A most venerable centenarian

Today, the name Gail Halvorsen probably rings a bell with only a few people. Perhaps some elderly Berlin citizens who lived through the immediate postwar years and the beginning of the Cold War will remember him, but for most the deeds of this flying gentleman has likely been confined to the history books.

Gail Halvorsen in his senior years, still going strong.

Celebrating his first century on this planet today, Commander Gail Seymour Halvorsen was born October 10, 1920 in Salt Lake City as the son of Luella and Basil Knud Halvorsen.[1] He was raised in the Mormon faith on a small farm in Tremonton, Utah, during the Great Depression of the 1930ties. Life was tough in those days and he grew up in modest surroundings on farms in Utah and Idaho.

Halvorsen had no taste for a farmer's life though. In a 2009 interview he recalled, how he as a boy and a young man watched the planes soar over the family farm and how he, while working 10 hours a day with the backbreaking labor of thinning sugar beets, longed for some day to be at the controls. The year was 1939, Halvorsen was nineteen and a demand for more civilian pilots in anticipation of war came to his rescue. The Federal Aviation Administration set up non-college programs in aviation, and, in competition with 120 others, he won a scholarship for one of the 10 openings available.

In September 1941, at the tender age of 21, he acquired his license as a private pilot and was accepted into a military pilot-training program. Prompted by the 1941 Japanese attack on the US naval base of Pearl Harbor in December, he joined the forerunner to the US Air Force; the Army Air Corps. Here he received fighter pilot training, partly with the British Royal Air Force, but eventually switched to transport planes.[2]

Halvorsen began active duty in March 1943 and spent the remainder of the war flying the C47 Skytrain and the C54 Skymaster to South America, ferrying cargo and airplanes to U.S. bases.

After the war, Halvorsen was seriously considering leaving the Army, seeking opportunities with the Western Auto Company to become a franchise dealer in auto parts, but, as it happened more than once in Halvorsen's life, fate intervened.

The Second World War may have come to an end, but in Europe hostility between former Allies was on the rise.

"Whoever controls Berlin controls Germany. Whoever controls Germany controls Europe."

Vladimir Lenin [1870-1925]

>> Shortly after 1 o'clock this morning the Soviet military administration for Germany announced that all railway traffic on the line between Berlin and Helmstedt had stopped in both directions. The Soviet authorities have also given instructions to the Berlin electricity company that deliveries of current from the eastern to the western sectors are to be stopped immediately. These measures followed the announcement yesterday that the three Western powers intend to introduce the new West German currency into their sectors of Berlin.

The instructions for stoppage of this important railway traffic which, air traffic apart, is the only means by which Allied and German supplies can now be brought from the Western zones into Berlin means that Allied zones of the city are essentially isolated <<

Times of London, June 24, 1948

Victorious Soviet soldiers in a Berlin street; just one of many more or less spontaneous parades following the surrender of the city's garrison in May 1945.

The Red Army had captured the German capital without help from the Allied armies [apart from the air war] and it had cost them staggering casualties. Postwar, Germany had been divided into four occupation zones, each to be governed by one of the four powers; USA, Britain, France and the Soviet Union. Berlin lay deep inside the Soviet zone, and although the city was itself divided in the same fashion with a sector under the auspices of each victorious nation, the Soviets made it no secret that they considered Berlin their legal tenure by virtue of conquest.

Agreements had been reached on top level at the end of the war. The 'big three'; Roosevelt, Churchill and Stalin met; first in Teheran, then Yalta and finally in Potsdam[3], trying to agree on how to cut the cake and reorganize the nations of Europe postwar, liberated from years of Nazi rule and largely in ruins, physically as well as politically and ideologically. The fruit of their

deliberations was expressed in the 'Potsdam Treaty'[4], but discord among the victors as exactly how to interpret and implement this soon became apparent.

"What is mine is mine; what is yours is negotiable!"

During the early stages of the Potsdam conference, Churchill realized that this stance would be the Soviet approach to the question of Berlin and had warned the inexperienced American president, who had held the office only since Roosevelt's death in April [and the Vice Presidency for just 82 days prior to that], of the possible troubles ahead, but in vain. As one contemporary put it, Harry Trumann, up to this point sidelined by Roosevelt and not involved in international politics, seemed to *"suddenly find himself in a shoot-out, when all he had expected was a sing-along"*.

Making matters worse, Churchill himself had been deposed after the July 5 election, leaving his seat at Potsdam to mild-mannered Clement Attlee,[5] a socialist who sought warm relations to Stalin, and, putting his faith in the prowess of the newly formed United Nations [October 25, 1945], refused to see or acknowledge the looming Soviet quest for world domination.

