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News

**Kindly bombers return; On the 60th anniversary of the Airlift, Berliners say thank you**

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BERLIN -Germany rolled out the red carpet yesterday for the pilots of the Berlin Airlift, marking the 60th anniversary of the operation that saved West Berlin from being starved into submission by Josef Stalin.

Veterans from Britain, the United States and France joined German leaders in toasting the colossal operation to rescue the Western half of the city from the Soviet blockade.

As the Russians put the city in a stranglehold in June, 1948, Germany's wartime enemies began an unprecedented mobilization to ensure West Berlin did not succumb.

"The Airlift turned foes into friends, and occupiers became helpers," Franz Josef Jung, the German Defence Minister, said at a wreath-laying ceremony at Frankfurt international airport, where many of the aid flights took off.

Later in Berlin, the former pilots addressed fellow veterans and German citizens eager to express their thanks in the arrivals hall of Tempelhof airport, the Airlift's hub.

Colonel **Gail Halvorsen**, a former U. S. Air Force officer and a frequent visitor to Germany, wore his old flight suit and regaled the audience with tales of the beautiful Berlin girls who ran the Tempelhof snack bar and the dignity of hungry children waiting for the aid.

The American, now 87, became an instant celebrity during those dark days in West Berlin when he dropped tiny bundles of candies with handkerchief parachutes for children waiting below.

Fans nicknamed him "the candy bomber" and "Uncle Wiggly Wings" for the way he manoeuvred his plane so the youngsters would know to look out for incoming chewing gum and chocolate bars.

"These kids had so much gratitude, silent gratitude, that they wouldn't beg," he said.

"Who wouldn't give them the shirt off their back?"

Gary Lamb, 85, a former officer in the Royal Air Force, thanked the German civilians who helped the effort.

"I think the fact that eventually Germany was unified and Berlin again became the capital of this prosperous and thriving country was due to the fact that the people in the Western zones insisted that 'we would do nothing which will encourage the Russians and everything which will encourage the Western powers'."

Tensions between the Western powers and the Soviet Union mounted in the postwar years and threatened to come to a head when the deutschemark was introduced in West Germany and West Berlin.

Seeing the new currency as part of a power grab by the West, Stalin closed all roads and supply routes to West Berlin, aiming to surround and conquer the free enclave in the Soviet-occupied zone.

U. S. president Harry Truman then gave General Lucius Clay, military governor for the U. S. zone, the green light to launch the Airlift, ensuring crucial provisions reached West Berlin's panicked population of 2.5 million people.

Operating almost non-stop and through the harsh winter, the Airlift carried more than two million tonnes of supplies in more than 270,000 flights, mainly into Tempelhof Airport outside Berlin's city centre.

At the height of the operation, planes were landing at 90-second intervals, carrying coal, fuel, newsprint, medicines, diapers, powdered milk, dried vegetables and ambulances. They even brought in a power plant in small pieces.

"It was quite a sight to watch those planes come in," said Ted Mohr, 84, who worked as a clerk for Gen. Clay. "My wife and I brought our chairs up to the roof of our building and watched. That was our evening entertainment."

Thirty-nine British and 31 U. S. pilots died before the operation wound down in May, 1949, when the Soviets called off the blockade.

Sixty years later, a new exhibition tells the story of the people behind the Airlift.

"Berliners only saw the pilots, but we want to show all the other people involved in making the airlift work," said Helmut Trotnow, director of Berlin's Allied Museum, where the exhibition opens this week, featuring photos and film extracts.

It also features information about the many Berliners like Mercedes Wild, who was seven when she stood in her family's garden, waving at the planes.

"I thought the pilots would also be able to see me," said the 67-year-old, adding she had been disappointed none of the goods had landed in her garden. But after she wrote to Col. Halvorsen, he sent her some chewing gum. Today, she still keeps some of the candy tucked into her purse.

Black & White Photo: Agence France-Presse / A U. S. transport plane flies over Tempelhof airport in 1948. Ceremonies to mark the Airlift's 60th anniversary were held in Berlin and Frankfurt yesterday.

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Text	"Gail Halvorsen"
Date	All Dates
Source	All Sources
Author	All Authors
Company	All Companies
Subject	All Subjects
Industry	All Industries
Region	All Regions
Language	English