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When Airborne Angels Saved Berlin

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It was the West's earliest victory in the cold war and an exhilarating hour in the long face-off between Communism and democracy. "The Berlin Airlift" takes us back 50 years to when a defeated and divided Germany was the main arena of confrontation between the Soviet Union and the Western allies. It may be only a historical footnote now, but as tonight's spirited documentary confirms, the West's stand with the people of Berlin against a Soviet takeover still brightens the memories of those who delivered the goods.

The scene was set by the post-World War II splitting of Germany into Western and Eastern sections. Berlin, stranded in the Eastern zone, was itself divided among the four victorious powers: the United States, Britain and France on one side and the Soviet Union on the other. Soon, with the collapse of the wartime alliance, Moscow stepped up the pressure on its former allies to leave Berlin, mounting a blockade of the city that left only air routes open to the West.

The allies, led by Harry S. Truman and the American commander, Gen. Lucius Clay, resisted, and the story is told mainly by the American and British pilots who were pressed into a round-the-clock supply airlift that moved from what one calls a "hasty, helter-skelter beginning" to an astoundingly smooth operation. Despite bad weather and buzzing Soviet planes, the shipments built steadily from basics like coal and dried food (the transports were filthy and stunk of fish) to everything from heavy equipment to cigarettes to toys and candy. One pilot, Gail S. Halvorsen, was known to German children as "the chocolate bomber." Another pilot says of the demanding schedule (one plane took off every three minutes), "You became like a bus driver."

With Berliners pitching in to unload the planes, self-interest created a new alliance between the former enemies. "We were buddies now," a pilot says, and West Berlin became a symbol of democratic

aspirations behind the Iron Curtain. When the harsh winter of 1948 stirred uncertainty over whether the planes could continue fulfilling their mission, President Truman reportedly overruled his skeptical advisers. He said, "We're going to stay in Berlin," and stay they did.

The spirit was catching. There's Irving Berlin entertaining the troops in occupied Germany with a song called "Operation Vittles." By the spring of 1949, when the Soviet Union ended the blockade, the transports had flown 277,000 flights. Casualties, mostly from accidents, were light. A pilot sums up the achievement: "We saved a city without firing a shot."

THE BERLIN AIRLIFT

PBS, tonight at 9

(Channel 13 in New York)

Produced and directed by Robert E. Frye; Laurie Rackas, senior producer; Ruth Schell, editor. A production of WETA/Washington and Bolthead Communications Group Inc. For WETA: David McGowan, executive in charge. Paul Duke, host.

Photo: **Gail Halvorsen**, whom German children called "the chocolate bomber," during the late 1940's airlift that broke the Soviet blockade of Berlin. (National Archives/PBS)

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