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### Hope from the heavens

**The "candy bomber" was honored for his Berlin missions in the late '40s.**

By Edward Colimore  
Inquirer Staff Writer  
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**Gail Halvorsen** never intended to be the "candy bomber."

Like many other American pilots, Halvorsen was flying supplies into western Berlin during a massive airlift campaign in 1948 and took a quick break to see the city before his next flight. He wanted pictures of Hitler's bunker, maybe the site of the old Reichstag building.

But Halvorsen was stopped by a more compelling sight: dozens of dirty-faced children gathered behind the barbed wire that ringed the airfield. He knew they hadn't had any gum or candy in many months, and he was surprised that "not one of them put a hand out."

"That hit me like a hammer," said Halvorsen, who tore his last two sticks of gum in half and gave them away. Other children seemed happy to simply smell the wrapper. "I had just come from the States, and we had everything. I found myself saying, 'Come back here to the barbed-wire fence tomorrow.' "

The next day, the children looked up to see gum and chocolate falling out of the sky, attached to parachutes made from handkerchiefs.

Yesterday, the pilot who became known as the "candy bomber" for his many missions of compassion was honored during an emotional ceremony at McGuire Air Force Base in Burlington County, where a recently opened dining hall was named in Halvorsen's honor. Dozens of parachutes with gum and chocolate hung from the ceiling of one of the hall's rooms.

"We're blessed to have this American military icon in our presence," said Air Force Brig. Gen. Marne Peterson of the 305th Air Mobility Wing as she recounted the accomplishments of Halvorsen's 31-year military career, including flying 126 supply missions into Berlin during Operation Vittles in 1948 and 1949. "It's incredibly fitting to name our hall after you... You've got to love this guy."

Halvorsen, 82, a retired Air Force colonel living in Salt Lake City, said the Air Mobility Wing has represented hope to many people all over the world.

"What greater mission can you have but the mission of hope?" he asked.

American pilots such as Halvorsen had a similar mission after World War II when relations between the United States and the Soviet Union cooled. The Soviets cut off West Berlin from being resupplied by land, so the United States began an airlift that delivered two million tons of supplies.

Fifty years later, Halvorsen met a tall man who had been 10 years old during the resupply effort in 1948.

"He said, 'Suddenly out of the clouds came parachutes with chocolate. I was astounded. It meant somebody cares,' " Halvorsen said. "That translates to hope. It was hope that counted. Without hope, the soul dies."

Halvorsen said he had been impressed by the children of Berlin. They seemed older than their years. And they appeared to understand what the American pilots were trying to do. No longer dropping bombs on their city, the pilots were bringing supplies, fighting for their freedom with an unprecedented airlift.

"They starting to tell me how important it was to them," Halvorsen recalled. "They said, 'Don't worry about us. When the weather gets bad and we don't eat enough, just give us a little and keep with us.' "

Halvorsen said he turned to go on his sight-seeing trip after that encounter, then stopped.

"I got about five steps and a little voice said, 'Boy, these kids are different,' " he said. "How come? They know the value of freedom. Freedom was more important than flour. They were saying, 'We don't have to have enough to eat right now. But someday we'll be free. We'll have enough to eat later on.' I was just dumbfounded."

Halvorsen wanted to make some small gesture of friendship with gum and chocolate but wondered how he could make the delivery.

"Then, an airplane came over and landed on the runway behind me, and

I said, 'Holy cow, I can air-mail and deliver them tomorrow,' " he said.  
"It was such a natural progression."

Turning to the children, Halvorsen said: "When I come in to land, I'll drop some [candy]. Will you share it?' "

"How will we know who you are?" the children asked, according to Halvorsen. There were airplanes every five minutes. "When you see me wiggle my wings, that's it," he told them.

Halvorsen said he got a double handful of rations of chocolate and gum but then became concerned that he might hurt the children when he dropped them from a great height.

"That's why I put handkerchief parachutes on them," he said. "I pushed the parachutes out there, came over, wiggled my wings, and they went mad. Every week, they were out there, and I was afraid of getting caught. I was almost court-martialed."

Halvorsen said he was "chewed out" by one commander, then lauded by a general who saw the humanitarian nature of the mission - and the good publicity. Other pilots began taking up the cause, eventually dropping 250,000 parachutes of candy.

"I'm grateful for the patriots that have gone before... so we might drink from wells we haven't dug and warm ourselves at fires we never built," he told the McGuire airmen yesterday. "You are the patriots today. God bless the United States of America."

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