



BERLIN AIRLIFT PREVENTED WORLD WAR III

By: Henry M. Holden

ON THE occasion of the 70th anniversary of the Berlin Airlift next month, it is proper to look back and judge its efforts. At the end of World War II, in 1945, Germany was divided into four zones administered by Britain, France, the United States, and the Soviet Union. The Big Four also occupied the capital city of Berlin, dividing the city into sectors, despite its location deep in the heart of Soviet occupied Germany.

Stalin's attitude toward the Germans was unforgiving. Germany had caused horrendous loss of life and physical damage to the Soviet Union. As a result, Germany would have to pay compensation to the USSR in machinery, money and German workers.

US President Truman felt Stalin's policy was wrong. He thought that the harsh Treaty of Versailles had caused World War II and he saw a democratic Germany as a possible future ally against the USSR. The post-war era, of co-operation between the four powers began to break down in 1947.

To achieve a democratic Germany, it would have to recover. In early 1948, the three Western powers decided to combine their zones and introduce a new currency - the Deutschmark.

In attempts to discourage the West, the Soviets deliberately escalated harassment of Western traffic to and from the city. This led to a blockade imposed on June 24, 1948. By blocking all road, rail and river approaches, Berlin was a city under siege - accessible only by air. The world was on the brink of another war.

Stalin saw this as an insult to the millions of Soviet victims of WW II. He also saw it as a threat. The worst aspect of Truman's policy

was seeing West Berlin recovering while Soviet-controlled East Berlin and the regions around Berlin struggled under the harsh dictatorship of the Soviet Union.

Stalin underestimated Truman. The Western Allies decided to bring essential supplies to West Berlin by air. An "air-bridge" consisting of hundreds of World War II C-47s, and later C-54s, supplied over two million West Berliners with food, fuel, medicine and other supplies. At its height one plane reached West Berlin every 30 seconds.

American C-47s and British Dakotas were still in service in England and Europe and were called into action. The United States Air Force and the Royal Air Force used them as the leading edge of a fifteen-month airlift of food, medicine, and fuel. This airlift neared the total tonnage moved during World War II.

As a young pilot, Lieutenant Gail Halvorsen fashioned small parachutes for candy bars, which he dropped from his C-54. His idea caught on, and soon many other pilots joined in to drop three tonnes of candy to the children during "Operation Little Vittles."

Halvorsen, was nicknamed "The Candy Bomber" and "Lt. Wiggly Wings" by the German children.

The Berlin Airlift marked the beginning of the Cold War. The event also helped establish the modern-day air traffic control system because of the sheer volume of aircraft involved.

In 2008, this author interviewed Kevin Kearney, vice president of the Berlin Airlift Historical Foundation. "The Allies got together, and we started flying supplies in, incredible amount of supplies. They needed 350 flights a day. The Berlin Airlift remains one of the most impressive and exceptional acts of humanity."

At the beginning of the airlift, C-47s comprised 85 percent of the total aircraft flown. Many flew with 8 000-pound payloads, exceeding the Douglas specifications. On June 26, thirty-two C-47 flights from Wiesbaden carried more than 80 tonnes of supplies into Tempelhof Airport.

Through an error in an invoice, one C-47 flew 13 500 pounds of steel, more than twice the weight recommended. Of course, the plane protested, was reluctant to fly, but did anyway. When it landed, tail wheel first, the weight blew both main tyres.

One C-47 carrying freight was on automatic pilot when, without warning, both engines quit simultaneously. There were four aboard, the pilot, copilot, engineer, and "Willie," the engineer's little spotted dog. Immediately, hands flew in all directions, changing mixtures and fuel selectors. The pilot or-

dered the crew to bail out if the engines quit again. Minutes later, they did. The crew bailed out, each of them forgetting Willie.

As the crewmen floated down to earth, they could hear the engines cutting in and out. Soon, the sound faded in the distance.

Some people working in a field in East Germany, heard a loud, scraping noise, like metal against wood. The pilot-less C-47 came into sight, and belly landed in a field.

The local policeman, seeing a chance to become a hero, cordoned off the transport to trap the Americans inside, and keep on-lookers away until the army arrived.

When the Russians arrived, they searched the aircraft. To their surprise, they found no human being living or dead, just Willie standing there barking at the intruders. To this day, the Russians still haven't figured out how the Americans taught a dog to fly.

Ten civilian airlines also flew supplies into Berlin. Half of their 39 aircraft were Dakotas and they made almost 7 000 flights. These Dakotas were responsible for much of the 54 325 tonnes of dry goods, and 87 474 tonnes of liquid fuel flown in during the first eleven months.

"Operation Plain Fare," the British codeword for the airlift, was called the greatest air transport operation of all time. The British Dakotas and American Gooney Birds, joined by the four engine Douglas C-54s flew under such dangerous conditions in and out of Berlin that the narrow air corridors required special flight rules.

Weather was often marginal at best, and if a pilot didn't land on the first attempt, he did not land at all, but instead, returned to his home base. Aviation entrepreneur, Sir Freddy Laker, at the time a young Dakota pilot said: "The weather was more dangerous than the Russians."

The air corridors were so narrow and crowded that there was no room to stack and orbit or go around for a second attempt. On December 11, 1948, at Gatow Airport, there were 278 landings in two hours. On an average day there were 58 runway movements every hour, or about one landing or take-off per minute.

The full extent of the C-47's help may never be quantified, but it is known that in the first three months of the blockade, C-47s made more than 12 000 round trips between West Germany and Berlin. One C-47 Hobbs meter recorded continuously for 327 hours, 27 minutes. The C-47s supplied the barricaded city for months, flying around the clock, in every type of weather. Later the Air Force standardized the airlift operations, using the Douglas C-54 "Skymaster."

On September 23, 1949, 321 days after the Russians blockaded the city, the last Dakota flew into Berlin. Stenciled on the side were the words, "Positively the last load from Lubeck."

Beneath this was written, "For they intended evil against thee; they imagined a mischievous device, which they were not able to perform. Psalm 21: Verse II." The C-47 had kept West Berlin alive and the world out of another war.

The Airlift officially ended fifteen months after it began. In total, the United States and Britain delivered 1 783 573 and 541 937 tonnes respectively, from 277 569 flights to Berlin.

Operation Plain Fare came at a human cost though. In total 101 fatalities mostly due to crashes were recorded as a result of the airlift, including 39 British, 30 Americans and 21 civilians.

In the end, the attempted strangulation of Berlin by the Soviet Union to force the Western Allies out of the city failed. The Berlin blockade, and subsequent airlift, went on to symbolize the uneasy peace that the Cold War brought to the world. The airlift, using U.S. and British forces delivered almost two and a half million tonnes of food and resources. The C-47s and C-54s flew over 92-million miles in order to do so and kept the world at an uneasy peace. →



THE GERMAN PEOPLE CHEERING THE ARRIVAL OF A C-54 LOADED WITH LIFE SUSTAINING SUPPLIES. (NATIONAL ARCHIVES)



THE SIDE OF THIS C-47 READS, "THIS WAS THE FIRST AIRCRAFT AND THE FIRST C-47 TO FLY ON OPERATION PLAIN FARE LANDED AT GATOW 0400 HRS 26 JUNE 1948 TOTAL SORTIES IN 12 MONTHS" (AUTHOR'S COLLECTION)