



Berlin launches year-long Airlift tribute.

By Erik Kirschbaum
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BERLIN, May 12 (Reuters) - Berlin on Tuesday launched a year-long tribute to the Western airmen who risked their lives ferrying supplies to break a Soviet blockade of the divided city at the start of the Cold War 50 years ago.

U.S. President Bill Clinton will fly to the now reunited capital of Germany on Wednesday to mark the anniversary of the Berlin Airlift.

More than 7,000 people are expected to attend his speech at Tempelhof Airport on Thursday.

Berlin Mayor Eberhard Diepgen thanked the American and British pilots who brought food, fuel and medicines to west Berlin for 462 days after the Soviet Union cut off land routes to the city on June 24, 1948.

"The people of Berlin live today in freedom," Diepgen said. "And for that we offer thanks for the sacrifices made by the pilots, the navigators, radio operators and crew. The Airlift showed that freedom is worth fighting for."

Colonel **Gail Halvorsen**, an American pilot who came up with idea to drop candy bars attached to small parachutes to children near the airport, spoke to journalists at the ceremony and said the Airlift brought more than just food to Berlin.

"The airlift provided the freedom, but it was not the Airlift alone," he said. "It was the spirit of the Berliners. If Berlin had fallen, Stalin would have kept going. The Airlift was a symbol of hope."

A highlight of the ceremony was a low-level fly-by of one of the 1940s-era C-54 Skymasters that had taken part in the Airlift. "The Spirit of Freedom", a four-engine propeller cargo plane, swooped down over the ceremony.

Elderly Berliners have fond memories of the "candy bombers", as the planes were sometimes called.

Following Halvorsen's lead, Allied pilots often dropped chocolate bars tied to miniature parachutes out of the plane's window as they were landing.

More than 20 tons of chocolate were dropped by the pilots, Halvorsen said.

The 1948-49 airlift was a defining moment of the Cold War, instantly transforming the Western Allies' role in Germany from World War Two conqueror to post-war protector of fragile freedoms in part of the divided nation.

It outwitted an attempt by Moscow to starve into capitulation two million people in West Berlin, an enclave ringed by the Soviet-controlled eastern sector of Germany.

"It was one of the most successful and impressive missions in world history," Diepgen said.

Diepgen called the Airlift the world's greatest airborne humanitarian rescue ever. More than 2.3 million tons of relief goods were flown on 277,728 flights by American and British planes to West Berlin from Allied air bases in western Germany.

The skies over Germany were crowded with up to 300 aircraft en route to or from Berlin at the same time.

Planes were taking off and landing in West Berlin every 90 seconds on average. They brought coal, fuel, newsprint, medicines, nappies, powdered milk, dried vegetables, ambulances and even an entire power plant in small pieces.

"We can never stop talking enough about the achievement of the Airlift, what the Americans, the British, the French and the German helpers did together," Diepgen said. "Berlin did not capitulate to a totalitarian state."

Diepgen placed a wreath for the 78 pilots and crew killed in accidents during the Airlift at the Airlift monument in front of Tempelhof Airport. A grateful Berlin government has paid 1.8 million marks (\$990,000) over the years to help support the widows and pay for schooling the dependants of allied airmen who were killed.

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