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Berliners Celebrate Life-Saving Allied Airlift

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An article Monday incorrectly reported that Jack Bennett flew more missions during the Berlin Airlift than any other pilot. Bennett said he flew 60 missions with the civilian carrier American Overseas Airlines. Some Air Force pilots flew more than 400 missions, said Roger Miller, an Air Force historian. A graphic accompanying the article incorrectly reported the year in which Western powers created a separate West German government in their occupation zones. The occupation zones of the United States, Britain and France were merged in 1949 to form the Federal Republic of Germany.

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Fifty years later, Herbert Monien still hears the low rumble of the American plane bearing a precious cargo of sugar as it dropped out of the clouds on a freezing November night. He still sees the flash of fire when the craft overshot the runway and crashed into a warehouse at Tempelhof Airport.

Monien, now 83, remembers the agonizing groans as he rushed to help the crew. "They were screaming like crazy," he said. "I dragged out the pilot and plunged him into a nearby water tank. Then I went back and got the other two crewmen. They all had third-degree burns, but I got them to the hospital in time to save their lives."

At the time, Monien was in charge of monitoring the relief supplies that Western allies were airlifting to 2 million residents of West Berlin, who were stranded when the Soviet army cut off ground access to their island of freedom in 1948. The blockade lasted 462 days and was one of the defining moments in the early days of the Cold War.

When President Clinton visits Tempelhof on Wednesday at the start of a European trip, he will pay tribute to the heroic actions of Monien and

countless others who ensured the success of history's greatest humanitarian air rescue. It is an achievement that for many Berliners symbolized how the United States would stand by newly democratic allies who only three years earlier were regarded as mortal enemies.

The statistics alone attest to an amazing logistical feat. More than 2.3 million tons of food, fuel and medicine were delivered to Tempelhof and two other makeshift airfields to sustain the Western enclave 110 miles inside the Soviet-occupied zone of Germany. U.S. and British planes, with crews mobilized for round-the-clock service, flew 278,000 cargo missions. At the peak of the airlift, planes were taking off and landing every 30 seconds.

The crisis erupted in spring 1948 when the Soviet army began disrupting the flow of troops and supplies by the three Western allies -- the United States, France and Britain -- to their occupation sectors in West Berlin. When West Germany introduced its new currency, the mark, on June 24, the Russians closed off all ground routes to force the allies to abandon their territory and to starve the West Berliners into capitulation.

The U.S. government, fearful of igniting war, balked at dispatching armed convoys to reopen the routes. So the U.S. military commander for Berlin, Gen. Lucius D. Clay, decided the only option to a Communist takeover or the starvation of 2 million Berliners was to fly in food and other vital supplies.

"Clay called me and asked if we could start an airlift," recalled Capt. Jack Bennett, who returned to Berlin to celebrate the 50th anniversary of what he calls his most fateful decision. "At first, I told him no way, because I thought it was too dangerous to do low-level flying at night over hostile territory. Clay said we could make history, but I told him I didn't want to make history because I was young and wanted to stay alive."

Bennett went on to fly 60 missions -- more than any other pilot -- in what he and his fellow airmen called Operation Vittles. Years later, after East German authorities built a wall to divide Berlin and Pan American World Airways Inc. began making regular civilian flights to the city through special air corridors, Bennett became the airline's director in Berlin. But nothing matched the excitement of the airlift.

"Those were the most important flights of my life," Bennett said. "We saved many lives, and that is a heck of a lot better than flying tourists back and forth on their vacations to Mallorca."

Bennett's apprehensions were well-founded. The airlift took place during one of Europe's coldest and wettest winters this century. The landings had to be conducted at such low altitudes that many planes were nearly skimming the rooftops. Seventy-eight airmen, including 31 Americans, lost their lives in crashes.

As Berlin embarks on a new phase of its eventful history as the capital of a reunited Germany, city officials have invited Bennett and

nearly 1,000 other airlift veterans back for a rousing set of celebrations.

