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## Dessert Storm: Berlin 1948; The 'Candy Bomber' Made Life Sweeter for Blockaded Children

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They fell slowly, and as they floated down from the plane to the children waiting below, the little parachutes bearing candy bars and packets of gum glistened in the sun like daytime stars.

That's how it looked to a young American pilot named **Gail Halvorsen** every time he scattered the packages to the wind: glints of white against the sky, magical, beautiful, too good to be true.

And that's how Halvorsen's story looks now, 50 years later. So pretty, so charming, it seems too gentle an image for our century.

A farm-raised American transport pilot swept up in the early Cold War brinkmanship known as the Berlin Airlift, Halvorsen was flying supplies into the Soviet-blockaded city when he took it on himself to do something generous, whimsical and utterly against regulations. Day after day, he and then others dropped candy to the 100,000 children of Berlin.

By the time the Soviets lifted their nine-month land blockade of Berlin in May 1949, American and British planes had brought in more than 2 million tons of food, fuel and other essential supplies, keeping 2 million people alive and a city functioning. By the end of the airlift, Halvorsen and his successors had dropped more than 250,000 parachutes of candy, tons of the stuff. In the process Halvorsen became a demi-hero of the Cold War, a symbol of American generosity more potent and appealing than any propagandist could concoct.

And he himself acquired the sort of story a man can continue to tell and live for an entire life.

"You'd be walking along in the fog, and through the clouds came a little parachute with a fresh piece of chocolate," Halvorsen is saying now. He is imagining what it was like to be a kid in ravaged Berlin, which only three years before had been decimated by American bombs, and was now being bombarded by candy.

"It was a symbol of hope that somebody out there realized you were under siege. They looked up -- he leans forward as he speaks, and his sky-blue eyes go suddenly wet. His chin quavers. "I think hope is the thing, not the candy bar. It was the hope."

The story still moves him, but this is not just an old man awash in nostalgia. Despite a long military career (he was an engineer in the space program and eventually commander of Templehof air base in Berlin), he remains in some fundamental way the Candy Bomber. The Candy Bomber -- that's what the Americans called him, once word got out about his private venture. The German kids wrote him letters addressed to the "Schokoladen Flieger" -- the Chocolate Flier -- or "Uncle Wiggly Wings," because he dipped his plane's wings to let them know the candy plane was coming in.

He has written a book about the airlift and his continuing ties to Germany and Russia (a committed Mormon, Halvorsen recently returned with his wife from a two-year mission to St. Petersburg). He helped organize a program that brings German students to America. This summer, he will fly with other veterans from the United States to Germany to celebrate the 50th anniversary of the Berlin Airlift, and he travels the country to air shows in a vintage C-54 outfitted as a flying airlift history lesson.

He is 77, his meticulous military-style shoes shining, his enthusiasm for his tale and the moral he drew from it undimmed.

"Little things in your life are important," that's what he learned. Little things like his decision to talk to a bunch of kids at an airstrip fence, to promise to get them some candy, to find a way to do it. By the time we get to the big decisions, he has come to believe, our lives have already been whittled into shape by the numberless small choices we make daily, the seemingly insignificant actions that define us as ourselves.

He is sitting now in a Washington hotel room. The retired Air Force colonel from Provo is in town to give a recent talk at the Air and Space Museum, as well as bring a little publicity to an upcoming WETA documentary about the Berlin Airlift, scheduled to air on July 13.

Relics of his Schokoladen Flieger days are laid out on the bed: His flight suit (it still fits), snapshots he took of the kids and the planes, letters he received from grateful German children, a medal

that came with a cash prize he used to buy a bed for himself and his new wife all those decades ago.

So much came from that small decision. The beautiful girl back home in Utah married him because of the candy drop, he likes to say. He had become more than just a bald guy who admired her from afar, he was the man who invited her to the Academy Awards when a movie about the airlift was nominated for an Oscar. He was the Candy Bomber.

"All," he says and clearly not for the first time, "because of two sticks of gum."

Two sticks of gum, that's what Halvorsen had in his pocket when he stopped in July 1948 to talk to a group of 30 or so German children pressing at the fence of the Templehof air base. In tentative English they thanked him for the airlift, then asked how long the West was willing to continue to supply Berlin.

In June, Stalin had cut off all Western roads to the divided city of Berlin, trying to assert Soviet control over Berlin and influence the shape of postwar Germany.

