

The Salt Lake Tribune

Candy bomber delivers explosion of inspiration (with video)

Education • Kaysville students watch candy bombs fall from sky as part of studies on the Berlin Airlift

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The Salt Lake Tribune

Published: September 8, 2012 09:52AM

Updated: September 8, 2012 09:56AM

Students at Morgan Elementary School in Kaysville stared at the sky on Friday and waited for the bombs to fall.

Piece by piece, students watched “bombs” — candy-filled parachutes — drop down to the ground near their school from a helicopter hovering above. And for a minute, they imagined what it was like to be a child living in Germany, watching treats fall from the sky from American soldiers who sent down candy from airplanes to children in war-torn Berlin.

Friday’s expedition for Kaysville students was part of a visit from Col. Gail Halvorsen, the famous Salt Lake City born “candy bomber,” who came to Morgan Elementary on Friday to reenact portions of his post-World War II experience during the Berlin Airlift — complete with a flying helicopter and 800 candy bombs.

Halvorsen, 91, earned his name by flying 126 airlift missions in Berlin for the U.S. Air Force.

By January of 1949, he and his squadron had dropped more than 250,000 tons of candy-loaded parachutes and more than 20 tons of chocolate and gum to Berlin’s 100,000 children. His heroics inspired a children’s book, *Mercedes and the Chocolate Pilot*, which students read in connection with Friday’s event.

Halvorsen’s visit to Morgan Elementary was conceived back in 2002 when librarian Pat Weyburn read the children’s book. Knowing of Halvorsen’s Utah ties, she dreamed how exciting it would be for her students to meet the “candy bomber.”



Rick Egan | The Salt Lake Tribune Col. Gail Halvorsen, the “candy bomber,” smiles at the students at Morgan Elementary where he dropped 800 candy bombs in a reenactment of the historical Berlin Airlift, Friday, September 7, 2012.

Ten years later — after jumping through district loopholes, recruiting a helicopter company, gathering donations, spending hundreds of dollars of her own money and hand-crafting enough candy bombs for every student at the school —she couldn't hide her elation to see Halvorsen on her school's grounds at last.

Weyburn, nicknamed affectionately by her students as “Mrs. Way-Cool”, threw her arms in the air in excitement as candy bombs fell from the sky.

“It means that I followed my dreams,” she said of organizing the event. “My children are these kids, and it's for the kids.”

Weyburn and the candy-hero both were hopeful students received a message through Friday's event: the importance of giving.

Halvorsen became accustomed to children throughout the world begging American soldiers for candy throughout his 31 years in the Air Force. But when he was in Berlin in the late 1940s, the children did not beg. A fence divided Halvorsen and a group of German children, and though they did not ask for it, he thought about giving them the gum he had in his pocket. Because he only had two pieces left, he started to walk away.

His conscience stopped him.

He gave the children his two pieces of gum and watched as they shared the pieces, dividing up the wrappers into tiny bits so they could smell the peppermint flavor.

Following that experience, Halvorsen's idea for candy bombs surfaced.

Western nations were dropping in food and coal, but Halvorsen decided to brighten the lives of the children as well. Flying through the Russian blockade of Berlin in his C-54 aircraft, then-Lt. Halvorsen tied together tiny candy-laden parachute bundles to drop for the city's hungry children. His kindness inspired other crews to do the same, and American schoolchildren even made their own parachutes and donated candy for the German children.

Halvorsen said his life, and thousands upon thousands of others, would be “totally” different if he hadn't stopped to give away his gum that day.

“The little decisions in life are the ones that matter,” he said. “The little decisions you make put your footsteps on the path that leads to your final destination.”

One mother at Morgan Elementary, Sherri Plummer, cried as she watched Halvorsen drop candy bombs from the helicopter on Friday, moved by the pilot's story of selflessness. Plummer, who is hosting Halvorsen in his home during his stay and paid for his plane ticket to Utah from his home in Arizona, said kids can learn an important lesson from the veteran.

“Even in bad times there's always something positive that can come out of it,” she said.

Halvorsen's grandchildren and great grandchildren were also at Morgan Elementary to witness the reenactment.

Boyd Halvorsen, the colonel's grandson, said the event was a culmination of a lot of years of fun. And even though he's heard his grandpa tell his Berlin story countless times, he still gets something out of it.

“His story kind of tempts everyone to be a better person,” Boyd Halvorsen said. “And inspires people to be more than what you think is within your grasp or within your bounds.”

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