



## American pilot hero to hungry Berlin children.

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BERLIN, May 13 (Reuters) - It started out with two pieces of gum from a young American pilot for a group of hungry Berlin children and ended up leading to a steady rain of sweets falling out of the sky from the U.S. "candy bombers".

Air Force pilot **Gail Halvorsen** became an instant hero in Berlin during the 1948-49 Airlift for his idea of dropping candy bars attached to small "parachutes" he made by hand from handkerchiefs as he landed at Tempelhof Airport in Berlin.

"It's the warmest feeling a human being can experience when you help out your former enemy," said Halvorsen, now a 77-year-old retired Air Force colonel who will share the spotlight with U.S. President Bill Clinton at ceremonies here on Thursday to mark the 50th anniversary of the Allied airlift.

"But it wasn't just the coal or the flour or the dried potatoes or even the chocolate that we brought here that was most important," said Halvorsen, who is still hugely popular in Berlin. "It was the hope that the Airlift brought here. With hope the human being can accomplish anything."

The airlift of food, fuel and medicines to overcome a Soviet blockade on the democratic enclave of West Berlin was a defining moment at the start of the Cold War and transformed the role of the Western Allies in Berlin from conquerors into protectors.

Halvorsen, a tall, friendly, and talkative man from Provo, Utah, said in an interview with Reuters that he got the idea for the dropping sweets to the hungry children of Berlin one day in July 1948, less than a month after the airlift began.

"I had a day off and walked out to the outer fence and saw a group of about 30 children just looking at me," Halvorsen said. "They weren't begging, just looking. I had only two sticks of gum and gave it to them, expecting them to fight for them.

"But they folded those two sticks of gum up and split them into 30 pieces and every one of those kids got one. They smelled their little pieces and held them up and looked at them as if they were \$100 bills. Their eyes were glowing. I could see it wasn't just the gum."

Halvorsen said he told the children he was sorry he didn't have more but would bring some sweets back when he flew to the airport the next day. Because he would be working then, he would only be on the ground a few minutes and would drop the candy from the plane. He attached the candy to the parachutes because otherwise it would have pelted them like rocks.

"They asked me how they would know it was me and I told them I would wiggle my wings for them so they would know it was me," said Halvorsen, who has five children and 24 grandchildren.

The next day he dropped five parachutes with a total of 15 chocolate bars attached. Word quickly spread among the children in Berlin and the crowds grew larger outside the airport. But his superiors learned of the drops and he was briefly reprimanded.

A Berlin newspaper wrote about the "candy bomber" and word soon spread back to the United States. Halvorsen and other pilots were allowed to resume their drops. Donations for candy and handkerchiefs began to pour in from the United States.

"We dropped more than 20 tonnes of candy during the airlift," said Halvorsen, who flew a total of 126 missions himself between July 11, 1948 and January 25, 1949.

He later worked for the air force in the space programme and was a dean at Brigham Young University in Utah.

"I love coming back to Berlin," said Halvorsen. "The people are still so grateful for the airlift. I met a man once who said he was standing there on a cloudy, foggy day when he couldn't see a thing. A box of chocolate dropped out of the sky and landed at his feet. He said it wasn't the chocolate, it was the hope. He said: 'Someone up there in the clouds knew I existed'."

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