Halvorsen

Candy Bomber, engineer, unofficial ambassador.

By Peter Grier

Air Force Col. Gail S. Halvorsen tried to avoid becoming commander of Berlin's Tempelhof Airport when the job came open in 1970. He knew the occupant of this position was also USAF's representative to West Berlin and had a heavy schedule of public and official appearances. Halvorsen did not think he was the best choice for that sort of job, as he had spent the last 20 years as an engineer working on cutting-edge aircraft and space systems. Besides, he was a Mormon and a teetotaler—and in Europe alcohol played an important part of most banquets and government parties.

But service leadership thought Halvorsen was just the man for Berlin. After all, he was still beloved there as "der Rosinenbomber," or "the Candy Bomber," the Berlin Airlift pilot who had dropped chocolate-laden parachutes across the city in its hour of need. During the lean months of the 1948-1949 Soviet-imposed blockade those Hershey bars and sticks of gum were treasures that floated down from the sky. Berlin children that he'd missed wrote him begging for airdrops near their homes.

During the airlift a nine-year-old named Peter Zimmerman had sent him letter after letter, many illustrated with a drawing of the air map to his house. Still, Halvorsen was unable to find him. "You are a pilot? I gave you a map. How did you guys win the war anyway?" the boy finally wrote. A girl named Mercedes Simon wrote that she lived near Tempelhof and that he should drop the candy when he saw her white chickens. Neither Halvorsen nor anyone else in his squadron spotted the white poultry. Eventually they sent both Peter and Mercedes some goodies through the mail.

So there Halvorsen was, in the fall of 1972, back in Berlin after 23 years, when he received an invitation to yet another dinner out. His host had been insistent. She'd been after him for 18 months to come to her home. Bring your two youngest sons, she said. I have two boys about their age. Eventually Halvorsen canceled an embassy appearance, put his boys in their Sunday best, and at the appointed hour arrived at

A crowd of children watch a C-54, loaded with relief supplies for the beleaguered people of Berlin, as it comes in to land at Tempelhof Airport. If the wings wiggled, the children knew the pilot was Gail Halvorsen, the Candy Bomber.

AP photo/Terry Ashe

the address, 15 Hahnelstrasse, a street not far from his office.

A pleasant young couple greeted them. The woman ushered them up to their apartment without introductions. In their front room, she reached inside an old-fashioned china cabinet, picked a letter from among the figurines, and held it out to Halvorsen. Her hand was shaking. Halvorsen opened the envelope, slipped out a note, and read. It was dated Nov. 4, 1948. "Meine liebe Mercedes," it began.

It was the letter Halvorsen himself had sent her decades ago. "You silly pilot, I am Mercedes," said his host. "If you take five steps over to the window you will see for yourself where the white chickens were."

In the end it turned out his superiors had been correct. The bonds Halvorsen had forged with Berlin's people during the airlift were lasting and profound. His assignment as Tempelhof commander, rather than being something to dread, turned out to be as moving a human experience as he could imagine.

"As I look back the four years in Berlin were a lot better in my life than if I'd stayed in the space program," Halvorsen recalls today.

First Lt. Gail S. Halvorsen became famous for his humanitarian actions during the Berlin Blockade, a tense standoff between the West and the Soviet Union that marked the beginning of the Cold War. He began by persuading navigator TSgt. Herschel C. Elkins to stuff candy out the flare chute of their C-54 transport on approach to Tempelhof. In the end his Operation Little Vittles delivered some 21 tons of candy and other goodies to Berlin's children and helped win thousands upon thousands of German hearts and minds to the cause of the West. But this was only the first act of his story.

Halvorsen stayed in the service, got an education, rose through the ranks, and helped usher the Air Force into the satellite age. Then he returned to Berlin, serving as a tireless advocate for strong German-American relations at a crucial time for the trans-Atlantic alliance. In his later years he has traveled the nation and the world, often in a restored

AP photo by Harry Harris

Halvorsen holds up a "candy bomb" attached to an improvised parachute.

