

Air and Space this Week

Item of the Week

THE BERLIN BLOCKADE AND AIRLIFT

Originally appeared May 9, 2022

KEY WORDS: Berlin Airlift Blockade C-54 Operation Vittles Tunner LeMay
Bizonia Gail Halvorsen Candy Bomber Uncle Wiggly Wings

The biggest military airlift of supplies was conducted in 1948-49. The Russians tried to blockade the sections of Berlin controlled by their other WWII allies, the United States, the UK, and France, starting on June 23, 1948. The only way to get food, coal, and other vital supplies to the two million plus citizens of Berlin was by air. The Allies laid on an enormous airlift, "Operation Vittles," that transported over two million metric tons of supplies via over 275,000 cargo plane sorties, in a mere fifteen months.

*The Allies laid on a counter-blockade that was hurting Russia, and demonstrated conclusively that they could and would support Berlin indefinitely, so on **May 11, 1949**, 73 years ago this week, they lifted the blockade on road and rail access to Berlin. The Airlift continued until September 30, just in case.*

And let's not forget Uncle Wiggly Wings ...

BACKGROUND: GERMANY AT THE END OF WWII

VE-Day 1945 (May 8) found Germany a battered, beaten, and occupied country. The Allies had been planning what to do with a soon-to-be-defeated foe for a number of months, and the immediate post-War was the focus of two major meetings with the "Big Three," FDR, Churchill, and Stalin. At Yalta (February, 1945 – Yalta is on the Crimean Peninsula, annexed from Ukraine in 2014), the Three discussed Russia's entry into the war against Japan, and what Russia would get when that theater of war was settled (Sakhalin, Port Aurthur, and the Kuriles). They also discussed Germany's fate. Russia wanted extremely-punitive reparations for the damage inflicted to them by the Nazi invasion (Russia had millions of casualties) and a buffer zone to protect against any future attacks from the West. Churchill and FDR wanted a rebuilt Germany as a buffer against the spread of communism. There was general agreement on the issues, including the inclusion of France in the final planning after the War was over, and the fate of, and elections, in the border countries.

The planning continued in more detail at the Potsdam Conference in late July, 1945. The War in Europe was over, and the Big Three met again to flesh out the plans from Yalta. The Pacific War was all but over; mushroom clouds would finish the conflict a few days after the Potsdam meeting concluded. Both sides agreed that Germany was to be de-militarized, that any German

industry that could be readily converted to military production be dissolved, and that Nazi leaders would face trial as war criminals.

Let's face it. Russia wasn't needed in the Pacific, and there was no longer a common European enemy. We were closely allied with the UK and with France, but in the case of Russia, we were cooperating against a common enemy, but it was clear at both Yalta and Potsdam that the Russians did not have the same post-War goals as the other Allies.

Germany was divided among the four victors. Russia got the eastern half, bounded pretty much by the distance Russian forces advanced to the west prior to Germany's capitulation. The western half was divided into thirds, the north going to the UK, the middle going to the US, and the south going to France.

But there was a rub. Germany's capital, Berlin, a city of well over two million inhabitants, lay deep within Russia's zone. It, too, had been partitioned into four as was the rest of Germany. The West wanted to have free access to Berlin via road, rail, and air. Three air routes were negotiated and agreed to, but the use of roads, rail, and canals for access was not.

PRELIMINARY MOVES

The four controlling countries established the Allied Control Council, which met regularly immediately after the War to coordinate occupation policy. For the first year or so, things went relatively smoothly, as everybody's main interest was their immediate recovery from the War's effects. But the Russian desire for punishment and a buffer on their west, and the West's desire for a buffer against communism on their east, soon led to conflict.

The Truman Doctrine was announced in a speech on March 12, 1947. It was a plan to contain Russian expansion, catalyzed by rebellions in Greece and Turkey. Truman stated that the U.S. would support free peoples who were resisting attempted subjugation, a policy that could be applied to Russia's behavior in Berlin. The situation worsened that May by the US and the UK merging their zones, forming an identity known as "Bizonia," and then further by the announcement the Marshall Plan in June, 1947, which supported economic recovery in Europe and having a shield against the spread of communism (it would be implemented in April, 1948).

A new policy also established in June, 1948, further inflamed the situation. A new currency was established for Bizonia and western Berlin, without prior consultation with Russia. The new Deutschmark wrested economic control in the western sector of Berlin from the Russians and facilitated the implementation of the Marshall Plan.

Berlin had a lot of symbolic value, so the West was disinclined to back down from Russian bluster. But the Russians had a lot more men and material in place in eastern Germany, and Stalin thought he could get the Allies to back down in the face of overwhelming firepower.

On June 24, 1948, the Russians blocked all access to Berlin by road, canal, and rail, and announced that the four-way split of the administration of Berlin was over.

