



Col (Ret) Gail S. Halvorsen



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The Berlin Airlift of 1948-1949 was the first humanitarian airlift of the Cold War and an early triumph for the fledgling U.S. Air Force. Soviet leader Stalin's response to the opposing political systems and goals of the Allied powers governing post-World War II Germany was to blockade all rail, road, and waterway traffic into and out of Berlin. They intended to force West Berlin into submission,

but it went squarely against Western commitment to rebuild democracy in Europe and set the stage for the later development of NATO.

Two days after Stalin's blockade began, Allied aircraft of the newly formed USAF and other American services, plus the forces of Great Britain and France, began flying supplies into the city. Everything the Berliners needed to survive—from groceries to gasoline—would come to them only by air until the end of September 1949. The airlift lasted over 15 months and cost more than \$224 million.

At the time of the Berlin Airlift, I was a simple pilot with a knowledge of how to fly an aircraft day or night, in most kinds of weather, carrying anything anywhere, any time. I didn't know the politics, and I certainly didn't understand the full significance of what was being played out in the skies over East Germany for the benefit of Berlin. I did know that people were hungry, they were being bullied, and they needed help. That was good enough for me.

Some of our Airlift pilots had bombed Berlin during the war. All of us had been conditioned to view Germans as the enemy. One of my best friends, Conrad Steffan, was shot down in his P-47 somewhere over Germany. I had given him his first airplane ride in 1941. He was never

found. Yet I never met an Airlift pilot who regretted flying in all kinds of weather to save Berlin. The pilots who had bombed Berlin said they now wanted to do all they could to help save the survivors.

Common Cause



An early morning block of USAF Airlift Task Force C-54s, flying coal to Berlin from Fassberg RAF station, being unloaded at Gatow Air Terminal in the British sector of Berlin.

I didn't know what to expect as I entered the South corridor from Fulda, West Germany on my first trip to Berlin. We had 20,000 pounds of flour in the cargo section of that faithful C-54, all of it for Germans in Berlin.

By the time the engines quit turning on the ramp at Tempelhof Air Base in West Berlin, the cargo door was open, and in streamed five Germans dressed in a mismatch of old uniform jackets and whatever other pieces of clothing that could be found in this shell of a city devastated by war. I had been told that these unloaders could have been pilots themselves or other professionals, but now their profession was survival. They were served a hot meal during their shift. That and freedom for Berlin was enough motivation for the back-breaking task of unloading 20,000 pounds in about 15 minutes.



I quickly looked from one German worker to another to find that superior look, the defiant stare, or a quality that would match my expectations of the ultimate enemy of a few years ago. As we approached each other, I suddenly noticed the closest man had his hand extended in greeting. A smile was on his face! They looked at those big sacks of flour and back at us like we were angels from heaven. There was an expression of gratitude in words I couldn't understand, but the moist eyes and body language was more than enough to convey the meaning. The tension I had was gone. We were almost instantly brothers working for a common cause: free agency.

Life in the air and on the ground



Crates of milk are loaded for the flight to Berlin.

On July 11, 1948, we first arrived at Rhein-Main Air Base after a long flight over the Atlantic Ocean from Mobile, Alabama. We had four crews on board, so we didn't need to stop enroute except for food and fuel. As we came within communication range of the tower, we were astounded by the non-stop transmissions between the many aircraft and the tower. We had never heard so much traffic on the radios. It was difficult to establish contact and receive landing instructions. Finally we were able to join the traffic at Rhein-Main for a landing. Planes seemed everywhere: on the ground, in the air and taxiing. It wouldn't be long before we were on our way to Berlin. First we were given a choice of where we would sleep.

