

NatWorldWire

Berlin Airlift remembered, key moment in Cold War

David Rising;

Associated Press

709 words

13 May 2009

Abilene Reporter-News

ABILRN

English

Copyright 2009 Scripps Howard Publishing, Inc. All Rights Reserved.

BERLIN -- Berlin paid tribute today to veterans of the 1948-49 international airlift of vital supplies to West Berlin, a key moment in the Cold War when the Soviets were forced to lift their blockade strangling the city.

At Tempelhof Airport, the key hub for the U.S. planes involved in the airlift, 60th anniversary ceremonies drew thousands of people to honor 120 American, British and French veterans of the operation.

The Soviets, one of the four occupying powers of a divided Berlin after World War II, blockaded the city in an attempt to squeeze the U.S., Britain and France out of the enclave within Soviet-occupied eastern Germany.

The Berlin Airlift began June 26, 1948, in an ambitious plan to feed and supply West Berlin.

It is widely regarded as the first battle of the Cold War -- one that marked the beginning of the end of the Soviet Union's ambitions to press further west and to this day shapes the German view of the Western allies.

It came as no surprise that after the Sept. 11 attacks on the U.S. in 2001, some 200,000 Berliners took to the streets of the German capital to show their support for the country that had helped prevent their city from falling behind the Iron Curtain.

During the airlift, American, British, Canadian, Australian, New Zealand and South African pilots flew 278,000 flights to Berlin over 15 months, carrying about 2.3 million tons of food, coal, medicine and other supplies.

On the busiest day -- April 16, 1949 -- about 1,400 planes carried in nearly 13,000 tons over 24 hours -- an average of one plane touching down every 62 seconds.

On the ground in Berlin, ex-Luftwaffe mechanics were enlisted to help maintain aircraft, and some 19,000 Berliners -- almost half of them women -- worked around the clock for three months to build Tegel Airport, providing a crucial relief for the British Gatow and American Tempelhof airfields.

The Soviets offered better rations to any West Berliner willing to register with the communist authorities -- but only 20,000 went to the other side.

Neither side resorted to force, although 39 Britons, 31 Americans and at least five Germans were killed in accidents.

Finally, on May 12, 1949, the Soviets realized the blockade was futile and lifted their barricades, restoring access to the city. The airlift continued for several more months, however, as a precaution in case the Soviets changed their minds.

American veteran Dale Whipple was an 18-year-old corporal with the United States Air Force who worked during the airlift on a British air force base in Celle, Germany, helping keep pilots and crews supplied.

The 78-year-old veteran from Benton, La., said participating in the airlift was one of the most significant events of his life.

"When you come over here and meet the people who've benefited from our efforts, its truly a humbling feeling, especially when we were just doing our jobs," Whipple said.

Among the best-known pilots was **Gail Halvorsen**, on hand for Tuesday's events, who came to the world's attention in an inadvertent propaganda coup. Early in the airlift, the man from Utah shared two sticks of gum with starving Berlin kids and saw others sniffing the wrappers just for a hint of the flavor.

Touched, he told the children to come back the next day, when he would drop them candy, using handkerchiefs as parachutes.

He started doing it regularly, using his own candy ration. Soon other pilots and crews joined in what would be dubbed "Operation Little Vittles."

On Aug. 19, 1948, an Associated Press story appeared under the headline "Lollipop Bomber Flies Over Berlin." A wave of candy and handkerchief donations followed.

To celebrate Halvorsen's effort, children from Berlin's Boy Scouts of America Troop 46 Freedom Outpost and the John F. Kennedy German-American elementary and high school have put together more than 700 small parachutes holding packages of chocolates and chocolate raisins. They are to be dropped over Tempelhof Airport from an aircraft that was used in the original airlift as a grand finale for today's event.

Document ABILRN0020090522e55d000dz

Search Summary

Text	"Gail Halvorsen"
Date	All Dates
Source	All Sources
Author	All Authors
Company	All Companies
Subject	All Subjects
Industry	All Industries
Region	All Regions
Language	English