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THE 'SPIRIT OF FREEDOM' STILL FLYING HIGH

MARY BETH WARNER, SPECIAL TO THE POST-GAZETTE

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The moment was years in coming.

Timothy Chopp stood at the side of the "Spirit of Freedom," a C-54 he tediously had helped restore to its glory days from the Berlin Airlift.

It glistened in the sun and stood nose to nose with the "Spirit of Berlin," a DC-17, one its modern counterparts. They served as a backdrop yesterday at Tempelhof Airport for speeches by President Clinton and German Chancellor Helmut Kohl commemorating the airlift's 50th anniversary.

Chopp grew up in Washington, Pa., and found himself far from his childhood home last week piloting his airborne artifact across the Atlantic to take part in the celebration. Total flying time was more than 25 hours from New York to Berlin, with the temperature inside the aircraft sometimes falling as low as 10 degrees below zero.

You have to bundle up on the "Spirit of Freedom," a plane still equipped to the standards of the 1940s that now symbolizes the 11-month effort in 1948 and 1949 to supply more than 2 million West Berliners cut off by a Soviet blockade.

"The fate of Berlin hung by a thread - the thread of air support," Clinton recalled yesterday.

The "Spirit of Freedom" is the only original plane from the airlift that resides in the United States and is open to the public. It is owned by the nonprofit Berlin Airlift Historical Foundation, which Chopp founded in 1988.

A corporate pilot and Vietnam veteran, Chopp had a general interest in history and aviation that combined to generate a specific interest in the Berlin Airlift.

Once his foundation was in place, Chopp embarked on a four-year search for the right airplane. He finally found it in Pontiac, Mich. After raising \$10,000 of the \$125,000 needed to buy the 53-year-old C-54, in 1993 Chopp took it home to his current residence in Farmingdale, N.J.

No detail was overlooked in bringing the old plane back to life. Chopp and his crew even scrubbed parts of the tail with toothbrushes.

The "Spirit of Freedom" is now a flying museum stocked with books and historical photos. It will tour Europe at air shows and other events through July 5 before returning home.

On board are living, breathing exhibits, as well, including retired Col. **Gail Halvorsen**, 77, the famous "candy bomber." Halvorsen remains a celebrity in Berlin because he was the first pilot to drop chocolate bars to children during the airlift.

Fifty years later, wearing his olive green pilot jumpsuit from 1948 with his faded name on the pocket, Halvorsen was greeted and honored by Clinton yesterday.

He said he loves to talk to the now-grown children to whom he once dropped Hershey bars and Wrigley's chewing gum. At least one has become a life-long friend.

"They say it wasn't the chocolate that was important," Halvorsen said, smiling, "It was the hope."

Kohl echoed that sentiment.

"The German population learned what it meant not to be alone in their hour of need," he said, as the crowd of 7,000 or so waved German and American flags.

Clinton said it was hard to imagine a better friend than Germany. He drew cheers when he recalled a June 28, 1948, meeting in the White House when "Harry Truman said, 'There is no discussion on that point. We stay in Berlin. Period.'"

His words hit home with some of the older Germans in the crowd, who recalled their treatment at the hands of their victorious enemy in World War II.

"That it (the airlift) was the beginning of a friendship is very important," said Henry Gliesche, 72, tears welling in his eyes.

Gliesche worked for two months during the airlift unloading coal and flour from planes at Tempelhof. His family never received any of the thousands of "Care Packets" flown in by the Americans and British, but he ate well while working at the airport.

"Hunger, you can't describe, you have to experience it," Gliesche said.

The "Spirit of Freedom" has flown all over the United States, giving thousands of people, many of them school children, a chance to learn about the hunger and heroics of the Berlin Airlift. Chopp features a stuffed bear with his spiel for the young ones. The bear is the mascot of Berlin.

Yesterday, at least 3,000 in the crowd at Tempelhof were students. Lili Eckes-Boehmer, an English teacher at Berlin's Ruppiner Primary School, brought 15 of her 12-year-old pupils to the event.

"It is a story worthwhile telling all the children," she said, "because it is a very important symbol of democracy. Not everyone knows how important it is to appreciate it."

Mary Beth Warner is a free-lance journalist based in Berlin.

PHOTO;

Caption: PHOTO: Jan Bauer/Associated Press: Retired Col. **Gail**

Halvorsen, the first pilot to drop chocolate bars to children during the airlift, lifts up Adrienne Hudson during yesterday's ceremony in Berlin.

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