These two well-meaning but rather naïve gentlemen, novices in the ways of the world outside their own countries, were no match for Uncle Joe.

Potsdam 1945. The body language of Clement Attlee [left] almost says it all.

To coordinate the work within Berlin city boundaries, a body named the 'Kommandatura', had been set up, responsible for the joint administration of the metropolis. Although all of this had been agreed upon by all parties, including that each of the four powers were to have an equal voice in this coordinating body, the presence of former comrades-in-arms within the city they regarded as theirs, clearly vexed the Russians and the meetings soon attained the nature of verbal fist-fights.

At this point in time, the Russians were busy dismantling and transporting back to Russia as much of German machinery and removable infrastructure as they could lay their hands on; their focus was on reparations and not on the economic revival of Germany, agreed upon and sought by the Western Allies.[6]

Finding their Soviet counterpart inflexible and unable – or unwilling – to agree to even modest steps to stabilize the disastrous German economy, USA, Britain and France began to plan for what would eventually become West Germany and to take steps to combat the flourishing Black Market and the crime that it spurred, switching currency to the 'Deutsche Mark' in June.

The 'Reichmark', introduced in Germany in the 1920ties, had postwar lost its credibility and eventually devaluated to a point where it was largely replaced with cigarettes as the de facto currency for shopping and bartering.

"I see no sense in continuing this meeting and declare it adjourned."

Marshal Vasily Sokolovsky

The tensions culminated in March 1948, when the Soviets learned of the Western plans for a currency reform to combat the Black Market. The words of Marshal Sokolovsky rang out as he led his delegation in a walk-out from the Allied Control Councils meeting, thus effectively ending four-power government in Germany.

The very day the new currency was introduced throughout the Western sectors, the Soviets responded by closing traffic on the freeway to Berlin and on the railroad traffic, due to 'technical difficulties'. It constituted a major blow to the supply situation in West Berlin.

The postwar carving up of Germany with the three air lanes to Berlin.

In order to be able to supply the westerns sectors of Berlin, the Allied relied on access-rights through the Soviet zone; by road, by river barges, by rail, and via three air corridors, serviced from airfields in the west. Unfortunately, the right of access over land was never specified in the treaty, it was merely a verbal promise Soviet Marshal Zhukov had made to American General Clay, and, as it was soon to be demonstrated, the Soviets saw it not as a right but as a privilege, which they could grant or deny at will.

The humble start of what would become the famous Berlin Airlift took place almost immediately with General Clay phoning the chief of the 8th Air Force, General Curtis Le May, asking him whether he had the capacity to deliver coal and food supplies to Berlin. Le May, as always, was brief and to the point:

“The Air Force can deliver anything, anytime, anywhere”

One major logistic problem though was that the predominant aerial workhorse in postwar Europe was the trusty, but moderate in capacity C47 Skytrain. Capable of lifting a modest three tons of cargo, the joint capacity of planes immediately available was a far cry from the estimated 4500 tons, regarded as a daily minimum for Berlin’s survival. Many of the aircraft were D-day veterans, still carrying the three white stripes on fuselage and wings that should protect them from friendly fire.

There was no lack of advisors in President Truman’s pointing out the difficulties and inherent dangers in General Clay’s initiative and advocating that abandoning Berlin altogether was a option that had to be seriously

considered. Truman, however, probably now realizing that he had been bamboozled by Stalin, was adamant.

"We stay in Berlin. Period!"

U.S. President Harry Truman

Thus the stage was set for the biggest air lift in history. In the months to come, Operation Vittles[7] as the Americans called it (in Britain it was codenamed Plainfare) would gain momentum.

Returning to Gail Halvorsen; in 1948 he was ordered[8] to Germany, among those selected to crew four C-54s that would fly immediately to Rhein-Main Air Base near Frankfurt, West Germany.

The day after his arrival, he took his first of many 280-mile flights from Rhein-Main to Tempelhof Airport in West Berlin carrying 138 sacks of flour for the hungry Berliners.

Potsdamer Platz area,1945. Just one house in this photo has survived until today.

