The Berlin Airlift—
The Largest Humanitarian Airlift in History

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The Berlin Airlift is not only a story of political intrigue, technological development, or military might; but also a story of human experiences. Unlike many of the anniversaries of late, which celebrated the victories of World War Two and provided much pomp and reason for jubilation, the Berlin Airlift has not been given the same attention. The Berlin Airlift marks another turning point in human history which many would perhaps prefer to forget, the beginning of the Cold War. Still this remarkable event brought several nations, once enemies in a bitter war, together again.

The events leading up to the blockade of Berlin, and the resulting airlift, fore-shadowed the "Cold War." With the end of World War Two, the Soviet Union was weary of the politics undertaken by the "Western" world, especially by the United States. The industrial potential of the United States had provided her allies ample equipment to win the war effort. The Soviet Union was not in the same position, her industries destroyed from several years of conflict. Both the United States and the Soviet Union were interested in establishing their political systems in the vacuum created by war in the defeated nations of Europe.

The Soviet Red Army had fought a bitter battle to take Berlin, and it considered the city to be within its sphere of influence. The four powers had agreed to geographical boundaries, which divided Germany into four zones of occupation. Berlin was located within the Soviet zone, but the city was also divided into four sectors. The Western Allies had halted their advance into Germany and even removed their troops from the Soviet zone under the terms agreed upon. Although World War Two ended on 8 May 1945, it was not until 2 July 1945 that American forces were allowed to enter their sector of Berlin.

The Soviet Union and the United States had cooperated in winning the war effort, but little attention had been paid to what would happen in Europe after the fighting ceased. Several questions had not been resolved between the two "world powers," such as Germany's future borders, the question of German unity, war reparations, rules for denazification, demilitarization and future form of German government. The policies of President Roosevelt intended Germany to have a form of democratic government, but what policy would President Truman now follow? After the war, the Soviet Union was more concerned with developing political parties, while the West concentrated on economic reconstruction. Since the Soviets established a Communist Party in Germany from the very beginning, they were all the more discouraged with their losses on 20 October 1946, in the first free elections in Berlin, when the SPD won 48%, CDU 22% and the Communist backed SED only 19% of the votes.

The "Marshall Plan" was the primary instrument created by American government, banking and industry to rebuild the European economies. The monetary unity of Germany along with a badly required new currency would force the situation to a head.

The Reichsmark had remained the legal means of payment, although the state it represented, Nazi Germany, no longer existed. The war had left the German population with a worthless inflated currency and nothing to buy. The black market, especially cigarettes and illegal trade of goods, was widespread. To complicate the situation, the victorious Allied Armies issued the Allied Occupation Currency. By giving England, France and the Soviet Union a set of plates, the United States forged mistrust amongst the German population. This currency was never considered nor trusted as legal tender, so the Germans kept using their old Reichsmark.

The Western Allies realized the only means of getting the German economy started was a new currency with self control. The Soviets protested and attempted to undermine this policy.

Three years after war's end, the situation called for action. New money was secretly printed at the U.S. Treasury Department in Washington D.C. and transported in 23,000 boxes, weighing 1,035 tons, to the old Reichsbank in Frankfurt/Main. The project was called "Operation Bird Dog," and General Lucius D. Clay, U.S. Military Governor of Occupied Germany, was given the discretion as to the timing of the currency's official release. As late as 17 June 1948, the Soviets had no knowledge of the project.

On Friday, 18 June, after all the banks had closed for the week-
end, the official announcement was made. On Sunday, 20 June, the
new currency was introduced within the western zones of Germany,
with each citizen receiving 40 Deutschemarks. This same currency
was issued a few days later to the citizens of the western sectors of
Berlin. This currency reform was a comprehensive and complicated
restructuring of wages, prices, public and private debt, exchange rates
and banking regulations. Wages and salaries acquired a genuine pur-
chasing power, because products suddenly became available.

The massive influx of now worthless Reichsmarks into the
Soviet zone forced the Soviets into their own currency reform of 23
June. This was very makeshift, as the old Third Reich currency was
reissued with a Soviet Zone Monetary Reform Coupon placed in the
corner. A short time later, the Soviets introduced their own new cur-
rency for the eastern zone of Germany.

