



Airlift sparks Berliners' emotions 60 years on

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By Kerstin Gehmlich

BERLIN, June 26 (Reuters Life!) - Sixty years after Allied planes streamed into Berlin with vital supplies during the Soviet blockade, a new exhibition tells the story of the people behind the airlift.

"Berliners only saw the pilots, but we want to show all the other people involved in making the airlift work," said Helmut Trotnow, the director of Berlin's Allied Museum, where the exhibition opens this week, featuring photos and film extracts.

Many Berliners vividly recall the 15-month airlift, and some Berlin bakeries are offering special "candy bomber breads" this week to commemorate the 60th anniversary.

Ted Mohr, an 84-year old who in 1948 worked as a clerk for Lucius Clay, the military governor for the U.S. zone in Germany, said he remembered the tension in his office when he learned the Soviets had blocked rail and road access to West Berlin.

"It was a time of great anxiety," Mohr said. "Clay told his staff to call (pilot) Jack Bennett and ask him whether he'd have the courage to fly. Bennett took a deep breath...and flew in."

Bennett, who died in his adopted hometown of Berlin in 2001, is credited with making the first flight of the airlift in a DC-4 loaded with potatoes 60 years ago this week.

His widow Marianne told Reuters her late husband had felt very worried before making what would turn out to be the first of nearly 278,000 flights by the western allies to deliver a total of 2.3 million tonnes of food and supplies.

"He felt a bit like a guinea pig. He didn't know how the Soviets would react," the 74-year old Bennett told Reuters.

The airlift was a turning point of the Cold War, pitting the United States against the Soviet Union over the fate of the two million people living in West Berlin, a western enclave in the Soviet-controlled zone that became East Germany.

In the months after Bennett's initial delivery, thousands of planes landed in intervals of just 90 seconds at Berlin's inner-city Tempelhof airport.

"It was quite a sight to watch those planes come in," said Mohr. "My wife and I brought our chairs up to the roof of our building and watched. That was our evening entertainment."

"CANDY BOMBER"

The new exhibition is also set to feature information about the many Berliners like Mercedes Wild, who was seven years old when she stood among chickens in her family's Berlin garden, waving up at the planes bringing in supplies.

"I thought the pilots would also be able to see me," said the 67-year old, wearing gold-rimmed glasses, adding she had been disappointed none of the goods had landed in her garden.

Wild wrote a letter to **Gail Halvorsen**, a U.S. pilot who came to be known as "candy bomber" or "chocolate uncle" to Berlin's children after he had the idea to drop mini-parachutes with sweets attached over the skies of Berlin.

Halvorsen sent Wild peppermint-flavoured chewing gum in a letter, which the pensioner still carries in her handbag.

Soviet dictator Josef Stalin called off the blockade in 1949 when he realised it would only succeed if he was to attack the airlift and thereby risk war with the United States.

Memories of the airlift still spark vivid emotions with many West Berliners, a phenomenon highlighted earlier this year when Wild and others campaigned against the closure of the Nazi-built Tempelhof airport that became the symbol of the airlift.

A referendum to keep Tempelhof open failed and Berlin is building a new airport south of the city to replace the giant site -- which is almost the size of New York's Central Park -- and two other airports.

Clay's grandson Charles said the Berlin airlift had a major emotional impact on his late grandfather, a man he described as a workaholic who insisted on discipline and rules.

"He was profoundly changed when (then Berlin Mayor) Ernst Reuter told him Berliners would rather starve than give up Berlin. My grandfather would never say it, but you could always see love and respect in his eyes when he talked about Berlin."

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