

TODAY

Pilot became Candy Bomber

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703 words

22 October 1991

Tulsa World

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English

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Forty-four years ago, **Gail Halvorsen** gave some German children two sticks of gum and a promise to drop more candy from his airplane as it flew over Berlin.

That small gesture led to a mammoth bombing of Berlin with more than 10 tons of candy.

The U.S. Air Force pilot, then 27, had flown a cargo plane supplying troops during World War II.

While waiting for the Air Force to send him to school after the war, he volunteered for "Operation Vittles," the airlift of food and medical supplies into Berlin from western Germany.

The Soviet Union, which controlled East Germany, blockaded western Berlin for almost a year in an attempt to drive out the United States, Great Britain and France, the three countries that had taken control of West Germany.

Initially, a shortage of pilots meant three round trips a day. "Then we would go to bed, get up and do it again," Halvorsen said during a recent visit to Miami, Okla., where he took military flight training in 1943 at the Spartan School of Aeronautics.

Halvorsen wanted to see a bit of Berlin, though, so during his off hours one day he flew to the city with another crew.

He popped over the tangled barbed wire fence by the airfield to take some pictures, "and almost immediately I was aware of the kids gathering."

"They didn't spend too much time talking to me about sacks of flour (being brought by the planes)," he said.

These youngsters, who lived in bombed-out apartment buildings nearby, wanted to talk about freedom and their desire to control their own future.

"I was dumbstruck," he said. Unlike most children in foreign countries who met American servicemen, "not one had asked for gum or candy."

Halvorsen, already late for his Jeep tour of Berlin, began to leave. Then he turned around; he had two sticks of gum in his pocket. He ran back and passed the gum through the fence.

He promised to drop candy from his airplane if the children promised to share it. They could identify his plane by watching for one that wiggled its wings.

The next afternoon, three packages of candy bars and gum tied to handkerchiefs used as parachutes sailed through the flare chute of the four-engine C-54 transport plane just before it landed.

Halvorsen knew the drop succeeded when he saw three hankies waving back at the plane after its takeoff.

He and his crew continued dropping the candy, which became known as "Operation Little Vittles," attracting donations of candy _ and hankies _ from throughout the United States.

German newspapers wrote about the "Candy Bomber," and Berlin youngsters sent thousands of letters to Uncle Wiggly Wings, as Halvorsen came to be known.

Halvorsen and his successors dropped more than 10 tons of candy to the children of Berlin. Eventually, German state officials named an elementary school after Halvorsen.

In 1979, Halvorsen and some of the now grown-up Berlin youngsters began an "airlift" cultural exchange between young people from Berlin and from Provo (Utah) High School in Halvorsen's home state.

Halvorsen, 71, has told the story of how two sticks of gum changed his life to youth groups, church groups, Boy Scout troops, college students and service clubs. He wrote a book, "The Berlin Candy Bomber," published by Horizon Publishers of Bountiful, Utah, last year.

Halvorsen grew up on a Utah farm, working in sugar beet fields, cleaning chicken coops and dreaming of becoming a pilot.

"I wanted to fly so bad!" Halvorsen said, leaning forward in his chair as the excitement flooded back.

Halvorsen, a Mormon, retired as a colonel in 1974 and lives again on a Utah farm, "raising Arabian horses, fixing fences and hauling manure."

He has been married for 41 years, has five children and 21 grandchildren.

And that time in Germany still reminds him of a lesson that he has tried to pass on to others through the years.

"The little things," he said, smiling as he remembered those two sticks of gum, "affect the big things in life."

PHOTO;

Caption: **Gail Halvorsen** tells of dropping treats on Berlin

streets during airlift.

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