

WHO THE HELL IS BOB?

The Man Behind the Magic

STEVE RUDMAN



ask, and for good reason. True, Bob Walsh is hardly a household name, yet for the last forty years he has found himself popping up in the middle of countless high-profile events, his own life inextricably entwined with the famous, the powerful, and the notorious.

Who else has a résumé that includes such disparate accomplishments as helping to create March Madness, coordinating disaster relief for earthquake victims, producing the successful 1990 Goodwill Games, converting Stalin's Dacha to a hotel, and resurrecting Mr. Blackwell's career.

Author Steve Rudman spices solid research and insider secrets with a generous dose of razor-sharp wit as he tells Bob's incredibly entertaining story. Politics, history, intrigue, romance, celebrity gossip — it's all there in the life of one "ordinary" man.

Who the hell is Bob? After reading this book, the answer will be an easy one: Someone you will not soon forget.

Bob is a unique individual who proves over and over that a single individual can make a difference. His life is a wonderful example of what courage, determination, and energy can accomplish.

- Eduard Shevardnadze, President, Republic of Georgia

Some people go through life sitting on the sidelines. Bob Walsh has always been a player, and the world is more interesting as a result.

- Bill Russell, NBA Hall of Famer, Seattle, Washington

Bob's story speaks to all of us who seek our own place on earth and whose whisper is louder than thunder.

- Mr. Blackwell, creator "Worst Dressed List," Los Angeles, California

Bob Walsh and I have been friends for twenty years. His story is fantastic, one that has been captured in this book. It is great reading.

- Jack McMillan, former chairman, Nordstrom

Everybody knows Bob has a lot of friends in high places. I think Bob is living proof that dynamite really does come in small packages.

- Ted Turner, Time Warner, Atlanta, Georgia



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Pictures, too
Bob Walsh*

Intervention In Armenia



Bob won't let people say no. He's going to make the thing work. He's an extremely rare personality.

— Rev. William J. Sullivan, former president, Seattle University, Seattle, Washington

The earthquake that shook the northern region of Armenia at 11:47 a.m. on December 7, 1988, produced devastation almost beyond comprehension. Three distinct tremblers, each lasting between ten and fifteen seconds, spiked in a Richter reading of 6.9, instantly transforming half of the republic's territory into a tapestry of death, misery, ruin, and ash. By the time the shaking and settling had stopped, 25,000 people were dead and 500,000 homeless. Seventy-nine cities, regions, and villages had been laid to waste, including Spitak, which was utterly flattened. Two hundred and thirty manufacturing enterprises, thousands of schools, and countless social and cultural institutions had been destroyed. The quake even cracked the foundation of the Hotel Tbilisi in Georgia's capital city, 250 miles from its epicenter.

Intervention In Armenia

Several hours after news of the disaster swept the globe, Gary Furlong, a personal-injury attorney, took a red-eye out of Seattle, his destination the U.S. State Department's Office of Foreign Disaster Assistance in Washington, D.C. Furlong, who had just been named the new chairman of the King County Disaster Relief Team, had a keen interest in Russia and the Soviet Union and wanted to volunteer his organization's services. But when Furlong arrived at OFDA, officials told him that while the Soviet government



The 6.9 quake that struck Armenia killed more than 25,000

welcomed donations of supplies and medicine, it would not allow American doctors, paramedics, or nurses to enter Armenia.

Furlong figured as much. While he realized Armenia was woefully ill-prepared to deal with still-unfolding carnage, he also recognized that the Soviets harbored profound paranoia that anyone in the West would discover the truth. Refusing to let it go at that, Furlong tracked down Bob Walsh's telephone number from U.S. Senator Brock Adams' office and called for advice. Gary Furlong and Bob Walsh had never met, but Furlong knew that Bob was president of the Seattle Organizing Committee, that the SOC had experienced difficulty generating support for its efforts in Seattle, and that Bob had connections to Soviet government officials. Furlong suspected that an earthquake response might put Seattle in the news and generate interest in the Games.

Bob immediately agreed to help Furlong, dispatching telexes to Gennadi Gerasimov at the Soviet Foreign Ministry and to Soviet ambassador Yuri Dubinin. The telexes vouched for Furlong, made it clear that Furlong only intended to conduct a private relief effort, and proposed a quick solution to Soviet customs and immigration

concerns. Meanwhile, Furlong met with Third Secretary Georgy Markosov at the Soviet Embassy.

