

Honoring a living legend: Paying tribute to the heroes of the Berlin Airlift

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WIESBADEN, Germany (July 2, 1013) -- "The noise of the planes became the sound of hope for the people of Germany."

That's how Frankfurt City Treasurer Uwe Becker described the massive humanitarian effort to supply the besieged people of Berlin in 1948 and 1949. Becker spoke June 26, during the 65th anniversary of the Berlin Airlift at the memorial situated just outside the former Rhein Main Airbase -- now part of the Frankfurt International Airport.

Speakers from the city and Hessen government praised the superhuman effort made by the Allies in the wake of World War II to provide the deprived citizens with millions of tons of desperately needed flour, coal and other goods during the Soviet Blockade of the city, which signaled the start of the Cold War.

Saying the memorial is now under official protection of the German government, Becker recalled the more than 80 German, American and British pilots and crew who gave their lives in the effort and thanked retired Col. **Gail Halvorsen**, who was present, for his part in helping German-American relations grow and flourish following the dark days of World War II.

Describing how the young lieutenant's personal intervention -- dropping small parachutes with chocolate bars to the children of Berlin -- gained the attention and appreciation of people around the world, Becker said Halvorsen put a personal face on the massive humanitarian effort.

"With your idea, **Gail Halvorsen**, you brought humanity to the people of Berlin and Germany," Becker said.

As in the days of the airlift, when the pilot lit up the faces of the children of Berlin with his small gifts, the now 92-year-old was happy to meet the young German children of today at the ceremony. Members of the Frankfurt Musterschule sang for him and those gathered after first getting a chance to shake hands and joke with the congenial American.

"It's very important to be with the children today to tell them about the children of Berlin who didn't have any bread or anything else to eat," said Halvorsen. "The children are why I am here today."

Members of the Wiesbaden military community gathered on Clay Kaserne, June 27, to welcome the famed airlift pilot, known as the "Candy Bomber" and "Uncle Wiggly Wings" for the signal he gave to the youngsters of Berlin upon approaching the city during the airlift, and to commemorate a building in his honor.

"Today we are witnesses of history: not just where it took place, but by whom," said Col. David Carstens, U.S. Army Garrison Wiesbaden commander, outside Building 1013, which served as a barracks for the pilots who flew airlift missions from the airfield.

"Flying from Wiesbaden, Rhein-Main and other airfields in Germany, the western Allies eventually transported more than 2 million tons of goods in more than 277,000 flights in and out of Berlin before the Soviet stranglehold was broken and the siege ended on May 12, 1949," said Carstens. "The name of the casern, Lucius D. Clay, and the road signs posted within, pay tribute to the extraordinary men and women who worked, flew and even

sacrificed their lives in this noble effort to safeguard liberty and ensure the survival of Germany's frail democracy following the defeat of National Socialism."

"What an honor to be home," said Halvorsen, while joining Carstens in unveiling a plaque on the former barracks commemorating his residence, from December 1948 to February 1949, and describing Operation Little Vittles which saw some 24 tons of candy being distributed by air to Berlin's youth during the airlift. "I didn't live here much, because I was in the air most of the time," he said, adding that the Wiesbaden quarters were a major step up from the tar-paper shack he and fellow pilots called home while flying from Rhein Main Air Base in the early stages of the mission.

Putting the airlift in perspective for his present-day listeners, Halvorsen said not one pilot complained about the up-to-three flights a day they made in and out of Berlin to feed the same people some of them had fought during the war.

Describing how he lost a best buddy who was shot down during the war, Halvorsen quoted another World War II/airlift veteran pilot who said, "It's a hell of a lot better to feed them than to kill them."

Before coming to Germany to serve in the airlift mission, Halvorsen said he wondered what it would be like to encounter the U.S.'s former foes.

"I wondered what these supermen were going to look like," he recalled.

Then, after clearing the destroyed buildings of Berlin and finally landing safely on his first mission of transporting flour during the airlift, he was relieved to see the plane's doors swing open and several men come forward to unload the flour with their hands extended in friendship -- "looking at us like we were angels from heaven."

"The pleasure of food was secondary to the principle of freedom," he said. "That's one of the biggest lessons I learned in the airlift."

And from the grateful children of Berlin, Halvorsen said he learned how important the gift of peace, freedom and democracy was to a population that feared more oppression from the Soviet Union similar to what they had experienced under Nazi rule.

"The American-style dream of freedom was their future and Stalin's rule was their nightmare," he said. "If we lose our freedom, we'll never get it back. That's what those kids taught me."

"Colonel Halvorsen, we are most honored to have you and your son here today," said Carstens. "You represent all that is best about our armed forces and the sacrifices made over the past 70 years securing liberty and freedom -- both at home and abroad. Thank you for your service and leadership at a time when Germany's fledgling democracy needed your service most. I hope this plaque will always make sure that you consider Wiesbaden: Your home in Germany."

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