Also on 23 June, at Midnight, the Soviets began to cut electric
power, and at 6 a.m. the next day they halted all road, rail and barge
traffic to Berlin. The Soviets no longer wanted to tolerate Western
influences within their zone. The Soviets were determined to obtain
Berlin and announced that the Kommandatura no longer existed.
The Berlin blockade had begun.

The situation appeared unfavorable, with the Western Allies
unprepared. Since the end of World War Two, the Allies had dra-
matically reduced the size of their armies, while the Soviet Union
maintained its huge military force and was in a far better position for
conflict. The U.S. Air Force had only 275 aircraft in Europe, mostly
light bombers or fighters, while the Soviets had some 4,000 aircraft,
two-thirds of which were in Germany. The situation in Berlin was no
different, with 6,000 Allied troops positioned there, versus the Sovi-
ets, who had 18,000 troops in Berlin and thousands more nearby.

To create a military balance, President Truman ordered sixty
long-range B-29 "Superfortress" aircraft, theoretically equipped with
atomic bombs, to bases in England. The United States still had a
monopoly on the atomic bomb, but unknown to the Soviets, these
bombs were scarce, and these B-29s had not even been modified to
carry them. In all probability, the atomic threat was enough to
prevent the Soviets from considering a massive military action to
acquire Berlin.

The Air Force also transferred 90 Lockheed F-80 "Shooting
Stars," the first operational U.S. jet fighter aircraft, to Germany. The
general public was never informed about these actions.

Although General Clay was inclined towards military action,
he was persuaded by Air Commodore Waite of the Royal Air Force
to attempt an airlift. President Truman was determined to maintain
Allied presence in Berlin but without using force. A previous short-
lived blockade of Berlin on 31 March 1948 demonstrated the suc-
cess of "Operation Little Lift." Beginning 2 April, 300 tons of sup-
plies were trucked to Rhein-Main Air Base and flown by volunteer
pilots flying C-47s to Berlin. These cargo planes could have been
easily destroyed by Soviet Yak-3 fighters, and so the pilots were given
the nickname: "Clay's Pigeons." This operation had proved the ef-
ectiveness of an air safety agreement that the Soviets had signed on
30 November 1945, which legitimized the Allied use of three air
corridors to Berlin.

Now faced with a major blockade, the Royal Air Force began
flying supplies to Berlin on 26 June 1948, in what was called "Op-
eration Plainfare".

The American "Operation Vittles" began the following day,
under the command of Brigadier General Joseph Smith. As a com-
batt pilot, Gen. Smith was unfamiliar with the requirements involved
in maintaining a long term airlift operation. As the Berlin blockade
evolved, the Air Force soon recognized the seriousness of the sit-
uation, replacing General Smith on 29 July 1948 with the more ex-
perienced Lieutenant General William H. Tunner.

During World War Two, General Tunner had commanded "the
Hump," an airlift by Tenth Air Force (later Air Transport Command),
from 13 air bases in India, to supply 6 air bases in China across the
Himalayan mountains. By July 1945, Tunner was able to triple the
tonnage transported, boost morale and decrease the accident rate.

To ensure success of the Berlin Airlift, General Tunner called
upon many of his former staff members, hand picking twenty office-
ers, who joined him on his flight to Germany. Tunner and his staff
immediately made a tour of bases and operations to learn "firsthand"
the situation. They discovered poor flight and maintenance schedul-
ing, lack of coordination and general confusion. The problems of
this "cowboy operation" soon became apparent on Friday,
13 August 1948, also called "Black Friday."
The clouds dropped to the tops of the apartment buildings surrounding the field, and then they suddenly gave way in a cloudburst that obscured the runway from the tower. The radio could not penetrate the sheets of rain. Apparently both the tower and the ground-control operators lost control of the situation. One C-54 overshot the runway, crashed into a ditch at the end of the field and caught fire; the crew got out alive. Another "Skymaster," coming in with a maximum load of coal, landed too far down the runway. To avoid piling into the fire ahead, the pilot had to brake with all he had. Another pilot, coming in over the rooftops, saw what seemed to be a runway and let down. He discovered, too late, that he had picked an auxiliary runway that was still under construction; and he slipped and then flipped over. With all the confusion on the ground - unloaded aircraft ready for takeoff, and more aircraft arriving, General Tunner in one of those aircraft arriving in Berlin, ordered all aircraft to return to their home bases. He then ordered twenty crack civilian controllers back to duty as reservists and on to Germany.