All the regular barracks were already filled. We were

given a choice between tents or tarpapered wooden buildings, which were without room partitions, water, toilets, or heating, except one black stove for wood. These temporary buildings likely were built by the Nazis for slave laborers working on the Autobahn. The buildings were located across, and next to, the Autobahn at Zeppelinheim. We had enough of tents during the war and immediately opted for the "buildings." We were not told that they were already occupied. The occupants were displaced persons from many different countries awaiting repatriation. They were temporarily employed by the Americans before the Airlift but were now heavily involved in loading aircraft for Berlin. By the time we arrived at the compound, trucks were moving the displaced persons out so we could move in. I didn't like the looks of those shacks and turned my attention to a nearby older barn, the bottom part of which was filled with farm equipment in various stages of disrepair. The attic above was in good shape, and I soon had my cot placed there. Being a farm boy, I didn't mind the inconvenience. Our mess hall and showers were some distance from the barn. The food was good and enough, but that wasn't the case for many Germans. It was a shock to see grown men go through the garbage barrels looking for scraps of food left from plates not emptied. When they found some, they would carefully place the food in a sack which would be taken home to children who didn't have enough. *If it is this hard here in Western Germany, I thought, how much worse must it be in Berlin?*

Later on we were moved on the base at Rhein-Main. The barracks were wooden but much better. At the end of December 1948, I was moved to Wiesbaden Y-80. The barracks were of masonry and wonderful by comparison. That old barn at Zeppelinheim, restored some years later, is still there and in much better shape. In fact I was stationed at Rhein-Main in the early 1960s, and our middle son, Bob, went to elementary school in that same building. The farm wagons were long gone.

The three air corridors across East Germany to Berlin were 20 statute miles wide, and there were no navigational aids from the East German border to West Berlin. For some of the distance, we could use transmissions from navigational aids located at Fulda and West Berlin. It was a similar situation for American and British aircraft flying the northern corridor from the British Zone. If we strayed from the corridor, we could be shot down. The Soviets used many devices to harass our aircraft. One of the most common harassments was the buzz jobs from the Yak-3 fighter planes stationed at Soviet airfields, such as Dessau and Zerbst, near and under the corridors.

The Russians didn't fire on us because President Truman stationed more than 60 B-29 bombers in England and



warned Stalin. Stalin knew what the B-29s were capable of delivering. When I realized why the fighters were not shooting, I began to enjoy watching them come straight on, and from behind and over our wing. Still there was the knowledge in the back of my mind that, on April 5, a Yak-3 buzzed and collided head-on in the corridor with a British Vickers "Viking" airliner, killing all aboard both aircraft. It is understandable that in June the British flew eight first line Hawker "Tempest" Mk V fighters to Gatow to provide escort if needed. They were removed back to the British Zone on July 14.

Initially we flew five different altitudes for the approach to West Berlin. I never did get used to breaking out of the clouds and seeing those big birds, C-54s, above and below me. It was a magnificent sight. Later we just used two flight levels in the south corridor as ground controlled approach and long range navigational radars

one step away. On July 29, 1948, General Tunner arrived from Washington to put some discipline in the operation and increase the tonnage to Berlin.

On August 12, 1948, I arrived over Berlin to find terrible weather and total confusion. Aircraft were arriving every five minutes, and only one able to land every 12 to 20 minutes. The clouds were solid rain, and Traffic Control tried to space the aircraft at different altitudes and over different holding beacons, but it was too much. They lost control. We were holding over Wedding beacon at 10,000 feet. Flying inbound in the murk, we suddenly came face to face with another C-54 at the same altitude, headed in the opposite direction. As we passed we could see the eyebrows of the other crew. The only reason we didn't collide was because we were both in level flight. I am not sure how we got out of that situation. By the end of that day, I had flown seven hours and ten minutes. Of that, two hours and 25 minutes were at night; plus one hour of night weather; two hours day weather, and one hour and 45 minutes of day in the clear. Added to the ground time, it made for a full day.

General Tunner heard about the breakdown in control and arrived over Berlin the next day with his staff to remedy the problems, only to find himself in the same predicament as many had the day before: He was in the middle of a stack of aircraft. One C-54 had landed long and was burning on the end of the runway. Another had blown out its tires trying to stop. A third had landed on a runway under construction. General Tunner called control and directed them to send the other aircraft back to West Germany. That was August 13, 1948, now known as "Black Friday."



