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Sweet Home Alabama: Schwein Named SAC in Birmingham

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He helped track down one of the nation's first domestic terrorists and earned an FBI Medal of Valor for securing the U.S. Embassy in Yemen in the wake of a 2008 attack. Now Richard Schwein is returning to Alabama as the special agent in charge of the FBI's Birmingham field office.

Schwein, a Center for Homeland Defense and Security graduate, was appointed to the position Nov. 5 by FBI Director Robert Mueller. With a resume laden with counter-terrorism roles, Schwein now will oversee all aspects of investigations and management at an office of approximately 180 agents and support personnel. He is one of 56 special agents in charge nationwide with the FBI.

"This is the culmination of a career in the FBI where I have been able to hold a number of positions over the course of 24 years," Schwein said. "While counter-terrorism is part of my responsibilities, I am responsible for all investigative programs, facilities and staff in the Birmingham Division."

Those years of experience have included being on the forefront of terrorism history in the United States.

He played a key role in capturing 1996 Atlanta Olympics bomber Eric Rudolph, who at the time was an FBI top 10 fugitive. Rudolph conducted a series of bomb attacks from 1996-1998 and was not captured until 2003. Schwein led the manhunt at the time of the fugitive's capture by a Murphy, North Carolina, police officer and was the on-scene commander during the multi-agency effort to locate and destroy explosives hidden by the terrorist in the mountains and hollows of western North Carolina. Almost a decade later, homegrown, violent extremists remain a top terrorism concern.

"These homegrown violent extremists that self-radicalize and decide to commit acts of violence in the name of some agenda are difficult to protect against," Schwein said. "Rudolph was a good example. He was not previously known, but had a social and political agenda in committing bombings to bring attention to his concerns. Because he was not a member of a specific group he was harder to detect and ultimately a lot more difficult to capture."

Schwein also has experience battling terrorism overseas. In 2004 volunteered for duty in Iraq where he coordinated FBI counter-terrorism and law enforcement activities. After working as the FBI senior representative to the military's U.S. Special Operations Command, where he began in 2006, he again returned to overseas duty in 2008 as the FBI's legal attaché in Sana'a, Yemen. In that capacity he served as the FBI Director's representative in the countries of Yemen, Djibouti, Eritrea and Ethiopia, working closely with the State Department and foreign law enforcement and intelligence partners.

But he will be most remembered for his action after the bombing of the U.S. Embassy in Yemen in September 2008. Attackers, including suicide bombers, hit the embassy with truck bombs, suicide vests, grenades and automatic rifles. A firefight erupted between the attackers and Yemeni security forces. Eighteen people died.

"It gets a little sporty when you have two car bombs go off outside your office window," Schwein said. "Now you



have a crime that has been committed against an American diplomatic facility. My team had to work hand-in-hand with the Yemeni government to identify the attackers and prevent a follow-on attack."

Schwein received the FBI Medal of Valor for his actions in the wake of the attack. His father, also a former FBI agent, earned the same honor in 1984. They remain the only father and son recipients of the FBI's highest award.

Returning to Alabama did not mean turning on career cruise control in calmer pastures. His first week on the new job involved speaking to an all-too familiar topic –violent extremism. Alabama-born Omar Shafik Hammami was added to the FBI's most wanted terrorists list Nov. 14. He was indicted in 2007 and 2009 on charges of providing support to, and training with, the terrorist group al-Shabaab in Somalia. Schwein was interviewed by an area television station regarding the fugitive, a topic in which he is well-versed.

As he assumes the role of a special agent in charge, Schwein will oversee prioritizing investigations across 33 counties in the northern judicial district of Alabama, ranging from terrorism to organized crime as well as corporate fraud. The agency has gravitated to an intelligence-driven, threat-based approach to prioritization.

"We're in the process of looking at various threats in the division's territory and taking a hard look at what we know and what we don't know," he said. "Our priorities will be in line with FBI national priorities, but if we determine we don't have threats in the national priorities we have flexibility to work the most egregious threats within our domain."

Schwein credits his CHDS education as broadening his understanding of interagency processes, building a network of fellow subject experts and nurturing critical thinking skills important to his profession.

"The Master's Degree Program was a tremendous opportunity to really think about what you are doing and what your organization's role is in homeland security and defense," he said. "It gave me some skills I have been able to use at the executive level of the FBI, such as critical thinking and strategic planning. It helped expand my knowledge base and skill-set so I could be effective in places like Yemen or running an FBI field office. There aren't many opportunities in a government career where you can do that kind of thinking and learn from your classmates' experiences."

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