The primary problem Tunner faced was a lack of aircraft. Soon the small C-47 (Gooney Birds) were replaced by numerous C-54 (Skymasters).

Tunner believed that certain factors such as maintenance, safety, instrument flying, rhythm, radar assisted approaches and competition were vital for the success of the Berlin Airlift.

Propeller aircraft require a great deal of maintenance caused by the vibrating engines and short life span of parts. Every 200 hours aircraft received an inspection at Obergaffenhofen and later Burtonwood, England. After 1,000 hours flight time, every aircraft received a comprehensive overhaul in the United States, either at Texas Engineering & Mfg. Co. in Dallas, Texas; Aircraft Engineering & Maintenance Co. in Oakland; or Lockheed Aircraft Service Corp. in Sayville, Long Island. Of the approximately 354 aircraft operating in the Berlin Airlift, at any time more than 100 were in the maintenance system. Usually 225 to 240 aircraft were operational in Germany at any given time.

With good maintenance, the safety of operations improved. General Tunner stressed the need of following safety regulations. In 1948, the U.S. Air Force averaged 48 accidents per 100,000 flying hours, while for the Berlin Airlift, the rate was only 39 accidents.

Safety was accomplished by mandatory instrument flying, regardless of weather conditions. General Tunner also introduced the practice which allowed pilots only one attempt at landing in Berlin. If a pilot missed his landing, for whatever reason, he would return to his home base. This prevented confusion and needless backup of aircraft in holding patterns.

General Tunner also believed an Airlift had to follow a rhythm. Each aircraft was assigned a hardstand position at its designated base. When an aircraft touched down, it had 4 minutes to reach its position. In one hour and 15 minutes, the aircraft was refueled; small maintenance work and loading occurred simultaneously, while pilots received a briefing. Once the engines were started, it would take 6 minutes to taxi, get clearance and takeoff. The flight from Rhein-Main Air Base to Tempelhof took 1 hour 45 minutes.

Aircraft from Rhein-Main and Wiesbaden, transporting food or supplies, would fly the southern corridor to Berlin at three different altitudes, 4,000, 6,000 and 8,000 feet, each two minutes apart. (The number of levels increased as the Airlift continued.) The approach to Tempelhof was dangerous, over a long, narrow row of high apartment buildings on each side. Once landed, aircraft required 5 minutes to reach the hardstand position and shut down engines. A truck with German workers would unload the aircraft within minutes. Pilots had to remain at their aircraft, while one jeep came by to provide weather information and clearance, and a second jeep operated as a mobile snack bar. General Tunner was very keen about having two beautiful Berliners work at these snack bars, "so that the men would have something to look at." Some aircraft were reloaded in Berlin with manufactured products, empty coal sacks, mail or other provisions, but generally speaking an aircraft remained on the ground in Berlin only 49 minutes.

From British bases at Fassberg and Celle, U.S. aircraft flew primarily coal to Tegel or Gatow Air Bases in Berlin. These aircraft used the northern corridors to Berlin. All aircraft used the center corridors for the return flight to their home bases.

The scheduling of operations was perfectly timed, so that the maximum usage of available airplanes, ground facilities and airmen was assured. This rhythm would become General Tunner's trademark. The initial rate of one aircraft movement every three minutes
was rapidly increased to one movement every minute by Easter 1949.

Radar assisted approaches were introduced by 18 August 1948, to assist in guiding aircraft through the corridors and while landing during the forthcoming winter months. Procedures developed during the Berlin Airlift played a major role in the development of modern air traffic systems, as we know them today.

General Tunner believed that given the challenge of a good healthy competition, Americans can accomplish anything. This competition arose between the various Air Bases in the form of daily tonnage figures, especially between Fassburg versus Celle and Rhein-Main versus Wiesbaden. Large “How Gozit” signs were erected at each base, and daily tonnage figures posted. These figures also appeared in the daily paper, the Task Force Times. With two Naval units operating during the Airlift from Rhein-Main Air Base, a fierce rivalry between the Air Force and Navy arose. Countless records were set, even between the U.S. Air Force and R.A.F. The highest daily tonnage figure was 1,755 tons for the R.A.F. set on 5 July 1949, and 10,905 tons for the Air Force, set on 16 April 1949.

