

**BERLIN AIRLIFT TAUGHT 'CANDY BOMBER' IMPORTANT LESSONS.**

By U.S. DEPARTMENT OF AIR FORCE.

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YOKOTA AIR BASE, Japan - Even being almost 80 years old, retired Air Force Col. **Gail Halvorsen** dedicates a great deal of his time to the Air Force. There are so many requests for his presence - like the visit here to talk to the Airlift Tanker Association and other airlift members - that his calendar is booked through March 2001. He travels around the globe speaking to people of all ages, from all walks of life, about the service he loves so much. Sometimes the former C-54 Skymaster pilot can hardly believe all the fascination about his life.

It was 1948 and World War II was over. Halvorsen, like so many others, was back in the United States trying to get his life back to normal. Then one day he received a phone call that he was needed to fly missions to Germany. This time he was to fly day and night, in all kinds of conditions, to support the very people with whom he had just been at war. During the next 14 months, Halvorsen and other "Operation Vittles" airmen flew some 190,000 missions, carrying nearly 1.8 million tons of food and supplies to help rebuild Berlin.

Halvorsen's life was changed forever during the Berlin Airlift, an operation which he says set the tone for the use of airlift today, and it was all because of two sticks of gum. He had been back in Germany for about 10 days when he met a group of about 30 kids. He spoke with them for more than an hour before he noticed he needed to get going. As he was leaving, he realized that not one of those kids, despite their poor conditions, had begged him for anything - not one stick of gum, not one piece of candy.

Halvorsen reached in his pocket, but all he had was two sticks of gum. He decided to tear the sticks in half and give the pieces to the four closest kids. He thought a fight might break out, but he wanted to give his candy away.

"The four kids who got it lit up. The others just wanted a piece of the wrapper so they could smell it. They were on cloud nine because of the smell of a gum wrapper. I realized the amount of self control they had exercised," he said. "In the war, children would chase you ... you're in uniform and a 'rich' American. To them, you are a pipeline to a candy store in the United States and they wanted some of that. There I was, one-on-one with them and they didn't ask for a thing."

Although he couldn't meet the kids at the fence again, Halvorsen wanted to give all the kids candy. He knew he didn't have permission, but he told them he'd drop it out of the airplane if they would share. He kept his word and as the weeks went on, the candy crowd got bigger.

He had sworn his friends to secrecy, because permission must be granted to drop something out of an airplane. But, once word got out, a German newspaper took a picture of his airplane and the candy that had been dropped.

Halvorsen found himself getting chewed out by his colonel. He thought he would be court-martialed. Thankfully for everyone, the commanding general thought his idea was a good one.

Soon, the news spread to the United States. Halvorsen, dubbed "The Candy Bomber," was asked by candy companies in the States how much candy he could drop. "I told them some outrageous amount and they sent it," the colonel said.

It was so much candy - 23 tons during the 14 months of the Berlin Airlift - that 22 schools in Chicopee, Mass., volunteered to be the candy headquarters. They wrapped the candy and sent it to Berlin through Westover Air Force Base, Mass., ready to drop.

Halvorsen, who retired from the Air Force in 1974 - after 31 years of service - learned an important lesson from those kids. They taught him that to "stick to your principles is the most important thing in life.

"They said 'when the weather gets too bad to fly, don't worry about us. We don't have to have enough to eat, just a little. Someday, we will have enough to eat, but if we lose freedom, we'll never get it back.' I apply that lesson to my life everyday," he said.

Fifty years later, Halvorsen said he is constantly reminded of the lessons he learned as a young man flying over Berlin. In 1998, Halvorsen flew his beloved C-54, along with another airlift pilot and a young pilot "to keep us old folks awake" for the 50th Anniversary of the Berlin Airlift.

"One man about 60 years old came up to me. He was well dressed, very sophisticated, but, he could hardly talk he was so overcome with emotions. He finally said, 'I was a boy 50 years ago on my way to school. The clouds were very low that day and I could hear your airplanes landing. All of a sudden a parachute with a fresh Hershey's candy bar landed at my feet. I was astounded,' he said."

The man told Halvorsen that he had heard about his famous candy missions, but he had never seen them before. "He told me it took him a week to eat his candy bar. He hid it day and night," Halvorsen recalls with tears in his eyes. "He said 'It wasn't the candy or the dried eggs of the airlift, but what they meant. It meant that somebody outside the blockade knew that we were here and that someone in America cared. That gave us hope.' And then he said something very significant ... something I'll never forget. He said 'Without hope, the soul dies.'"

The Candy Bomber said airlift is what made that hope possible 50 years ago and the same is true today. "One of the greatest sources of hope is that American flag on the tails of the C-130s that are going out to earthquake or flood victims, or projecting force half way around the world. To save a city or prevent a war creates hope. Airlift is hope."

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