

US Fed News

STATE DEPT.: ON BERLIN AIRLIFT ANNIVERSARY, 'SWEET' MEMORIES OF SUPPORT REMAIN

696 words

13 June 2008

US Fed News

INDFED

English

© Copyright 2008. HT Media Limited. All rights reserved.

WASHINGTON, June 13 -- The U.S. Department of State's International Information Programs issued the following press release:

By Michael Buchanan and MacKenzie Babb Staff Writers

While Allied planes delivered much-needed supplies into Soviet-blockaded Berlin 60 years ago, one pilot parachuted in a different kind of cargo - chocolate, candy and chewing gum - in an effort to sweeten the lives of the city's children.

President Bush commemorated the anniversary of the Berlin Airlift, which became a lifeline for the city in the troubled first years of the Cold War, during his June 9-16 visit to Europe.

The massive humanitarian effort began in June 1948 with the Soviet Union's attempted seizure of Allied-governed West Berlin. By cutting off all land traffic into and out of the city, the Soviet Union deprived the citizens of West Berlin of basic supplies. Tensions between the two superpowers flared dangerously as the crisis threatened to turn into armed conflict.

"Well, there was only one choice. We had to find a way to feed the inhabitants of Berlin," President Harry S. Truman later explained. "And the only thing that was left to do was to try to take care of the situation by air, which is what we did."

Some 102 cargo planes continually flew into the city's Tempelhof Airport in the first month, but this force was deemed inadequate for the upcoming winter months, when people would need bulky stocks of coal to use for heating fuel.

Foreseeing the increased demand, General William H. Tunner, who was put in charge of the expanded airlift in July, set a goal of planes taking off and landing every minute of a 24-hour day. While this ambitious target never was met, 2.3 million tons of cargo were delivered in 189,000 flights during the 15-month operation through a combination of careful coordination and seamless planning.

"The planes came from Alaska, from California, from Tokyo, from Texas. From our allies, some of them did, and from every place we had planes. Every airfield in the country was stripped of its transport planes and they were put into the airlift," Truman said.

One of those planes was piloted by U.S. Air Force Lieutenant **Gail Halvorsen**, who was surprised at what he learned from a group of children he met in Berlin.

"After a while, I realized I had talked to these kids for an hour and they hadn't asked for anything. I found out there hadn't been any candy in months," he said.

That's when he decided to do something about it.

Giving them his only two sticks of gum, he promised to return with more. Although it was forbidden for the air crews to drop unapproved supplies, Halvorsen risked his job by sending thousands of chocolate bars floating down under his handmade handkerchief parachutes.

His initiative became the stuff of legend when the German press picked up the story. No longer did Halvorson fly alone. U.S. organizations, inspired, began making their own candy parachutes to send with airlifted supplies. "Operation Little Vittles," as the project was dubbed, ended up providing 23 tons of sweets to German children. Although Halvorsen went on to become a colonel and received numerous awards for his heroic, humanitarian candy flights, he stressed that it was simply the right thing to do.

"It's called service before self," he said.

Before a year was up, U.S. and Allied planes had delivered enough food and fuel, and even a little happiness, into Berlin to foil Soviet plans. Armed conflict was avoided, and an agreement ending the blockade was signed May 5, 1949. But Allied planes kept delivering supplies until the end of September to ensure that Berlin's citizens had nothing to fear from any renewed blockade.

"The longer the blockade continued, the more the people of Germany looked toward the West to strengthen them in their determination to remain free. ... Berlin became a symbol which made the Allied determination greater and greater to do the job," President Truman said.

HTS ukpp 080616-1614195 H-PrakaPilla

Document INDFED0020080616e46d000uv

Search Summary

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