

OPINION

50 YEARS AFTER, BERLIN AIRLIFT STILL A MODEL OF CARE, INGENUITY

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Just before the clock struck twelve on the night of June 23, 1948, the lights went out in Berlin.

U.S., British and French forces occupying the western portion of the city who dispatched investigators to determine the cause of the electrical malfunction soon determined it was no malfunction at all - Soviet troops in the eastern part of the city had deliberately shut off the power.

It was only the latest in a long string of provocative acts ordered by Soviet dictator Josef Stalin to try to make life so unbearable for the Western military forces in postwar Germany that they would leave. In the weeks prior to this incident, Russian troops repeatedly blocked land-access routes to Berlin, which sat deep in the heart of Soviet-controlled East Germany.

So, three days after the "blackout," the U.S. Air Force, along with the British Royal Air Force, began one of history's largest and most remarkable humanitarian aid operations: the Berlin Airlift. For 13 remarkable months - from June 1948 to August 1949, the Western powers defied the Soviet blockade and supplied an entire city exclusively by air.

June marks the 50th anniversary of the beginning of that extraordinary operation.

In a steady stream, the cargo planes roared into and out of Berlin around the clock - one landing every three minutes, one taking off every three minutes. At some airfields a plane was either touching down or taking flight every 90 seconds.

These planes carried coal and food. They even shipped the parts for an entire power plant to end reliance on the Soviets to keep the

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lights on. More than a quarter of a million flights were completed and 2 million tons of cargo were shipped. During this time, Berliners grew used to the constant overhead roar of aircraft such as the venerable Douglas C-54 Skymasters, the boxy British York and the ubiquitous C-47 Dakotas, C-74s and Sunderlands.

Pulling off this massive aid operation was a huge logistical feat whose scope extended far beyond the view of the pilots who ferried the goods. While working within limited means to accomplish the operation's goal unleashed lots of innovative thinking, there were also well-intentioned ideas that flopped.

For example, back at the Pentagon Gen. Curtis LeMay thought an effective way to get fuel into Berlin was for daily flights of B-29s to drop coal from their bomb bays and then have workmen clear the coal during the night under floodlights. In a trial run, the idea bombed: The coal, packaged in sacks, was reduced to dust, as recounted by Arthur Percy in his classic book, *Berlin Airlift*.

Operation Vittles also required masterful coordination to keep the huge air convoy operating safely in the three aerial corridors between Berlin and West Germany established at the end of World War II. At first, West Berlin had only two airfields to receive goods: Tempelhof and Gatow.

Tempelhof, the main civilian airfield in the American sector of the city, had escaped severe damage during the U.S. and British bombing raids three years before. Gatow was in the British sector. The need for a third airfield soon became evident, and with the labor of many - including women - Tegel airfield was built to accommodate more planes in the French sector.

Safety was a huge concern. While there were no midair collisions during the airlift, crashes on the ground and collisions with fixed structures claimed the lives of 79 people: 39 British airmen, 31 American airmen and nine civilians. Perhaps the most infamous single day of the Berlin Airlift is "Black Friday" - Aug. 13, 1948 - when miserable weather played a direct role in three crash landings at Tempelhof.

The smaller cost was the financial bill for the whole operation: \$350 million for the U.S. government, \$17 million for the United Kingdom and 150 million deutschmarks for the West Germans.

Meanwhile, on the ground, in the beleaguered city of Berlin, still struggling to recover from the ruin laid to it just three years earlier, there was a rich sense of solidarity that no price tag could be set to. Living, working and going to school in structures often in disrepair - especially during the winter when temperatures fell to far below zero - was a tough existence.

But the connection to the free world that was evidenced every day in the perpetual flow of planes into Berlin surely buoyed the spirits and strengthened the resolve of its denizens to persevere.

This summer, historians will look back 50 years and wax philosophic about the meanings of the Berlin Airlift - and indeed there are many. The Soviet blockade and ensuing airlift was the first tangible skirmish of the Cold War. During this operation, airlift was successfully used for the first time as a diplomatic solution in the face of a hostile military threat.

But when the celebrations begin next month in Berlin to mark the event, what will be remembered most is the resilience of the human spirit that was manifest in that city five decades ago - both by its brave residents and by the courageous men and women of the airlift.

Jason Sherman, associate editor of Armed Forces Journal International, regularly covers the Pentagon and Capitol Hill.

Caption: SCOTT APPLEWHITE/The Associated Press
Berlin Mayor Eberhard Diepgen uncovers the name on a C-17 cargo plane Thursday with Gen. John Jumper, President Clinton, Chancellor Helmut Kohl and airlift pilot **Gail Halvorsen**.

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