"It was a flexing of muscles to see what would be the response of the West," says David Stefancic, a professor of 20th-century Russian history at St. Mary's College in Indiana. The Soviets were also starting to "feel the pinch" of people fleeing their zone for the Western section of Germany.

The blockade, Stefancic says, "wasn't just aimed at the Americans, but also the East Germans, to show them that West Berlin was not going to be an island of democracy that they could run to. They were going to try to squeeze it out of existence."

The airlift started in an improvisational fashion as a way to buy time for negotiations, according to Air Force historian Roger G. Miller. When it became clear negotiations were going nowhere, the Americans and British developed an efficient and disciplined round-the-clock operation. At its peak, American planes were landing every three minutes, often at night, often in bad weather.

"The airlift itself has to be considered the greatest humanitarian airlift ever attempted," Miller says.

Standing on that airstrip in 1948, Halvorsen listened as children asked if the flights would continue, no matter the weather, no matter the pressure from the Soviet Union. We don't need too much food, Halvorsen remembers one boy saying, but we do want freedom.

After a few minutes, Halvorsen walked away, but then stopped, wishing he could give the kids something. All he had was the two pieces of gum, but he broke the sticks in half, and returned to the fence.

He made a small decision, and changed his life.

Only four children got the gum, but after years of war and privation, even the kids who didn't get the Doublemint were enthralled. They delicately ripped off strips of the wrapper, pressed them to their noses to inhale the luscious sweet tang. Halvorsen watched them, and knew the two sticks were not enough.

He started the candy drop.

Within a couple of weeks, the brass found out. Halvorsen's commander heard of it from above, and chewed him out for not keeping him informed. But by then the officers behind the airlift had recognized the public-relations brilliance of a Candy Bomber, and the drops continued.

The crowds of kids at the airport fence grew and grew until it became dangerous, and soon Halvorsen was dropping candy all across the western section of Berlin.

One boy wrote to him and said he was too slow to get any candy, the older kids got there first. Would Halvorsen please drop it at his house, and here was a map, showing the way.

When the candy failed to appear, the 9-year-old wrote again, outraged. "He wrote, 'You're a pilot!' " Halvorsen remembers, laughing even now. " 'I gave you a map! How did you guys win the war anyway?' "

Another letter from a girl named Mercedes told of how the low flights frightened the white chickens she and her mother raised in the yard. The birds were traumatized; they were losing their feathers. " 'It's a terrible problem for us,' she wrote. 'We need the eggs.' But the last line was the payoff. 'When you see the white chickens, drop the candy. I don't care if you scare them.' "

When children from the Eastern section wrote to Halvorsen asking why they couldn't get candy, he began to drop in their neighborhoods, too. At that, Soviet diplomats roared in protest, and the higher-ups told Halvorsen to stick to the West.

Back in the United States, individuals and communities organized to wrap candy, to make parachutes. The American Confectioners Association donated tons of candy.

Some of the kids whom he couldn't reach, including the boy who'd sent the map, got their candy in the mail, dropped into a Berlin mailbox by Halvorsen between flights.

A quarter-century later, when he was in Germany again, Halvorsen kept getting invitations to dinner from a family he had

never heard of. One day, the Halvorsens knocked on the door, and a young mother showed them upstairs. "Look out the window," she said. "That's where the chickens were."

The woman was Mercedes.

Too good to be true, isn't it? But it is true, he says. It happened that way. Kind people, honorable people, touching stories everywhere he looked.

What Germany did during the war was about Hitler, the "system," not the children at the airfield, their parents struggling to get by. That is the moral the Candy Bomber found in the story of his life.

He tells no bleak stories. People, he believes, are innately good.

These days, the Candy Bomber is busy with interviews and air shows and speeches. The veterans of the airlift, Halvorsen among them, are determined that it will live in history. But when the summer ends, and the 50th anniversary passes, he knows, the public attention will fade.

"Then," he says with a gentle smile, "it will be over. It will go to sleep."

CAPTION: **Gail Halvorsen**, the "Candy Bomber," in his airlift days. "I think hope is the thing, not the candy bar. It was the hope," he says.  
CAPTION: Children at the Templehof air base in Berlin await a candy drop. The crowds grew so thick there that Halvorsen began dropping candy all across western Berlin. The American Confectioners Association donated tons to the cause.

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