



Berlin Airlift veteran flew 403 missions of hope

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MATHEWS, Va. - On June 28, 1948, Harry D. Immel Jr. flew a B-17 bomber over Berlin on a mission fraught with peril.

"I carried a bomb bay full of sugar," Immel, 78, said as the 50th anniversary of the Berlin Airlift approached. The anniversary is being marked in ceremonies in the United States and Europe through next month.

Immel's flight from Rhein-Main Air Base, in the U.S. sector of a Germany partitioned after World War II, occurred just two days after the start of the airlift. It was the free world's response to the Soviet Union's attempt to cut off food, fuel and other necessities to the free half of Berlin - 110 miles into Communist-controlled Europe.

American B-17s soon were supplanted by airplanes more suited for hauling lifesaving cargo: coal, flour, bottled milk and other food, and medicine. Immel flew the mission for the entire 15 months of the airlift, which the Americans dubbed "Operation Vittles."

Many pilots were rotated in for six-month assignments.

C-54s, the plane that became the workhorse of the airlift, were brought in from around the world. Immel, stationed in Germany with the 61st Troop Carrier Group, was experienced with the C-54 after flying all over Europe for the top U.S. commander in Germany, Gen. Lucius D. Clay.

"I was one of the few guys qualified on the C-54, so I could start checking out other guys," he said. He became an instructor or "check" pilot, flying with new arrivals until they were proficient with the plane.

The flights could be frightening. To land at one American airfield in

West Berlin, pilots had to fly between two apartment buildings and over a cemetery.

The airlift became so finely tuned, planes took off or landed every minute. A missed landing approach meant turning back without unloading. Pilots often navigated by instruments because of foul weather.

"We used to get buzzed by Russian fighters a lot at night," he said.

The round trip from Rhein-Main to Tempelhof took about three hours, Immel recalled. He would fly in with a crew and taxi to the terminal for unloading. To hurry things along, an operations officer would bring the required forms to the plane. "They even had roving coffee shops," Immel said.

"I've helped many of the German crews unload coal," he said. The coal often leaked from its bags. "Oh, gee, did those airplanes get dirty - filthy. Everything you touched was coal-black."

He usually flew two missions a day.

On Sept. 30, 1949, Immel climbed aboard a C-54 laden with coal and piloted the last flight of the airlift.

Immel later served at Langley Air Force Base, and he was among the airlift veterans invited to a ceremony last week at Andrews Air Force Base near Washington.

"He's one of the key players in the Berlin Airlift," said Capt. Ruth Larson, a base spokeswoman.

At the end of the airlift, Immel was credited with 403 missions. He was cited in numerous newspaper clippings and photographs as flying more missions than anyone. "I'm not bragging; I was just doing a job," said Immel, who retired as a colonel in 1970, after 29 years in the service.

Immel knows of no other pilot who flew more than 400 missions. Neither does Roger G. Miller, an Air Force historian who tracked down Immel while writing his new book, "To Save a City: The Berlin Airlift, 1948-1949."

Miller said some veterans got a lot of well-deserved attention through the years, such as **Gail Halvorsen**, who became known as the "Candy Bomber" because he dropped candy in handkerchief parachutes to German children.

"It came straight from his heart to do this," Miller said.

"But if you scratch 100 airlift veterans, including Harry Immel, you'll find a little of **Gail Halvorsen** in each of them. Because this

came from the heart for so many of them. It was a tough job, done under terrible conditions, but it wasn't just a job."

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