

Interview with Gail Halvorsen, the Berlin Candy Bomber

By David Lauterborn Originally published by *Military History* magazine. Published Online: April 29, 2009
Gail Halvorsen in 1948. (U.S. Army Photo)

Gail Halvorsen, 88, a child of the Depression, recalls watching planes soar over his family farm in Utah and how he longed someday to be at the controls. As America geared up for the looming world war, Halvorsen was accepted into a pilot-training program. The attack on Pearl Harbor prompted him to join the Army Air Corps, and he trained on fighters with the Royal Air Force. Reassigned to military transport service, Halvorsen remained in the service at war's end. He was flying C-74 Globemasters and C-54 Skymasters out of Mobile, Ala., when word came in June 1948 that the Soviet Union had blockaded West Berlin. During the 15-month airlift (Operation Vittles), American and British pilots delivered more than 2 million tons of supplies to the city. But it was Halvorsen's decision to airdrop candy to children (Operation Little Vittles) that clinched an ideological battle and earned him the lasting affection of a free West Berlin.



'I came in over the field, and there were those kids in that open space. I wiggled the wings, and they just blew up—I can still see their arms'

Do you recall spotting your first plane?

Oh yeah. I was raised during the Depression on a small farm in northern Utah. The war started, and we were sending training planes—AT-6 Texans, painted yellow—to Canada from California and Salt Lake City. They'd come up flying over the farm, and I was enthralled.

Subscribe Today

- Did you enjoy our article?
- [Read more in *Military History* magazine](#)
- *Subscribe online and save nearly 40%!!!*

How did a farm boy become a pilot?

The government was trying to build the pilot base for the looming war and offered a non-college pilot training program at a ground school in Ogden. I competed with about 150 other people, and they gave 10 flight-training scholarships. I got my license in September 1941.

How did your folks react?

My first cross country, learning to fly in '41, I came up over the farm. Dad was down in the sugar beets with two horses, pulling the cultivator, and Mother was in the garden. I thought, *Boy, I'll show 'em I can fly this airplane!* So I circled a few times, gunning the engine. They didn't even stop. So I climbed up another 1,000 feet or two, then cut off the power and did a two-turn spin over the farm.

I came back that night, and my dad met me at the door. "You're through. You're grounded." I asked, "Why?" He said, "Well, your mom just about had a heart attack. She knew it must be you after circling a few times, and she started watching. She's not feeling well yet." I said, "Oh no, hey, I won't do that again!" And so the next



time over the farm, I just circled and wiggled the wings.

Then you joined the Army Air Corps?

Well, I didn't get the scholarship with that in mind. I just wanted to fly. But as soon as Pearl Harbor hit, that was what I wanted to do. I was accepted into training in May 1942.

Were you hoping to fly fighters?

Oh yeah. That was where all the glamour and excitement was. Then one day at training school, they posted a notice: THOSE WANTING TO TRAIN WITH THE ROYAL AIR FORCE, CHECK INSIDE. And I thought, *Heck, that sounds great! RAF. These are the heroes of the world.* They had training bases in the United States and sent me and my buddies to Miami, Okla. But when we came back in June 1944, they had all the fighter pilots they needed, so they transitioned us to transport pilots. We flew supplies to bases up and down South America.

Where did you wind up?

In 1944 they needed transport pilots to fly The Hump from India to support the Chinese. We got as far as Brazil, the jumping-off point to cross the South Atlantic, and they changed our orders.

Were you disappointed?

Oh well, I thought. *You salute and do what you're told.* We did take out some of our energy in Navy Douglas SBD Dauntless dive bombers. We had five at the base for recreational flying. After a cargo run, we jump in these airplanes and go beat up the sky, dogfight each other. Then the war ended.

I came back stateside and was flying C-74s and C-54 Skymasters when they needed me. In our pilot meeting every month, we'd get a world briefing and were right up to snuff about Stalin. Then the call came in one night. Our commander said, "They've cut off stuff to Berlin, and we need to have four planes in the air tomorrow for Germany."

How long did you expect the mission to last?

