

# Deseret News

## Berlin candy drops are Utah's sweet memory

By Lee Davidson  
Deseret News Washington correspondent  
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WASHINGTON -- Big things can start small. And Utahn **Gail Halvorsen** started something big when he gave away two pieces of gum to hungry children -- because they were NOT begging for it.

Their joy led him to organize air drops of 23 tons of candy -- via tiny parachutes made from handkerchiefs -- to children during the Berlin airlift. That led much of the Western world to cheer and help that effort on top of its deliveries of regular food.

Fifty years later, Halvorsen, of Provo, is taking sort of a delayed victory lap celebrating those old deliveries.

On Thursday, to mark the 50th anniversary of the airlift, he was to give a lecture at the National Air and Space Museum about it -- especially focusing on his candy drops. After that, he was to have Washington autograph sessions for his book.

Next month, he and two other pilots are flying a vintage C-54 cargo plane from America back to Berlin, where the mayor and other German officials plan to honor him.

The plane is the same type used during the airlift and has been converted into a flying museum. It will make stops en route near some Massachusetts schools that helped supply much of the candy he delivered, so he can honor his old helpers.

And on July 13, PBS is scheduled to air a new documentary about the airlift -- again focusing heavily on Halvorsen and his candy drops, depending largely on footage he shot himself.

"It all came from two pieces of gum," he said in his hotel in

Washington, where he had spread on his bed his collection of photos and medals resulting from the airlift.

It started in 1948 on a day he was supposed to be sleeping after flying 17 straight hours of dangerous missions to take flour and other basic food into West Berlin. The city was then an oasis of freedom blockaded within East Germany by Soviet forces trying to starve it into becoming communist.

"I wanted to take some pictures of the approach into Berlin." So instead of sleeping, he flew with a buddy and shot the film. As he stood at the end of the runway while the plane was quickly unloaded, he noticed several children watching through a fence.

"Everywhere else I had been in Europe, kids would run up to you and beg for candy until you gave them something. These kids were different," he said.

"They didn't beg," he said. "To them, it was all right if they didn't have enough to eat. They said having freedom was more important, because they could always have more to eat later -- but if they lost their freedom, they might never get it back."

On impulse, he reached into a pocket and pulled out two sticks of gum. He broke them in half and passed them through the fence.

"They broke it in strips and shared it. Those who didn't get any got the wrappers and smelled them. They were so happy just smelling them," Halvorsen said.

"I told them to come back tomorrow and I would make a special air mail delivery of more. They said, 'How will we know which plane is yours?' I said I would wiggle my wings."

Halvorsen made good on the promise, dropping candy bars with handkerchief parachutes. He did it again on two later missions -- but then found himself in trouble for violating rules.

"We were about court-martialed, but then the general heard about it -- and thought it (dropping candy) was a great idea," he said.

When press stories about subsequent missions followed, Halvorsen started receiving so much mail he was assigned two secretaries to help.

Near Chicopee, Mass., 22 schools started buying candy and attaching and folding handkerchief parachutes and shipping them to him. He will stop there next month in the C-54 to honor them and include some memorabilia from them in the flying museum.

Some homebound children in Berlin also sent special requests for drops

-- and often included directions via landmarks on how to get to their homes. He tried to follow them and drop candy when possible.

But he kept missing one boy. Halvorsen said, "He wrote back and said, 'I gave you directions. How did you win the war anyway?'"

He said such contacts helped him develop friendships that have lasted a lifetime and led many of the candy-receiving children (or their children) to travel to Utah later through exchange programs.

"The airlift made a big difference. We stopped communism in Berlin. I've had many people there tell that the West standing with them and bringing in food made all the difference," he said.

And looking back a half century later, he said the thing that still stands out most to him "are those kids. They were willing to put principle over immediate desire -- like fasting," he said. "They put principle before food."

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