"We have access to doctors and experienced paramedics who are prepared to fly to Armenia to render assistance," Furlong told him.

"You already know our position," replied Markosov. "No Americans in Armenia."

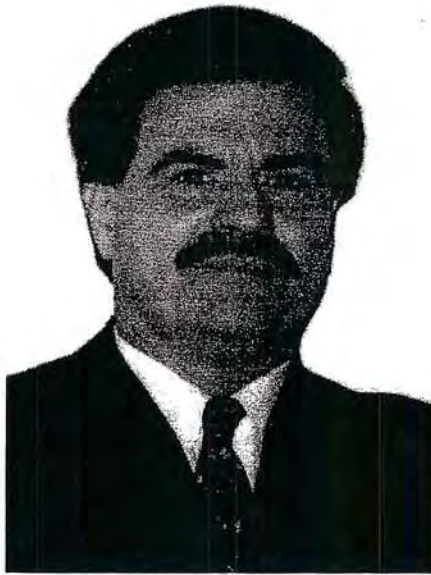
"Are you aware that Bob Walsh has offered to help?"

The Russian's attitude changed perceptibly.

"I'll get back to you this afternoon after I consult with Moscow," said Markosov.

The Soviets normally took weeks to make any kind of decision, even relatively insignificant ones. But a few hours after

Gerasimov, Markosov, and Dubinin had discussed the contents of Bob's telexes, Gary Furlong, who had never traveled outside the United States, found himself making frantic plans to fly to Soviet Armenia. The Soviets had agreed to Bob's proposal that Furlong and his team be allowed to fly directly to Yerevan.



Gary Furlong

That solved several problems. Under ordinary circumstances, American relief team personnel would first have to obtain visas to enter the Soviet Union. Normally, that paper trail would snake through the Soviet Embassy in Washington, D.C., and then on to Moscow; the process would

have taken weeks — even without delays, miscommunication, or misplaced paperwork. Once the disaster team received visas, it would have had to fly to Moscow, where the airplane's cargo would be unloaded and inspected. Only then would it be permitted to fly into Yerevan.

Since Furlong's relief team had no time for that, Bob suggested the Soviets waive standard procedures and permit Furlong's team to fly directly to Yerevan without visas so it could get to work immediately. Bob promised to screen and certify all individuals making the trip to assure that they weren't agents of the federal

government or media representatives. Bob also vowed to provide the Soviet Embassy, via telex, with registration information on the U.S. aircraft that would enter Soviet airspace. When the U.S. transport arrived, the Soviets could send up their fighter planes; their pilots would be able to check the registration identification on the tail of the U.S. transport jet against those Bob provided. If they matched, the American transport would be given a Soviet escort into Armenia. If they didn't, the Soviets would shoot the American plane down.

This venture not only marked the first public-private American relief effort conducted anywhere in the Soviet Union since 1923 (U.S. soldiers had done relief work in the Soviet Union during World War II), it became the start of what the International Red Cross would ultimately describe as "worldwide, public-private relief symbiosis." And it only happened because of a major, here-to-fore unheard of concession by the Soviets: They would allow Americans without visas to enter Armenia solely on Bob's word.

Furlong had never orchestrated a relief effort anywhere in the world. He had, however, made frequent visits to the Office of Foreign Disaster Assistance, studying how the organization set up disaster responses, and the technical components of planning a relief mission. Now he had three primary tasks: Get his team into Armenia, get it going, and get it out. After exploring several options to transport his team, equipment, and supplies into Soviet territory, Furlong contacted Flying Tigers, a cargo service that operated all over the world. He began with a weekend night clerk at Los Angeles International Airport; a couple of hours and supervisors later, Furlong had the company's vice president of operations on the phone. Furlong explained the situation and asked if Flying Tigers could help. Within a relatively short period of time, Furlong had a plane, a crew, the necessary fuel, and one-way transport to Armenia. Flying Tigers could get Furlong and his team into Armenia; because the airplane would depart shortly after arrival, Furlong would have to make other arrangements to get his team home. The plan fell short of perfect, but a frenetic Gary Furlong had few other options.

When the Flying Tigers 747 arrived in Seattle from LAX, Dr. Roy Farrell coordinated the packing of the plane with blood plasma, medicines, blankets, tents, and other gear. An emergency physician at Group Health's Central Hospital in Seattle, Farrell held the responsibility of orchestrating medical services for the Goodwill Games. He had already made a few trips to the Soviet Union and had

a decent understanding of conversational Russian, much of his language expertise owing to his participation in a one-month exchange with Soviet doctors in Tashkent, Uzbekistan.

