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Veterans of the greatest humanitarian airlift in history recall the experience. It began 50 years ago this month.

Berlin Airlift

By Stewart M. Powell

BILL Lafferty flew one of the first missions of the Berlin Airlift and didn't even know it. Joe Bracewell served up more "S.O.S." as a line mess cook than he cares to remember. George Hoyt bombed Nazi Germany from his B-17, but it's the humanitarian relief of Operation Vittles that he cherishes most. And Ed Dvorak, who saw plenty of combat during 76 bomber escort missions in his P-38 during World War II, can't shake the memory of seeing the body of his poker buddy carried out of the smoldering wreckage of a C-47 hours after their last hand.

For many Americans, the Berlin Airlift is a faded memory, a distant skirmish in a conflict known as "The Cold War." The quiet resolve of the World War II generation that crushed Nazism and turned around to rescue ordinary Berliners three years later has been eclipsed by the more recent image of jubilant East Germans streaming through the Berlin Wall to spell the end of Soviet power in 1989.

But for the veterans who took part in the greatest humanitarian airlift in history, the operation is as fresh as yesterday. The airlift stretched 15 months, from June 26, 1948, to Sept. 30, 1949. By the end of the operation, American and British pilots had flown 92 million miles on 277,000 flights from four primary airfields in the western sectors of Germany into Berlin to deliver nearly 2.3 million tons of supplies to three airfields conducting round-the-clock operations within 10 miles of each other.

Three-quarters of the flights were piloted by Americans. At its peak, 32,900 American military personnel were involved, backed by another 23,000 civilians from the United States, Allied nations, and Germany. Killed



Among the first to fly a mission in the Berlin Airlift, 1st Lt. William Lafferty (left) and 1st Lt. Robert Barlow await refueling of their C-47 at Tempelhof before returning to Wiesbaden for another load of supplies.

in the operation were 77 men—31 of them Americans.

“Go ... Now!”

For Lafferty, the affair began on June 26, 1948, when he was ordered to make a second C-47 trip into Berlin from Rhein–Main AB in western Germany. At the time, regulations barred night transport operations in the air corridor. “They were not getting the airplane loaded quickly enough, so I announced to the base operations officer that we’d go at first light,” recalls Lafferty, a retired Air Force colonel living in Green Valley, Ariz.

The operations officer insisted, “You’ve got to go now.”

Lafferty balked.

“Lieutenant,” thundered Col. Walter Lee, commander of Rhein–Main. “You get your butt out to that airplane and take it to Berlin as soon as it is loaded!”

Lafferty flew to Berlin and returned to Wiesbaden AB instead of Rhein–Main.

“Congratulations,” is the first thing the young pilot heard from Air Force Col. Bertram C. Harrison, commander of the 60th Troop Carrier Group.

“What for?” asked Lafferty.

Harrison replied, “You’ve flown the first mission on the Berlin Airlift for our group.”

Nascent Cold War hostilities provoked the standoff.

The Russians, prostrate after a Nazi invasion and years of fighting that killed more than 25 million Russians, pressed the Allies for continued occupation and division of Germany without the economic revival sought by the West. The United States, Britain, and France were unable to win Russian agreement for modest steps to stabilize the reeling German economy. The Western Allies began secretly mapping steps to create an independent, democratic West German republic tied to the West.

On March 20, 1948, the Russian representative on the Allied Control Council in Berlin bluntly demanded Allied plans. The Allies refused. The Soviet representative stormed out. Kremlin forces immediately began intermittent interference with Allied railroad traffic into Berlin, stopping and searching trains ferrying supplies and coal into the former Nazi capital.

Moscow had hit the most sensitive nerve. The Western Allies had no

guarantee of land access to Berlin in postwar agreements, other than a verbal promise from Soviet Marshal Georgi K. Zhukov to US Army Gen. Lucius D. Clay, military governor of the American zone in Germany and the American commander in Europe, according to a history produced for Military Airlift Command entitled, “MAC and the Legacy of the Berlin Airlift” by historians Roger D. Launius and Coy F. Cross II.

The Air Corridor

The Western Allies did have an ironclad guarantee of air access to Berlin, however, stemming from the 1945 Allied Control Council agreement. The air safety accord set aside a “Berlin Control Zone” extending 20 miles from the city center. It laid out three 20-mile-wide air corridors linking Berlin with the occupied western sectors of Germany. The Allies could fly into Berlin at any altitude below 10,000 feet without advance notice.

The Russians’ sudden interference with Allied rail shipments prompted Clay to launch an ad hoc air resupply operation to Berlin that relied upon C-47s drawn into Rhein–Main from across Europe.

“During one period of 11 days in April, when the Soviets demanded the right to search and investigate all military shipments by rail, we flew small quantities of food and other critical supplies to Berlin—something like 300 tons,” Lt. Gen. Curtis E. LeMay, commander of US Air Forces in Europe, later recalled.

William F. Shimonkevitz, of Denver, was a base photo officer at Rhein–Main when he was summoned for the emergency relief operation. “We carried fresh foodstuffs in—milk, eggs, cheese, meat, vegetables, et cetera—and empty milk bottles, household goods, furniture, personal belongings out,” recalls Shimonkevitz, a retired Air Force colonel who flew on more than 200 round-trips into Berlin.

The “max effort” operations during Russian interference served as a crucial building block for the subsequent airlift. “It was during those periods under the guidance of the then–USAFE leadership that procedures, routing, and timing first proved successful and operationally

feasible,” recalls William J. Hooten, a retired Air Force lieutenant colonel who lives in San Diego.

