



General John M.D. Shalikashvili, USA

IN MEMORIAM

How General John Shalikashvili “Paid It Forward” to 500,000 Others

By ANDREW MARBLE

The world lost a great warrior-diplomat with the recent passing of General John Malchase David Shalikashvili, USA. The General will likely be most remembered for his tenures as Chairman of the U.S. Joint Chiefs of Staff (CJCS) from 1993–1997, as Supreme Allied Commander Europe (SACEUR) from 1992–1993, and as Assistant to CJCS General Colin Powell from 1991–1992. Notable as well is General Shalikashvili’s distinction as the first draftee, the first immigrant, and the first graduate of Officer Candidate School to rise to the position of Chairman.

Yet among his many achievements, it was Operation *Provide Comfort*—the first major international humanitarian crisis ever tasked to the U.S. military—that was General Shalikashvili’s defining moment.

At a 1992 ceremony awarding the General his fourth star prior to being promoted to SACEUR, General Powell, CJCS

at the time, told the audience that General Shalikashvili had “worked a miracle” in northern Iraq.

Indeed, a miracle was required. For it was a crisis of epic proportions that had arisen in northern Iraq in April 1991. Over 500,000 Iraqi Kurds—men, women, and children—were trapped in the inhospitable mountains along the Turkish border. They had been chased out of the Iraqi lowlands by the Iraqi military. It was payback for a failed Kurdish attempt to overthrow Saddam Hussein in the immediate aftermath of the first Gulf War. Barred from crossing the border by a fearful Turkey, and expecting that they would be shot or even gassed if they returned home, the Kurds were in dire straits. Subject to the harsh mountain elements and lacking food, water, sanitation, and shelter, the refugees were dying at a rate of about 1,000 per day.

The United States responded by launching Operation *Provide Comfort*. Then-

Lieutenant General Shalikashvili, who was serving in Germany at the time, was tapped by SACEUR General John Galvin, USA, to head this massive rescue attempt. General Shalikashvili had a reputation as an intelligent, hardworking, and low-key officer skilled in diplomacy and logistics.

The choice was even more fitting because General Shalikashvili understood what it was like to be a refugee. He was born in Warsaw, Poland, in 1936 to refugee parents who had fled the Russian Revolution. After the violent Warsaw Uprising of 1944—which the family survived by hiding in cellars and scurrying through sewer pipes—he too became a refugee. The Shalikashvilis fled westward to Germany, their train coming under Allied air attack along the way. They settled in the Bavarian village of Pappenheim,

Dr. Andrew Marble is currently writing a biography of General John Shalikashvili. A preview of the biography is available at www.shalibography.com.

where they were supported by the kindness of relatives and assistance from the International Refugee Organization. The Shalikashvili family were able to emigrate to the United States in 1952 with the help of distant relatives who provided sponsorship, a safe ocean passage, housing, jobs, and even college scholarships. These benefactors “didn’t know us from beans,” General Shalikashvili would later recall.

Almost four decades later, this former World War II refugee found himself at a temporary command headquarters in Incirlik, Turkey, faced with the herculean task of rescuing these 500,000 Gulf War refugees.

What a complex operation it would be. Over 35,000 soldiers from 13 countries and volunteers from over 50 nongovernmental organizations (NGOs) would be involved. How does one coordinate so many national armies or coax mutually distrustful soldiers and NGO workers to cooperate? Just imagine overseeing the largest airdrop in history, one that exceeded even the scope of the Berlin Airlift. There was also the logistical task of quickly building temporary refugee camps and way-stations, and then undertaking the delicate diplomatic mission of convincing tribal leaders to urge the Kurds to return home. Moreover, there was the challenge of keeping the Iraqi troops at bay, requiring equal parts diplomacy and displays of raw military power. Shalikashvili adroitly directed all of this—and in the critical glare of the international media spotlight.

There was no blueprint to follow for this unprecedented operation. It could have turned out to be a nightmare, but somehow General Shalikashvili jerry-rigged a miracle, bringing an end to the suffering and death and persuading 500,000 Kurds to willingly return to their homes in Iraq in an astonishingly short 90 days. No wonder Chief of Staff of the Army General Gordon Sullivan would later liken General Shalikashvili to the great jazz improvisational artist Dave Brubeck: highly trained in the classical approach but able to operate successfully, almost magically, in new conceptual territory.

What deep motivations might have inspired General Shalikashvili to such a virtuoso performance of leadership?

At the ceremony where General Shalikashvili received his fourth star, General Powell had also lauded him for being “not only a gifted leader but a sensitive human

being,” one who “understood what it was to be a refugee.”