The purpose of the commemoration, according to Mayor Eberhard Diepgen, is not only to honor the valor of the pilots. It is also to remind a new generation of Germans about the unique partnership with the United States -- one that risks losing its vigor now that a common strategic threat has vanished and both countries find themselves focusing on different challenges in the post-Cold War era. As a sign of the times, the last remaining civilian air route between Berlin and the United States was canceled two months ago.

For Berliners who were alive during the airlift, however, the special connection with the United States remains as strong as ever. People like Mercedes Wild recall that U.S. planes delivered food and candy rather than bombs.

"I was 7 years old at the time, and I remember how frightened we were when we first heard the engines of so many planes," she said. "We could not help but think of the burning houses and all the destruction in the last days of the war. But then, when we saw that they were bringing food and not bombs, we recognized the planes as symbols of a new friendship."

Wild became particularly close to **Gail Halvorsen**, the American pilot who began attaching packets of sweets to small parachutes and floating them down to delighted children. Halvorsen and other pilots were known as the Rosinenbombers, or raisin bombers, because they first dropped dried fruit to the children. As the habit became more popular, they switched to chocolate. By the end of the airlift, more than 23 tons of candy had been delivered.

Wild maintained contact with Halvorsen after he returned to his hometown of Provo, Utah. When the Berlin Wall came down in 1989, she and her husband launched their own airlift between Berlin and Provo. Each year, they sponsor an exchange between two dozen German and American high school students that Wild says is designed to maintain "the spirit of freedom" established by the airlift.

"We hope these children will never experience the fear and deprivation we felt in those days," Wild said. "But they can learn the lessons of history and keep alive the warmth and generosity that have characterized ties between Germans and Americans after the war."

Amid all the hoopla surrounding the anniversary, the spirit of the airlift remains brightest in Herbert Monien's memory. For saving the lives of three American airmen a half-century ago, Monien will be thanked by Clinton.

While pleased by the honor, Monien says nothing could surpass the elation he experienced when he received a thank-you note from Gen. Clay three weeks after the rescue. "He included three cartons of Lucky Strike cigarettes," Monien said. "I felt like I'd been handed the biggest fortune I could ever imagine."

Berlin Blockade Remembered

When the Soviet Union halted rail and road traffic to isolated West Berlin, the Western Allies -- the United States, Britain and France -- countered with a 15-month airlift, demonstrating Western resolve to stop the spread of communism.

Highlights of the Airlift

1945: Britain, France, the United States and the Soviet Union occupy Germany after World War II, with each controlling a zone. Berlin, surrounded by the Soviet zone, also is divided into four sectors.

1946-47: Cooperation among wartime allies breaks down. Western powers create separate West German government in their zones; Soviets oppose move.

1948: Airlift begins after Soviets block all train and road traffic and cut electricity to western part of city.

1949 -- May 12: Soviets lift blockade. Airlift continues while ground links are restored.

Sept. 30: Airlift ends.

Oct. 7: East German government established in Soviet zone.

Facts About the Airlift

Duration: 462 days, from June 26, 1948, to Sept. 30, 1949.

Flights: 278,228 -- 189,963 U.S., 87,841 British and 424 French.

Busiest 24 hours: April 15-16, 1949; 1,398 flights, bringing in 12,940 tons of cargo (equal to 22 trains with 50 rail cars.)

Cargo: 2,326,406 tons, two-thirds of it coal. 23 tons of candy are dropped on tiny parachutes to children.

Deaths in airlift crashes: 31 Americans, 39 British, at least 9 Germans.

SOURCE: Associated Press

CAPTION: A U.S. airman aboard a Navy C-54 secures cargo Jan. 9, 1949, for airlift. CAPTION: Herbert Monien, 83, displays the certificate of appreciation he received for rescuing the three-man crew of a U.S. plane

that crashed during the airlift. CAPTION: West Berlin children watch during the airlift as a U.S. plane carrying supplies prepares to land at Tempelhof Airport.

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