The same competition arose between German civilians. Maintenance crews recorded the daily percentage of aircraft ready for duty. German workers noted the time required to load or unload an aircraft. One twelve-man German crew unloaded 20,000 pounds of coal in 5 minutes and 45 seconds. Each member of the crew was rewarded with a pack of cigarettes.

This competition helped morale. Some resentment had set in when units were transferred to Germany from Texas, Panama, Hawaii and Alaska on TDY (Temporary Duty) for 30 to 90 days, which often was extended several times for another 30 days. One Navy unit had just been transferred to Hawaii, and before the wives and children arrived, the husbands had departed for Germany. Many would not see their families for almost a year. The competition between units and between bases helped relieve these tensions and make the time go faster.

General Tunner realized that behind it all the Berlin Airlift was a political competition between the Soviets and the Western Allies.

But the Berlin Airlift cannot be looked upon as strictly a military operation, rather there is a human touch that brought forth a change in attitude amongst the defeated German population and the victorious Allies.

Although the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter Day Saints (The Mormons) was the first to provide humanitarian assistance to war-torn Germany; the organization remembered by all and best summed up by its acronym CARE (Cooperative for American Remittances to Europe), was formed on 27 November 1945. During the Berlin Airlift, CARE delivered 739,000 29-pound packages of food to the needy of Berlin. These packages would normally cost donors $10, but because of the Blockade, packages to Berlin cost an additional $2.50 in air-freight charges. American Overseas Airlines handled the task of transporting these packages on routine daily flights from Rhein-Main to Berlin, independent of the military airlift operations. The Quakers, Mennonites, Catholic Relief Services and many more, all provided assistance for the hardships endured during the Blockade.

The countless acts of humanitarianism, as demonstrated by our pilots, is best symbolized in the story of an unknown 13-year-old boy, who lived in Wiesbaden. The boy had just received word that his mother, who lived in Berlin, had suffered a heart attack. The boy managed to pass the guards and make his way to an aircraft, when a pilot discovered him. He told his story to the pilot, who realized that the boy was telling the truth. Making sure no supervisors were watching, the pilot lifted the lad into the aircraft and said; “Make yourself comfortable, son. In two hours you’ll be in Berlin.”

Among the most famous individuals, who best symbolizes the concept of Christian humanitarianism, was First Lieutenant Gail Halvorsen. In 1948, he was assigned to Rhein-Main Air Base. While piloting C-54’s into Tempelhof, he met some German children standing along the fence of the base. The many years of war and hardship had left their mark on the faces of these children. Gail had only two sticks of gum in his pocket, which he broke in two and gave the children, telling them to share, by far, not enough for all the children standing there. “For thirty cents, I could put these guys on Easy Street,” he recalled. He told the children that he would fly into Berlin the next day and would drop candy during his approach. The children asked “How will we recognize you?” Gail said he would tip his wings up and down, an old form of greeting among pilots.

That night he experimented with small parachutes made from handkerchiefs, which were in large supply to combat colds. The next
day as he approached Tempelhof, he wiggled his wings and dropped several parachutes with candy attached. The kids went wild with joy, and every day more children would appear along the fence. Gail started to receive thousands of letters daily, until the military authorities learned of Gail’s activities. At first they were displeased, because it had not been approved by the Chain of Command. On the other hand, these candy drops were a huge morale factor, not only for the German children but for all the soldiers involved. From this humble beginning, “Operation Little Vittles” was created, dropping over 23 tons of candy, using thousands of homemade parachutes and candy provided by schools, organizations and from GI’s back Stateside.

Many years later Gail Halvorsen returned to Berlin as Commander of Tempelhof Air Base. He probably is the most remembered GI that ever served in Berlin. His actions have come to symbolize the good deeds of many pilots during the Airlift.