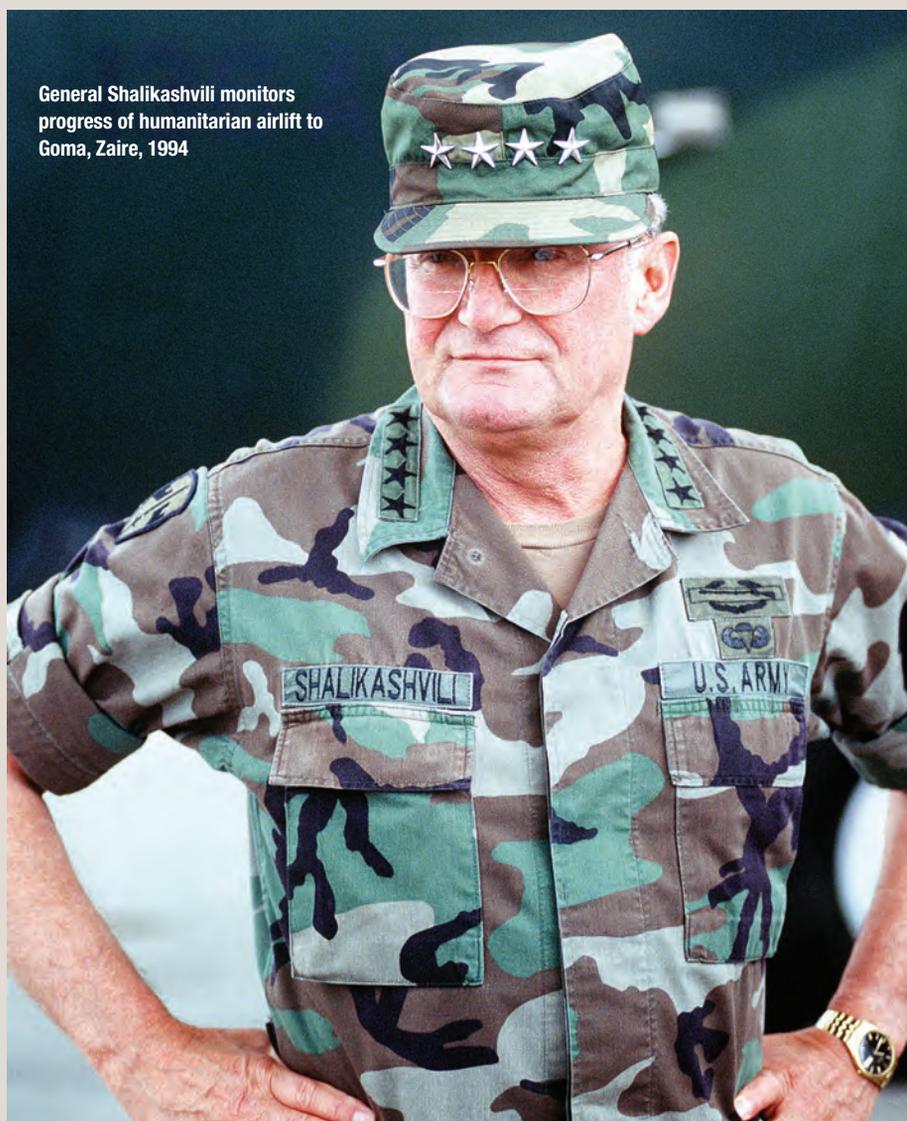
And indeed, many times during the operation, General Shalikashvili would visit the Kurdish camps. As he strolled among the makeshift tents, he would seek out the refugee

David Halberstam fittingly wrote that General Shalikashvili had “an immigrant’s special appreciation for America and a belief that this country, not just in the eyes of its own citizens, but in the eyes of much of the world, was the place the least fortunate turned

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children, particularly the orphans. They would chat together—and laugh. Asked once about those visits to the camps, the General replied, “When you see youngsters who are muddy and dirty and near death, and then see them a few weeks later cleaned up and playing and feeling like kids again—if you walk away from that without your heart beating fast, then you are made out of something different than I am.”

to as the court of last resort.” When the crisis in the Iraqi mountains occurred, the General thus willingly answered the call. All his leadership gifts were called into play, but it was with a heart attuned to the refugee plight, a sense of indebtedness to past benefactors, and the desire to pay it forward to 500,000 others that General Shalikashvili “worked a miracle” in northern Iraq. **JFQ**



General Shalikashvili monitors progress of humanitarian airlift to Goma, Zaire, 1994

U.S. Air Force (Andy Dumasway)