THE AIRLIFT

The United States responded to the blockade two days later by launching “Operation Vittles,” an airlift program that would bring enough food, coal, and other supplies to the 2 million plus residents of Berlin. The U.K. followed two days after that with their “[Operation Plainfare](#),” which would assist greatly in the overall airlift effort.

[The U.S. also sent B-29s to the U.K. at this time that were specially-fitted to carry nuclear weapons, just in case the Berlin situation got really out of hand.]

A diplomatic solution was proposed by Russia, where they would agree to lift the blockade if the West would withdraw the deutschmark from West Berlin. Their offer was flat-out rejected, inspired in large part by a demonstration of 300,000 Berlin citizens at the Reichstag in favor of the West’s position. Desultory negotiations continued into September, but the Russians thought their blockade would hold and the Airlift would fail, especially when winter weather would impair the flights. The Russians realized the Allies resolve, so further negotiations were broken off.

The logistics of the Airlift were incredibly formidable, especially for the brand-new U.S. Air Force. Fortunately, some amazing managerial talent and a big industrial base were available to the Allies.

Major General Willam H. Tunner was brought in to set things up. He had a significant role in the setting up of the USAAF Ferrying Command at the start of WWII, and was the creator of the famed “Over the Hump” aerial supply of Chinese forces from India. At least in Germany, our cargo planes would not have to fly over the world’s highest mountains! He saw the conflict in Germany as one between good and evil, and he was a stickler in the machine-like maximization of cargo delivered per level of effort. He developed a process that was to be followed religiously.

The U.S. had a number of C-47 cargo planes immediately available (the military equivalent of the DC-3), and there were a number of four-engine C-54 Skymaster cargo planes in the pipeline. At the time, the USAF had a total of 866 C-54s total, and 105 of those were in the initial cadre for the US side of the Airlift along with 105 C-47s. Each of the 54s had three full crews. The force was augmented by civilians flying previously-commercial C-54s. By the mid-August, the Airlift had a total of 126 C-54s. There was some friction at the highest level; Tunner believed that the Military Air Transport Service (MATS) affair, others thought it should be managed by the US Air Forces in Europe (USAFE), which was under the overall command of General LeMay Tunner’s boss. When LeMay commanded, most of the friction was gone, but he rotated out of that billet in mid-October, cooperation between the US and UK commands involved, and between Tunner and General Cannon, LeMay’s replacement, deteriorated somewhat. Cannon was an old-school fighter guy, and knew little about air transport, and strove to control Tunner and the relatively free-wheeling set up LeMay created. Cannon forced Tunner to route everything through USAFE, which placed a damper on the speed with which the Airlift could adjust to conditions.

November, 1948, was the low point in the Airlift, in part because of the friction at the top previously mentioned, and in part because of the weather. And in part because of Bob Hope.

Hope had wanted to bring his WWII-type morale building show to Germany to entertain the Airlift personnel, and they were very eager to see him (OK, and the girls). When Tunner found out that Hope was to give two shows, neither in a location where the Airlift guys could see them, Tunner blew up and delivered a sharp ultimatum. Either his guys got to see Hope (which is why Hope wanted to go to Germany, after all) or all mention of the Airlift would be removed from the event's advance publicity, which would have raised difficult questions back home. The USAFE capitulated, and the shows went on.

The Secretary of the Air Force even got involved, both in breaking the jam over the shows, but also in moving subordinates regarding the poor living and working conditions faced by the Airlift personnel. He went out and talked with the troops, and then orders came down like rain. Better housing, equipment, aircraft maintenance, and supply movement were made available as immediately as possible.

An operation the size of the Berlin Airlift required enormous amounts of planning and management, all on a short timeline, and in total, everyone involved did a great job.

RESOLUTION

The Blockade and Airlift were more than just a very large military support effort. It was also a PR effort to win the hearts and minds of the German people and the citizens of the countries between Germany and Russia. Which economic system could serve the need of the people best? [The Airlift in some ways was the pre-cursor to other Cold War efforts, such as the IGY and the Space program.] And on this particular front, the Allies scored a major coup, thanks in large part to a quiet guy from a small town in Utah, 1Lt. Gail Halvorsen.

Halvorsen was detached from his station at Brookley AFB in Alabama in July, 1948, and sent to Berlin, to support the Airlift. He was greatly impressed by the behavior of a number of German children, who would gather and watch the Airlift planes taking off and landing. He noticed that they, unlike children with which he was familiar at home and elsewhere, never asked for candy, gum, or things like that. He went over to talk with one group, and had two sticks of gum on him, so he broke the gum up and gave the pieces to the kids he encountered, with a bold promise to drop more from his cargo plane when he flew over. He had stuffed a bunch of handkerchiefs in his haversack when he left Alabama, because he had a cold, and told the kids he'd use them as a parachute to drop candy and chocolate to them. He told them to look for the plane that would wiggle its wings. Needless to say, the kids were thrilled.

