



Pilot who fought against Russians learns from them during Mormon mission

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PROVO, Utah (AP) - A pilot during the Berlin Airlift, known for the bags of goodies he dropped from cargo planes, learned some important lessons from his former Cold War enemy while serving a Mormon mission to Russia.

Nearly five decades ago, **Gail Halvorsen** delighted the children of West Berlin by tying up gum and candy into little parachutes he made from handkerchiefs and then dropping the packages into welcoming hands.

"Back in '48 I remember sometimes traveling from West Berlin through Communist East Germany on the train and seeing all the stern-faced Soviet soldiers," Halvorsen said.

In 1995, Halvorsen had a much different experience while he and his wife, Alta, were serving a mission to St. Petersburg, Russia, for The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints. They returned to their home in Provo on April 14.

"The first time we went to work in St. Petersburg, Alta and I went to a meeting and sitting across from us was a man in a Russian military uniform," Halvorsen said.

He was a bit shocked, since his last recollections of Russians in uniforms were associated with his enemies during the Cold War.

The soldier he met two years ago was a fellow Mormon and one of the volunteer seminary teachers the Halvorsens were responsible for teaching.

Halvorsen said he would run into other Mormons wearing military uniforms and even a former KGB agent. In fact, nearly every day in city subways he would stand next to men in Russian uniforms going to work.

In 1948, Halvorsen and other pilots ferried supplies critical to American troops after the Soviet Union blockaded West Berlin - a geographically isolated island of freedom inside Communist-controlled East Germany.

Halvorsen also would drop gum and candy from his four-propeller C-54 airplane - wiggling the wings of his aircraft just before passing over the children below.

He became known as Uncle Wiggly Wings to the kids and the Berlin Candy Bomber to much of the world.

The airlift continued until the Soviet Union ended the blockade nearly 10 months later in May of 1949.

While serving in St. Petersburg, Halvorsen found that few Russians knew about the Berlin Airlift. But at one church meeting, he said, he talked to a former Soviet soldier who had been involved blockade.

"He told me his unit had only a couple of hours worth of ammunition and were to be sacrificed as a shock force if the Cold War blockade turned into a hot shooting war," Halvorsen said.

"Here sitting and talking to me was my former enemy, who was now my brother and a good member of my church."

Rush

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