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**First Lt. Gail Halvorsen is credited with saving millions of West Berliners from starvation ; ‘Candy Bomber,’ mates relive Berlin Airlift**

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“Don’t desert us,” the children begged the young American airman as they spoke across a barbed wire fence at Tempelhof Air Force Base in West Berlin. “We don’t like that Stalin fellow. We don’t need very much to eat, just don’t give up on us.”

It was May 1948, and after the children left, First Lt. **Gail Halvorsen** was struck by something: “Everywhere else in the world that I’d gone, the kids begged, ‘Give me American chocolate.’ Not one of these kids in Berlin put out their hands. They were so grateful for flour and being free.”

Halvorsen wanted to do something for the kids, “but I only had two sticks of peppermint gum on me. The other kids didn’t fight for it; if they didn’t get a part of the gum, they wanted part of the wrapper.”

He vowed, “I’ve got to do more for them,” and asked them to come back the next day.

And that’s how Halvorsen went down in history as the famed “Candy Bomber” of the Berlin Airlift, which saved millions of West Berliners from starvation during the Soviet blockade in 1948 and 1949. Other nicknames included “The Chocolate Flier” or “Uncle Wiggly Wings” for the way the pilot dipped the wings before making a drop. Many pilots followed suit, airlifting 23 tons of candy to the children of Berlin.

In what turned out to be a master stroke of public relations — and renewed good will between Germany and the United States — Halvorsen conceived the idea of dropping candy, encased in small parachutes, out of airplanes. “I thought they deserved a little candy,” Halvorsen explained last week while attending the convention of Berlin Airlift Veterans Group which is held in Dayton. The brotherhood of these men is evident as Halvorsen posed before his youthful photograph at the Berlin Airlift exhibit at the National Museum of the U.S. Air Force. “That’s him, all right, even though he had a lot more hair back then, and better teeth,” teased the group’s president, Earl Moore of Dallas.

At the time, the young servicemen — now in their late 70s and 80s — didn’t understand they were making history. In fact, some were downright resentful, Moore said: “Two guys I knew had been POWs in Germany, and now they were being asked to fly an airlift over towns where they had been held captive. Their response was ‘we don’t want to feed those SOB.’ ”

Most of the pilots experienced a change of heart, including Moore himself, who’s descended from Pennsylvania Dutch stock. “I was stationed in Shanghai, and living in a penthouse,” recalled Moore, who served as a Navy pilot in the South Pacific. “When they Shanghai’ed me out of my comfortable life, I was madder than hell. And then I met all these German women, and they looked like my mother and my aunt, except they were skinny and undernourished. And I resolved those Russians couldn’t do that to them. After that I flew my heart out.”

Chuck Childs, 89, of Rapid City, S.D., admitted that it felt surreal at first: “Three years earlier I was a B-17 pilot bombing Germany, and here I was flying for Germany against the Russians. After my first mission I stepped out of the plane and a German farmer held out a big dirty hand and shook my hand. That told me what I was there for.”

The planes dropped far more than candy, of course — their main mission was to deliver food, medicine and coal during the operation that continued 24 hours a day. “Think of a great big conveyor belt, and we were flying in 10

times each day," Moore explained. "Weather didn't stop us, anti-aircraft didn't stop us." Despite the adverse circumstances, only 13 planes — and 31 U.S. and 39 British servicemen — were lost during the entire operation.

"They were such staunch men — they faced a lot and stood up to it," said Jeanette Flowers of San Jose, Calif., who attended the reunion with her husband, Tom Flowers, and two of their daughters. Many other veterans attended with extended family members.

The Berlin Airlift was comprised of two Navy squadrons and 16 Air Force squadrons. It was the first true test for the young U.S. Air Force, and they performed it brilliantly. "Joe Stalin had big eyes — for West Germany and all of Europe — but we stopped him in Berlin," Moore said.

"It was the first battle of the Cold War — and we won it," exulted Richard Clark of Kingston, N.Y.

Bill Morrissey was an 18-year-old kid from Tyrone, Pa., at the time, serving as an air traffic controller in the British Zone. "I didn't realize the political significance of what I was doing, but I found out very early that for a mission to be successful, everybody had to do their jobs," Morrissey said.

Moore glanced at Morrissey and quipped, "Had I known there was a 19-year-old kid directing traffic in the control tower, it would have scared the daylight out of me. But somehow, it worked."

The veterans who took part in the Berlin Airlift are still profoundly revered in Germany. Roland Hermann, deputy consulate general for the German Consulate General in Chicago, flew into town to honor the Berlin Airlift veterans. "It represented an historic change in German-American relations — the moment at which we became friends, partners, and allies," he said.

Many of the veterans described experiences very similar to the one Moore experienced last year when he went to Berlin for 60th anniversary ceremonies: "A man came up to me with his children and grandchildren and told them, 'He is the reason any of you are here.'"

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