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[Kentucky Air Guard to commemorate Berlin Airlift 'candy drops' during Thunder air show](#)

On April 18, 2015, in [Kentucky National Guard](#), by scottraymond1

Story by Maj. Dale Greer, 123rd Airlift Wing Public Affairs



Col. Gail Halvorsen, a former U.S. Army Air Corps pilot who originated the idea of airdropping candy to German children during the 1948-49 Berlin Airlift, visits the Kentucky Air National Guard Base in Louisville, Ky., April 17, 2015. Halvorsen, who is known as the Berlin Candy Bomber, will be the guest of honor during the 2015 Thunder Over Louisville air show April 18. The Airmen are standing in front of a Halverson Loader, named for the colonel, that can rapidly load up to 25,000 pounds of cargo onto airlift aircraft. (U.S. Air National Guard photo by Maj. Dale Greer)

KENTUCKY AIR NATIONAL GUARD BASE, LOUISVILLE, Ky. — Members of the Kentucky Air National Guard will pay tribute to the famous “candy drops” of the Berlin Airlift during Saturday’s Thunder Over Louisville air show.

A Kentucky Air Guard flight crew will deploy two simulated bundles of candy over the Ohio River from the back of a Kentucky C-130 Hercules aircraft at 4:39 p.m., according to Lt. Col. John Ward, a pilot in the 123rd Airlift Wing who will be flying the aircraft.

The idea for candy drops originated in 1948 with C-54 pilot Gail Halvorsen, who was then a first lieutenant in the U.S. Army Air Corps. Halvorsen, who eventually rose to the rank of colonel, will be the guest of honor at this year’s air show.

“It’s a real privilege to participate in this kind of tribute because it honors the tremendous accomplishments of Colonel Halvorsen and the proud military heritage of the airlift community,” Ward said.

“In a way, the Berlin Airlift was similar to the missions our own wing flew in Bosnia in the 1990s, when we were able to drop hundreds of tons of food and humanitarian aid to Bosnian civilians after they were cut off from the rest of the world by an intense ethnic war.”



Col. Gail Halvorsen, a former U.S. Army Air Corps pilot who originated the idea of airdropping candy to German children during the 1948-49 Berlin Airlift, visits with crew members from the U.S. Air Force Thunderbirds at the Kentucky Air National Guard Base in Louisville, Ky., April 17, 2015. Halvorsen, who is known as the Berlin Candy Bomber, will be the guest of honor during the 2015 Thunder Over Louisville air show April 18. (U.S. Air National Guard photo by Maj. Dale Greer)

In 1948, Halvorsen found himself flying airlift missions into West Berlin as part of Operation Vittles, the U.S.-backed effort to keep the territory supplied with food, milk and coal after the Soviet Union blocked road and rail access in what was to become the first major battle of the Cold War.

One day in July, Halvorsen was walking inside the perimeter fence at West Berlin's Tempelhof Air Base — headquarters for Operation Vittles — when he came across about 30 children gathered on the other side.

“We had been bombing Germany just a few years before, and you’d think they would be antagonistic, but they weren’t,” Halvorsen recalled Friday during a visit to the Kentucky Air National Guard Base. “I was there at the fence talking to them for about an hour, and when I turned to leave, I realized that not one had asked for candy. It was the first time that had ever happened to me when I was in a foreign country. And these kids hadn’t had any chocolate for a couple of years.

“They didn’t ask because they were grateful — grateful for flour and grateful to be free. They wouldn’t beg for something so extravagant as chocolate. When I realized that kids from 9 to 15 years of age had that kind of value system, that they valued freedom so much, it kind of blew my mind.

“So I reached in my pocket, and I had two sticks of Wrigley’s Doublemint gum, and I thought, ‘You can’t give that to 30 kids. You’re going to have a fight.’

“I turned to leave again, and I got about two steps when a voice came through to me clear as a bell: ‘Go back to the fence.’ It was almost a command. So I went back to the fence and pulled my hand out of pocket, and I broke the sticks in half so I would have four pieces.

