

**BERLIN AIRLIFT DELIVERED HOPE.**

By DEPARTMENT OF U.S. AIR FORCE.

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RHEIN-MAIN AIR BASE, Germany - During the Berlin Airlift, U.S., British and French aircrews hauled 2.3 million tons of supplies, primarily coal and food, to 2 million desperate people trapped by a Soviet blockade. And according to those who made the 15-month long operation successful, they brought another vital substance: hope.

Retired Col. **Gail Halvorsen**, who flew 126 missions during what Americans called Operation Vittles, said supplies brought into Berlin's Tempelhof Air Base kept stranded Germans sustained, but it was faith that kept them alive.

"Throughout the years, countless number of middle-aged Germans told me that just knowing that we cared and that we wouldn't abandon them was just as important as crates of milk and flour," Halvorsen said during a question-and-answer session at the base theater here. "You can survive with limited amounts of food, but when you lose faith and hope you die. What we delivered was a reason to keep going."

Gerald Munn, a veteran of 121 airlift flights, also took questions and spoke of nearing Berlin in June 1948 and seeing immense damage still remaining three years after World War II had ended.

"There was nothing there," said Munn, who also made 50 B-24 bombing runs during the war. "Everything was flattened and the buildings were demolished. I thought to myself, 'How can anyone be living in such terrible surroundings.' That's when I knew what we were doing was literally keeping a city and its entire population alive."

Added Fred Hall, an aircraft mechanic and flight engineer: "Just looking into those people's eyes made me forget that they once fought us. There was no doubt in anyone's mind that we were doing the right thing. We couldn't fail to save those people."

The airlift came about from France, England and the United States clashing with the Soviet Union over who would feed Germany's population, how to dismantle part of the country's industrial capacity, and movement of people and goods in different sections of Berlin ruled by Western and communist powers. At stake: whose model of government, economy and society would prevail.

By early 1948, the Soviets exploited the vulnerability of a divided city by stopping coal deliveries to western-controlled Berlin. In March, they tried canceling air rights over the area, but backed down as the Allies invoked a 1945 agreement which permitted the other three countries to cross Soviet-owned airspace in Germany.

Further dissatisfied with plans of an independent German state, they restricted rail traffic in April with a miniblockade that lasted for 11 days, showing who controlled all supply lines.

On June 18, 1948, the Soviets, upset over Allied plans to introduce new German currency, claimed "technical difficulties" and closed surface traffic into Berlin, virtually sealing it off from the rest of the world. Six days later electricity was cut. The Soviets clearly meant to wrestle complete control of eastern Germany by strangling Berlin's lifeline and forcing the Allies into leaving the beleaguered city.

Faced with the choice of abandoning Berlin or attempting to supply its 2 million people using the last transportation routes left - three 20-mile-wide air corridors - the United States, along with England, chose the latter. And for 11 months, Air Force units flying C-47 Gooney Birds and C-54 Skymasters, augmented by Navy and Royal Air Force aircraft, kept the city alive during an unprecedented and hectic mission.

Halvorsen compared Operation Vittles to the Air Force's current philosophy of global engagement.

"What we were doing is what now is called rapid global mobility," said the colonel, wearing the same flightsuit he wore when piloting C-54s in and out of Rhein-Main five decades ago.. "We displayed for a watching world the might of U.S. air power. Today, you carry on that tradition."

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