C-54, re-enacting his candy bombing while promoting freedom, charity, and reconciliation to audiences of all ages.

And as he himself says, all of that stems from a moment—the briefest instance of time—when he decided to part with two sticks of gum. "That is what I tell children all the time: Little decisions put your foot on the path to wherever you are going to end up, good and bad," says Halvorsen.

The Soviet blockade of West Berlin was the moment when the Cold War became real for many in Western Europe. Though the crisis developed over a period of months, it began in earnest on June 24, 1948, when the USSR stopped all surface transportation into the Allied-controlled sector of the German capital. At the time, Berlin was broken into zones run by the US and its Western Allies and the Soviets. Stalin hoped to push the West out and seize control of the city. The air bridge to supply food and fuel to the increasingly desperate population of Berlin began on June 26.

A Chance Meeting

At the time Halvorsen was based at Brookley Air Force Base in Mobile, Ala. He was a Utah farm boy who'd won a US flight school scholarship, detoured through RAF fighter training, then ended up a transport pilot in the Army Air Corps. He'd spent World War II ferrying cargo and airplanes down through South American bases, across to Ascension Island, and occasionally to Great Britain. Now he was angling to get out of uniform. He'd been eying franchise opportunities with the Western Auto company. "I wanted to start one of those stores," he said.

Fate intervened. The new Air Force suddenly needed C-54 pilots for West Germany, and the single Halvorsen volunteered, taking the spot of a friend named Capt. Peter Sowa who was married with two kids. Within days he found himself standing in the rain at Rhein-Main AB, West Germany, holding his duffel bag and marveling at the sense of purpose reflected by the roar of airplanes and men. He bedded down in an old barn next to the runway. The next morning he was on his way to West Berlin, flying a C-54 with 138 bags of flour.

The early days of the airlift were "a cowboy operation," Halvorsen says. They'd load their airplanes with 20,000 pounds of whatever cargo was at hand—mostly coal, as opposed to food. After landing in Berlin at Tempelhof pilots would wander into the terminal for a snack while their cargo was unloaded. It was all somewhat disorganized.

The C-54s themselves performed well. The military variant of the DC-4 was a stable platform, flew well in bad weather, and was easy to load. But as the airlift tightened up, with regular flight plans, choreographed ground operations, and even mobile snack bars to keep pilots in their seats, the job became harder. "In my memory of it the most difficult part was the separation between aircraft and safety of flight. ... When we got [ground] radar my blood pressure went down 20 points," Halvorsen says. The final approach to Tempelhof was also a problem. Aircraft had to maneuver around a five-story apartment building before roaring over a grassy strip and then the airfield fence. The open strip was often filled with groups of children watching the airplanes land.

Halvorsen had brought along his Revere 8 mm movie camera to record his Berlin adventures during the airlift. But the pace was punishing and the schedule tight. He had a difficult time figuring out how he was going to break away long enough to film the Brandenburg Gate, the Reichstag, and other famous city sights. Eventually, one fellow pilot agreed to carry Halvorsen as a passenger in and out. Another provided

The Candy Bomber is surrounded by dozens of German children, thanking him for dropping sweets to them.

USAF photo

German children sent "Uncle Wiggly Wings" thousands of letters, thanking him and asking him to drop candy near their homes. At one point, Halvorsen needed two full-time secretaries to help him answer the torrent of mail.

the name of a sergeant with a jeep who'd provide a quick Berlin tour.

On July 19 the plan came together. Halvorsen figured that by skipping sleep he could make it to Berlin then return for another 16-hour flying shift. When he landed at Tempelhof, he called his ride, who said he couldn't be there for another hour. Halvorsen decided he'd go over and film C-54s popping over the apartment building and hitting the Tempelhof planked steel runway. It took him about 20 minutes to walk the distance along the perimeter fence. When he got there he filmed a few airplanes and noticed a group of 30 children gathered in the open strip. They were watching the American pilot with the camera in silence. All seemed between the ages of about eight and 14. They were boys and girls, dressed in shoddy clothes.