The first C-82 used during the Berlin Airlift is unloaded at Tempelhof Air Force Base.

were installed in Berlin. That was a great improvement. The last 70 miles coming into Berlin were then covered by the long-range radar. The operator could tell us how close we were to the aircraft in front and behind us and whether to speed up a bit or slow down. It was marvelous, and as with the ground controlled approach radar, the always reassuring voice of the operators caused my blood pressure to drop by at least 20 points.

In the beginning the Airlift was a "cowboy" operation. Pilots were trying to beat each other to Berlin and back. When the weather dropped in Berlin, we couldn't land the aircraft as fast as we were arriving. Disaster was just

General Tunner quickly instituted some life-saving procedures. There would be no more stacking of aircraft. The inbound aircraft would make its radar ground controlled approach, and if it failed to land, it would return with its load to West Germany. Every flight would be under instrument flight rules, no matter how good the weather. Every crew would stay by their aircraft while it was being unloaded and then depart as soon as the job was finished. General Tunner was tough as nails but equally as concerned for crewmembers' safety. He was a brilliant, unequalled airlift genius. He made the airlift work and work most efficiently. I respected his tough-love discipline. The next day, August 14, I was



again over Berlin in weather, but things were different. The burned-out aircraft was still on the far edge, past the end of the runway, but General Tunner's procedures were already beginning to work.

On the ground in Berlin, living conditions were difficult. The Berliners slept in bombed-out buildings, mostly without heat. Electricity was on for only a brief time, about one o'clock in the morning. Anytime we felt discouraged because a cockpit heater didn't work, we only had to look at the ruins of Berlin and be grateful. If at times we were on a long shift without food, we only needed think about the Berliner sweeping up some spilled flour mixed with coal dust and very carefully putting it in a paper sack to take home.

Heroes of the Airlift

First and foremost in my view are the British, American, and Germans who gave their lives in supplying the blockaded city of Berlin. Many other names stand out. General Lucius Clay certainly set the tone right in the beginning. He had an iron will and exercised his exceptional leadership on behalf of the Berliners and their freedom. He was ready to fight to open up the ground access to Berlin. In full partnership with him on the British side was General Sir Brian Robertson, and on the French side, General Pierre Koenig. General Clay's relationship with Berlin Governing Mayor, Ernst Reuter was special. When Clay asked the Mayor how the Berliners would support such a daring move, Mayor Reuter replied something to the effect that, "You take care of the airlift. I'll take care of the Berliners." The Mayor was certainly a hero.

Hardly enough credit can be given to General Tunner, the Combined Airlift Task Force commander. He made it work. His British deputy was Air Commodore J.W.F. Merer of the RAF. Merer maintained his command of the British effort, named "Plainfare." The American effort was named "Operation Vittles." A major contribution by the French occurred when French General Jean Ganeval ordered the Soviet radio tower next to the new runway at Tegel Airfield dynamited. The Soviet East Berlin Commander, General Kotikov, was furious. I was enroute from Berlin to Rhein-Main when I heard the good news on the radio.

Of the rest of the American military, as a group, I would nominate not the pilots but the aircraft mechanics. There was not sheltered space for maintenance of the 225 C-54s that needed ongoing care in Fassberg, Celie, Wiesbaden, Berlin, and Rhein-Main. In the winter these people, some of them former German Luftwaffe mechanics, changed engines in open fields with snow, ice,

and freezing temperatures. Fingers often stuck to sub-freezing cylinder head bolts. The British mechanics at their bases in the British Zone gave similarly exemplary service. Close behind them in my view were the security police who were out in all kinds of weather, much of the time without shelter.

The civilian heroes were certainly the Berliners themselves. Without their determination, commitment, motivation, and support, the Airlift would have never worked. Berliners coped with little or no heat, very little electricity, and little food. The Berlin men, women, and children gave the most.

