



Chocs away as pilot returns to city he bombed with candy.

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JIM McBETH.

IT WAS a defining moment for a young United States Air Force captain playing out his small role in Operation Chow Hand.

In the summer of 1948, Berlin was starving, its food and medicine cut off by Stalin in an attempt to drive the Allies out. The city was at a standstill, there was no electricity.

In June, at the beginning of what would be an 11-month siege, Capt **Gail Halvorsen** was waiting for his aircraft to be unloaded at Tempelhof. He was one of hundreds of British and US pilots who helped to move thousands of tons of supplies into the Russian blockade.

History records the allied effort as the Berlin Airlift, the greatest humanitarian aviation feat in peacetime history.

Stalin had said: "It cannot be done; the Allies will fail." But the volunteer pilots who landed an aircraft laden with vital food and medicine in Berlin every 90 seconds forced Stalin into a humiliating climbdown that was to fuel the Cold War for 30 years.

On that day in June, Capt Halvorsen, later reached the rank of colonel, was standing by a fence surrounded by German children who had been battered by years of war. "I had two sticks of gum and I cut them into little pieces to give to the children," he said and added: "It wasn't enough to go round so I promised I would bring more."

The legend of the Berlin Candy Bomber was born - the pilot who diverted his aircraft to drop sweets to thousands of children on parachutes fashioned from handkerchiefs.

Halvorsen's small act of kindness gripped the imagination of the US public and he was soon filling his McDonnell Douglas C54 with tons of sweets donated by Americans.

Today the veteran flier will pilot that same aircraft from Iceland to Prestwick airport en on his way to Tempelhof for the 50th anniversary celebrations of the airlift.

"I became known as Uncle Wiggly Wings because I signalled the children that I was above and they gathered for
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the drop," said Col Halvorsen, 77, who is co-piloting the C54 with a Vietnam veteran, Capt Tim Chopp, the president and founder of the Berlin Airlift Historical Foundation in New Jersey.

He added: "I was called into the base commander's office one day and I thought 'This is it, I'm going to be reprimanded'. However, he thought it was wonderful and before I knew it I was on the candy run.

"Enthusiasm spread across America and within weeks manufacturers were donating candy by the boxcar load.

"The blockade was lifted in May 1949 but the memory of those candy-filled parachutes was to last for another generation. It was a symbol, I suppose, of man's love and concern for others."

The Berlin Airlift was a remarkable irony as until 1945 the Allies had done their best to raze the city. However, post-war politics dictated that it was split into zones controlled by the Russians, Americans, British and French.

Stalin, fearful that a Berlin outwith his control would be a focal point for German reunification, ordered a halt to all traffic to the city. Roadblocks were set up at Marienborn, 100 miles from the capital, in the early hours of 24 June.

It was Stalin's first big gamble of the Cold War and the President Truman of the US and Britain's prime minister, Clement Attlee, decided a withdrawal from Berlin was unthinkable. An armed confrontation between Russia and the Allies was equally unthinkable.

Dr Peter Strachura, of Stirling University, said: "There wasn't much chance of war, but it fuelled the Cold War to come. Stalin was flexing his muscles in the name of Soviet expansion.

"However, he was still maintaining diplomatic relations. It was brinkmanship. Stalin had threatened to attack aircraft flying in supplies, but it never happened.

"He was forced to back down and it created the divisive system of West Germany and Soviet-controlled East Germany. The airlift was the opening shots of the Cold War and stood as a symbol that the Allies would not back down."

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