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Berlin honours airlift veterans on 60th anniversary of blockade's end

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Crowds gather at Tempelhof airport to remember operation that saved city from starvation

On the 60th anniversary of the lifting of the Soviet blockade of Berlin, the city honoured the veterans and mourned the victims of one of the most extraordinary international operations in aviation history: the airlift that saved its people from starvation.

Crowds came to Tempelhof airport, where at the height of the airlift an allied plane landed every 62 seconds, to honour 120 British, American and French veterans attending the ceremonies. For 15 months from 26 June 1948 they had joined pilots from Canada, Australia, New Zealand and South Africa in 278,000 flights carrying 2.3m tonnes of food, medicine, coal and other supplies into the besieged city.

On both the Soviet and the allied sides, the fate of Berlin became part of the propaganda war which escalated into the cold war of the 1950s.

As the Soviet claws closed – cutting off all land and sea routes – the airlift, nicknamed Operation Vittles, was the only way in for the desperately needed necessities of life – and occasionally a few luxuries.

The veterans who returned included "the Lollipop Bomber", **Gail Halvorsen**, a pilot from Utah. Early in the airlift he shared two sticks of gum with some children, and was moved to watch others sniffing and licking the wrappers. He promised to drop them some sweets the following day, using handkerchiefs as parachutes and his own rations: he continued it on every flight throughout the months, helped by thousands of donated handkerchiefs and sweets as the story spread – a tradition honoured in hundreds of packets of chocolate raisins dropped from one of the original aircraft as part of the celebrations.

The monument outside the airport, intended to symbolise the three air corridors into the city, bears the ominous nickname the Hunger Claw. It carries the names of the 39 British and 31 American pilots who lost their lives in the operation.

After the celebrations, Tempelhof will return to the echoing silence which descended last October when, despite a campaign to retain what is one of the world's oldest airports – partly inspired by its imposing art deco architecture, partly by its place in the city's history – all flights ended. Its fate is still to be decided.

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