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FOREVER THE CANDY BOMBER

A SPLIT-SECOND DECISION TO SHARE CANDY RATIONS WITH BLOCKADED CHILDREN ESTABLISHED AN AIR FORCE PILOT'S LASTING LEGACY OF HOPE

(this page)

Then-1st Lt. Gail Halvorsen, an Air Force pilot serving in the Berlin Airlift, offered hope to children of West Berlin through his actions as the Berlin Candy Bomber.

(opposite)

Retired Col. Gail Halvorsen is greeted by a young girl at the 60th Anniversary of "Operation Little Vittles."



acceptance for its plans for Germany's future. The Berlin Airlift began two days later, with U.S. Air Force C-47 Skytrains and C-54 Skymasters delivering milk, flour and medicine to West Berlin. Throughout the duration of the blockade, U.S. and British aircraft delivered more than 2.3 millions tons of supplies.

Colonel Halvorsen was at Templehof filming aircraft landings with his Revere movie camera when he encountered about 30 German children between the ages of 8 and 14, he said in his autobiography, "The Berlin Candy Bomber."

He greeted them with practically all the German he knew, but one of the group spoke English, and he was soon answering questions about how many sacks of flour and loaves of bread the airplanes carried and what other types of cargo were being airlifted.

He talked with the children for an hour before he realized not one had asked him for anything. Instead, they gave him something he didn't expect: the best lesson on freedom he'd ever heard.

"Hitler's past and Stalin's future was their nightmare. American-style freedom was their dream," Colonel Halvorsen said. "They knew what freedom was about. They said someday we'll have enough to eat, but if we lose our freedom, we'll never get it back."

"These were kids, and they were teaching me about freedom. That's what just blew me away."

With Hitler's crumbled Third Reich in their memories and Stalin's chokehold on their future, Germany's children were starving. But as an American pilot learned in a conversation with German youth at Templehof Air Field in July 1948, they were hungry for more than food. What they wanted most was freedom, but the pilot's split-second decision to share his chewing gum led to hope in the form of candy descending from tiny parachutes in the West Berlin sky.

"I got five steps away from them, and then it hit me," said

retired Col. Gail Halvorsen, commonly known as the Berlin Candy Bomber. "I'd been dead-stopped for an hour, and not one kid had put out their hand. Not one. The contrast was so stark because during World War II and all the way back to George Washington, if you were in an American uniform walking down the street, kids would chase you and ask for chocolate and gum.

"The reason they didn't was they were so grateful to our fliers to be free. They wouldn't be a beggar for more than freedom. That was the trigger. Scrooge would've done the same thing. I reached into my pocket, but all I had were two sticks of gum. Right then, the smallest decision I made changed the rest of my life."

Then-1st Lt. Halvorsen, who retired from the Air Force as a colonel in 1974, was one of the American pilots flying round-the-clock missions from Rhein-Main Air Base to Templehof, with 126 missions from July 1948 to February 1949. One day the American pilot, who the German children would later call "Onkel Wackelflugel" or Uncle Wiggly Wings, made the decision that would not only change the lives of numerous German children, but also help the West win the ideological war in the battle for Germany's future.

More than three years after World War II ended, on June 24, 1948, the Soviet Union blocked the Allies' railway and road access to Berlin to force

When he reached into his pocket for the two sticks of Wrigley's Doublemint gum, Colonel Halvorsen debated the wisdom of giving it to them. Perhaps they'd fight over it. But he broke each in half and passed four halves through the barbed wire. He braced for the rush to

the fence that never came. The children who didn't get any of the gum simply asked for a piece of the wrapper so they could smell the aroma. Their reaction, along with the surprise the pilot felt when they didn't beg for anything, led to his decision to do more for them.

"The only way I could get back to deliver it was to drop it from the airplane, 100 feet over their heads, on the approach between the barbed wire fence and bombed-out buildings," Colonel Halvorsen said. "A red light came on that said you can't drop it without permission. But

I rationalized it by saying that starving 2 million people isn't according to Hoyle, either, so what's a few candy bars?"

Colonel Halvorsen told the kids to promise to share and that he'd wiggle the plane's wings so they would know it was his plane, something he'd done for his parents after he received his pilot's license in 1941.

He combined his candy rations with those of his co-pilot and engineer, made the first parachutes with handkerchiefs and strings and tied them to chocolate and gum for the first "Operation Little Vittles" drop from his C-54 Skymaster on July 18, 1948.

The amount of candy steadily increased, along with the number of waiting children, for three weeks until a Berlin newspaper published a photo of the now-famous Candy Bomber. Soon, stacks of letters began arriving at Templehof base operations for "Der Schokoladen Flieger" (the Chocolate Flyer), or "Onkel Wackelflugel."