Halvorsen delivered. Whenever he saw kids below his plane, he'd wiggle his wings and drop three handkerchief parachutes from the flare chute on the plane, each laden with candy. Word got out among the children of Berlin, and more and more of them started showing up at Halvorsen's "drop zone." And they didn't just show up, they wrote thank you letters to "Uncle Wiggly Wings" and the "Chocolate Flyer."

The mail caught the attention of his squadron commander, who ordered Halvorsen to report on his actions. Not that the CO needed to do much to find out; the Berlin newspapers, who had received a bunch of letters, too, started to give Halvorsen's kindness front-page treatment. No discipline was needed here, instead the squadron CO gave him an enthusiastic order to continue the good work. Word even got up to Tunner, otherwise a by-the-book disciplinarian focused only on the Airlift mission, who praised Halvorsen's initiative enthusiastically, because Tanner recognized the PR component of the mission was of paramount importance, too.

And man, did the program explode. The brass called it "Operation Little Vittles," the USAFE wives got involved, and Halvorsen got sacks of fan mail for the States, much of which contained handkerchiefs (he became the only lieutenant in the USAF with a mail clerk assigned to him personally). The American Confectioners Association got behind the effort and supplied literally tons of candy to the cause, and public service, religious, news, and other organizations held candy drives to help out. The "Chocolate Flyer" became the symbol of the Berlin Airlift. Hollywood could not have written this any better.

Gail Halvorsen passed away earlier this year; he was 101. And [you would not believe](#) the outpouring of love and affection and thanks for what he did to help the kids! He left behind a lot of thankful ex-kids and an education foundation that bears his name. I'd write more about this remarkable man, but I seem to have gotten something in my eye.

At its height, Airlift aircraft were landing every 45 seconds at Tempelhof, and other planes were busily using the other airfields involved. By springtime in 1949, it was clear to all that the Russian blockade had failed, that the Russians were getting hurt more by the counter-blockade (and were worried about the civil unrest it was causing), and that the Russians had completely lost the battle for little hearts and minds. NATO had been established and there was no point in keeping the blockade in place; it was lifted on May 11, 1949. NATO was established two weeks later.

So let's review.

During the War, Allied bombers dropped tons and tons of bombs on Berlin and other German cities. A mere three years later, Allied aircraft became the lifeline to freedom, bringing food and fuel to a beleaguered city, still under attack from the east, and bringing hope to children who had only known death and destruction previously. It took the combined efforts of tens of thousands of military and support personnel, and international cooperation, to defeat the Blockade with the Airlift. It took the inspiration of one lieutenant to win the rest of the battle.

Berlin had become the symbol of democracy and freedom in the fight against communism, a role it would have throughout the Cold War, until the fall of the Berlin Wall.

Berlin Airlift stats: Airlift planes flew a total of 92 million miles, ***about the same distance from the Earth to the Sun***. They delivered 2,334,374 tons of food, coal, and other supplies to the city, and dropped 23 tons of chocolate, gum, candy to the children of Berlin, using 250,000 handkerchief parachutes.

SINCE THEN

The Berlin Airlift was one of the great accomplishments of military cargo transportation in the civilian world, but there have been others since. One of the most noteworthy was Operation Provide Promise, which delivered humanitarian aid to Sarajevo during the war between Bosnia and Serbia as the former Yugoslavia self-destructed. The Air Force used C-130 Hercules cargo planes to fly 12,895 supply sorties, carrying 160,536 metric tons of supplies over a period of 42 months (7/92 – 1/96), three times longer than the Berlin Airlift.

The Hercules has been a workhorse since its debut in December, 1956. It's been in continuous service for over 65 years, now in its J Super Hercules variant. [It was my ski-equipped ride to Antarctica 40-some years ago, and it was an impressive thing when it landed on a snow/ice runway!]

Even larger airlift transports became available, too. The C-141 Starlifter entered service in April, 1965 and enjoyed heavy use until 2006. Depending on model and configuration, it could carry a complete LGM-30 Minuteman ballistic missile or up to 50 tons of cargo. [And could make the Christchurch to McMurdo run in 5 hours instead of the Hercules' 8.]

The biggest, baddest transport on the block is the C-5M Super Galaxy, which entered service in June, 1970. It, too, could carry a Minuteman missile, an Abrams tank, or a maximum load of 381 tons.

Some specialty one-of-a-kind aircraft were also built, such as the B747 [Space Shuttle carrier](#) and the [Super Guppy](#), a modified version of the Boeing C-97J Turbo Stratofreighter (which was developed from the B-29 design), which could carry a Saturn V third stage.

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More on Military Airlift – see the A+StW Item of the Week for 3/22/2021 here: <http://airandspacesthisweek.com/assets/pdfs/20210322%20Curtiss%20C-46%20Commando.pdf>

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Last Edited on 8 May 2022

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