

NFWS

Miracle from the sky Massive airlift saved Berlin 50 years ago Planes that carried death changed cargo to candy

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Fifty years ago, Paul Goerz was 9 years old and living in blockaded Berlin. His family's home had been destroyed by allied bombs, and hope was in even shorter supply than bread.

Then the German boy watched in awe as U.S. and British planes began a seemingly unending procession, buzzing the apartment buildings on either side of Tempelhof Airport day and night as they ferried 2.3 million tons of coal and food to a city besieged by the Soviets.

Gail Halvorsen was one of the U.S. pilots in the sky, a 27-year-old volunteer for the fledgling airlift. "I heard most of the people in Berlin who were cut off from food and sustenance were women and children, and I thought it was a dirty trick," he recalls. "It was a challenge."

A challenge it was. Defying policymakers who warned it couldn't succeed, U.S. and British forces undertook the greatest humanitarian air rescue in history. Ten months later, the first confrontation of the Cold War ended with Soviet leader Josef Stalin lifting the blockade.

The airlift's success was a triumph for the West that helped turn World War II foes into steadfast friends and propel creation of NATO later that year.

In the first stop of a European tour that begins today, President Clinton will kick off a year-long commemoration of the 50th anniversary of the Berlin Airlift. In a ceremony at Tempelhof Thursday, Clinton and German Chancellor Helmut Kohl will tour "The Spirit of Freedom," a C-54 cargo plane used in the airlift that has been restored as a flying museum. They will dedicate a new generation C-17 Globemaster III cargo plane as "The Spirit of Berlin."

Clinton's itinerary also includes the annual Group of Seven economic summit where he joins leaders of the world's financial heavyweights -- Canada, France, Germany, Great Britain, Italy, Japan. The G-7 leaders, meeting in Birmingham, England, will be joined by Russian President Boris Yeltsin, and Clinton will attend a U.S.-European Union summit in London.

But no other event during his week-long trip is likely to have the emotional resonance of the airlift commemoration, held in a Berlin that is being restored as the capital of a unified Germany. Attending will be aging Americans who flew the planes and Berliners whose lives and freedom they helped save.

"Everything was in ruins, and people were pretty much starving. A loaf of bread was a treasure," says Goerz, who later emigrated to the United States and is now a police officer living in Basking Ridge, N.J. He remembers when the planes coming in for a landing suddenly began dropping Hershey bars and Wrigley gum, tied in handkerchiefs that were deployed as tiny parachutes.

Halvorsen, dubbed "the Candy Bomber," devised the idea as a surreptitious treat for children who had been deprived of so much. After some favorable worldwide publicity, more than 250,000 pieces of donated candy were launched.

"We children couldn't figure it out, `What's coming from the sky?' " Goerz says. Once the packages were retrieved, "we realized these were friendly gestures."

'We have no coal'

The crisis began on June 24, 1948, when the Soviets cut off rail, road and waterway access to Berlin, blaming "technical difficulties." World War II had ended just three years earlier, and Stalin was ready to challenge the Western powers that controlled sectors of the divided city, isolated 110 miles inside the Soviet occupation zone. The airlift officially began two days later, on June 26, with supplies for U.S. troops. Supplies for Berliners began arriving on June 28.

"All food has to come by air. That will be for a certain time but can't be in wintertime . . . and what will be in winter? We have no coal," Christa Ruffer, a 19-year-old Berliner, wrote in her diary on June 29, 1948. She is now Christa Ronke, a 68-year-old grandmother still living in Berlin. She relayed entries from the worn green diary during a telephone interview.

"The war ghost is going around," she wrote then. "If the Americans will give up the western part of Berlin, we will be Communistic and that will be awful, or we will have war. Nobody knows what there will be tomorrow. If we are fortunate, the Russians will give up, and then everything would be OK. But I don't think the Russians will give up."

While Christa worried, U.S. leaders debated how to respond. Gen. Lucius Clay, the American military commander of Germany, proposed sending an armed convoy along the autobahn across 125 miles of Soviet-controlled territory. But Truman administration officials feared that could spark a war with the Soviets. Without asking Washington for permission, Clay started the airlift.

Clay did meet first with Berlin's legendary mayor, Ernst Reuter, to ask if the city's war-weary citizens were prepared to withstand more hardship. Robert Lochner, Clay's interpreter and a U.S. citizen who still lives in Berlin, recalls the conversation clearly.

"You take care of the airlift and I'll take care of the Berliners," he says the mayor responded. In her diary, Christa recorded similar sentiments: "We are fighting for democracy, and about 80% of the Berliner people are for that."

