-month deployments to work with our foreign counterparts in those regions. So my role was, I was nothing special. I was just an agent out there doing the job.

Question: Who were DEA's partners in Snowcap?

Dan Salter (02:14):

DEA's partners in Snowcap, we have to start with the US military because they're the ones that trained us, that taught us jungle operations and boat operations and everything that we needed when we were down south. Our other foreign partners, our partners would be the host

nations, whether it's Bolivia, Columbia, Peru, Ecuador, Guatemala. The host nation, obviously we're not law enforcement in those countries, so we had to work with our host nations.

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

Dan Salter (02:44):

DEA's greatest assets in Snowcap were the people. Highly trained, highly motivated individuals that would go down and leave their families for 90 days and work again with our foreign counterparts to disrupt and dismantle the cartels that were manufacturing, growing the product and shipping it our way.

Question: What were its challenges?

Dan Salter (03:08):

The greatest challenges we faced at Snowcap probably were, I guess just the environment we worked in. Some of it's pretty rural jungle operations. The greatest challenge also would be the fact that you leave your family for 90 days. That was tough, but just the terrain that we had to traverse to get to some of these cocaine labs, the weather was always a factor, but those are probably the biggest challenges. I think the challenges and the danger of just the fact the operation, because these were nefarious folks that were operating these cocaine labs.

Question: Did you receive special training?

Dan Salter (03:47):

We did. As I mentioned earlier, we received some specialized training from the US Army, from the Marines. We did navigation at Quantico with the Marines, and then we did Ranger School down in Fort Benning, Georgia, which was a modified ranger school. We're not ever claiming to be Rangers, but we would do... I can't remember how many weeks it was, but it was too many weeks, and it was pretty tough training.

Question: What specialized gear did you use?

Dan Salter (04:22):

Our specialized gear was just the firearms we used. We used obviously the long guns, the semi-automatic pistols. Also, we used explosives too to blow up runways and the cocaine labs. So all that training that we got from the army and the military really helped us in our mission down south.

Question: What memorable operations did Snowcap have?

Dan Salter (04:47):

A memorable operation in Snowcap. Well, there were so many, honestly. I think obviously we had the CASA (212 Aviocar airplane) that crashed with five agents killed. That was a memorable moment, not a good one. Really, I guess in the face of sometimes pretty tough situations where the bad guys are shooting at you, those were always little tense and memorable. But I think probably the biggest impact was the tragedy of the CASA crash and killing five of our friends. That was obviously a terrible moment. I actually went in, I was the team after that crash, and it was kind of hard to fill those shoes knowing that the guys there before you were killed in the

plane crash. We didn't really ever operate under fear, but we did understand that that's part of the mission. So yeah, lots of memorable moments. I could think of times where we're just out just having fun, running 10, 12 miles just for the heck of it. That was memorable. Our times in the jungle where you didn't have anything to eat for three or four days, pretty memorable. Water was sometimes hard to come by, but all those things kind of formed us to be a better, stronger team, which misery loves company, and we always did things together.

Question: Tell us about the Shining Path.

Dan Salter (06:13):

Sure. So the Shining Path was a formidable adversary that we encountered many times in some of the cocaine labs in Peru. I know that there were times where actually we would kind of sneak up on their camps and try to make an effective arrest for the Peruvian National Police, with the Peruvian National Police. They were a formidable adversary. They had better communication than we did a lot of times. They could communicate back and forth. We would see them sometimes interact in some of the big cities where they'd come in and try to terrorize folks. But more importantly, when we're in the jungle, they would sometimes be... They'd be a pretty strong resistance.

Question: Tell us about your Snowcap team.

Dan Salter (07:06):

I had some great teams. I did three deployments. I did Trinidad, Bolivia, Guatemala City or Guatemala, and Peru. All three were phenomenal teammates. I'd probably say I couldn't put one team better than the other. My team in Bolivia was probably the most active. We did a lot in - they call it the Beni part - of Bolivia. We had just a phenomenal group of eight or ten guys. My Peru tour was probably one of the most memorable. When we landed in Terrapoto, Peru, that night it was bad storms and two of the small children were swept down a river, and they came to us to help. The town did because they knew we were Americans, and we'd probably have boats and access to medicine and whatnot. So we helped them and unfortunately two children had drowned and died. But it was at that time where we had a medic and I asked... The medic gave some medicine to the mom, the two moms are obviously hysterical to help calm them down. And then out of respect for us inserting and helping the best we could, it was kind of like the cartoon. The traffickers kind of slowed down their traffic while we were there. They weren't a threat to us. They appreciated us trying to save those two boys. Unfortunately we didn't, but they slowed their operations down.

(08:36):

Terrapodo was a... I don't think there's any paved streets. It's a small town. And we'd go to dinner….maybe cooking chicken over a hot grill, but the traffickers would be there and they knew who we were, we knew who they were, and they'd wave and oftentimes pay for our meal. So it was kind of a unique situation. It was after the CASA crash. It was a time when there was a lot of bad things happening with obviously these children dying. And the town really adopted us for that tour there. We had water balloon fights with the kids. We had a pretty good sized weight room in the garage. We opened the door up. They thought it was fascinating to

watch us lift weights. So it was a lot of fun. We'd ride around, I don't remember, on a little bicycle with a motor on it. We would rent those and take them all over. It was a good tour. So they weren't really using that part of the country for operations at that time. So we'd go down to a place called Pukalpa where there's another DEA team and work operations down there with them. And that was also pretty memorable.