The Berlin Airlift must also not be considered strictly an Air Force achievement. Two squadrons of twelve RSD (Naval version of the C-54) were transferred to the Airlift operations. The Navy units, VR-6 and VR-8, were both stationed at Rhein-Main. They brought their own Quonset hut barracks, Mess Hall and aircraft maintenance equipment and together transported 130,000 tons of cargo to Berlin.

The Navy also transported more than 100 million gallons of aviation fuel from the United States to Bremerhaven, not to mention the tons of food and supplies (which were not available in Germany), that the Air Force then flew to Berlin. This operation was called the “Sea Lift.”

The U.S. Army also played an essential role in supporting the Airlift. A total of 1,900 Army personnel served in transportation units which trucked goods to the waiting aircraft, or handled rail operations from Bremerhaven to various bases. These units were primarily staffed by black soldiers, since desegregation of the military was a time yet in coming. More importantly, the Army supplied over 500,000 duffel bags, needed to transport coal inside aircraft. The Army Quartermaster provided housing, furniture, clothing and other services for Airlift personnel.

However we consider the Berlin Airlift, it would not have been possible without the support of the British Royal Air Force (R.A.F.). Every week the R.A.F. airlifted 1,500 tons of goods out of Berlin, usually electrical products, books, toys, etc., in order to maintain the Berlin economy, not to mention the 60,000 individuals flown out.

Unlike the United States, which provided large numbers of C-47’s which were replaced by large numbers of C-54 aircraft. The R.A.F. did not have ample aircraft to use any single type in large numbers as did the United States. Therefore the R.A.F. used several types of aircraft, such as the Bristol Type 170, “Freighter,” Douglas DC-3, “Dakota,” Handley Page “Halifax,” “Halton” and “Hastings,” Avro “Lancastrian,” “Lincoln,” “Tudor” and “York,” as well as the Short “Sunderland.” These various aircraft had different air speeds, spare parts, and operating procedures, which made organizing an effective airlift difficult. Poor weather, especially fog, often meant that groups of aircraft had to be diverted to other bases. Traffic controllers often had to juggle things around, which could ruin flight plans and cargo schedules, if not handled correctly.

The R.A.F. and the pilots provided by Commonwealth nations (New Zealand, Australia and South Africa) alone, could not achieve the required tonnage. Civilian carriers were contracted by the British government for one month periods, with a 14-day cancellation clause. Fiftytwo aircraft from 24 different charter airlines provided an additional 750 tons daily. The short-term nature of these contracts prevented carriers from making large-scale investments. These carriers lacked the experience for sustained operations, had inadequately trained pilots, and suffered from the general shortage of spare parts. Since these airlines were paid for flying time, they often had to “make do,” which resulted in numerous accidents and casualties. The R.A.F. suffered 7 fatalities, while the civilian carriers suffered 21.

Although the British contributed only one-third the tonnage, it suffered two-thirds of the total fatalities.

From the very start, France could not support the Airlift with aircraft, equipment, or crews because of the Indochina conflict. The French did provide space for the Americans to build Tegel airfield and also operated a single confiscated German Ju-52, which provided 200 tons of fine food and wines for the French Officers in Berlin.

The German civilians contributed greatly to the success of the
Berlin Airlift. Ernst Reuter, the elected mayor of Berlin, mobilized public support. The Berliners worked hard to support Allied effort. A runway at Tegel was constructed in only 62 days. They worked around the clock to improve Tempelhof and Gatow airfields. Most of the loading and unloading was done by German nationals. Although food, fuel and power were in short supply, Berlin was able to keep its industry going and the spirit of the people intent on freedom.

The Berliners suffered from short rations; as once stated “We Berliners aren’t starving, but we’re always hungry.” The average daily ration consisted of 15 ounces of bread, 1.5 ounces of meat and 15 ounces dried potatoes. For the entire winter of 1948-49, only 27.5 pounds of heating fuel (wood, coal, etc.) was available for each Berliner.

The Berliners became most creative and inventive during these hard times. Oil lamps were discovered in attics and repaired. People built home-made, hand-operated generators that provided additional power, which was otherwise limited to 2 two-hour periods daily. Throughout the city, Blockade Gardens were planted. Flower boxes covered entire balconies with potatoes and vegetables. These crops provided several thousand tons of badly needed food.