But there were serious doubts that an airlift could transport the daily food ration needed to sustain the city's 2 million residents: 646 tons of flour and wheat, 125 tons of cereal, 64 tons of fat, 109 tons of meat and fish, 180 tons of dehydrated potatoes, 180 tons of sugar, 11 tons of coffee, 19 tons of powdered milk, 5 tons of whole milk for children, 3 tons of fresh yeast for baking, 144 tons of dehydrated vegetables, 38 tons of salt and 10 tons of cheese. Coal and liquid fuel were in critically short supply.

At the time, Clay held a thumb and forefinger apart and predicted pessimistically, "I wouldn't give you that for our chances." In his memoirs, Truman wrote, "Even the Air Force chiefs themselves at first had serious doubts it could be done."

Clay called Frankfurt to confer with Gen. Curtis LeMay, then commanding general of U.S. air forces in Europe.

"Have you any planes there that can carry coal?" Clay asked, in a conversation related by Truman biographer Robert H. Ferrell.

"Carry what?" LeMay asked.

"Coal."

"We must have a bad phone connection," LeMay said. "It sounds as if you are asking if we have planes for carrying coal."

Clay said, "Yes, that's what I said: coal."

After a pause, LeMay responded, "The Air Force can deliver anything."

In the end, the airlift pilots flew 277,569 flights. That's an average of 601 flights a day for 462 days -- 25 an hour, day and night, clear weather and foul. At its peak, a plane was landing every three minutes at each of three airfields: Tempelhof, Gatow and, later, Tegel, built by the Berliners themselves from the rubble of war.

By September 1948, Christa Ruffer was feeling a bit safer. "I think there will be no war this year," she wrote in her diary. "That is my opinion now."

Organizing a rodeo

"It was basically nose to tail, three minutes apart," recalls William Voigt, a 77-year-old retired Air Force pilot who now lives in Dover, Del. The airlift planes flew in such close formation that a pilot who missed his first approach on landing in Berlin didn't get a second chance, forced to return to his home base with his cargo still loaded.

"When we first started, it was sort of like a rodeo, where there's a bull or wild horse in the ring and everybody is running around with their heads off," Voigt says. With the arrival of Maj. Gen. William Tunner -- officially nicknamed "Tonnage Tunner" but known to his troops as "Willie the Whip" -- things were organized with a meticulous attention to detail. All the pilots were trained to handle instrument landings. Minute calculations were made on what to carry.

Was it better to fly in loaves of bread, or to fly in the flour and coal to bake bread? Since a loaf of bread was 30% water, the raw materials were carried in. Only dehydrated potatoes were flown in, one-fifth the weight of fresh ones. Coal was carried first in leftover World War II canvas "B-bags," then in hemp bags and finally in reinforced paper.

"We were flying and sleeping, flying and sleeping," says Halvorsen, 77, who lives in Provo, Utah, but will be in Berlin for this week's celebration. The crews flew for 12 hours, then had 12 hours off.

Voigt flew 116 roundtrips, all of them carrying coal. "We got filthy dirty," he recalls. "We looked like coal miners." When one of the airlift's C-54s was restored and displayed at Dover Air Force Base, Voigt checked the plane's tail numbers (C54E-44-9030) and his logbooks and found he had flown four trips in it.

There's still coal dust in its belly.

On May 12, 1949, the Soviets finally lifted the blockade, though the airlift continued at a reduced level through September to build up supplies in case it was imposed again.

"We heard on the radio the starting of the first train," Christa wrote in her diary in May. "We danced and were so glad that we are free now." The shops were soon full of food. "I ate fish!" she wrote.

"This was the first great confrontation of the Cold War, and it sets the tone for the Cold War thereafter," says Roger Miller, an Air Force historian and author of To Save a City: The Berlin Airlift. "The Soviets will push when they think they can gain an advantage, but they will stop when we show our resolve. The ground rules were established at the time of the Berlin crisis."

Ingeborg Lee, then a German toddler living near the U.S. feeder base in Celle, has a more personal perspective on the airlift. For her family, it marked the return of sense of possibility after a long war. She later married an Air Force serviceman and now lives in Clinton, Utah.

"I remember vividly the planes flying over constantly," she says. "There was a plane every minute, constantly going and coming and going and coming." For some members of her family, the sound of planes "always meant something bad," a warning that bombs would soon follow.

But not for her.

"I had the feeling of security when I heard the planes, because I was told they were doing something good," she says. Now, at 52, she has the same reaction. "It is still a very secure feeling in me. Even these days, every time I hear planes, it is something good."

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