The Berlin Children

A chance encounter with some Berlin Children in July 1948, early in the Soviet siege of West Berlin, played a key role in my understanding of the Berliners' unconquerable spirit. Like all pilots assigned to fly food and fuel over heavily fortified Soviet East Germany, I wanted to see the Brandenburg Gate, the Reichstag, and Hitler's bunker, not just from the sky, but up close and on the ground. But General Tunner's wise policy requiring all pilots to stay by their aircraft while they were being unloaded, meant there was no opportunity for sightseeing. The engines were to be started the moment the last sack of flour or coal was taken from the aircraft, and then we were to get back to West Germany for another load, fly two or three round trips to Berlin from Rhein-Main, sleep, and do it again.

My only chance to see Berlin on the ground was to finish my three round trips and, instead of going to bed, return to Berlin from Rhein-Main as a non-crew member (a hitchhiker). That is what I did early in the afternoon one mid-July day. This allowed me to look around Tempelhof and the main sights, then catch a ride back to Rhein-Main on a returning aircraft. That was no problem. C-54s were leaving Berlin empty for Rhein-Main every few minutes. The only problem was the loss of sleep for 24 hours and getting back to West Germany before I was scheduled to start another three trips to Berlin.

It was at this time I met about 30 children at the barbed wire fence on the approach end of the runway at Tempelhof. I had stopped to get movies of our aircraft coming over the bomb-damaged apartment houses, and soon about 30 children came up on the opposite side of the barbed wire fence and began talking with me in broken English. They were watching the planes land with special interest. The discussion began about the increased number of planes landing each day, their cargo, and our commitment to keep the airlift going. There



Lt Gail Halvorsen speaking with children from West Berlin, who were watching Berlin Airlift operations from the other side of a barbed wire fence.

were no complaints about the dried: eggs, potatoes, or milk. Their questions began to center on how firmly we were committed to keep up the airlift in the face of the Soviet threats. I was a pilot, not a politician, but I told them not to worry.

They cautioned me that the good summer weather would be replaced with fog, freezing rain, and snow. Could we do it then? I assured them we could, but they still showed some concern. They said something like: "During bad weather times you don't have to give us enough to eat. Just give us a little. Some day we will have enough to eat, but if we lose our freedom, we may never get it back." It was the children encouraging me rather than me encouraging the children. They said that whatever we could do would be good enough. They taught me a lesson about the importance of being able to choose one's destiny, another definition of freedom. I knew that free choice was not just valued by the children, but by almost all Berliners. Gratitude for their freedom was the great motivation in this city under siege.

The hour I was with them at the fence went quickly. As I turned to leave them for the jeep waiting at the Tempelhof terminal building, I marveled at how mature these young children were. How concerned they were for the truly important things of life. Not one begged for gum or candy, even though they hadn't had any for

months. They were too grateful for the flour each day which kept them free. Because of the children's gratitude, I wanted to give them some sweets, but all I had were two sticks of gum. Thirty children and two sticks—there could be a fight. I broke the sticks in two and passed the four pieces through the fence. There was no fight, but those who didn't get any wanted a piece of the wrappers. They smelled the small pieces of wrapper, and their eyes got big as they remembered what it was like to have gum. I was astonished at their response. Just then a C-54 flew over our heads and landed behind me. I decided that the next day I could drop enough gum for all, and even some chocolate, out of my aircraft as I flew over their heads to land. That way I could respond quickly, and I wouldn't lose anymore sleep. The children were more than excited when I explained my plan. Because there were so many airplanes landing, they immediately wanted to know how they could recognize mine. I told them that when I came over Tempelhof from West Germany, I would wiggle (rock back and forth) the wings of that big C-54. They said let's get this thing started!

The next day I came back over Tempelhof. There were the children down below. When I wiggled the wings they went wild. They caught the three parachutes loaded with goodies, and they shared. We wanted to keep it a secret because we had no time to get approval. For each of the next three weeks we dropped more. The crowd grew.



Berlin children waiting on a rubble-strewn hill for a candy drop from American Berlin Airlift pilots.



