



'Candy bomber' of Berlin airlift returns to air

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CHICOPEE, Mass. (AP) - On the 50th anniversary of his Berlin Airlift candy drops, **Gail Halvorsen** was both flying and again making children smile.

Once dubbed the "Candy Bomber," the 77-year-old retired Air Force colonel flew Tuesday from New York City to Westover Air Reserve Base in Chicopee. The base was the airlift's domestic hub.

In 1948-49, American, French and British airplanes ferried food, coal and medical supplies to 2 million West Berliners blockaded by the Soviets. Halvorsen struck on the idea of delivering candy too via tiny parachutes for the children. Within the next 15 months, he and his squadron dropped more than 20 tons of candy and gum in small, kid-sized bags.

"This was something you could grasp," said German Consul General Peter Christian Hauswedell at the Westover ceremony. "It was the human gesture."

The goodies-for-kids project - at first unauthorized and then encouraged by the military command - was called "Operation Little Vittles." Donated from around the world, most of the candy and material for parachutes went through Westover. Local children and other volunteers tied packs of gum, chocolate bars, and other candy to handkerchiefs that served as parachutes.

On Tuesday morning, Halvorsen, of Ogden, Utah, left a Brooklyn airfield with a 14-member crew, including others from the original airlift, in a C-54 cargo plane that also flew to Berlin at the time. They later left for Goose Bay, Labrador, on their way to Germany to re-enact the candy drops and join five weeks of anniversary celebrations for the airlift.

At his Westover stop, more than 700 local children buzzed with eagerness inside a cavernous hangar. One child tossed him some candy tied to a plastic bag. Still trim and athletic-looking in his flight suit, he flung it high into the air. As it floated back to the ground, the children let out a round of cheers.

He recalled that years after the airlift, a Berliner told him that, as a child, one of Halvorsen's special deliveries had sailed through an overcast sky and landed right in front of his feet. "What it was hope," he remembered the Berliner saying. "You can't buy hope."

Betty Viens, 62, of Chicopee, pulled a palm-sized plaque from her purse Tuesday. As a 12-year-old, she had volunteered to cut material for the Candy Bomber's parachutes. Her sister was in the armed services at the time, so Viens understood some of the import even then.

"You want to know what it meant to me?" she asked. "I saved this for 50 years." She showed the plaque, which said: "For Meritorious Service: Operation Little Vittles, 1948-49."

Nearby, a crush of children awaited a tour of Halvorsen's plane, "The Spirit of Freedom," which he intended actually to co-pilot for some of the journey.

Few of the children seemed to understand clearly what Halvorsen and his comrades had done. But they all seemed to grasp one thing: he gave away candy to children. For many, that was enough.

"Sweets are good for a treat - once in a while," soberly observed Stefanie Morgan, an East Longmeadow fourth grader.

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