The Russians’ interference with rail shipments became a blessing in disguise. “The Soviets made a major mistake,” says retired Lt. Gen. Howard M. Fish, a veteran of the airlift who retired from the Air Force in 1979 as vice chief of staff and now resides in Shreveport, La. “They gave us the opportunity to learn, and we learned the things that we used later.”

Later in April, the Kremlin allowed surface transportation to resume, ending what became known as “the Little Airlift.” But the foundation of the looming showdown was in place. The Western Allies moved ahead with their



Fast and Furious

The lumbering two-engine airplane carried three tons of cargo at a cruising speed of 175 miles per hour over a range of 1,500 miles. Many of the aircraft were war-weary, still emblazoned with the three horizontal stripes used to designate friendly aircraft during the D-Day landings at Normandy four years earlier, but they did the job. Deliveries on Day 2 jumped up to 295 tons. By Day 3, deliveries had soared to 384 tons.

The airplanes “were coming in so fast and furious,” recalls Paul Harris of Winter Park, Fla., who was on duty at the Berlin Air Safety Center alongside British, French, and Russian counterparts on the first day of the airlift. The Russian air controllers “knew what we were doing,” he said. “They could count all ours on the control board.”

Harris and his American colleagues turned control of inbound American cargo airplanes over to Tempelhof tower for the final 12 miles of the inbound flight. Russian controllers remained amiable despite the tensions that had provoked the crisis. They were as friendly as always, recalls Harris, a retired Air Force lieutenant colonel. He says the Americans would always offer them cigarettes; otherwise, the Russians would smoke their own. “Theirs smelled like horsehair,” adds Harris.

The Germans dubbed what was going on as “Luftbrücke,” or “air bridge.” The British labeled their phase of the



Pilot B.J. Anderson peers through the rip in his C-54’s fuselage. He was taking off from Celle, Germany, when the hydraulic line to the C-54’s No. 2 engine ruptured. Despite attempts to shut it down, the engine continued to accelerate and the propeller then sheared off and cut into the side of the fuselage. Anderson and his crew made a safe landing back at Celle.

five-part plan to revive the failing German economy. Soviet forces retaliated anew on June 15, 1948, closing the autobahn into Berlin “for repairs.” On June 24, 1948, the Soviets cited “technical difficulties” and cut off electricity and halted all cargo and passenger traffic into Berlin from Allied sectors in western Germany.

Clay assured Berlin Mayor Ernst Reuter that the Allies would stand by the 2.5 million Berliners who had survived World War II.

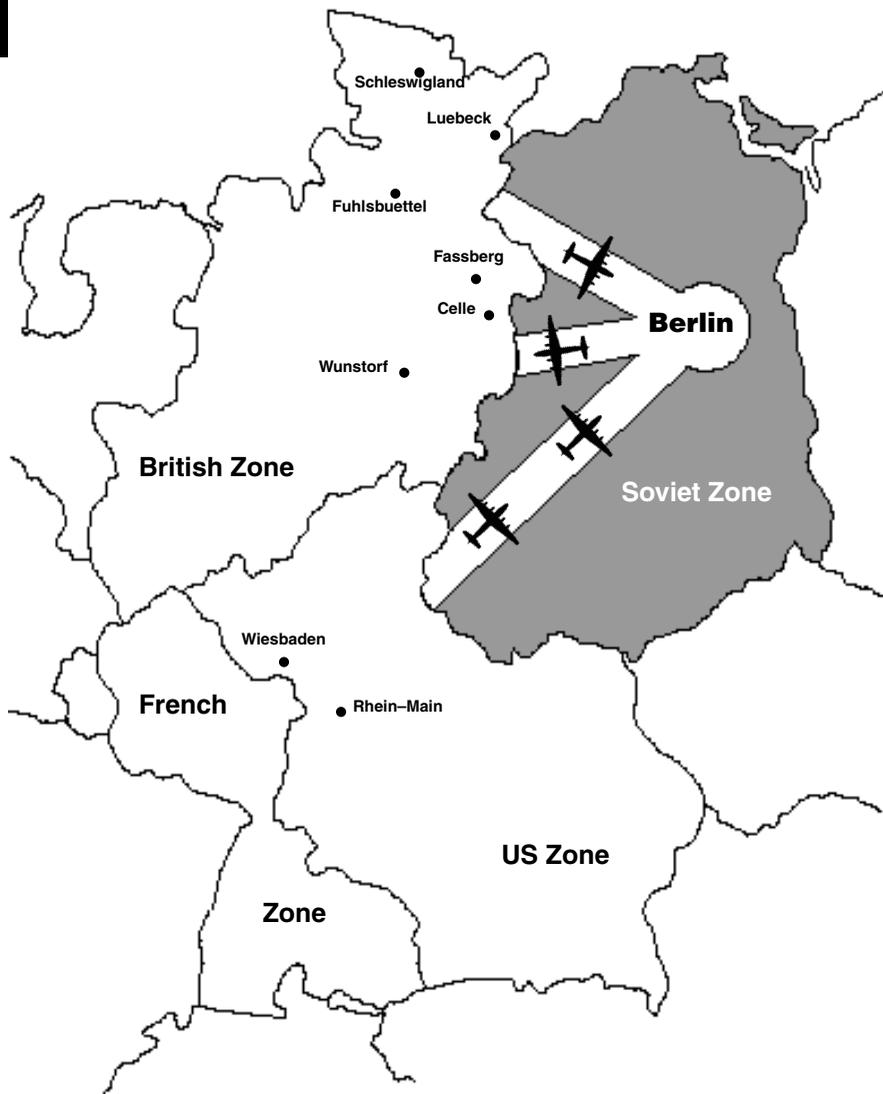
Clay called LeMay. Could cargo aircraft ferry coal into Berlin to heat

and power the city, Clay asked in a historic telephone call to the gruff USAFE commander.