One day I returned to Rhein-Main from Berlin. There was an officer there to meet me. He took me to my colonel who demanded to know what I had been doing. Because I didn't get permission first, I could have been court martialed, but the general thought it was a good thing, so I was given permission to continue.

My squadron members gave me their candy and gum rations and handkerchiefs for parachutes. Then candy companies in America sent tons of candy and gum through Chicopee, Massachusetts, where children from 22 schools loaded little parachutes and sent large boxes, full and ready to drop. They were flown to Rhein-Main through Westover Air Force Base. By the end of the blockade, our squadrons had dropped 23 tons of candy and chewing gum. Fifteen tons were just from the children in Chicopee.

I didn't realize at the time that the big thing happening was not the serving of Berlin, but the impact a free West Berlin would eventually have on the course of history and the free world. The Berlin Airlift provided the opportunity to bond together, save lives, become friends, and be the right kind of example of Democracy. You cannot put a price on that. ☆

Col (Ret) Gail S. Halvorsen, or "The Berlin Candy Bomber," grew up on a sugar beet farm in Garland, Utah. The 1941 attack on Pearl Harbor prompted him to join the Army Air Corps, and he trained on fighters with the Royal Air Force. After getting his RAF wings in 1944, he went back to the Army Air Corps and was assigned to foreign transport operations for the rest of the war. After the war, Halvorsen returned to fly for the USAF military transport service. He was flying C-74 Globemasters and C-54 Skymasters out of Mobile, Alabama, when word came in June 1948 that the Soviet Union had blockaded West Berlin. Halvorsen's decision to airdrop candy to children during the 15-month Berlin Airlift clinched an ideological battle and earned him the lasting affection of a free West Berlin. Today Halvorsen is affectionately known by Berliners and many around the world as the Candy bomber ("Rosinenbomber"), Uncle Wiggly Wings ("Onkel Wackelflugel"), and the Chocolate Pilot. Halvorsen would go on to fill assignments in the research and development of aircraft and space systems until 1970, when he was assigned for four years as the commander of Tempelhof Air Base in West Berlin. In 1974 he was decorated with the "Großes Bundesverdienstkreuz" (Grand Cross of the Order of Merit of the Federal Republic of Germany), one of Germany's highest medals. Halvorsen returns often to Germany and drops candy to commemorate the Berlin Airlift. In November 1999 Halvorsen was inducted into the Airlift/Tanker Hall of Fame and into the Utah Aviation Hall of Fame in May 2001. The U.S. military has modeled some of Halvorsen's actions in Iraq, dropping toys, teddy bears, and soccer balls to Iraqi children. Note: A longer version of this article originally appeared in the summer 1998 Friends Journal. It was revised with the assistance and approval of Colonel Halvorsen.

The Berlin children wrote thousands of letters. I had no time to answer them, so two German secretaries answered the mail. Two examples of these letters follow:

3 September 1948
Dear Chocolate Uncle!

The oldest of my seven sons had on this day his sixteenth birthday. But when he went out in the morning we were all sad because we had nothing to give him on his special day. But how happily everything turned out! A parachute with chocolate landed on our roof. It was the first sweets for the children in a very long time. Chocolate can't be bought even with money. My oldest son, a student, came home at eight o'clock, and I was able, after all, to give him some birthday happiness. I will gladly return the handkerchief parachute if necessary, but I would pray for you to let me keep it as a memento of the Airbridge to Berlin.

With deep appreciation,
Frau Helga Mueller, Neukolln

4 October 1948
Dear Chocolate Uncle,

The seven hundred children yesterday who at Tempelhof met you on the ramp with flowers gave their thanks and appreciation not just to you but to all fliers, American and British, who labor day and night to keep us free. We Berlin school children will never forget it was the Western Allies who alleviated our hunger. I hope with all my heart that every single airplane with its brave occupants will continue to make unending flights through the blockade safely.

Gesla Bock
13-year-old school girl



Lt Halvorsen, surrounded by boxes of Hershey bars, reads letters from the grateful children and parents of West Berlin.