Gail Halvorsen: Berlin's Beloved 'Candy Bomber'

Gail Halvorsen, 88, a child of the Depression, recalls watching planes soar over his family farm in Utah and how he longed someday to be at the controls. As America geared up for the looming world war, Halvorsen was accepted into a pilot-training program. The attack on Pearl Harbor prompted him to join the Army Air Corps, and he trained on fighters with the Royal Air Force. Reassigned to military transport service, Halvorsen remained in the service at war's end. He was flying C-74 Globemasters and C-54 Skymasters out of Mobile, Ala., when word came in June 1948 that the Soviet Union had blockaded West Berlin. During the 15-month airlift (Operation Vittles), American and British pilots delivered more than 2 million tons of supplies to the city. But it was Halvorsen's decision to airdrop candy to children (Operation Little Vittles) that clinched an ideological battle and earned him the lasting affection of a free West Berlin.

Did you have misgivings about helping the Germans?
Of course. They'd started the war, and we had been told what beasts these people were—killing Jews and everybody else, whatever it took. Germans were bad news.

How did you resolve those feelings?
Stalin was the new threat. Most people in West Berlin were women and children, and he was starving them, cutting off their food supply!

Did you miss your ride?
I looked at my watch and said, "Holy cow, I gotta go! Goodbye. Don't worry." I took three steps. Then I realized—these kids had me stopped dead in my tracks for over an hour and not one of 30 had put out his hand. They were so grateful for flour, to be free, that they wouldn't be beggars for something extravagant. This was stronger than overt gratitude—this was silent gratitude.

What else did you transport?
Coal, milk, potatoes, dried eggs... everything. I even flew gasoline in drums before the British converted their Lancasters to tankers. And candy. How did that start?
A buddy of mine in Berlin told me, "If you get a chance, I've got a driver and a jeep for you." So I flew back to Templehof. I always had a movie camera with me, and I wanted a movie of the approach before meeting the jeep. At the end of the runway, in an open space between the bombed-out buildings and barbed wire, kids were watching the airplanes coming in over the rooftops. They came right up to the barbed wire and spoke to me in English. These kids were giving me a lecture, telling me, "Don't give up on us. If we lose our freedom, we'll never get it back." American-style freedom was their dream. Hitler's past and Stalin's future was their nightmare. I just flipped. Got so interested, I forgot what time it was.

Did you get permission?
No. At first I thought, "Well, I won't have time for that." Then I rationalized, What's a few sticks of gum and chocolate bars, anyway?
How did you work it?
My copilot and engineer gave me their candy rations—big double handfuls of Hershey, Mounds and Baby Ruth bars and Wrigley’s gum. It was heavy, and I thought, Boy, put that in a bundle and hit ‘em in the head going 110 miles an hour, it’ll make the wrong impression. So, I made three handkerchief parachutes and tied strings tight around the candy.

The next day, I came in over the field, and there were those kids in that open space. I wiggled the wings, and they just blew up—I can still see their arms. The crew chief threw the rolled-up parachutes out the flare chute behind the pilot seat. Couldn’t see what happened, of course. It took about 20 minutes to unload the flour, and I worried all the time where the candy went. As we taxied out to take off, there were the kids, lined up on the barbed-wire fence, three handkerchiefs waving through, their mouths going up and down like crazy.

Three weeks we did it—three parachutes each time. The crowd got big.

Had anyone noticed?
On one trip to Berlin, I ran into base operations. Inside was a big planning table, and it was loaded with letters addressed to Onkel Wackelflügel ("Uncle Wiggly Wings"). And I just broke out in a sweat. Holy cow, we’re in trouble! I went back out and said, "Guys, we gotta quit." For two weeks we quit, the crowd getting bigger all the time. And we looked at each other and said, "Once more, and that’s all." Fateful words. We got six parachutes—two weeks’ rations—and dropped them.

Next day an officer met the airplane and said, "The colonel wants to see you, right now." So I went in, and he says, "Whatcha doing, Halvorsen?"
"Flying like mad, sir."
"I’m not stupid. What else you been doing?" And he pulled out a newspaper with a big article and a photograph of my plane and the tail number. So I told him. He understood, and airlift commander General William Tunner said, "Well, then keep doing it!"

And the operation grew?
It went crazy. I’d come back from Berlin, and my buddies would have my bed covered with candy bars. That September a representative of the National Confectioners’ Association asked, "How much candy can you use?" I gave him this ridiculous number, and he said, "We’ll send all you can drop."

We had big cardboard boxes filled with the stuff. We’d cut off the top of each box, put it up against the escape hatch, and it would draw like a vacuum cleaner—scatter it everywhere. A squadron—must have been 10 planes—was doing it.

Were there enough handkerchiefs?
Word got back all over the United States. One day I went down to the post office and picked up three mailbags of letters—all filled with handkerchiefs. The news release said I was a bachelor. Some of the handkerchiefs were black lace, some perfumed. "I love what you’re doing. Write me."

But we couldn’t handle the volume. Then Mary Connors, a college student from Chicopee, Mass., got a hold of the confectioners’ association: "We’ll tie up all the parachutes. Have the candy sent to us."

Have you revisited Berlin?
We flew the restored C-54 Spirit of Freedom [www.spiritoffreedom.org] back to Templehof for the 50th anniversary of the airlift. People would come streaming through it, men and women who had been there during the blockade, their eyes moist, shake your hand and say, "Thank you, for freedom!"

I’ve been back 35 times in all, three times in 2009.

Operation Little Vittles dropped more than 21 tons of candy during the airlift. How does that total strike you? All from two sticks of gum in 1948—unbelievable! ☝

Visit www.historynet.com to read the full interview with Gail Halvorsen.