In halting German, he asked how they were. They giggled and responded in a mix of German and schoolroom English. They were very interested in the mechanics of the airlift and asked what each airplane carried and how much. They also chattered about Cold War life in East Germany—relatives in the Soviet zone who were forbidden to read certain things or go certain places. They didn't want to live like that. Halvorsen did not know what to make of this. For all he knew, they could have once been members of the Hitler Youth. Then he remembered: He had to make it back to the terminal for his ride. He told the children he was sorry, but had to go, and turned for the long walk back.

He was 50 yards away when it struck him—none of the children had asked him for anything. In his past experiences, crowds of kids always laughed and begged for a handout or a treat. He felt in his pocket. All he had were two sticks of Wrigley's Doublemint gum. "This was what Hal Halvorsen would later call his 'moment of truth,' the continental divide of his long life," writes author Andrei Cherny in his history of the Berlin Airlift, *The Candy Bombers.*

Catching On

Halvorsen turned back toward the fence. He didn't know if the children would fight over his small offering, but he broke the gum into bits and handed them out through the fence. The children carefully tore the gum and foil into even smaller pieces, enough for all. Just then another C-54 roared overhead. That gave Halvorsen an idea—on the spur of the moment he promised that he'd drop them more candy when he flew over. They'd know it was him because he'd wiggle his wings, he said.

"Luckily, the driver was still waiting. I was very late," wrote Halvorsen in his autobiography.

Halvorsen was good to his word. The next day he and two crew members bought their full allowance of sweets at the Rhein-Main base exchange. Halvorsen tied up handkerchiefs for parachutes to slow the candy's descent. The pilot wiggled the C-54's wings and passed over the apartment building. Navigator Elkins stuffed the goods out the emergency flare chute in front of the left wing.

It worked. As they taxied in, they could see the children celebrating. Over the next several weeks, the aircrew pooled resources and dropped as much candy as they could. But they knew they were breaking many, many regulations with their behavior and were likely to get shipped back home if caught. Then Halvorsen got a nasty shock. One day he ran into Tempelhof base operations to check on weather. On a table he spotted a pile of mail, addressed (in German) to "Uncle Wiggly Wings."

They quit—for a while. But the crowd of kids at the end of the runway grew bigger. Eventually they tried another delivery. Just one more, they told themselves. The next day Halvorsen's commander summoned him. The colonel slapped a copy of the *Frankfurter Zeitung* on the table. "You almost hit a reporter in the head with a candy bar in Berlin yesterday," he said. "He's spread the story all over Europe. The general called me with congratulations and I didn't know anything about it. Why didn't you tell me?"

The US had quickly recognized the publicity value of what came to be called Operation Little Vittles. Commanders charged Halvorsen with organizing a larger airdrop. Eventually dozens of pilots were involved. Halvorsen made a tour Stateside, where he appeared on radio and TV to promote the project to the American people. Candy manufacturers donated their wares by the boxcar load. Residents of Chicopee, Mass.—location of Westover Air Force Base, home station for many of the aircraft dispatched to the Berlin lift—organized to tie up parachutes. The town's children did much of the work on weekends and after school.

Halvorsen's tour ended in mid-January 1949. He returned to a hero's welcome. He spoke at civic groups across the country and even represented the Air Force at the Academy Awards. The National Geographic Society gave him a new 16 mm camera. And on May 12, 1949, the Soviet Union lifted the blockade. The Berlin Airlift's ability to deliver food and fuel—13,000 tons on the maximum effort "Easter Parade" day of April 16, 1949—had triumphed.

A month after returning home, Halvorsen proposed to his longtime long-distance sweetheart, Alta Jolley. His celebrity was such that newspapers across the country carrried their engagement photo. With new responsibilities to consider, he thought once again about leaving the service. But the Air Force had other ideas. "They offered me a permanent commission, full pay, and said they'd send me to university. I said, 'That's great!'" recalls Halvorsen.

