

**Halvorsen still 'bombing' kids with love**

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**Gail Halvorsen** has always loved kids.

Whether it was a group of German children starving behind the Iron Curtain or, as it was Wednesday, a group of school children touring a plane Halvorsen helped to make famous, the retired Air Force pilot has an abiding interest in the world's little ones.

It was in fact his concern for a group of kids growing up in West Berlin in the 1940s that earned Halvorsen his own fame as the "Candy Bomber."

During a visit at Elizabeth City Regional Airport aboard the flying Cold War museum "Spirit of Freedom" Wednesday, Halvorsen shared with a group of school children how he came to gain the moniker.

One day while flying over West Berlin during the Berlin Airlift in 1948, Halvorsen says he saw below him a group of youngsters huddled by a barbed-wire fence. The youngsters waved and seemed so grateful to see an American pilot, Halvorsen said he decided to land his plane and talk with them.

Just a couple years before when Adolph Hitler carried Germany into world war, America had been the enemy of their country. But now, because of the Soviet blockade of their city, the United States was Germany's friend, and the youngsters understood that, Halvorsen explained.

"They didn't like Hitler's past and America's freedom was their dream," he said. "I said to the kids, don't give up, we'll keep coming," referring to the Allied pilots taking part in the Berlin Airlift.

Halvorsen said beside their love for America and freedom, he could also tell something else about the youngsters: they hadn't had chocolate bars or chewing gum in many months.

Unlike youngsters in other countries, however, the Berlin youngsters refused to beg him for candy, he said.

"They were so grateful for freedom, they couldn't lower themselves for chocolate," he said.

But Halvorsen could tell they really wanted some candy.

"So I reached in my pocket and told them what I had," he said. "(I gave it to them and) .. boy, they looked like they got a million dollars. Some even fought over the (gum) wrappers."

Halvorsen said he returned to where the children gathered many more times, sometimes bringing other pilots in his squadron. He said he promised the children he'd continue coming as long as they shared what he gave them. They always did, he said.

By 1949, Halvorsen and his squadron dropped more than 250,000 parachutes filled with candy over Berlin, making an estimated 100,000 children happy before the Soviet siege of West Berlin ended.

Halvorsen said even today, he gets occasional letters from Germans who said they ate his candy as children more than 55 years ago.

It's obvious he hasn't lost his touch with kids.

"You're the future of this country," Halvorsen told a group of Elizabeth City Middle School students, his green eyes sparkling and broad smile widening, as they filed aboard one of the transport planes he piloted during the Berlin Airlift.

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