“General,” LeMay replied, “We can haul anything. How much coal do you want us to haul?”

“All you can haul,” Clay replied.

The independent Air Force, not even a year old, launched the full-scale airlift on June 26, 1948, using C-47 Skytrains to ferry 80 tons of supplies from Wiesbaden to Tempelhof Airport in Berlin, requiring a total of 32 missions. USAFE headquarters hurriedly rounded up 110 of the “Gooney Birds.”



Under the 1945 Allied Control Council agreement, which set aside three 20-mile-wide air corridors within the "Berlin Control Zone," the Western Allies could fly into Berlin at any altitude below 10,000 feet without advance notice.

lift Operation Plainfare. Weary pilots of all nationalities called it "The Le-May Coal and Feed Delivery Service." Then—Brig. Gen. Joseph Smith, first US commander of the operation, grabbed the first code name that came to mind.

"Hell's fire—we're hauling grub," Smith told aides. "Call it Operation Vittles if you have to have a name."

The US-led airlift was expected to last two weeks.

Young Air Force personnel across Europe saw their plans, orders, and schedules scrapped overnight.

Charlie T. McGugan was dispatched from his assignment at USAFE head-

quarters to fly C-47s. "We had no idea how long this was going to last," recalls McGugan of Aberdeen, N.C., who retired from the Air Force as a colonel. "They pulled in everyone who could be spared to supplement the pilots who were already flying."

William A. Cobb was heading through Wiesbaden en route to Fuerstfeldbruck AB near Munich to pilot an F-80 fighter, but his orders were abruptly changed when a desperate personnel officer spied Cobb's college engineering degree. The fighter pilot became a maintenance control officer at airlift headquarters, scheduling upkeep

and tracking the burgeoning fleet of airlift aircraft.

"This was a 24-hour-a-day operation," recalls Cobb, now a resident of Melbourne, Fla. "We ... kept track of all aircraft in commission and made a report each morning."

You're In. Get Moving

J.B. McLaughlin was summoned from his assignment as air attache at the US Embassy in Athens. "I had about 3,000 hours, most of it in fighters, with about 300 hours in the 'Gooney,'" recalls McLaughlin, a retired Air Force colonel living in East Tawas, Mich. "Upon arrival in Wiesbaden, I discovered that this qualified me as first pilot."

Paul A. Jarrett, of Warner Robins, Ga., remembers the early C-47 missions with the 60th Troop Carrier Group between Wiesbaden and Tempelhof. "The first several weeks of the lift were the worst—rain, fog, and no relief," recalls Jarrett, who retired from the Air Force as a lieutenant colonel. "Until the C-54s showed up, it was tough."

Smith, the commander of the post at Wiesbaden, made one crucial decision after another, shaping an operation that would frustrate Moscow for 15 months. Drawing upon his experience as a mail pilot for the Army Air Corps in 1934, Smith established a duty and maintenance schedule designed to keep 65 percent of his aircraft airborne each day.

The elaborate schedule enabled each C-47 in the expanding aircraft fleet to complete three flights a day into Berlin. Smith had airlift pilots fly under the most rigid system of air traffic control to be instituted up to that point. He established the pattern of one-way operations through the three corridors—two corridors devoted to Berlin-bound aircraft and the central East-West corridor reserved for outbound traffic. Aircraft flew at five different altitudes, later cut to three. Aircraft at the same altitude were separated by 15-minute intervals.

Smith ordered aircraft to fly in "blocks" to overcome differences in speed between the twin-engine C-47s with their three-ton payloads and the four-engine C-54s with their 10-ton payloads. Pilots flew their routes at predetermined speeds, checking in one after the other at successive bea-

cons, then landing in Berlin in close succession.

As the operation got under way, some members of President Harry S. Truman's National Security Council in Washington expressed concern that the hard-pressed effort might be little more than a holding action until the Allies were forced to capitulate. One who disagreed with the view was Gen. Hoyt S. Vandenberg, USAF Chief of Staff. Vandenberg forcefully challenged any "piecemeal approach," insisting that the Air Force "go in wholeheartedly" to supply the beleaguered city. "If we do," Vandenberg declared, "Berlin can be supplied."

Get the Circus Moving

Preparing for the long haul, American commanders turned to the Army Air Corps legend who had masterminded the illustrious cargo flights "over the Hump" of the Himalayas from India to China during World War II. He was Maj. Gen. William H. Tunner, deputy commander of the Atlantic Division, Military Air Transport Service, based at Westover AFB, Mass. LeMay wanted "the transportation expert to end transportation experts," and that was Tunner. LeMay summoned Tunner to orchestrate the Berlin operation, a move LeMay said was "rather like appointing John Ringling to get the circus on the road." Airlift would never be the same. Tunner, who became provisional



Charles S. Allen, now a retired colonel, takes a breather from airlift duties to pose for this shot in the midst of downtown Wiesbaden. The devastation reinforced the importance of the airlift for Berliners trying to survive similar conditions.

commander on July 29, 1948, saw the Berlin crisis as a golden opportunity to demonstrate the concept of airlift as a strategic force.

Airlift crew members quickly dubbed Tunner "Willie the Whip" because of his unrelenting demand for precision. He ordered pilots to rely on instrument procedures at all times to avoid variations due to weather or darkness. He had ground operations reassessed repeatedly to shave turnaround times. His motion study experts developed a procedure for a

12-member ground crew to load 10 tons of coal packed into 100-pound burlap bags into the cargo bay of a C-54 in six minutes. Aircraft unloading times in Berlin were cut from 17 minutes to five; turnaround times in Berlin were cut from 60 minutes to 30; refueling times at bases in West Germany were slashed from 33 to eight minutes.