“Within a week of the earthquake we were on the scene,” recalled Dr. Farrell. “During that week, we put together a 747 full of medical supplies and equipment. We had a mobile field hospital and



Dr. Roy Farrell

three search and rescue dogs from Alaska. Once word got out that we had permission to enter the Soviet Union, everybody wanted to get on that plane. Donations came from everywhere. We even had Armenian physicians from California and the Midwest.”

When the Flying Tigers 747 stopped at JFK in New York en route to Yerevan, Furlong and a small group of doctors joined the flight. As the plane departed, Bob telexed Victor Gribanov at the Soviet Embassy in Washington, D.C., providing him with the tail identification letters: L V M L O.

“The landing in Armenia was hairy and the pilots were real nervous about it,” remembered Furlong. “You had to come through the mountains. In the two days preceding our arrival there had been two mid-air collisions there. I heard that the air traffic system was just overloaded. Then the Soviets gave altitude in meters where we calculated in feet. Their tower people did not speak English very well. Our interpreter did not speak traffic-control Russian. There were real tensions in that plane as to what the hell was going on. When we were getting ready to land in Yerevan, I was sort of doing a last-minute briefing and I asked whether there were any questions.”

“Yeah,” someone shouted from the cockpit. “How are we getting home?”

“I don’t know,” Furlong replied.

Nearly everyone on the plane burst into laughter.

“They thought I was kidding,” Furlong recalled later.

“No, really, how are we getting home?” asked another voice.

"I told them again I didn't know," Furlong remembered. "Then there was a quieter laugh, and then there was dead silence."

"Fuck, you're serious!" came another voice.

"I told them I was," Furlong explained later. "The only thing I knew was that Aeroflot would bring six people out a day through Moscow back to the United States. Aeroflot had told us it would do that. Or Aeroflot had told Bob Walsh. I wasn't sure."

"I knew that this was the first 747 Armenia had ever seen," recalled Dr. Farrell. "The airport was thronged with people gaping at this double-decker airplane. It took fifty-two trucks to unload it."

"We arrived at night," Furlong advised later. "As we taxied in, the pilots commented about one of the planes on the ground."

"Look who's here," one of the pilots said.

The other pilot peered out the side window. "Shit. What's he doing here?"

"God only knows."

Overhearing the two pilots, Furlong glanced at the plane sitting on the tarmac.

"Who's plane is that?" he asked.

"You don't wanna know."

"No, really, I wanna know. Who is this guy? What's the name of this guy's company?"

"Pan Aviation. Out of Miami."

The name meant nothing to Gary Furlong and he couldn't get any more information out of the pilots, so he turned to the task at hand, becoming aware soon after disembarking the 747 that the Soviets had not prepared for Furlong or his team. They didn't know what to do with them and couldn't answer any of Furlong's questions. After standing in a heavy rain for what seemed to be hours, Furlong snapped.

"Look," Furlong said to a man who seemed to be in charge, "if I don't have a meeting with someone of a certain level within an hour, and if my guys aren't taken out of the rain, we're going to put all this shit back on the plane and we're leaving. And I'm going to tell Moscow it's your goddamn fault."

"Do you want me to interpret 'goddamn?'" asked the Soviet translator.

"You bet I do!" barked Furlong.

Fifteen minutes later, a man identifying himself as a "deputy minister" introduced himself to Furlong.

“He could have been the janitor for all I knew,” Furlong admitted later. “But he was sitting in a nice office. He said the arrangements for getting our team into the field would have to be made the next day. There would be someone at the hospital for me to talk to. So the next day I went to talk to this guy at the hospital. The first thing he wants to know is what our team will give him to let us go into the field.”

It stunned Furlong that the man wanted a bribe. Dead bodies had been stacked everywhere. Thousands of people suffered from exposure. Countless others remained trapped beneath flattened buildings. Each member of Furlong’s team had gladly given up the Christmas holidays to fly to Armenia to assist earthquake victims, only to encounter an asshole who wanted a kickback in exchange for allowing Furlong’s team to save lives and treat the injured.

“I was surprised the guy could be so goddamn calloused,” recalled Furlong. “The deal we finally cut was that, in return for a bus for our team and a person with the authority to get my team anywhere it wanted to go, I would get him ten doctors over the next six months to perform surgeries. Obviously, I had no intention of doing that. But the long and the short of it was that I found out the value of ten surgeons was a bus and KGB guy.”