“They didn’t push or shove, and the kids that didn’t get to have a piece of gum asked for a strip of the

wrapper. They took those pieces of wrapper and put them to their noses so they could smell it, and their eyes got big just from the smell.

“That did it. I thought, ‘I gotta do something more.’

“I’d always flown by the book, and I got promoted because I flew by the book. But I told them, ‘Stand in this grassy area tomorrow, and when I fly overhead, I’ll drop enough chocolate for all of you to have some.’”

When the children asked Halvorsen how they would know which plane was his, he told them to look for the aircraft that’s wiggling its wings, earning him the nickname Uncle Wiggly Wings.

That same day, Halvorsen asked his crewmates to give him their chocolate rations. He then fashioned makeshift parachutes from three handkerchiefs, to which he attached the precious candy.

When Halvorsen’s crew returned to the airfield the next day while flying a re-supply mission, he looked down and saw all 30 kids standing exactly where they were told to be. The crew chief collected the tiny bundles and dropped them out of the plane from a flare chute behind the pilot’s seat.

“We didn’t know if the candy had made it over the fence, but when we flew over them again on takeoff, all 30 kids were lined up by the fence with their mouths going up and down, chewing like crazy and waving at the airplane.”



Col. Gail Halvorsen, a former U.S. Army Air Corps pilot who originated the idea of airdropping candy to German children during the 1948-49 Berlin Airlift, visits the Kentucky Air National Guard Base in Louisville, Ky., April 17,

2015. Halvorsen, who is known as the Berlin Candy Bomber, will be the guest of honor during the 2015 Thunder Over Louisville air show April 18. (U.S. Air National Guard photo by Maj. Dale Greer)

Encouraged by the success, Halvorsen's crew repeated the candy drop three more times — “and then I got caught.”

His superior officers were not happy by the unauthorized airdrops, and the phrase “court martial” was used more than once. But a general officer caught wind of Halvorsen's stunt and, impressed by the kindness of the act, told him to keep it up. Others American aircrews soon joined in. By the end of the operation — and with the help of boatloads of candy from American manufacturers — more than 21 tons of sweets had been airdropped to the children of West Berlin.

Experts in foreign relations say the campaign “had a major impact on the transition of hate that West Berliners had for (Allied forces),” Halvorsen noted. “It really helped change the attitudes of the West Berliners and improve relations after the war.”

In fact, the impact extended far beyond the borders of Germany, affecting a global audience that had begun to view the actions of the Soviet Union with increasing unease.

“The Soviets were putting the screws to the West Berliners, while we were feeding their children chocolate,” Halvorsen said. “The contrast was remarkable, and several historians have said it helped end the blockade.”

The mission also made a lasting personal impression on Halvorsen, who is 96 and will forever be remembered as the Berlin Candy Bomber.

“It made me realize the importance of little decisions in my life,” he said. “Those little decisions that you make on the road of life put your footsteps on the path where you end up, good or bad.”

The voice that Halvorsen heard, clear as a bell in 1948, led to a very small decision that helped change the course of history.

In addition to the “Candy Bomber” tribute, this year's air show will feature performances by the U.S. Air Force Thunderbirds and the U.S. Marine Corps Harrier Harrier AV-8B Demonstration Team.

Other acts include the U.S. Army Golden Knights parachute demonstration team, a Canadian Air Force CT-142 trainer, P-51 Mustang and F-86 Sabre warbirds, a United Parcel Service 767, and multiple aerobatic performances.

As in past years, the Kentucky Air National Guard is providing logistical support that enables military aircraft to participate in the show, which routinely draws crowds of more than 500,000 and is broadcast live by local TV and radio stations, said Capt. Josh Ketterer, air show coordinator for the Kentucky Air Guard.

“We log hundreds of hours of work every year to plan and support Thunder so the public has an opportunity to see for themselves the incredible abilities of the finest military aviators in the world,” Ketterer said. “It's a privilege and an honor for us to support that mission, and I'm looking forward to great show.”

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