

Kids still love the Berlin Airlift Candy Bomber

By Frederick A. Johnsen

Gail Halvorsen is the grandfather of 24 and the friend of countless kids from here to Germany. His place in history will always be as the Candy Bomber, the Berlin Airlift pilot who dropped candy bars to German children via tiny parachutes when the Soviet Union blockaded Berlin in 1948.

But a visit with Colonel Halvorsen at EAA AirVenture Oshkosh 2007 quickly reveals him to be more than a one-time, good-deed phenomenon. Just as his parachutes dispensed cheer to the children of blockaded and war-torn Berlin, Halvorsen continues to hand out goodwill in the form of a compliment, a cheery greeting, a hearty handshake.

During World War II, Halvorsen trained to fly fighters, then ferried brand new B-24s from the Ford construction plant to a modification center in Alabama, subsequently piloting four-engine C-54 transports across the south Atlantic route to Europe.

When the Soviet Union blockaded roads and rails leading into Berlin in 1948, the United States and other western powers took a bold chance and surmounted the blockade with airlift. A round-the-clock stream of transport planes brought food and supplies into Berlin, a city still recovering from the devastation of World War II. With conditions sometimes bordering on starvation, the German population was eager for any signs of hope.



Always a hit with kids, Gail Halvorsen chats with three-year-old Meagan Bracknell during a book-signing at AirVenture this week. During the Berlin Airlift, Colonel Halvorsen earned the nickname Candy Bomber for dropping candy bars tied to small parachutes that were retrieved by the children of Berlin. Photo by Frederick A. Johnsen



The C-54 at AeroShell Square is the type of aircraft from which Colonel Halvorsen dropped candy over Berlin. Photo by Frederick A. Johnsen

Halvorsen said he was moved by the sight of German children at the airfield fence quietly watching his C-54 being unloaded during the airlift. They did not beg for candy or gum that he and other American fliers could give away as trifles. The children's polite stoicism in the face of need impressed Halvorsen. Soon, he began tying candy bars to small parachutes made from handkerchiefs and raining them down where he figured kids would be as his C-54 passed low over Berlin on its way to landing at Tempelhof airfield.

For a brief couple of weeks, this included candy drops over portions of communist-held East Berlin. "We got into trouble with the Russians," he chuckled. "I saw a soccer match going on in East Berlin and dropped" candy, he recalled. His last view of that game was as the soccer ball went one direction and the kids went another in quest of the parachutes. Halvorsen was instructed to stop the East Berlin drops as a diplomatic measure.

From an impromptu gesture, Halvorsen's candy drops gained worldwide media attention. Soon, service clubs in the United States were clamoring to send candy and parachutes cut from whole cloth. A retired fire station in Chicopee, Massachusetts, became an assembly line where volunteers attached candy to parachutes, delivering 15 tons of the goodwill bundles by the time the Berlin Airlift ended in early 1949, Halvorsen said. Other donation sites added to the total. Halvorsen figures about 25 pilots in his squadron adopted the mission of airdropping candy while delivering vital supplies to Berlin.

Just before Christmas 1948, with shortages hampering much of Berlin, Halvorsen

was shown a guarded railroad car at Rhein-Main Air Base in Frankfurt, Germany. It was filled with 6,600 pounds of chocolate bars he could distribute. With no time to lose, this candy would be delivered to Berlin for ground distribution. "Each of my guys in the squadron took 100 pounds extra," on subsequent flights, ferrying the candy to West Berlin before Christmas, where other volunteers ensured it was given out at many German Christmas parties, a sweet gesture as the Cold War soured.

The test of wills over Berlin ended in success for the airlifters as the Soviets relented on their blockade in 1949. Halvorsen went on to a career in the Air Force as an engineer, ultimately playing a role in the development of missile systems including the mighty Titan I and III, plus a stint back in Berlin in the early 1970s as Air Force commander there. An elementary school on the American base at Rhein-Main was named for Halvorsen.

In civilian life, he worked as an assistant dean at Brigham Young University in Provo, Utah, and now lives in rural Spanish Fork, south of Provo. Anyone spending even a little time with Gail Halvorsen is bound to conclude he found his stride early, making others happy with kind gestures.



Colonel Halvorsen shows a candy drop chute used as a gesture of goodwill during the Berlin Airlift. Photo by Mark Forman