Furlong had gotten his team in, arranged transportation, and gotten it going. Now he had to get back to the United States to see what he could do about getting his people out of there. As Furlong departed on Aeroflot for Moscow, Dr. Farrell and his medical colleagues began performing operations and search-and-rescue services.

“We went out to a little town near the epicenter and set up camp in a park,” remembered Dr. Farrell. “One night we went to a collapsed building with the dogs. We took them into a department store that had collapsed like a house of pancakes. The Armenians are Christian; to go through this department store with Santa Clauses and Christmas trees, well, it was gut wrenching when you thought about all the people who were crushed and killed in the building.”

Furlong flew from Moscow to New York, where he was promptly targeted by a news media eager to have him criticize the Soviet government’s apparent inability to manage the crisis in Armenia. Taken aback by his instant celebrity status, Furlong grew more astonished when the news media failed to understand that no country, not even the United States, could be prepared for a quake of the length and magnitude that jolted Armenia. And it irritated him, especially as

fatigued as he was, that the media peppered him with inane questions; either the news media hadn't listened to his answers or it wanted to trip him up.

Furlong could have been critical about a lot of things he'd seen and heard in Armenia, especially the bribery, corruption, and siphoning off of money and goods intended for the relief effort. People in the Armenian community had told Furlong not to route medicine, equipment, or money through Moscow because Armenia would receive only a small percentage of it. Moscow would snatch the majority, much of it winding up on the black market throughout Russia. But Furlong certainly wasn't going to tell any secrets — not while he still had a team on the ground in Armenia, and not while Bob Walsh still had the Goodwill Games in Seattle to produce. So Furlong danced the media dance, then hopped a shuttle to Washington, D.C., where he used U.S. Senator Brock Adams' office to search for a way to get his team out of Armenia and back home by Christmas.

Furlong weighed the pros and cons of routing options on several carriers. Aeroflot had offered to take out six people at a time from Moscow to either New York City or Washington, D.C., but that would be a slow, tedious process. He checked with Donald Trump's people. Trump had a stake in TWA, but Trump had no interest in assisting Furlong, who explored additional commercial avenues, including Yerevan-Moscow-London, Yerevan-Istanbul-London, and Yerevan-Frankfurt-London. Pan Am had a flight out of London for New York on the evening of December 21, which would get many of Furlong's people home by Christmas thanks to a deal Furlong cut with Continental Airlines to fly his people home for free, wherever they lived, if they made it to the U.S. by December 22.

Furlong wanted his team to make that Pan Am flight, but just in case, he scratched around for other flights. Then he remembered Pan Aviation. He didn't know anything about the company or the mysterious individual who owned it, but he located Pan Aviation's telephone number and called it. A receptionist grilled Furlong about the nature of his call, then transferred it.

"What do you want?" said the gruff voice on the other end.
"Where are you calling me from?"

"Senator Brock Adams' office."

"Do you work for the senator?"

"No."

"What are you doing there? How do you know the senator?"

Furlong explained that he once ran one of Adams' political campaigns in Washington State, but had no official connection to the senator and was not on Adams' payroll. Adams had permitted Furlong to use one of his offices, and there was nothing more to it than that.

"Look," said Furlong, "all I want to know is if you can get my team out of Armenia and into Europe."

"Okay. I'll talk to you about it. Come down and see me."

Furlong asked several people in Adams' office what they knew about Pan Aviation. All of them advised Furlong to stay away from it.

"He has airplanes in Armenia and seems willing to help," said Furlong. "So I'm going to Miami."

"Just watch your ass," advised one of Adams' staffers.

So Furlong jumped on a plane to keep his appointment with Pan Aviation's major-domo, Sarkis Soghanalian. On the flight down, a pair of reporters, one from *The New York Post* and the other from *The Miami Herald*, both of whom recognized Furlong, struck up a conversation. By coincidence, they knew all about Soghanalian and were en route to interview him.

Furlong quizzed the reporters, eager to learn more about the man the Flying Tigers pilots told him he didn't want to know anything about. According to both, Soghanalian occupied a shadowy netherworld teeming with the kind of implausible figures ordinarily found in a John Le Carre novel. The bottom line on Soghanalian: March out 50,000 naked soldiers and Soghanalian could equip them out of stock with uniforms, boots, weaponry, bullets, explosives, vehicles, and helicopters. And what he didn't have in stock he could get: grenade and rocket launchers, Uzi's, precision sniper and antisniper rifles, ammunition, whatever the client ordered.