"As we looked down right over Berlin, it just took our breath away…"

The sight of devastated Berlin from the air shocked Halvorsen and his crew. From above the city looked barely habitable, but there would little time to ponder the ravages of war in the months to come:

"Planes were scheduled to land at three-minute intervals, but there were times at peak periods over the next eleven months when they were arriving

every ninety seconds. Tempelhof, in the American Sector, was a nightmare for pilots coming in to land in poor visibility, as they often had to. It was no easy job for them even when weather conditions were satisfactory. The airfield was little more than a grass patch situated right in the middle of the city, in a clearing surrounded by buildings and bombed-out ruins. Pilots would bring their heavily-loaded, giant Skymasters down low over the top of an apartment building and there they suddenly were, at Tempelhof, quickly levelling off and hoping not to overrun the runway, which they sometimes did. Even years later, when the pressure was off and the weather was fine and the airliner you arrived in was not hauling ten tons of coal, landing at Tempelhof was hardly a relaxing experience, for passenger or pilot."

Norman Gelb; 'The Berlin Wall', p.31

Halvorsen was thus now part of the increasing batch of airmen, struggling to supply the starving and freezing German capital with everything from flour, canned food and condensed milk to coal and gasoline, but his life was about to take another unexpected turn.

Onkel Wackelflügel

The story of the Candy Pilot is well-known to most; albeit off-time was sparse and primarily required for sleep [pilots flew up to three sorties a day], Halvorsen found time to roam the Tempelhof area, shooting with his 16 mm film camera. One day he came upon a group of children squeezed tightly against the perimeter fence as they in visible awe watched the endless stream of planes, landing and taking off with minutes' interval.

At Tempelhof Airport, kids and grown-ups are watching the approach of numerous airplanes carrying supplies to the city.

Halvorsen approached the group and a conversation in broken German and schoolbook English ensued. The maturity of the children, aged 8 to 14, struck the good Mormon, as they expressed their gratitude to the pilots

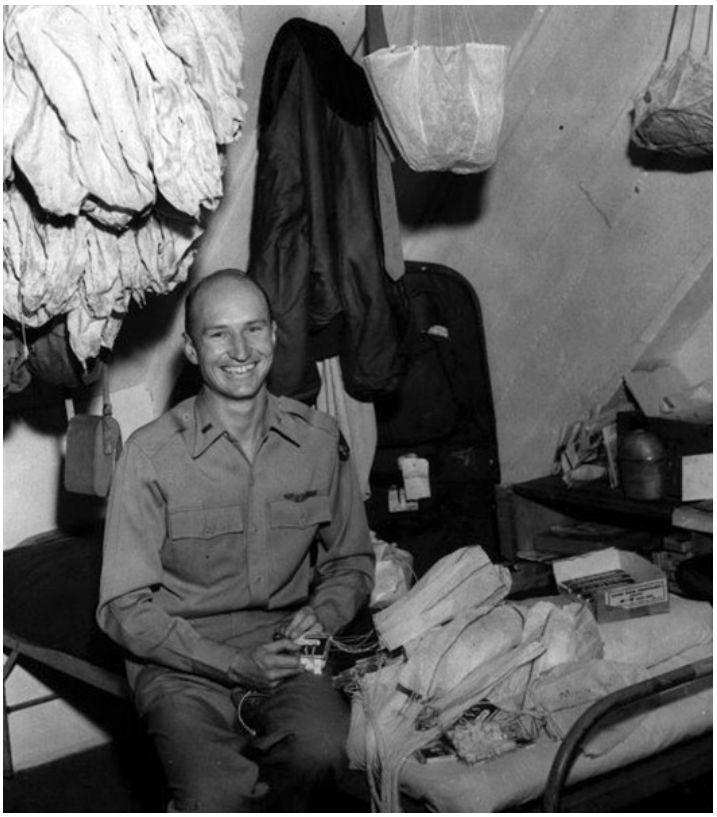
bringing in food and coal, and wished for nothing more than it would continue, and that the former enemies would not leave Berlin in the lurch.

Having nothing more in his pockets than a few sticks of chewing gum to regale them with, Halvorsen distributed it and was again moved as he observed that no fighting broke out over the goodies. He promised them that he would bring more sweets on his next tour into Berlin and drop it from the cockpit as he approached for landing.

"I got five steps away from them, and then it hit me," said Halvorsen, "I'd been dead stopped for an hour, and not one kid had put out their hand. Not one. The contrast was so stark because during World War II and all the way back to George Washington, if you were in an American uniform walking down the street, kids would chase you and ask for chocolate and gum. The reason they didn't was they were so grateful to our fliers to be free. They wouldn't be a beggar for more than freedom. That was the trigger. Scrooge would've done the same thing. I reached into my pocket, but all I had were two sticks of gum. Right then, the smallest decision I made changed the rest of my life."