The orders were something around 23 days. But for me it lasted seven months.

Did you have misgivings about helping the Germans?

Of course. They'd started the war, and we had been told what beasts these people were—killing Jews and everybody else, whatever it took. Germans were bad news.

How did you resolve that?

Stalin was the new threat. Most of the people in West Berlin were women and children, and he was starving them, cutting off their food supply!

Did the Soviets ever interfere?

Oh sure. We got buzzed a number of times by fighters coming over from East Germany. They'd come up individually, buzz you head-on and then at last-minute pull up and come right over your wing. At first, we didn't know whether they were going to shoot or not. When we found out they weren't going to shoot, why, that kind of broke the monotony.

Just before the airlift started, in April 1948, in a corridor from the northern bases over East Germany into Berlin, a British airliner was coming in and one of these guys buzzed it and didn't pull up in time—killed everybody. So we just hoped each pilot had had a physical and that his depth perception was okay.

Do you recall your first flight into Berlin?

Indelibly. We came over the top and could look *through* the buildings—they were like fingers pointing to the sky. It looked like a moonscape. I wondered how 2 million people could live in a place so totally devastated.

Templehof Airport was right in the middle. We had to come over those bombed-out buildings and get down real quick.

Not having seen many Germans, I wondered what these supermen were going to look like. When I landed that first 20,000 pounds of flour and opened the back doors, they came right up and put out their hand. Couldn't understand a word they said, but boy, the look in their eye and tone of their voice when they looked down at that flour. From that point on, we were on the same page.

What else did you transport?

Coal, milk, dried potatoes, dried eggs...everything. I even flew gasoline in drums before the British converted their Lancasters to tankers.

And candy. How did that start?

A buddy of mine in Berlin told me, "If you get a chance, I've got a driver and a jeep for you." So I flew back to Templehof. I always had a movie camera with me, and I wanted a movie of the approach before meeting the jeep. At the end of the runway, in an open space between the bombed-out buildings and barbed wire, kids were watching the airplanes coming in over the rooftops. They came right up to the barbed wire and spoke to me in English. These kids were giving me a lecture, telling me, "Don't give up on us. If we lose our freedom, we'll never get it back." American-style freedom was their dream. Hitler's past and Stalin's future was their nightmare. I just flipped. Got so interested, I forgot what time it was.

Did you miss your jeep?

I looked at my watch and said, "Holy cow, I gotta go! Goodbye. Don't worry." I took three steps. Then I realized—these kids had me stopped dead in my tracks for over an hour and not one of 30 had put out their hand. They were so grateful for flour, to be free, that they wouldn't be beggars for something extravagant. This was stronger than overt gratitude—this was silent gratitude. *How can I reward these kids?*

I went back to the fence and pulled out my two sticks of Wrigley's Doublemint, broke them in half and passed the four pieces through the barbed wire. There was no fight. The kids who got gum carefully tore the tin foil and passed it to the others, who put it up to their noses to smell—*just smelled it*—and I stood there dumbfounded. I told them, "Come back here tomorrow, and when I come in to land, I'll drop enough gum for all of you."

One asked, "How do we know what airplane you're in?"

"I'll wiggle the wings."

"Vas ist viggel?" he asked.

Did you get permission?

No. At first I thought, *Well, I won't have time for that.* Then I rationalized, *What's a few sticks of gum and chocolate bars, anyway?*

How did you work it?

My copilot and engineer gave me their candy rations—big double handfuls of Hershey, Mounds and Baby Ruth bars and Wrigley's gum. It was heavy, and I thought, *Boy, put that in a bundle and hit 'em in the head going 110 miles an hour, it'll make the wrong impression.* So, I made three handkerchief parachutes and tied strings tight around the candy.

The next day, I came in over the field, and there were those kids in that open space. I wiggled the wings, and they just blew up—I can still see their arms. The crew chief threw the rolled-up parachutes out the flare chute

behind the pilot seat. Couldn't see what happened, of course. It took about 20 minutes to unload the flour, and I worried all the time where the candy went. As we taxied out to takeoff, there were the kids, lined up on the barbed-wire fence, three handkerchiefs waving through, their mouths going up and down like crazy.

