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BERLIN AIRLIFT: REMEMBERING THOSE WHO FELL TO FEED HUNGRY CITY DURING MASSIVE HUMANITARIAN MISSION

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WIESBADEN, Germany, June 30 -- The U.S. Army issued the following news release:

For those who lived through the massive humanitarian effort to deliver life-saving supplies to the citizens of Berlin in 1948 and 1949, remembering is the easy part.

But ensuring that future generations are aware of what it took to supply a blockaded city of 2.5 million people with coal, food, medicine and other desperately needed supplies for more than 15 months is a mission members of the Luftbrücke Chapter (Airlift Chapter) take personally.

"We definitely do not want the Berlin Airlift to be forgotten," said Celeste Warner-Heymann, a chapter member and former longtime Rhein Main Area USO employee. "It is our quest to keep this memory alive and to pass it on to the younger generations. ...The Germans especially should never forget it. This is part of our reunification."

Members of the Luftbrücke Chapter and guests gathered at the Berlin Airlift Memorial at the Frankfurt Airport June 24 to remember the nearly 80 airlift personnel who lost their lives and the incredible feat accomplished in moving 2.3 million tons by air in 277,264 flights in and out of Berlin.

"The Berlin Airlift was part of my life," said Warner-Heymann, who as an 8-year-old child helped sack potatoes for flights from her home in Celle in northern Germany to Berlin during the airlift. Thanks to the generosity of former foes who occupied Germany following World War II, "enemies became friends."

"It still is and probably will remain one of the largest ever humanitarian airlifts," said local historian John Provan, coauthor of the book "Berlin Airlift - the Effort and the Aircraft." Comparing it to the many other airlift missions operated from Rhein-Main Air Base in the years following the Berlin Airlift, Provan said all of them combined equaled less than half of what was transported during Operation Vittles, as the airlift was nicknamed by then Wiesbaden Military Post commander, Brig Gen. Joseph Smith.

When Soviet leader Joseph Stalin ordered the blockade of West Berlin in June of 1948 in an attempt to starve out its citizens and force the Allied forces to leave the city surrounded by communist East German he didn't foresee the rapid response by the Western Allies in launching the around-the-clock effort to supply the city by air.

"I'm very proud to stand here, not only as a Frankfurt citizen, but as someone who was already alive when the airlift started," said Frankfurt city official Lutz Raettig, who was born in Berlin. Raettig said he was proud to have a memorial at one of the former air bases so critical during the airlift - "reminding us that peace doesn't come for free."

Capt. Joseph Kopcha, commander of U.S. Army Garrison Wiesbaden's Headquarters Company, described arriving in Wiesbaden just as some 30,000 visitors descended on Wiesbaden Army Airfield to celebrate the 60th anniversary of the Berlin Airlift. "I vividly remember it as my first observing the German-American partnership at its best."

"I had heard about the airlift of course, but it wasn't until I came to Wiesbaden that I realized how historic the post was where I was stationed with the first flight having originated from Wiesbaden on June 26, 1948," said Kopcha.

"In the beginning, there was almost universal disbelief that the city of Berlin, with over 2 million inhabitants, could be supplied totally by air over an extended period of time. Eleven months later, the blockade was broken."

"The Berlin Airlift changed history," he said. "It changed people too. It transformed the relationship among Western Allies and the German people. Perspectives changed from 'them and us' to just 'us.' The seeds of German-American friendship were planted and nurtured. Today we continue to enjoy the fruits of those efforts."

For a young German woman working at Rhein-Main Air Base as the airlift shifted into high gear, the mission meant helping assign servicemembers as they arrived at the base. Gisela Raineri, now long retired, recalled how as a 20-year-old she met famed "Candy Bomber" **Gail Halvorsen** and joined his effort to shower young Berliners with chocolate bars tied to tiny parachutes while serving on the airlift.

"I met **Gail Halvorsen** through a friend. He needed help tying the parachutes and I translated the letters of thanks he received from the children of Berlin. I had the feeling of helping the Berliners. I did my normal job and then after hours I helped **Gail Halvorsen** in 'the Barn,'" as the Candy Bomber's preparation site on Rhein Main was fondly known.

Raineri also recalled how her Air Force boss would work in the office with her during the day and then fly airlift missions to Berlin at night.

Like Raineri, Hans Bergschwenger was also on hand to commemorate the 62nd anniversary of the airlift at the memorial. The former driver for Maj. Gen. William H. Tunner, one of the primary architects of the Berlin Airlift and later U.S. Air Forces Europe commander, Bergschwenger recalled the hardship of surviving the war years. He described how his father, a postal employee, suffered from starvation after being apprehended by the secret police and sent to a concentration camp for helping German Jewish families in Wiesbaden.

"He weighed only 58 kilos when he came home and died shortly thereafter," Bergschwenger said.

While his mother and sibling emigrated to the United States after World War II, Bergschwenger remained in Wiesbaden. "It was a tough time, but I said I'll stand through it," eventually working as a driver for the Wiesbaden military community and eventually being offered the chauffeur job as Tunner's driver while he served as USAFE commander in Wiesbaden in the early 1950s.

"It was a great time," he said, sharing memories of driving for everyone from Frank Sinatra to Eva Gardner, Bob Hope to the king of Saudi Arabia.

As wreaths were placed at the base of the Berlin Airlift Memorial, a giant stone three-pronged monument symbolizing one of the corridors into Berlin and sometimes fondly called the "Hunger Fork" by citizens referring to its twin at Tempelhof Airport in Berlin, guests stood in silent homage to those who made the ultimate sacrifice to keep the airlift operating.

Members of the Luftbrücke Chapter invited anyone interested in helping keep the memory of the Berlin Airlift alive to contact them at civ (069) 1302 5811 or to visit their website at www.luftbrueckechapter.de.

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