



How sweet it was, says candy man

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PITTSTON TOWNSHIP, Pa. (AP) - When Air Force pilot **Gail Halvorsen** dropped candy to the children of Berlin from his C-54 aircraft 50 years ago, he was offering more than just chocolate bars on tiny parachutes.

Much, much more.

"They were symbols of hope; hope that the Berlin Airlift would succeed, that the British, French, and Americans would not desert them," Halvorsen said. "That was the significance of the airlift. It was about hope for mankind."

Col. Halvorsen was known as the "Candy Man Bomber" of the Berlin Airlift for dropping chocolate bars tied to handkerchief parachutes during runs that brought food, fuel, and medicine to the people of West Berlin to foil a Soviet blockade.

Halvorsen recently spent two months touring Europe after being honored by President Clinton at Berlin's Tempelhof Airport, where his legendary adventure began.

"It rolled back time for me," Halvorsen said. "It brought me face to face with the kids who were on the ground, didn't have enough to eat, were blockaded and didn't know what their future was. And now they're grown up."

His historic flights began in July 1948 as an unauthorized personal mission that nearly got him court-martialed.

He had sacrificed sleep time to see Berlin, arriving at Tempelhof Airport to find about 30 kids lined up along the barbed wire fence.

Unlike children he had encountered elsewhere, these didn't beg him for gum or candy.

"Not one of them was a beggar; they wouldn't hold out their hands and say, 'Give me some,'" Halvorsen said. "When I realized that, it hit me like a ton of bricks."

He had two sticks of gum that he broke in two, passing the four pieces through the fence. He expected the children to fight over the pieces, but instead, they shared what they could. Those who didn't get gum were happy for a piece of the wrapper.

"Their eyes got big; they held onto it like it was a \$50 bill," he said. "They took it home to show their mom or dad or whoever survived the war. I was dumbfounded."

Halvorsen figured out that he could drop candy and gum to the children, and told them he would return. He'd wiggle the airplane's wings to distinguish his plane from the dozens of others that flew over each day.

"I came back and looked down and there's 30 kids," he said., "I wiggled the wings and they went crazy. I came overhead, and dropped it out -- there's these stovepipes that come out for emergency flares. They were waving at the parachutes coming out of the airplane."

Halvorsen, then a lieutenant, made a few of his unauthorized drops before he was caught. His supervisors had seen a newspaper picture of parachutes dropping from his plane.

"The colonel chewed me out, and I thought I was going to get court-martialed," Halvorsen said.

But the general who had seen the photo liked the idea. And soon candy makers throughout the United States were sending packages to Massachusetts, where schoolchildren attached the tiny parachutes.

"They went crazy," Halvorsen said. "They sent tons of it."

By September 1949, with the full support of the Air Force, Halvorsen and his fellow pilots had dropped more than 20 tons of chocolate to the children of Berlin.

What he didn't realize at the time was how meaningful the candy was to those who received it. Halvorsen learned its impact when he returned to Berlin in May.

"I wondered what the Berliners thought the real significance of the airlift was; what that little parachute and candy bar meant," he said. "One man told me."

The man had been 10 years old, walking to school on a cloudy day, when one of the parachutes landed at his feet.

"It surprised him; it shocked him," Halvorsen said. "Here was a Hershey candy bar, fresh from America. He said, 'I didn't eat all of that candy for a week. Just a little at a time. But it wasn't the candy that was important. It wasn't the chocolate. It meant that somebody out there knew I was here, knew I was blockaded, knew I was in trouble. Somebody cared. What that chocolate meant was the hope that some day, things would be all right.'"

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