Marcus C. West remembers coal-bearing trucks rolling toward his returning airplane at Fassberg even before he cut the engines.

"By the time the flight engineer had the giant rear hatch open ... the German [coal] truck would be stopping within inches of the loading hatch," recalls West, a retired Air Force colonel living in Yankeetown, Fla. Ten workers ran an oval racetrack pattern from the truck to the front of the cargo bay with bags of coal. The average turnaround time at Fassberg was 21 minutes, West says, adding, "The record for [a] turnaround was an unbelievable seven minutes."

Victor R. Kregel of Colorado Springs, Colo., a 23-year Air Force veteran who retired as a lieutenant colonel, remembers the "energetic attitude of the people who met the airplanes," adding: "It was just incredible. Berlin was starving. Whatever you had on board was whisked off. There was never any foot dragging."

When Tunner learned that arriving aircrews were leaving their aircraft on



Pfc. W.R. "Bill" Baley, here with a broom in front of his Quonset hut at Burtonwood Air Depot, UK, was one of the airmen who supported the depot's massive maintenance overhauls of aircraft that had flown 200 hours.



Maj. Gen. William H. Tunner kept the operation humming, even arranging to have snack wagons, like this one at Tempelhof, and weather briefers meet arriving aircraft so the crews did not have to waste time leaving their aircraft.

the apron at Tempelhof to head inside to the terminal for snacks and weather briefings, he ordered meals, snack trucks, and weather briefers to move out to the flight line. The same flight-line services became the pattern elsewhere.

“We operated out where the crews would come in before and after their flights,” recalls Bracewell of Jacksonville, Fla., who served as a line mess cook for the 61st Troop Carrier Group in Rhein–Main. “We served a lot of breakfast, a lot of S.O.S.”

No Beans

Bracewell, who participated in the airlift for 15 months and retired from the Air Force as a major, proudly recalls that, unlike the RAF, “we never served beans for breakfast. Eggs and hash browns—that’s what we served.”

Tunner assessed and refined his operation relentlessly.

“The actual operation of a successful airlift is about as glamorous as drops of water on stone,” Tunner wrote in his memoir. “There’s no frenzy, no flap, just the inexorable process of getting the job done.”

However, the operation needed more than just speedy ground operations. Germany’s notorious fall and winter weather loomed on the horizon. Within weeks of Tunner’s takeover, his task force launched a determined search for airfields closer to Berlin to cut down the two-hour flight times between Berlin

and the two main bases in the west, Rhein–Main and Wiesbaden. Tunner’s team first settled on the RAF base at Fassberg, from which Berlin could be reached in 55 minutes’ flying time. The first American C-54s flew out of Fassberg on Aug. 21, 1948.

At Celle, a former Luftwaffe fighter base in the UK sector, the British began building a 5,400-foot runway to enable American C-54s to use the base, as well. Tunner moved the 317th Troop Carrier Group from Wiesbaden to Celle by Christmas.

Hugh C. Kirkwood of Greenville, Maine, a former gunner on a B-25,

worked as an approach coordinator in the Celle tower. “It was the usual thing—getting blocks of aircraft off and getting aircraft rolling into final approach,” recalls Kirkwood, a 21-year USAF veteran who retired as a master sergeant. “Timing was the most essential thing. You’d be landing and launching aircraft on the same runway. Every pilot knew they had to do it right.”

In Berlin, the US airfield at Tempelhof and British airfield at Gatow were overwhelmed by stepped-up airlift operations. Tunner moved ahead with plans to build a third airfield in Berlin, to be located in the French sector to disperse the flow of aircraft.

Under the supervision of only 15 American officers and 50 enlisted men, some 17,000 German men and women transformed Hermann Goering’s former anti-aircraft training area at Tegel Forest into a working airfield in a record 92 days. Tegel AB was dedicated in November 1948. The construction team’s determination, however, failed to persuade the Russians to take down a tall radio tower that imperiled incoming aircraft on final approach.

Bill L. Cooley, who kept ground control radar up and running as chief of maintenance at Tegel, remembers that the problem was handled by a group of no-nonsense French troops.

“They were very tough people when it came to dealing with the Russians,” Cooley remembers. “No amount of



2d Lt. Charles E. Bartels, standing here at Rhein–Main, flew the airlift from July 1948 until the end. Bartels, now a retired colonel, believes he was the first aviation cadet to get his wings in the newly formed Air Force.

negotiating would get the Russians to take down that tower. I drove to work one day and saw the tower lying across a field like a broken snake. A French patrol had just gone out there with their munitions, forced the Russians to back off, and blown up the tower.”

In the fall of 1948, the Allies took other steps to prepare for the demands of onrushing winter. Five C-82 Packets joined the airlift to deliver wide-bodied cargo from Wiesbaden. The Joint Chiefs of Staff ordered Navy R-5Ds to lend a hand. On Oct. 15, American and British efforts were combined under a single joint command. Tunner commanded the operation backed by RAF Air Commodore John W.F. Merer as his deputy.

From Montana to Berlin

Preparations for a lengthy operation



With little margin for error and only one shot at landing, aircrews had to be on the mark. Here, a C-54 carrying coal overshoots the runway at Tempelhof and crashes into a fence, then bursts into flames. Its crew managed to escape.