Sarkis Soghanalian ranked among the largest private arms dealers in the world and was known in the trade as "The Merchant of Death." As the glamour guy of the industry, Soghanalian sold weapons everywhere on the planet that insurrections and armed conflicts could be found. Soghanalian had a murky and ill-defined relationship with United States government agencies and law enforcement officials. He apparently worked on and off for them but was currently under indictment for selling attack helicopters to Iraq.

A Lebanese citizen of Armenian decent, Soghanalian had been born and reared in a Beirut suburb and grew up to become a freelance gunrunner; he had nearly been murdered once for selling arms to Lebanese Christian groups. When he arrived in the United States, he had

\$46 in his pocket. He struggled for years, working in a small garage in upstate New York while selling arms to Lebanese Christians whenever he could arrange financing. Then he reportedly picked up the CIA as a client and his fortunes turned around. Over the next two decades, Soghanalian's buyers came to include a roster of bloody headline makers: the Lebanese Christian Forces in their war against the Palestine Liberation Organization; the Argentine military junta in its war in the Falkland Islands; Nicaragua's radical Somoza. Soghanalian apparently had branches of his illusory and high-profit operations in Miami, Beirut, Madrid, Athens, Geneva, and Baghdad.

Soghanalian had boasted that he was not only an arms dealer, but a military consultant who frequented battlefields to visit customers and provide morale for the troops. He maintained that his sales exceeded \$1 billion per year and his annual income topped \$12 million. He had held legal residency in the United States for more than two decades and, according to the grapevines that whispered in Soghanalian's sphere, had reportedly received jars of severed human ears from his clients.

Furlong would find out much later that Soghanalian had gone to jail for bank fraud and money-laundering, and that he had conspired to sell high-tech weaponry, including rocket launchers, to Saddam Hussein for his country's use against Iran, and then against the United States during the Persian Gulf War. According to U.S. assistant attorney Susan Tarbe, Soghanalian was "a con man who had perverted the American dream."

Yet following his release from prison, Soghanalian helped U.S. agents uncover a Middle East-based counterfeiting scheme. The Sarkis Soghanalian that Gary Furlong met was about sixty years old and weighed more than 300 pounds. He owned a stable of Arabian horses, a fleet of jets and helicopters that whisked him and his weaponry anywhere at a moment's notice, a palatial home on Biscayne Bay, and additional homes in Athens, Madrid, Paris, and Los Angeles. His main office occupied part of a private hangar at Miami International Airport.

The office actually amounted to a compound surrounded with a barbed-wire fence, guarded by several frowning men with guns. Two of them escorted Furlong to Soghanalian's quarters.

"Are you CIA or are you State Department?" Soghanalian asked, bypassing pleasantries.

"Neither," said Furlong.

“Are you working with Senator Adams?”

“No, I’m nothing, you know? I’m telling you the truth. If I lie to you, you are not going to believe me. If I tell you the truth, you are not going to believe me. At least this way, I’m honest.”

“Fuck you,” said Soghanalian, walking away.

For the next three days, Soghanalian interrogated Furlong about his relationship with Senator Adams, pushing to find out who Furlong really was and what Furlong could do for him, although Soghanalian seemed to have nothing specific in mind. Soghanalian talked about the Soviets, about several regional conflicts, and even told Furlong where weapons were manufactured and how they were bought and sold. Soghanalian generally displayed a friendly attitude, but Furlong detected an undercurrent of menace in his personality. During the course of their conversations, they discussed a range of options for getting Furlong’s team out of Armenia.

“Maybe the best thing,” Soghanalian finally told Furlong, “is to just send my private jet to collect the doctors.”

Soghanalian eventually returned to prison for an array of scurrilous deeds. But had he not provided that plane, a number of the weary American doctors, paramedics, and nurses would have been at Heathrow Airport in London on December 21st, ready to board a Pan Am 747 bound for Kennedy International Airport in New York where they could catch the free Continental flights home. The London flight pushed off Heathrow runway 27R at 18:04 hours and leveled off at cruise altitude at 18:56 hours. Seven minutes later, the 747 disappeared from Heathrow’s radar screens. Most of the wreckage from Pan Am 103 was found in Lockerbie, Scotland.