However we assess the Berlin Airlift and its achievements, the effectiveness of the Soviet blockade must also come into question. In 1949, the Berlin Wall had not yet been erected, so border crossings were not well protected. Traveling was restricted but not impossible. The Soviets blocked only the main means of transportation to the city, but Berlin was still a single city, and the exchange of goods and services was impossible to totally disrupt overnight. Families from western Berlin could visit relatives in the eastern Zone, or vice versa, and, even if on a small and informal scale, an exchange of goods occurred. This was disapproved of by both sides, but little could be done to stop it.

Even during the Blockade, there was a mutual exchange of goods between east and west. At Gatow, for example, the Soviets could easily have turned off the electric power to the R.A.F., causing a major problem for the Airlift. On the other hand, the British sector provided electric power to a Russian fighter base.

Throughout the Airlift the Soviets and Germans in the Eastern Zone harassed the Allies in almost any manner possible, without risking political or military conflict. Pilots were blinded at night by searchlights, and radios were jammed. Balloons were launched to obstruct takeoffs. Buzzing by Soviet aircraft made most pilots uneasy, but the majority of U.S. pilots had seen wartime duty and were conditioned to hold formation at all cost. A total of 733 incidents were reported during Airlift.

It was on 16 April 1949, Easter Sunday, when the Blockade was broken. General Tunner mustered men and equipment to achieve the goal of one aircraft landing every minute in Berlin. Although the Allies came only 2 flights short of that goal, a record 12,849 tons were transported on 1,383 flights. The Berlin Airlift transported twice as much tonnage that day as the city of Berlin required or as the Soviets provided East Berliners.

General Frank Howley, Commandant of the American sector of Berlin, stated his feelings so: “It is conceivable that the Russians credited us with the ability to bring in food for the city. We had been doing it for months, but what they didn’t count on was coal. Who ever heard of supplying a city with coal by air?”

On 4 May 1949, the four powers agreed to the proposed end of the Blockade by 12 May. The final aircraft departed Rhein/Main Air Base on 30 September 1949 for Berlin. The Airlift had ended.

The final statistics of the Berlin Airlift are impressive and unsurpassed. The U.S. Air Force transported 1,422,000 tons of coal, 296,000 tons of food and 65,000 tons of miscellaneous goods, for a total of 1,783,573 tons. The British R.A.F. contributed another 542,000 tons of goods. A total of 75,000 individuals were involved in making the combined Airlift work.

The Berlin Airlift was the first time in history in which military air transport was used to achieve diplomatic goals. Not only did the Soviet Union suffer the defeat of the Blockade breaking, but the Allies had witnessed a change in attitude by the Germans themselves. Before, the Allies had been considered, a Besatzungsmacht (an Army of Occupation). After the Airlift, the Germans considered the Allies as a Schutzmacht (Army of Protection). The Airlift acted as a unifying element between the participating nations of the United States, Great Britain and France leading to the creation of NATO (North Atlantic Treaty Organization). The Berlin Airlift was also the first major mission undertaken by the newly created U.S. Air Force.
Rhein-Main Air Base, the largest U.S. military air transport facility in Europe, in its 54 year history has supported over 170 humanitarian airlifts. Rhein-Main has come to symbolize America's resolve in supporting nations in time of need through the use of military air transport. Yet, when we consider the figures, despite the larger aircraft used by the military today, the significance of the Berlin Airlift is placed into perspective. If we add up all the tonnage of these other airlifts, it represents only one half the tonnage of the Berlin Airlift. Or when compared to "Operation Provide Promise," the longest humanitarian airlift in history, (almost four years in duration) which supplied aid to Yugoslavia, the tonnage represents only one month's effort by those small C-47 and C-54 aircraft during the Berlin Airlift.

This unique event, the Berlin Airlift, was forged by the determination of the citizens of Berlin to remain free despite the hardships and shortages of fuel, heat and food. It was forged by the determination of the three allied nations to remain in Berlin against all odds of success. It was forged by the determination of General William H. Tunner to succeed. It was forged by the determination of U.S. and R.A.F. pilots, mechanics, radio control operators, as well as civilian laborers, U.S. Army transportation and construction units, and the U.S. Naval units which supported the Airlift. It is remembered for the countless humanitarian acts for which Berliners are still grateful today.

Thank you