DOD photo

Left: Halvorsen in 1989 leans out of the window of a C-54 on static display at Tempelhof. After coming home and earning two engineering degrees, the Candy Bomber went back to Berlin to take charge of the air base for USAF. Below: A Halvorsen Loader lifts relief supplies for Afghans onto a KC-10. The massive 25,000-pound loader was named in honor of Halvorsen in 2001.

USAF photo by Paul Zadach

Eventually the one-time beet farmer earned two aeronautical engineering degrees at the University of Florida. Afterward, he and Alta were posted to Wright Air Development Center in Dayton, Ohio.

His first assignment was airlift related. The experience of carrying tons of loose cargo in military aircraft had taught pilots that dust got into everything, especially control lines. The clogs could be fatal if left unaddressed. That was why the C-54s had often flown with open hatches: The airflow sucked out potentially dangerous extraneous material.

"They hoped I would design a large cargo-carrying capability and control systems that would take ample doses of flour and coal dust," remembers Halvorsen.

Eventually Halvorsen segued into the Air Force space program. He worked on a series of pioneering space launch vehicles, principally the Titan III. He was assigned to the Pentagon for a job dealing with manned, maneuverable, and reusable spacecraft. By 1969 he made colonel and became head of a satellite-tracking facility at Vandenberg AFB, Calif. He and Alta built a house and kept horses for their children. He was thinking about retiring from the military. Then his past caught up with him.

In July 1969, he got a call from the Pentagon. "Are you Uncle Wiggly Wings?" asked the voice on the other end of the line. It turned out many of the children who had caught his parachutes were now parents themselves and wanted their kids to see what they'd gone through. Some had contacted the Air Force officer in charge of Tempelhof, Col. Clark A. Tate, and requested a re-enactment of the airlift at the airport's annual open house.

Halvorsen was happy to oblige. He sent ahead a list of names from the German children's letters he'd kept, and in Berlin he flew over the airport, dropping candy bombs, once again. He finished the visit with a dinner at Tate's magnificent German-supplied house. "I'm the security blanket for the Germans—I'm out every night at events of some kind," Tate told him. "Sure glad I haven't got your job," said Halvorsen.

Back to Berlin

Perhaps he should have knocked on wood afterward. The Air Force thought the Berlin airdrop had been a great success, Tate became ill, and by 1970 Halvorsen was back in the mansion, this time as a resident.

The start was rocky. At his first big appearance representing the US he had to publicly wangle some orange juice so he could toast the President of France with something other than champagne. But the city's close-knit international community proved welcoming and highly tolerant of his abstinence from alcohol. Berliners, particularly those who remembered the airlift, indeed embraced him. "Almost everyone who had caught a parachute wanted us to come to dinner," Halvorsen wrote in his memoir.

In the end Halvorsen and his family stayed longer than expected. When they left in 1974 he had been at Tempelhof for four years and had served longer than any post-World War II US base commander. Some of the Berlin "kids" he'd connected with became ardent proponents of improved German-American relations. Mercedes and husband Peter Wild became close friends of the Halvorsen family and helped found a US-German student exchange program.

Halvorsen has returned to Berlin for airlift-related commemorations many times since then. In 1989 he led a group of 200 US airlift veterans for a Tempelhof event only weeks before the Berlin Wall fell. A decade later he helped fly a restored C-54 from Westover to Berlin for the 50th anniversary airlift celebration.

Now in his 90s, the Candy Bomber has continued to fly the C-54 as second-in-command and talk about the Berlin Airlift and its impact, at events from elementary schools to Air Force airlift training centers. In 2001 the Air Force's 25,000-pound loader was named the Halvorsen Loader in his honor.

"Halvorsen's kindness provides the 'why' to what we do day in and day out as an airlift wing," Col. Erik W. Hansen, then 437th Airlift Wing commander, said at a June 2012 JB Charleston, S.C., ceremony honoring the Candy Bomber. "His inspiration played a major role in saving Berlin and proved the concept of airlift as a strategic tool during the Cold War years and beyond." ■

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