One day, after he returned from Berlin, he was summoned by Col. James R. Haun, who was the C-54 squadron commander. Colonel Haun had received a call from Brig. Gen. William H. Tunner, deputy commander of operations during the airlift, who wanted to know who was dropping parachutes over Berlin. Colonel Halvorsen knew he was in trouble when Colonel Haun showed him the newspaper with the picture of little parachutes flying out of his C-54.

"You got me in a little trouble there, Halvorsen," Colonel Haun told him.

"I'd had a long relationship with him, but he was put out because he was sandbagged," Colonel Halvorsen said. "So when I talk to kids, especially high school kids, I say, 'when you get a job, don't sandbag your boss.'"

"He said to keep [dropping candy], but keep him informed. It just went crazy after that."

Fellow pilots donated their candy rations. Eventually, they ran out of parachutes, so they



(below) Colonel Halvorsen holds out a handkerchief that he used as a parachute for candy that he dropped to children West Berlin during the Berlin Airlift.

(right) In his barracks, then-Lieutenant Gail Halvorsen constructed parachutes for the chocolate bars he dropped from his C-54 Skymaster.



made more from cloth and old shirt sleeves before noncommissioned officers' and officers' wives at Rhein-Main began making them. Later, the American Confectioners Association donated 18 tons of candy, mostly sent through a Chicopee, Mass., school where students attached it to parachutes before sending to Berlin through then-Westover Air Force Base, Mass. By the end of the airlift, American pilots had dropped 250,000 parachutes and 23 tons of candy.

"Willie Williams took over after I left Berlin," Colonel Halvorsen said, "and he ended up dropping even more candy than I did."

Since the Berlin Airlift ended in September 1949, Colonel Halvorsen has met countless

Germans whose lives were changed because of "Operation Little Vittles." One of them wrote a letter in the early stages of the candy drops, and they met when he returned to Berlin as Templehof commander in the early 1970s.

Their friendship began from just one of many letters to Berlin's candy bomber from a 7-year-old girl named Mercedes, who loved Der Schokoladen Flieger, but was concerned for her chickens, who thought the airlift planes were chicken hawks. Mercedes asked him to drop candy near the white chickens because she didn't care if he scared them.

Colonel Halvorsen tried, but never could find Mercedes'

white chickens, so he wrote her a letter and sent her candy through the Berlin mail. Twenty four years later, Mercedes' husband, Peter Wild, convinced the Templehof commander to come to his home for dinner. Mercedes showed him the letter he'd written her in 1948, along with the chickens she'd written about in her own letter. Their friendship was even featured in Margot Theis Raven's children's book, "Mercedes and the Chocolate Pilot."

Colonel Halvorsen has returned to Berlin nearly 40 times since the airlift. In 1974, he received one of Germany's highest medals, the Grosses Bundesverdienstkreuz, and carried the German team's national

placard into Rice-Eccles Stadium during the opening march for the 2002 Winter Olympics in Salt Lake City. Colonel Halvorsen participated in a re-enactment of "Operation Little Vittles" during the 40th and 50th anniversaries of the Berlin Airlift and also dropped candy from a C-130 Hercules during Operation Provide Promise in Bosnia-Herzegovina.

Even at the age of 90, Colonel Halvorsen keeps a busy schedule as he and his wife, Lorraine, split their time between their homes in Arizona and Utah. Several times a year, he still flies the C-54 "Spirit of Freedom," with FAA certification to fly second-in-command. He's also visited many schools, both



(above) Colonel Halvorsen stands in front of a C-54 Skymaster, the aircraft he piloted during the Berlin Airlift, at the Pima Air and Space Museum in Tucson, Ariz.



(left) Colonel Halvorsen demonstrates how the chocolate bars, attached to handkerchief parachutes, drifted to the children of West Berlin after he dropped them from his plane in "Operation Little Vittles." The colonel's initiative, the result of a spontaneous meeting with blockaded children, helped shape early-Cold War German perceptions of American forces in Berlin.

stateside and overseas, and recently visited Iraq to review Air Mobility Command transport operations and visit troops deployed in southwest Asia.

More than 60 years since the airlift, the colonel remains universally beloved as the Candy Bomber, but enjoys one thing about his perpetual notoriety the most.

"The thing I enjoy the most about being the Candy Bomber is seeing the children's reaction even now to the idea of a chocolate bar coming out of the sky," he said. "The most fun I have is doing air drops because even here in the states, there's something magical about a parachute flying out of the sky with a candy bar on it."

As much praise as Colonel Halvorsen receives for bringing hope to a generation of Germans through candy attached to parachutes, he's quick to deflect much of the credit to that first group of children at the barbed wire fence at Templehof. Their gratitude and thankfulness for the pilots during the Berlin Airlift to

keep them free inspired him to reach into his pocket for those two sticks of gum.

The smallest decision, as Colonel Halvorsen calls it, led to 23 tons of candy dropped from the sky for the children of West Berlin and changed countless lives, not to mention the life of the Candy Bomber, himself.