



Chocolates falling from the sky: Berliners remember

By ANNE THOMPSON

Associated Press Writer

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BERLIN (AP) - Half a century later, memories of the Berlin airlift remain crystal clear: The blackouts, powdered eggs and milk, chocolates falling from the sky. And above all, the roar of the American planes.

"It was so loud you couldn't speak sometimes, but we didn't care," Berliner Wolfgang Messall recalled. "As long as the planes were coming, we knew we weren't alone."

And come they did. Over the course of 462 days, 278,228 flights of mercy kept hope alive for the besieged people of West Berlin.

Messall, a retired newspaper salesman, was one of dozens of honored guests at a ceremony Thursday - honored for their age and for their experiences. Clasp bouquets of tiny U.S. and German flags, the old West Berliners sat front and center in the audience at Tempelhof airport, living testimony to a Cold War chapter of fear and hope.

President Clinton and Chancellor Helmut Kohl, with eloquent speeches, commemorated the 50th anniversary of the airlift. But it was the survivors' stories that resonated.

Joachim Zillmann, 13 years old when the airlift started in June 1948, helped dig stones from the streets to expand the runways at Tempelhof for the Allied aircraft that ultimately delivered 2 million tons of coal and food.

Karl Janetzke, wearing a crisp navy suit for the occasion, remembers his mother hurrying to iron during the two hours of daily rationed electricity. After school, he and his buddies rode their bikes to the airport hoping for a closer look at the planes glimpsed only fleetingly as they thundered over the city.

"There was an expression back then that everyone knew: 'The Russians are coming.' That was our greatest worry," he said. "And the Americans saved us from that."

Gratitude to the United States was the theme of the day, for sustaining West Berlin and for eventually bringing about the fall of communism as a result. Many of those old enough to remember the airlift said the continued existence of West Berlin - just a Wall away from the East - kept constant pressure on the communist bloc with its blatant example of freedom.

In his speech, Kohl described the airlift as an inspiration to all of West Germany, one that gave a defeated nation the goal of rebuilding their democracy and once again standing on its own as part of the free world.

Kohl thanked the U.S. veterans in the audience, and remembered the 31 Americans killed during airlift duty.

In the background stood an original airlift plane, the silver wings of the C-54 glinting in the sun. It belonged to the famous Candy Bomber, the U.S. pilot who started the airlift hallmark of throwing parachuted packages of gum and chocolate to West Berlin children. By the time the airlift ended, pilots had parachuted 23 tons of candy.

"I flew that plane right there," said 77-year-old **Gail Halvorsen**, the Candy Bomber, who had a front-row seat at the ceremonies. Halvorsen, a retired colonel from Provo, Utah, wore a dark-green flight suit from his airlift days and his silver wings.

Sitting behind him were dozens of former West Berliners, now retirement age, who remember waiting patiently for the candy parachutes. For them, the candy wasn't just a treat; it was a sign of hope.

As a 7-year-old, Mercedes Wild grew tired of waiting for the candy and wrote a letter to the Candy Bomber telling him to drop a parachute on her house - the one with the chickens outside.

Halvorsen did even better. He mailed her a package.

"That was the beginning of friendship," she said during the ceremony, referring not only to her friendship with the pilot but also to the warming ties between Germany and America.

Her voice cracked with tears. "Thank you for all," she told the pilots in English. To the audience, she said: "Never forget what they have done."

Rush

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