Commander Halvorsen in a 2009 interview

Thus, the legend of the Candy Pilot, or 'Rosinenbomber' as German media dubbed it, was born - in all modesty by one man taking pity on some children. True to his word, Halvorson persuaded his crew to give up their rations of sweets; made parachutes out of handkerchiefs and dutifully dropped them when the kids came into his sight. He identified himself by wiggling his wings at approach, as he had agreed with his joyfully excited audience, thus earning the 'Wackelflügel' [wiggly wings] nickname.



Gail Halvorsen on his cot, attaching parachutes to candy bars.

Halvorsen knew that his actions were not entirely in line with military regulations and that they would not go undetected forever. True; on one sortie a Berlin reporter was apparently hit on the head by a stray Hershey Bar and a cameraman got a photo of Halvorsen's plane and its insignia. The next morning the enterprising pilot stood tall before the man.

Consequences could have been dire, but some genius in the general's staff had quickly seen the propaganda potential in Halvorsen's doings, and far from being reprimanded, the lieutenant got the go-ahead to organize 'Operation Little Vittles' on an industrial scale and eventually, dozens of pilots and crews were involved.

Had the military been quick to grasp the publicity value, the marketing value was soon appreciated by American manufacturers of sweets - and of linen for the small parachutes. Soon truckloads of candy arrived at Halvorsen's base in Saxony; neatly packed in bundles and supplied with chutes by American school children; everyone wanted a piece of the action.

And the Berlin children? They wrote letters of gratitude to Onkel Wackelflügel – and requested air drops on specific locations, close to their homes. One little girl wrote; "Close to where you see the white chickens!" Halvorsen wrote back to many of them and sent them some sweets.

"Hitler's past and Stalin's future was their nightmare.
American-style freedom was their dream."

Although this statement from Halvorsen, allegedly derived from his first conversation with the children, may in truth have been conceived at the desk of some propaganda officer, it probably quite accurately reflects the sentiments among West Berliners in those hectic days where their future hang in the balance.

The airlift continued to grow in tonnage, soon exceeding to original target of 4500 tons a day. After some eleven months, the Soviet leadership realized that the blockade wasn't working; on the contrary it was just galvanizing West-Berliners resolve to stay off Soviet control. The Allied seemed determined on – and capable of – continuing the supply of Berlin by air indefinitely, if so required, and the whole shebang only made the Soviet Union look bad in the eyes of the world.

In April 1949, having experienced the determination of Berliners and the Allied alike, the Soviet finally budged. They announced their willingness to 'discuss' the situation and negotiations were resumed, ending in agreement on May 4, that the blockade would be lifter one week later. Thus, on May 12, one minute after midnight the trains and lorries were running again.

Man Proposes, God Disposes

The story of the Candy Pilot does not end with Little Vittles. Returning home to a hero's welcome in January 1949, some four months before the Soviet blockade ended, he proposed to his sweetheart Alta Jolly and got a "Yes". With family responsibilities to consider, he once again mulled over leaving military service and enter the business world, but the Air Force

thought otherwise and offered him a permanent commission – and an opportunity to frequent the university. Halvorsen also said "Yes!"

The one-time farmers' boy would eventually leave the University of Florida with two aeronautical engineering degrees, starting out with aircraft design – cargo planes, not surprisingly – and ending up in the space program, working with launch vehicles and reusable spacecrafts. In 1969 he made Colonel and headed the satellite-tracking department at Vandenberg Air Force Base in California, where he and Alta Jolly had settled down to raise their children.

That same year, the twentieth anniversary of the Airlift, a reenacting was planned in Berlin (this was only eight years after the erection of the infamous Wall) at the annual 'Open House' arrangement at Tempelhof. Halvorsen got a call from the Pentagon; would he come? The Candy Bomber happily obliged, once again flying over the airport, dropping candy, and later met with some of the 'children', now themselves parents bringing their own children to see the flying legend.

Later that evening he dined with the base commander, Colonel Clark A. Tate. The two men got along well, compared careers and joked about how none of them wanted the others job, but again fate intervened!

Return of the Jedi

Shortly after Colonel Tate fell ill, and the Pentagon, who thought Halvorsen had done a great job so far, felt that he was just the man for the post as Commander at Tempelhof. By 1970 he was back in Berlin, bringing his family, where they would stay for four years.

Welcomed by the international community of expats, living in West Berlin, and embraced by native Berliners in particular, the Halvorsens' made many friends and stayed longer than planned. When they left in 1974, he was the longest serving postwar US base commander in Europe.