The often poor visibility at Tempelhof led the Air Force to install a high-intensity lighting system. Two parallel rows of 20 lights each mark the 3,000-foot approach as yet another C-54 makes its landing.

greatly increased the demand for C-54 pilots. The US air base at Great Falls, Mont., was opened. Many World War II pilots transitioned to the four-engine workhorse using mock air corridors, which were laid out across Montana’s landscape to simulate the approach to Berlin.

West, like so many others, swept through the fast-paced ground school and flew 21 hours aboard C-54s to transition into the aircraft as a copilot before shipping out to Germany.

With enough C-54 pilots coming into

the pipeline, the last of the USAFE C-47s were replaced with C-54s, clearing the way for a steadily expanding US effort in the face of fast deteriorating weather. The last C-47s were withdrawn from the operation in late September 1948. By Jan. 15, 1949, 249 US aircraft were in operation—225 Air Force C-54s and 24 Navy R-5Ds. The British flew 147 airplanes.

Tunner’s attention to detail left nothing to chance. He boosted from 308 to 570 the number of weathermen assigned to the operation, a move that enabled

the airlifters to continue operating in some of the most unpredictable, fast-changing weather found anywhere on Earth. Crewmen on every seventh C-54 reported weather conditions at four points along the way.

“Weather was extremely tough,” says Paul W. Eckley Jr., a retired Air Force lieutenant colonel living in Clearwater, Fla. “But when you’re flying two missions a day in the same aircraft, you got yourself to a degree of professionalism where the weather didn’t really bother you. You gave your full attention to ground control and you just flew the airplane. You didn’t even have to look out the window.”

Harris, working in the air traffic control center in Berlin, remembers traffic controllers’ nagging concern. “When we had bad weather, ... we always had to worry about the planes’ fuel situation,” Harris recalls. They had all sacrificed fuel for payload and they couldn’t hold long. “If it got too tight, you’d have to send them back.”

Hey, Macaroni

Winter icing nearly cost the life of Howard S. “Sam” Myers Jr., of Riverside, Calif. On a flight from Rhein–Main to Tempelhof on a “miserable, cold, snowy night” in early winter, Myers was flying at 7,000 feet in a closely packed block of Berlin-bound C-47s. Ice had accumulated on his wings and was choking his engines’ carburetors.



Poor weather was no deterrent to the airlift, only slowing the furious pace somewhat. Workhorse C-54s receive a load at Wiesbaden despite the snow.

Myers was forced to feather his right engine propeller in hopes of maintaining speed and altitude to avoid colliding with nearby C-47s in his block. But he started to lag. The quick-thinking pilot directed his copilot to crawl back through the loosely wrapped containers to jettison cargo. Myers regained airspeed and altitude.

Said Myers: "I often wondered what people on the ground over Soviet-controlled East Germany must have thought as over 4,000 pounds of macaroni came raining out of the sky on that cold winter night."

Flying "through the soup" to Berlin became so routine by late 1948 that many flight crews began to relax. Lafferty and his crew were confident enough to tune into the Army-Navy football game on the radio, relayed from Wiesbaden. He checked in at each way point as required. As he neared Berlin, he radioed Gatow tower. The control tower operator calmly told Lafferty to fly his C-54 almost due west on a course of 280 degrees.

Lafferty flew for about 20 minutes before coming over the glow of city lights. He figured the lights were Berlin until he crossed an airfield bristling with "umpteen Yak fighters."

"I had no idea where we were," Lafferty says now. "It took us another 40 minutes to get to Berlin. We were 100 miles off course and I still don't know if it was a magnetic anomaly, wind, or



The British dubbed their portion of the airlift Operation Plainfare. Here, an Avro York airlifter, which with the Dakotas was the primary transport used by UK aircrews, drops off a load at Gatow, the British airfield in Berlin.

just plain stupidity."

McLaughlin, who flew 196 round-trips to Berlin, was flying a C-47 designated "Willie One" in a westbound block from Tempelhof to Wiesbaden when he heard a Wiesbaden controller clear another C-47 to hold at the same altitude over the same beacon.

"I chopped all power, slammed the nose down, and caught a glimpse of 'Willie Six' as he passed about 20 feet overhead," McLaughlin recalls.

"My God," gasped the Wiesbaden controller. "I forgot Willie One."

McLaughlin landed safely. "The

controller in question was a good friend of mine," McLaughlin says. "But we had a few words that evening—over a martini."

Tunner's emphasis on all-weather operations put a premium on Ground Control Approach operators like Joseph G. Haluska, a 20-year-old GCA final approach controller at Wiesbaden.

"On an eight-hour shift, I would talk down three blocks of 28 C-54s, roughly one a minute," Haluska recalls. "The weather was zero-zero and after landing, a cleat tractor would have to tow the aircraft to the loading zone because the pilot couldn't see the lights on the taxi strips."

Young GCA operators became unsung heroes. McLaughlin, the veteran pilot, fondly recalls the teams he worked

with. "If there were any published minimums, I've forgotten what they may have been," says McLaughlin. "GCA brought us all the way in until we either broke out [of the weather]—or ran out of guts."

Dvorak, the wing technical inspection officer for his C-54 troop carrier group based at Fassberg, still voices gratitude for their work. "We'd be flying through soup all the way, under ground control," Dvorak recalls. "We'd drop down and break out at just a couple of hundred feet, and we'd be looking right into apartments on both

sides of the runway at Tempelhof. The GCA operator would bring you in. You'd be maybe a foot and a half off the centerline of the runway, and the GCA operator would come up to you and say, 'Sorry, we'll do a better job next time.' They were incredible."

