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A Section

Berliners, U.S. Veterans Cheer A Shared '48 Airlift to History

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Gail Halvorsen was a young pilot when the United States and other Allies launched the Berlin Airlift in the summer of 1948 to break a Soviet blockade of the city. "I thought it would be over in a few weeks," he said.

Instead of a few weeks, the blockade lasted 11 months, and the airlift continued for 15. During that time, Allied airplanes flew more than 278,000 sorties into Berlin. Halvorsen flew 190 of those himself and was back in Berlin today to commemorate the 50th anniversary of one of the boldest chapters in U.S. and European history and one of the most audacious examples of air power ever seen.

If it was a month short of the real 50th anniversary, no one seemed to mind. President Clinton joined German Chancellor Helmut Kohl at Berlin's Tempelhof Airport to praise both the courage of crews that kept the city alive and the spirit of the people in Berlin in the face of Soviet aggression.

The cooperation between the Allied military forces and the people of Berlin made the city a symbol of resistance to Soviet expansionism and a beacon of freedom around the world. The airlift also helped transform German-American relations in the aftermath of World War II.

As Clinton put it today, "Western Allies became protectors, instead of occupiers, of Germany."

Clinton and Kohl were joined by some of the veterans of the airlift and by thousands of Berliners who cheered the contribution of the American pilots and their own spirit of determination to survive.

Clinton called Tempelhof Airport "the first battlefield of the Cold War." On the tarmac was a little C-54 cargo plane that Western pilots used to ferry flour and coal, food and medicine, into Berlin around the clock for those 15 months, landing every 90 seconds at the operation's peak. Hovering over the C-54 was a huge, modern C-17 cargo plane, christened by Clinton and Kohl as "The Spirit of Berlin."

Kenneth Herman was one of the American veterans on hand for the events today. He was 25 when the airlift began and over the next 15 months flew 190 sorties. "We knew we were tasked to keep the Russians from forcing the Allies out of Berlin," he said. "We were not about to allow a repression-type government such as the Communists take over all of Berlin."

Halvorsen, whom Clinton mistakenly referred to as "she" in his speech, talked about the scariest moment of his airlift experience, the day in August 1948 when air traffic controllers in Berlin lost control of the planes supplying the city. Halvorsen was at 10,000 feet when suddenly another plane appeared at the same altitude. "We came head on," he said. "We just missed by a few feet."

Mercedes Wild, who at the time was a little girl longing to receive candy dropped from Allied planes, told the audience that the Allied planes were bringing not only supplies but also "the hope of freedom" to the residents of Berlin.

Both Clinton and Kohl used the memories of the airlift to encourage the same kind of resolve and determination in the reshaping of Europe in the wake of the Cold War. "I hope both Americans and Germans will always remember the lesson of what happened here 50 years ago," Clinton said. "We cannot relinquish the responsibilities of leadership, for the struggle for freedom never ends."

Later, Clinton and Kohl left Berlin for Eisenach, a small city in the former East Germany that was once home to both Johann Sebastian Bach and Martin Luther but which is now in an area of Germany suffering economically.

CAPTION: Retired Air Force Col. **Gail Halvorsen**, a Berlin Airlift veteran, holds student Adriene Hudson at Berlin's Tempelhof airport.

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