Question: What were the major Snowcap victories?

Dan Salter (09:51):

Well, the major victories were every cocaine lab we blew up, that cocaine wasn't coming to the US. We did have an impact. I think the price of cocaine started to rise in the US, which we knew that had an impact because obviously with Colombia and Peru being two of the primary source countries for cocaine, it was obviously having an impact. So we felt like between Columbia, Bolivia and Peru, we were having a big impact. I think also too, the partnerships with our foreign nationals really helped too. It helped our foreign offices now because we would go down and make the partnerships to some of these remote areas that we never had access to and the host office would benefit from our relationships and knowing those people that are part of the police force that were with us for those 90 days.

Question: Tell us about the tragic helicopter [airplane] accident that took the lives of five DEA special agents.

Dan Salter (10:46):

So as I mentioned, the crash of the CASA, it was devastating. It was a devastating loss. It did impact what we did and ultimately the program shut down not long after the crash. As I mentioned, I was one of the tourists right after the crash and I knew everybody on that flight that was killed. I knew four of them really well. And so it took a whole new meaning to why we leave. You leave your family, and now they know that they've had this tragedy, and they worry about you. It made us closer because we realized that we have to rely on each other in these times that are, like I said, they're tough times, whether it's in combat or whether it's just marching through the jungle. But the CASA crash was devastating agency-wide and it still is, still is. I can still remember the last conversation I had with three or four of those people on the plane.

Question: Who were the Los Zetas?

Dan Salter (11:52):

So Los Zetas, so they're based in Mexico. When I was in Dallas, they were one of the most violent cartels operating out of Mexico. We were fortunate because we had some really good informants and we had some phenomenal agents that were investigating the Zetas. Matter of fact, the current administrator, Mr. Cole, his group was one of those groups that had phenomenal agents and phenomenal informants and were focusing their efforts on the Zetas in Mexico that were, like I said, very dangerous and operating greatly around the city of Dallas and the Dallas metroplex. There was not a more formidable group than Mr. Cole's group, probably one of the best groups I've ever been around of just pound for pound agents and analysts that were focusing their efforts on the Zetas. I like to say we knocked them in the dirt pretty hard.

There was a lot of...When you talk about the Trevino brothers, you can think about the Zetas. These guys were serious hitmen that were putting contracts out on not only informants, but agents, supervisors, even reaching to Dallas. So we understood that this was not a game, but ultimately both the Trevinos are in prison, and they'll be there for the rest of their living life. And the Zetas are a fraction of what they were, but the Zetas had taken over a good part of Mexico as well as along the US border. So I grew up in Del Rio, Texas, which is on the Mexican border. And my mom obviously was, when I'd go home, she'd ask me to go into Mexico to get her some Mexican vanilla or something. I told her, "Can't anymore. The Zetas have taken over." Then we drove into town, and I could tell her that tire shop is operated by Zetas, that restaurant. So it had taken over even little towns along the Southwest border. So by them being the focus and target of Mr. Cole's group, I think we really hurt them, and that was a good thing.

Question: Who were the Trevino brothers?

Dan Salter (14:04):

The Trevino brothers, Omar and Miguel. They were actually at one time US citizens--went to Mexico. They were in the special forces. They trained, and then they turned ugly, and they started kind of the combative part of the Zetas in Mexico. Ultimately where they were in charge, and they killed at random. They had no regard for life. If anybody even looked at them wrong or crossed their territories, they'd kill them, and they'd kill them in horrible ways, put them in boiling oil, they'd chop them up. They'd make people play kind of like hockey with bats and bash each other's heads, and the last one that survives lives. All those things are part of what the Los Zetas and the Trevino brothers and La Familia were doing.

Question: What is the most current situation with the Los Zetas?

Dan Salter (15:03):

The recent Los Zetas take down. As I mentioned, they're fragmented from where they were back in the 2000s, early, maybe 2010. They're really fragmented, what they are now. They're not near the cartel that they were. So when we start taking the remnants of the Zetas down, it's pretty much abolishing what they were and the stronghold that they had in Mexico. So the Mexican people are better off with these Zetas in US prison.

Question: Why is Fentanyl Free America important?

Dan Salter (15:35):

The Fentanyl Free in America is important because as you know, really, truly one pill can kill. Every time somebody takes a pill, they're almost playing Russian roulette, they don't understand. There's no more experimenting with drugs. These fake fentanyl pills or these fake pills that are coming across look just like medicine, and unfortunately they're made by some backyard idiot in the garage in Mexico that presses it into a pill, and it looks just like something that you'd get from your doctor.

(16:08):

So if you think about times when our students in college are studying, they take an Adderall to stay awake, so they continue studying through the night. And unfortunately, sometimes these

Adderalls are fake, they have a lethal dose of fentanyl, and they wake up dead. So it happens regularly. We have a wall full of Faces of Fentanyl in our lobby, and when you look at every one of those pictures, there's a story. It's a story of a young man or young woman that either took it intentionally but didn't know it was a bad pill, or they took it unintentionally, and they died because they thought they were taking something to help them stay awake and study. Then you see that the children that are exposed to the fentanyl as well where parents may leave it out, and the children get ahold of them and they die.

(17:00):

So that wall in our lobby tells a story, but the pictures are just one thing. You have to go further in each picture because each picture is a loved one lost and it's a family grieving that has to deal with that the rest of their life.