High Incentive

Pilots knew they got only one shot at landing, no matter what the weather. "You'd come down out of the weather between the buildings, with blocks of airplanes coming in right behind you, staggered in altitude or distance," recalls Kregel. "If you missed the approach, you couldn't get back into the landing pattern. You'd have to go back loaded. That made every pilot really keen to land, even in really severe weather conditions."

Within eight months, American aircraft had completed 36,797 Ground Control Approach landings on the Berlin Airlift.

Weather was hardly the only challenge. Aircrews remained ever alert to Soviet dirty tricks and harassment—everything from tampering with radio beams and firing flak to blinding aircrews with powerful searchlights. Cooley, of Miami, Fla., recalls seeing four Russian MiG-15s trying to force a C-54 to land in Soviet-controlled territory.

"They caught him on the fly and tried to make him land, but the pilot refused," Cooley recalls. "The C-54 flew

At the start, duty and maintenance schedules kept 65 percent of USAF aircraft airborne each day. Pilots, like now-retired Lt. Col. Ivan Glasscock, shown here in his C-54 cockpit, flew in blocks to overcome the differences in speed between the twin-engine C-47s and the four-engine C-54s. The pilots flew at predetermined speeds, checking beacons en route, then landed in close succession.



over Tempelhof so everyone could see it. The MiGs were just feet from the aircraft, but he landed it anyway. The MiGs made a very low pass—maybe 10 feet above the transport as it rolled down the runway."

Eckley said he may have been drawn off course by Russians bending the

beams of navigation beacons. He was heading down the corridor to Gatow when Berlin control told him to pick up a compass heading that was 45 degrees off his normal course. "We had drifted far out of the corridor," says Eckley, who served 24 years in the Air Force. "Controllers quickly put us back into the middle of the corridor. But we never got a clear understanding of whether the Russians had screwed up the compass headings in the plane to force us out of the corridor."

Charles E. Minihan of Ingram, Texas, who retired from the Air Force as a colonel with 28 years' service, remembers constant problems. "They'd play music, polkas, that sort of thing—anything to make it hard to navigate," recalls Minihan.

The US took countermeasures. Authorities believed they limited the extent of Soviet harassment with an early decision to move 90 B-29 bombers in to send a none-too-subtle signal for Moscow to restrain itself.

Kregel, who served with the Airways and Air Communications Service based in Wiesbaden, handled the specially



Two Texans, Howard Fish and Jamie Tom, met and married in Berlin in May 1948. Fish, now a retired lieutenant general, was a statistical control officer in Berlin when he flew in the airlift. His wife was a civilian working in Berlin.



The greatest humanitarian airlift in history delivered 2.3 million tons of supplies to three Berlin airfields conducting 24-hour operations within 10 miles of each other. Here, a USAF aircraft makes its final approach to Tempelhof during Operation Vittles.

equipped C-47s that flew up and down the corridor to make sure that each radio range leg was where it was supposed to be.

Kregel, who later served as president and chairman of the board of the Air Force Association, remembers that there was constant concern that the Russians might “put up a transmitter to bend the radio beams that we were using for navigation to lure the flock out of the corridor and subject the planes to interception or destruction.”

The Best Place To Be

Pilots could often see MiGs patrolling outside the corridor, Kregel says, adding: “We always tried to be sure that we were in the center of the corridor.”

Minihan, working in MATS headquarters, was assigned to get state-of-the-art navigation aids over to Germany to combat Russian efforts to jam the airlift’s low frequency radio beacons.

“I brought over some VHF nav systems that were just beginning to see the light of day,” recalls Minihan. He tracked down some radar surveillance pods that had been used by the Marine Corps as part of a night fighter attack system and got them installed on a few C-54s. The radar return enabled flight crews to pinpoint their location. “We sort of played the Russian game with them and beat them at it,” recalls Minihan.

USAF officials counted 733 incidents of harassment along the air corridors and in Berlin. These included 103 cases where searchlights were directed at pilots in an effort to confuse them, 173 incidents in which Russian airplanes either buzzed transports or flew too

close, and 123 cases in which transports were subjected to flak, air-to-air fire, or ground artillery fire.

Maintenance remained a top priority—and a constant worry.

Gerald A. Leen of Silverdale, Wash., who handled supply and maintenance duties at Tempelhof when the airlift began, specialized in quick repairs. “Any airplane that needed something fixed to continue its mission, we handled that in Berlin,” recalls Leen, who retired from the Air Force as a colonel after 27 years of duty. “My team took care of all the turnaround maintenance.”

Mechanics worked at the squadron level to handle the 50-hour and 150-hour checks, putting in three shifts of 12 hours on and 24 hours off. The rotation sped maintenance, cutting in half the time it took to get the aircraft back into the operation.

L.W. “Corky” Colgrove, of Fort Lupton, Colo., was fresh out of mechanic’s school when he arrived at Rhein–Main two weeks into the airlift. The young mechanic plunged into duty, maintaining hard-pressed aircraft, before shifting to maintenance chores on the airlift’s

1948

- March 20:** Soviets walk out of Allied Control Council.
- April 1:** Soviets impose rail and road restrictions on Allied traffic from western zones to Berlin.
- June 11:** Soviets halt rail traffic between Berlin and West Germany for two days.
- June 12:** Highway bridge on road to Berlin closed “for repairs.”
- June 16:** Soviets walk out of Allied Commandatura.
- June 24:** Soviets, at Stalin’s order, halt all surface traffic into Berlin and cut electricity to the city.
- June 26:** Allies launch Operation Vittles as C-47 aircraft bring 80 tons of supplies into city on first day.
- July 16:** US and Britain announce that 60 USAF B-29 bombers will temporarily beddown at UK bases. The first group of 30 B-29s lands on July 17.
- Oct. 15:** Maj. Gen. William H. Tunner assumes command of newly created Combined Airlift Task Force for airlift.
- Dec. 31:** Allies notch Berlin Airlift’s 100,000th flight.