Today he can call himself a centenarian. One must assume his flying days are over, but he can look back with pride on a long and productive life.

2022: Commander Halvorsen passed away peacefully on February 16 at the venerable age of 101 years. RIP old gentleman, you will not be forgotten.

Cold War Hot Spots

Some places to see if you want to do a 'Cold War walk in Berlin. If you have more ideas, post them in the facebook thread.

Platz der Luftbrücke at the gates of Tempelhof Airport is a memorial to the pilots who gave their lives in the struggle to supply Berlin.

Tempelhof Airport had its last commercial flight in 2008. **Web**: https://www.thf-berlin.de/en/

On the tarmac, right outside the terminal, you will find the '**Rosinenbomber**', a C54 that actually took part in the airlift and actually has been flown by Gail Halvorsen

While Tempelhof takes the main credit, **Gatow** also played a major role. **Web**: http://www.mhm-gatow.de/

Finally there is **Tegel Airport** or rather; in the beginning there wasn't. The airport, today one of Berlins busiest, emerged from scratch due to a combined effort by the Allies and the people of Berlin. **Web**: https://www.berlin-airport.de/en/travellers-txl/index.php

The **Allied Control Council** had its offices at the Kleistpark, formerly seat of the 'Kammergericht', where the infamous judge Roland Freisler held his mock-trials and condemned many people to death.

From inside the Kleistpark, looking towards Potsdamer Strasse. The year '1945' is probably wrong as the guys on the photo are Americans. Probably late 1940ties.

Rathaus Schöneberg will be known to many as the place where President John F. Kennedy renewed the United States pledge to defend Berlin in front of thousands of cheering Berliners. It was also the seat of

RIAS, Radio In the American Sector. Kufsteiner Strasse, Wilmersdorf.

Alliertenmuseum on the Clayallee is definitely worth a visit. **Web**: http://www.alliiertenmuseum.de/en/exhibitions.html

Outside Berlin, in Celle, Lower Saxony, you will find the **Fassberg Airlift Museum**. It's small, but well worth a visit if you are in the vicinity. **Web**: https://luftbrueckenmuseum.de/

Further reading:

Turner, Barry; 'The Berlin airlift: the relief operation that defined the Cold War', © 2107, Barry Turner

Reeves, Richard: 'Daring young men: the heroism and triumph of the Berlin Airlift, June 1948-May 1949', ©

Grier, Peter: Halvorsen: Candy Bomber, engineer, unofficial ambassador', © 2013, Air Force Magazine

Powell, Stewart M.: 'The Berlin Airlift', © 1998, Air Force Magazine

Gelb, Norman: 'The Berlin Wall', © 1986, Norman Gelb

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[1] As the middle name 'Knud' [or Knut] indicates, the father was of Scandinavian descend as his father again was an immigrant from Norway.

[2] There is no clear indication why, but Halvorsen may have been influenced by his religious background.

[3] At the final - and decisive - meeting in Potsdam in June 1945, Stalin was the only of the 'big three' still in office. Roosevelt had died on April 12 and was replaced by the inexperienced vice president Trumann [always notoriously sidelined by his boss], and Churchill, having lost the postwar elections in Britain, had to step down half-way through the conference in favor of Clement Attlee, a mild-mannered and well meaning Labour politician who was no match for the cunning Uncle Joe.

[4] Not to be confused with the 'Potsdam Declaration', concerning itself with the terms for the Japanese surrender.

[5] Legend has it that Churchill, after his defeat in the referendum, and when one of his aides tried to cheer him up and alleviate his worries for the future of England by pointing to Attlee being a very modest man, brusquely replied; *"He also have a lot to be modest over!"*

[6] Admittedly, this attitude by the West was of a fairly new date. Up until the end of the war, the so-called Morgenthau Plan called for a de-industrialisation of Germany, reducing the twice belligerent nation to a predominantly agricultural country in order to prevent future military threats to its neighbours. Only after post-war reconsideration and the calculation that this could lead to the death of some 25 M Germans by starvation, and the realization, that a peaceful Europe needed a balance of power between the two biggest states, France and Germany, did the idea of helping instead of punishing root with USA and Great Britain.

[7] Vittles can be roughly translated to 'grub'. Coining the code word for the operation is ascribed to its first US commander, Brigadier General Joseph Smith, when asked, answered; "Hell's fire, we're hauling grub. Call it Operation Vittles if you have to have a name".

[8] Actually, Halvorsen, who was still single, volunteered, taking the spot of a friend named Capt. Peter Sowa who was married with two kids.