

DAILY BREAK

A LOOK BACK AT AIRLIFT THAT SAVED BERLIN 50 YEARS AGO

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IMAGINE A CITY of millions living in darkness because there is no electricity. Trains and streetcars sit idle.

The people, isolated from the rest of the country by a formidable enemy who had built a wall around them, live on black bread and jam made from rotting apples.

It is a dark, eerie tableau not unlike a Kurt Russell film about civilization in peril. But this is no science-fiction movie, as you will see tonight at 9 on PBS in "The Berlin Airlift."

Unfolding on WHRO will be the western sector of Berlin in 1948, when the Soviet Union cut off road, rail and barge traffic. In the tense Cold War, the Soviets were furious with the Americans, British and French for deciding to help West Germany rebuild.

"The Soviets retaliated with a blockade made possible because Berlin was located 120 miles inside the Soviet occupation zone," said Paul Duke, a Richmond native and former moderator of "Washington Week in Review." Duke hosts the program marking the 50th anniversary of the airlift.

Among those who helped break the blockade were Virginians Richard Millan of Virginia Beach, David Taylor of Charlottesville and Joseph Laufer, who lives in Annandale.

Millan, who recently returned from Berlin, where he and about 100 other members of the Berlin Airlift Association gathered, said they were warmly received by the Germans, whose memories are long.

"We witnessed a great outpouring of affection," he said. "There

was a standing ovation at the opera, tears of gratitude elsewhere. It gave me goose bumps."

Millan, a retired Air Force colonel, said 1948 was "a momentous time. A time when the Soviets were attempting to bleed the Germans dry, a life-and-death situation. The Germans were saved by their former enemies, and for that they are thankful."

The Americans flew in tons of supplies - everything from yeast to Spam - aboard huge C-54 aircraft, which made more than 275,000 flights. An Air Force colonel from Utah, Gail S. Halvorsen, dropped gum and candy by parachute. Operation Little Vittles.

Laufer, a 24-year-old Air Force first lieutenant in 1948 who had flown missions in the Pacific during World War II, carried coal, not candy, in the airlift.

He delivered 10 tons of coal per mission, two missions a day. And there were many trips. "We didn't sleep much," Laufer said.

"The details are beginning to fade from my memory, but I do remember the tension of flying in difficult weather in an air corridor full of Soviet fighter planes," said Laufer, who retired as a lieutenant colonel.

The Soviets 50 years ago had 300,000 troops in Germany.

The Berlin blockade was cruelty on a grand scale. Until the Allies began flying in supplies that summer - 646 tons of flour and wheat, 85 tons of sugar, 10 tons of cheese every day - the West Berliners were living for days on a few ounces of meat, potatoes and bread.

"Simply put, the airlift saved a city of two and half million people from starvation," say the PBS producers.

Even with Laufer and the other Allied pilots bringing in coal day after day, there was never enough for the power plants to supply West Berliners with all the electricity they needed. They were lucky to have the lights on four hours a night.

When and if street lights came on, they gave off a dim glow.

Berlin at night had a surrealistic look. The trains and streetcars stopped running at 6 p.m. This went on for 11 months.

"In an extraordinary display of grit and determination, the mission succeeded against incredible odds," Duke said. "It was the first struggle of the East-West Cold War that would last for decades."

Taylor, 77, a retired Air Force colonel, found intense irony in flying the airlift. He piloted his cargo plane over the same geography where earlier in the 1940s, aboard a B-17 Flying Fortress, he had dropped bombs on German targets.

"It was an amazing thing," Taylor said of the airlift, which cost the Allies \$200 million. The U.S.S.R. ended the blockade, and the crisis, on May 12, 1949.

Taylor was so into the operation that he volunteered to fly on his days off. The schedule was four days on, two days of rest. The flights from Rhein-Main to Berlin and back took four hours.

Taylor's plane, built to carry paratroopers in time of war, landed with its belly full of skim milk for adults, whole milk for children, plus cereals and dehydrated vegetables, including potatoes.

"We flew in fog and rain," he said. At first, the pilots flew into Berlin without radar to guide them. Tough.

The PBS special, said Halvorsen, should give viewers a crisp understanding of what Americans fought to win and keep in the 1940s and what is taken for granted today. Freedom.

{Photos} HENRY RIES NATIONAL ARCHIVES HENRY RIES PBS Pilot **Gail Halvorsen**, known as the ``Candy Bomber" after he dropped gum and candy by parachute, is surrounded by appreciative Berlin youngsters.

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