1949

- March 4:** Amount of cargo hauled during Berlin Airlift hits one million tons.
- April 16:** Airlift “Easter Parade” breaks all tonnage records by lifting 12,940 tons of food and coal to Berlin in 24 hours.
- May 12:** Moscow lifts blockade after 328 days. Airlift continues but undergoes gradual reduction.
- July 30:** US and Britain announce plans to phase out Berlin Airlift.
- Sept. 30:** Berlin Airlift officially ends after 277,000 flights and 2.3 million tons of cargo, of which 1.7 million tons were hauled by US aircraft.

lone long-haul C-74, with its 25-ton payload. Colgrove quickly moved up to become the crew chief for the C-74 that completed 24 deliveries into Berlin with a total cargo of almost 429 tons.

For more comprehensive maintenance, airlift aircraft were dispatched to Burtonwood Air Depot in England after 200 hours of flight operations. The maintenance facility opened on Nov. 2, 1948, but it got off to a rocky start.

Retired Air Force SMSgt. Paul J. Gurchick of Tampa, Fla., who began work at Burtonwood two months before full-scale maintenance operations began, says it took maintenance crews three days to complete a 200-hour inspection on the first C-54. By the end of the airlift, five hangars were in full operation, completing nose-to-tail maintenance on five airplanes a day.

Goopy Mix

Gurchick, a veteran of 28 years of Air Force service, repaired all the communications and navigation gear. The four-channel, push-button VHF radio sets proved to be the toughest to maintain due to the ever present damp and dust from coal and flour. Gurchick still remembers the goopy mix of coal dust and hydraulic fluid that complicated his repairs.

Aircrews were so busy, flying two or three missions a day, that few ever saw the Berliners they were feeding. Ford M. Garvin, who worked at Celle setting



The number of flights and tons just kept climbing higher—to keep track airlift participants updated this “howgozit” board hourly at Fassberg, the RAF base used by US airmen during the airlift.

up the briefing system for aircrews, says the Berlin assignment was demanding on everyone. “Thirteen hours on, 11 hours off, seven days a week,” recalls Garvin of Melbourne, Fla. “It was six months before I got a day off. But still it was the best military operation that I’ve ever been a part of. It had precision. It worked.”

West, who flew out of Fassberg, remembers flying two weeks straight in one 12-hour time slot, taking three days off, and then changing shifts to fly two weeks straight in a shift that began eight hours later.

Aircrews grabbed shut-eye whenever they could. At Fassberg, many personnel bunked in three story, red-brick buildings that unfortunately had the acoustics of an echo chamber. Practical jokers awakened many comrades with stunts such as tossing the large cylindrical fire extinguishers from the head of each stairwell down the steel steps, sending a shotgun-like clatter through the buildings.

“It seemed as if I were tired all the time,” West recalls, “and I tried to spend most of my free hours trying to get some rest.”

That was not the case for Gail S. Halvorsen, then an inquisitive first lieutenant. “I wanted to see where we were landing,” recalls Halvorsen of Provo, Utah. “I wanted to see Berlin.”

After finishing his share of round-trips from Rhein-Main to Berlin one day in mid-July 1948, Halvorsen grabbed his camera and hitched an aircraft ride back to Berlin. Once at Tempelhof, the Utah State ROTC graduate made his way to the base perimeter, where he encountered about 30 children aged 8 to 14. Not one pestered or begged Halvorsen for candy or gum, the tokens of affection that so many German children had come to expect from GIs in World War II.

“Don’t worry about us,” the kids told Halvorsen in broken English. “Just give us a little to eat for now and someday we’ll have enough.”



A vital part of the operation were air traffic controllers like Cletus W. Whitaker, now a retired senior master sergeant. Here, Whitaker stands in the doorway of his low frequency beacon on wheels, parked at Braunschweig, Germany.



What began as a simple gesture by 1st Lt. Gail S. Halvorsen to a few Berlin children blossomed into a widespread effort known as Operation Little Vittles. Ultimately, the airlift's candy bombers dropped 23 tons of candy over Berlin.

The Candy Bomber

Halvorsen was so touched by their sentiment that he dug into his pocket for his last two pieces of Wrigley's Doublemint gum. He promised to surprise them on his next run the next day.

"How will we know it's you?" the boisterous kids asked Halvorsen.

"When I come over the beacon, I'll wiggle my wings. Watch that plane and get ready," Halvorsen replied.

On his next flight, Halvorsen pushed three tiny packs of candy and gum attached to handkerchief "parachutes" out the flare chute behind the pilot's seat on his C-54.

The simple gesture sparked the spirits of Berliners on the ground and the imaginations of Americans back home. Halvorsen's one-man airlift won the endorsement of Air Force superiors. Candy collection points were set up in Europe and the United States. Special flights were arranged for Halvorsen to circle the city to drop candy.

Americans donated thousands of pounds of candy and handkerchiefs and other pieces of scrap cloth to sustain what became known as "Operation

Little Vittles." By the spring of 1949, the "candy bombers" rained candy-bearing parachutes down upon a picnic for thousands of Berlin children that had been arranged at Peacock Island in Lake Hegel by the airlift detachment at Tempelhof. All told, the pilots eventually dropped 23 tons of candy.