Three weeks we did it—three parachutes each time. The crowd got big.

Did anyone notice?

On one trip to Berlin, I ran into base operations. Inside was a big planning table, and it was loaded with letters addressed to *Onkel Wackelflügel* ("Uncle Wiggly Wings"). And I just broke out in a sweat. *Holy cow, we're in trouble!* I went back out and said, "Guys, we gotta quit." For two weeks we quit, the crowd getting bigger all the time. And we looked at each other and said, "Once more, and that's all." Fateful words. We got six parachutes—two weeks' rations—and dropped them.

Next day an officer met the airplane and said, "The colonel wants to see you right now." So I went in, and he says, "Whatcha doing, Halvorsen?"

"Flying like mad, sir."

"I'm not stupid. What else you been doing?" And he pulled out a newspaper with a big article and a photograph of my plane and the tail number. So I told him. He understood, and airlift commander General William Tunner said, "Keep doing it!"

And the operation grew?

It went crazy. I'd come back from Berlin, and my buddies would have my bed covered with candy bars. That September a representative of the National Confectioners' Association asked, "How much candy can you use?" I gave him this ridiculous number, and he said, "We'll send all you can drop."

A squadron—must have been 10 planes—was doing it. We had big cardboard boxes filled with the stuff. We'd cut off the top of each box, put it up against the escape hatch, and it would draw like a vacuum cleaner—scatter it everywhere.

Did you have enough handkerchiefs?

Word got back all over the United States. One day I went down to the post office and picked up three mailbags of letters—all filled with handkerchiefs. The news release said I was a bachelor. Some of the handkerchiefs were black lace, some perfumed. *"I love what you're doing. Write me."*

But we couldn't handle the volume. Then Mary Connors, a college student from Chicopee, Mass., got a hold of the confectioners association: "We'll tie up all the parachutes. Have the candy sent to us."

Have you revisited Berlin?

We flew the restored C-54 *Spirit of Freedom* back for the 50th anniversary of the airlift. People would come streaming through, men and women who had been there during the blockade, their eyes moist, shake your hand and say, "Thank you, for freedom!"

I've been back 35 times in all, three times in 2009. Every time we came back into Berlin, boy, it'd just make you feel like a hero every time you landed. The public affairs people would let groups of children, large groups, come out on the sideline and meet flight crews. Incredible. And they'd bring gifts.

Do you recall a particularly memorable gift?

A lady and her daughter, about 10 years old, came out to our airplane. The little girl had a teddy bear—well worn, you could see. She tried to give me the teddy bear. "I can't take your teddy bear," I said. "This is

probably the only thing you've got left." She spoke a little English. Her father had been killed in the war, in the bombing of Berlin, and she wanted to give it. I said, "Naw, you can't do that."

Her mother interceded. "This teddy bear, my daughter thinks it saved her life during the bombing of Berlin—in the air raid shelter or, if we didn't have time, in the basement," she said. "She had this teddy bear every time and held it tight. In Germany the teddy bear is like a talisman, for good luck. She's convinced it saved her life, and she wants to give it to you....You gotta do it."

Do you still have the teddy bear?

Well, I gave it to three of my kids, and it came apart. I've got a newspaper picture of it.

How do you explain such strength of feeling?

Without hope, the soul dies. And that was so appropriate for the day. In our own neighborhoods people have lost hope, lost function because they have no outside source of inspiration. The airlift was a symbol that we were going to be there—service before self.

The Soviets made an offer: "We'll give you fresh fruit, all you want, if you turn in your West Berlin [ration] card for our card." Some capitulated, but not many. Why? Because of the integrity of people saying, "We've got to stay," and the hope demonstrated by the food coming into Berlin. The strength food gave people was less important than the strength hope gave them—hope that someday they'd be free. Of course, it did end up causing the walls to come down.

Operation Little Vittles dropped more than 21 tons of candy during the airlift. How does that total strike you?

All from two sticks of gum in 1948—unbelievable!