

US Fed News

CANDY BOMBER VISITS SPANGDAHLEM, IMPARTS WISDOM

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SPANGDAHLEM AIR BASE, Germany, May 23 -- The U.S. Air Forces in Europe issued the following press release:

Retired Col. **Gail Halvorsen** visited here May 18 and spoke to a diverse audience of Airmen, civilians and family members about his involvement with the Berlin Airlift.

Colonel Halvorsen spoke about the history of Berlin Airlift and how he became involved in one of the most important morale missions staged in Air Force history.

"Right after I got there to Rhein-Main [Air Base], I thought the airlift would be over right away; that's how dumb I was," Colonel Halvorsen said. "I thought it'd be over; I'd be sent back to the States before we even got to look around the city."

When the pilots landed in Berlin, they had to stand right beside their aircraft and as soon as supplies had been loaded, they were on their way back to Rhein-Main AB.

"I wanted to take a look around, so on July 17, 1948, I finished three trips, which took about 14 hours, and was supposed to go straight to bed and start flying that night, but I had my movie camera with me and wanted to go back to Berlin. My buddy was starting his engines next to me with a load of dried potatoes ready to go to Berlin," he said. "I told my co-pilot and engineer to go to bed, and that I was going to Berlin. They said I was crazy, and I replied 'I know, but I'm going anyways.'"

A friend of Halvorsen's had a jeep waiting to take him around as soon as he landed at Templehof Air Base.

"I told the driver that I wanted to take some shots from the other side of the runway," the colonel said.

"On the other side of the barbed wire were about 30 [children]. Those [children] were friendly. Their aunts and uncles lived across the border and told the [children] that they didn't want anything to do with the Soviets. They said 'you'll lose your freedom,'" he said. "The chance for their freedom depends on whether the airlift works.

"These children told me not to worry about them. They can take care of themselves with just a little food. But if they lose their freedom, they will never get it back," Colonel Halvorsen said. "[Children] 8-14 years old were telling this to me."

"I had been at the fence for an hour and not one of those [children] had asked me for anything. In Frankfurt, the [children] would run you down for a piece of chocolate. These children were different. They were grateful to have their freedom. When I had just realized that, it just blew me away. I wanted to give them something, so I reached into my pocket to find something to give them. I only had [two sticks of gum] left, so I decided I should run or else I'd start a fight," he recalled.

"As I turned to leave, something inside me told me to go back to the fence. When I turned around, the children stood at attention as I gave them four halves of gum through the barbed wire. They broke the pieces even smaller and the children who didn't get a piece just wanted to smell the wrapper."

When he realized he probably wouldn't see them again, he promised them he would drop candy for them the next day. They asked how they would know it was him and, since a new plane would land at Templehof Air Base less than every five minutes. He told them he would wiggle the wings of his plane so they would recognize him.

After three weeks of dropping candy to the children outside of the base, the weather had deteriorated and Colonel Halvorsen went to base operations to get any updates. It was here that he made a startling discovery.

"There was a map table stacked with letters sitting in there," Halvorsen said. "I thought to myself 'Well somebody better be giving me a letter.'"

As he approached the table, he immediately broke out into a sweat. The letters were sent to him under the names "Uncle Wiggly Wings" and "The Chocolate Bomber."

"I told the others. We decided that we had to quit doing this before anyone found out, but it was too late. When we got back to Rhein-Main, an officer approached us and asked who was flying this plane. My buddies pointed to me and said that I was in charge and I was escorted to the commander's office."

When he went into the office, the commander asked Halvorsen what he had been up to.

"I've been flying like mad, sir," Halvorsen responded.

"I'm not stupid, son," the commander replied. "What else have you been doing?"

The commander threw a newspaper on the desk and on the front page was then-lieutenant Halvorsen's plane dropping parachutes.

"I thought I was getting an early ticket back home for what I had done," Colonel Halvorsen said, "but [Lt. Gen. William H.] Tunner wanted us to keep dropping candy for the children."

For the next 14 months, U.S., British and French cargo planes dropped more than 20 tons of candy to children in Berlin.

Colonel Halvorsen told the audience that the greatest word of advice he could was to be grateful for what they have.

"I am very happy to get out to the young people especially. I try to get [the children] to feel what life's like without the all the nice things we have today. Children their age didn't even have enough to eat; never take that for granted," the colonel said. "One man said to me 'I can live on thin rations, but not without hope.' Without hope the soul dies.

"These people were trapped in the city, but they had hope and were encouraged by the people working day and night to help them," he said.

He reminded the audience of the importance of appreciation and helping others.

"I think as time goes on, people forget the lessons that we've learned. The longer that time goes without a reminder, we end up making the same mistakes or lose appreciation," Colonel Halvorsen told the audience. "When we lose appreciation, we lose touch with life and the lessons learned."

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Text	"Gail Halvorsen"
Date	All Dates
Source	All Sources
Author	All Authors
Company	All Companies
Subject	All Subjects
Industry	All Industries
Region	All Regions

Language	English
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