By the midpoint of the winter of 1948-49, USAF had proved that the Allies could sustain Berlin indefinitely. On Jan. 17, 1949, the airlift set a weekly delivery record of 41,540 tons of cargo. Two days later, Allied authorities boosted the daily food ration in West Berlin from 1,600 calories to 1,880 calories. On Feb. 18, airlifters landed the one millionth ton in Berlin—potatoes aboard a British York aircraft.

Day after day, week after week, cargo volume soared and delivery records tumbled as airlift operations reached a crescendo. On April 6, GCA crews at Tempelhof landed one airplane every four

minutes over six hours, setting a record for sustained high tempo operations.

A Fassberg-based C-54 completed the round trip to Berlin in one hour, 57 minutes, with ground turnaround time of 15 minutes, 30 seconds.

Tunner, ever the master of milestones and competition, mustered airlifters for an "Easter Parade" into Berlin.

Aircrews met the challenge to set a record, ferrying 12,940 tons of cargo into Berlin aboard 1,398 inbound flights over a 24-hour period on April 16, 1949. The pace of operations—2,796 takeoffs and landings in the 1,440 minutes over a 24-hour period—meant that an aircraft was landing or taking off every 30 seconds, day and night. The Allies had delivered enough coal over the 24-hour period to fill 1,100 rail cars.

It's All Over

"It was that day, that Easter Sunday, that broke the back of the Berlin Blockade," Tunner recalled. "From then on we never fell below 9,000 tons a day. The land blockade was pointless."

Nine days later, the Soviets' official news agency, Tass, signaled that the Kremlin was willing to lift the blockade. Allied negotiators concluded an agreement with the Russians on May 4 to lift the blockade on May 12.

The Allies kept up deliveries, waiting until July 30, 1949, to announce a target date for ending airlift deliveries. Phase out operations began in earnest.

The Celle-based 317th Troop Carrier Group flew its final mission into Berlin on July 31, 1949. C-54s began leaving Rhein-Main for the United States in early August. By August's end, the Fassberg-based 313th Troop Carrier Group had completed its last mission into Berlin.

The Allies commemorated their losses in late September with a memorial service at Camp Lindsey for the 77 men killed during the airlift—including 31 Americans. Authorities counted 126 aircraft accidents, including one midair collision.

One of the casualties was Dvorak's poker pal.

Stewart M. Powell, White House correspondent for Hearst Newspapers, has covered national and international affairs for 28 years, based in the US and abroad. His most recent article for Air Force Magazine, "Nuclear Arms Reductions Roll On," appeared in the December 1996 issue.

“Berlin seemed easy after World War II,” recalls Dvorak of Lakewood, Colo. He had fought Japanese attackers at Hickam Field on Dec. 7, 1941. He had flown 76 bomber escort missions out of England in a P-38 as well as having flown air cover over the beaches of Normandy on D-Day in 1944.

“An aircraft went in at Fassberg about 3 a.m. one night, and as a member of the crash rescue team, I had to go out to try to find out what went wrong,” Dvorak recalls. “As I approached the crash site, it was dark, it smelled from fuel, and here comes the flight surgeon with remains. I saw the cadet ring on my poker buddy’s hand. We’d played poker that night. I’d been in a lot of combat and it never bothered me. But that did.”

When the airlift finally ended on Sept. 30, 1949, after 15 months, it was almost anticlimactic.

“The dramatic moment came when the Soviets announced that they were raising the blockade,” recalls Fish. “That’s when we knew we had won.”

But the stunning operation had not only saved a city. It had left an indelible mark on the Air Force, on Cold War relations with the Kremlin, and on men and women touched by the operation.

Vandenberg, the Air Force Chief of Staff, said that the Berlin Airlift enabled the fledgling Air Force to demonstrate the “ability to make airpower a true force for peace.”

W. Phillips Davison concluded in



After Moscow lifted the blockade, celebrations, like this one by a US Navy squadron for an R-5D crew on its return from Berlin, were standard. It would be another four months before the Western Allies officially stopped all flights.

his assessment *The Berlin Blockade* that the airlift had “changed people’s attitudes toward the Western powers, raised their esteem for Western strength, and reassured those who were anxious.” The airlift had fostered a “feeling of partnership” that lasted for a generation.

For many veterans of the experience, the rewards were far more personal.

Halvorsen, whose “Candy Bomber” had inspired Americans and Berliners alike, cherishes the fact that the operation “cemented Americans’ relations with Germans,” adding: “By working to save people’s lives, we changed world

opinion. I feel certain that history would be markedly different if we’d gone to war over Berlin.”

West remembers his Berlin days fondly. “Of all the sometimes exciting, other times routine, and a few dangerous events I was to experience throughout my military career, except possibly for the thrill of picking up fliers down behind enemy lines during the Korean War, the Berlin Airlift gave me the greatest sense of accomplishment.”

Hoyt of Lilburn, Ga., a B-17 crew member in World War II who returned to active duty to help set up control tower operations at the British base at Celle, found that delivering food to starving Berliners offset any regrets about the wartime necessity of bombing Nazi Germany.

“I had flown 38 bombing missions for a good purpose during the war,” Hoyt recalls. “But when this situation cropped up, it was another ball game, a real turnaround from the war. There was a complete feeling of cooperation and rapport. As I think back on it, this was really the highlight of my career.”

Hoyt met Elfriede, his wife-to-be, while on duty at Celle. She and her family had fled from eastern Germany to Celle ahead of onrushing Soviet troops at the end of World War II. The couple got married in Frankfurt at the end of the airlift. The mayor of Frankfurt presided.

“We have good memories of those days,” Hoyt says. ■



Rhein–Main AB was a picture of organized pandemonium when it served as a transport terminal point during Operation Vittles. The C-47s and C-54s were scattered throughout the field along with field tents and sundry equipment.