



**Q&A with Andrew Marble, PhD, Author of *Boy on the Bridge: The Story of John Shalikashvili's American Success*.**

Randy Dunham (Artillery OCS Class 10-69) Secretary of the Artillery OCS Alumni Chapter recently talked to Dr. Marble about the new book.

**Q:** You've written *Boy on the Bridge*, the first-ever biography of Gen. John Shalikashvili, one of the most illustrious Artillery Officer Candidate School graduates ever. What an underdog success story: from draftee to officer via Artillery Officer Candidate School Class 4-59 and finally to Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff (1993-97), the nation's chief military advisor to the President and Secretary of Defense. Wow!

Please tell us a bit more about the general's life and your new book. We're especially interested, of course, in the role OCS has played in both.

**A:** Sure. Gen. "Shali," as he liked to be called, was very unusual. And I've sought to do him justice by writing one of the most unusual military biographies you're likely to read.

**Q:** Boy, that's quite a statement. Let's start with the general. What made him so unusual?

**A:** Any movie about his life would seem too colorful to be true. Just take his European background. Though born in Warsaw, he was a citizen of no country because his parents had become stateless following the collapse of Tsarist Russia.

He spent his early childhood in WWII Poland. Danger was everywhere. As just one example, during the Warsaw Uprising his family's apartment was hit by a dive bomber, forcing them to live in cellars and move through sewers for weeks. Afterward, they escaped to Germany to live off the charity of relatives. The title of the book, *Boy on the Bridge*, evokes this low-point of his life—the dramatic evening in Bavaria at the end of the war when he first lays eyes on American soldiers.

Pure luck, though, intervened to bring him to the U.S. in 1952. And he came in style! He savored his first Thanksgiving meal aboard the stately red, white, and blue ocean liner, the *SS America*. He landed New York city, and settled down in the country's heartland, Peoria, Illinois. Poignantly, the U.S. would be the only country to ever award him citizenship.

**Q:** So, his is a great American rags-to-riches success story?

**A:** It's even more. He was actually born a prince in a long line of Shalikashvili princes dating back to at least the year 1400 in Georgia. His great-grandfather and namesake, Maj. Gen. Jean Shalikashvili, for one, fought with such distinction in the Crimean War that the Tsar Nicholas reportedly awarded him a gold saber and the title "The Brave."

But his mother's lineage was even more jaw-dropping. A descendent of the first Russian admiral to circumnavigate the globe, she was born in the Winter Palace in St. Petersburg, where her mother and aunts were serving as a lady in waiting to the last Russian tsarina.

**Q:** Wow—so it's really his "riches-to-rags-back-to-riches" story then that you found so unusual?

**A:** Yes. But again, there's even more. Gen. Colin Powell said of his successor: "He's a quiet, decent man and a very hard worker. There is a mistaken notion that you have to have Pattonesque qualities to be a great general. You don't need to rant and rave or be an arrogant jerk to be successful. Shali showed that."

Others found Shalikashvili to be "honest," "straightforward," "low-key," "self-effacing," and "informal." A consensus builder who "understands teamwork." Someone "extraordinarily sensitive in terms of caring for people" and whose humility was "bone deep." One who balances "firmness" with "compassion." A

man with a voice “seldom raised but always heard.” Someone, all told, who was “enormously loved and respected.”

How many national leaders, civilian or military, can you recall getting such press coverage?

Warm and fuzzies aside, though, this “softer” approach to leadership helped make Shalikashvili a consummate warrior-diplomat, enabling him to guide the U.S., Europe, and beyond through the chaos of the Soviet Union’s collapse.

Examples? For one, he led Operation *Provide Comfort*, the largest-to-date humanitarian mission, to successfully rescue 500,000 Kurdish refugees trapped in the mountainous Turkish-Iraqi border in the first Gulf War’s aftermath. After that represented chairman Powell in helping secure “loose nukes” in the former Soviet republics. And as NATO’s top military officer and then as chairman himself, he joined forces with fellow immigrant Madeleine Albright on the Clinton administration’s Partnership for Peace initiative and NATO enlargement program of the 1990s.

**Q:** Okay, Shalikashvili’s uniqueness is clear. What, then, makes your biography so atypical?

**A:** A conventional military biography would focus on Shalikashvili’s accomplishments as a national leader. There might be some discussion of his upbringing and rise through the ranks, yes. But the main focus would be on how he shaped his epoch, how he compared to other historical military leaders.

**Q:** So, *Boy on the Bridge* doesn’t do this?

**A:** No. The book is really about the chairmanship as a journey, not a destination. It’s a nuanced investigation into a question I found so fascinating as to motivate me to quit a full-time job, put my belongings in storage, and jump into my car for an open-ended cross-country research trip: *How in the heck did he do it?!* How did a stateless, penniless WWII refugee go on to become the highest-ranking officer in the world’s most powerful military?

The answer, I found, was largely because of who John Shalikashvili grew into as a human being. Or how he became that nominee who garnered such glowing praise over his unique approach to working with others.

Engagingly, the book explains his development through a series of “snapshots” of what he was like at key points in his life: as a young boy witnessing the horrors of war; as a teenager growing up in America’s heartland; as a private facing the crucible of Officer Candidate School; as a young husband and father who tragically loses both his wife and child; and finally as a four-star general having been nominated by President Bill Clinton for his last and most prestigious posting, having then to face the very public revelations of his father’s service in Hitler’s infamous Waffen SS and questions of what he himself knew of the association.

Those are jumping off points to examine how key factors—from Old World people, places, and events to New World opportunities and challenges—shaped his development. By vividly portraying the beliefs and actions of his parents, grandmother, and great aunt under the stress of wartime, for instance, the book helps readers to themselves make connections about how genes, upbringing, and childhood experiences influenced his rise up the ranks.

**Q:** So, is it fair to say that what makes *Boy on the Bridge* unique is also the central role of character study?

**A:** Exactly. It seeks to show how nature and nurture combined in a most fascinating way to create someone of Shalikashvili’s unusual success and personality.

The book also keeps names, dates, and jargon to a minimum. What little exposition there is by me, the biographer, only supplements this largely character-driven biography. Further, the structure of the book is atypical, relying heavily on flashbacks and jump forwards both to make important causal connections and to heighten the drama.

In sum, it’s a book that will appeal to military and civilian circles alike.

**Q:** Okay, so my final question: How does OCS fit in to all this?

**A:** Many OCS grads will tell you that the school was a defining moment for them. The pressure cooker atmosphere forced young men to either mature quickly or give up and quit. For Shalikashvili, it was exactly this. He’d done poorly in college and at his first job as an engineer. He’d been unlucky in love. His life was in the doldrums.

OCS thus constitutes the setting for one of the six main parts of the book, which is four chapters long—one chapter of which is a flashback to the military career of

his father, somebody who was surely on Shalikashvili's mind as he grappled with the decision to apply to, and whether to stay in, OCS. Put differently, it was Shalikashvili's first major attempt at living up to his exalted ancestry.

I don't want to give too much away, but through colorful anecdotes of the school's mainstays—the big/little brother relationship (one of his little brothers had “the urge to be independent,” a big no-no at OCS!), demerits, outright harassment, and of course Jark Marches—the book shows how OCS was the immigrant soldier's first major step in becoming the man almost four decades later who'd have that sterling reputation for effectively working with others. You know, cooperate and graduate! And of course, it was doubly hard for him to do because the key to success at OCS was keeping a low profile. How do you do that with a name like “Shalikashvili”?!

Sounds fascinating.