



AS IT HAPPENED

BY

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SURVIVAL OF A CITY - THE BERLIN AIRLIFT WHAT WAS IT?

The Berlin Airlift, which started on 23rd June 1948, resulted from a politically motivated rivalry between the Soviet Union and the United States in conjunction with their respective Allies. There was limited use of weapons due to fear of creating a nuclear holocaust. Today, relatively few people know of the Airlift or what it entailed, yet it was the greatest flying airlift operation ever undertaken by the U.S and Allied air forces.

During 1948/49 698 aeroplanes flew 124 million miles (about 200 million kilometres), carrying over 2.5 million tonnes of food, clothing, heating fuel and machinery to keep the city of West Berlin alive and working. After World War 2, Germany was divided into 4 Occupation Zones under a Four Power Rule agreement. Berlin was also divided into East Berlin which was controlled by the Soviet Union and West Berlin which was controlled by the United States, Britain and France.

Moscow's intention was clear. They wanted the Allies out of Berlin to stop any Western interference with their plans for the future of government in Germany. The USSR had 400 000 troops deployed and they adopted niggling tactics. For example, they issued an order stating that all personnel and baggage on military trains had to be checked by Soviet inspectors and that no freight could leave Berlin without a permit which had to be obtained from the Soviet Commander. Conditions between the Allies and the USSR deteriorated until all entry by rail, road and water stopped.

Berlin was in the centre of the Soviet Zone of occupation and 3 corridors were established to link the Western Zone with Berlin. The London Agreement of 1945 designated in writing Western access rights by air. However, agreement on other forms of transport access were verbal and not formally ratified. Accordingly, the USSR regarded a verbal agreement as not binding and used that to their own advantage.

Stalin was deeply suspicious of Western plans towards a revival of German economic standards. The Allies badly wanted to lower the cost to taxpayers in the USA, Britain and France but Stalin saw enemies everywhere, even among his close associates. He believed that the Capitalist World was determined to destroy the Communist State, so his main objective was to keep Germany weak. If that occurred, Germany would never be in the position to again attack the Soviet Union. His attitude was that provided Germany

remained under the Four Power Rule, Moscow retained the power in the United Nations to veto any Western programme for Germany's future.

Zonal currency was the factor which brought matters to a head. In 1945, in return for their approval for a unified currency in all four Occupation Zones, the Soviets had demanded and received a second set of currency printing plates in order to print their own money. The USSR refused to account for the exact number of currency notes which flooded into circulation. Consequently, the value of the German Mark fell drastically.

In 1948 a new currency was introduced by the western alliance to stimulate the German economy and overcome the political differences by assisting the creation of a new West German Government. Moscow responded by imposing a series of restrictions on movement to and from Berlin, harsh enough they reasoned, to force the Allies from Berlin. The Allies countered that by indicating that they would fly in food and equipment following the submission of a plan by an RAF officer, Air Commodore Waite, being received enthusiastically by the American Commander, General Lucius Clay.

General Robertson warned London that the USSR planned to screw down the 'Iron Curtain' more firmly thus showing the Allies who were the real masters of Germany. The Allies, on the other hand, were determined to stay in Berlin, even if it meant war. Many leaders believed that if the Berlin Airlift had failed there would have been war with the Soviet Union.

WHAT DID THE BERLINERS THINK?

The populace of Berlin was mostly unhappy with living conditions. Life in the city was hard. Seventyfive percent of houses had been destroyed and reconstruction had hardly begun. In some instances several families shared a single room.

Due to low pressure of coal gas, cooking was a trial. In addition, electricity was available for maybe four hours a day, food was unappetising and difficult to obtain. The black market flourished. Hospitals were allowed to heat their rooms during the winter months only and Government buildings and offices went without heat.

Berliners assumed at first that, as they had a month's supply of food and the necessities for living, the foreign occupiers of their city would settle their differences before stocks ran too low. Before long they realized how serious and dangerous the situation was. They endured because they had little choice.

A sense of humour helped them in their grim situation. They said "If there must be a blockade, it was better to be blockaded by the Soviets and fed by the Americans than blockaded by the Americans and fed by the Soviets."

THE AIRLIFT STARTS

Moscow gave the Allies 3 air corridors into Berlin. The corridors were 20 miles wide, 10 000 feet high and terminated in a circle of 20 miles radius around Berlin. Those corridors were patrolled by the Soviet Union using YAK3 fighter aircraft.

In April 1948 a major incident occurred in one of the corridors when a YAK3 first buzzed and then collided with a British Airways 'British Viking', killing all aboard. Moscow's response was typical of the times, claiming that the Viking was outside the corridor and totally to blame for the accident.

When the Airlift started, the RAAF had 10 crews ready to leave Australian shores immediately. The RAF was to provide the aircraft but they sought experienced DC3

crews. The crews were then operating from Schofields Air Base in New South Wales. On arrival in the UK, our home base was at Bassingbourne, near Cambridge. In Germany we were stationed at Lubeck which was situated on the border of East and West Germany.

Our planes would take off from Lubeck, fly south to the radio beacon to pick up the air corridor then fly east to the next beacon for approach to Gatow. In Germany, British aircraft used Gatow Airfield, the Americans used Tempelhof and the French used Tegel.

Planes involved flew in all kinds of weather conditions which had to be particularly hazardous before flying was stopped. Planes landed continuously every 3 minutes. The records show 20 landings per hour, 480 per day. Unloaded planes took off in between the landings. Ground Controlled Approach (GCA) radar played a major and essential part in that fantastic operation.

The mix of aeroplanes included DC3s, DC4s, Globemasters, Stratofreighters, Yorks, Hastings, Packets, Sunderlands, Haltons, Lancastrians, Tudors, Vikings, Liberators and Bristol Freighters. Of the 689 aircraft used, 441 were American and 248 were British. The 20 different types of planes ranged from the small DC3 with a 95 feet wingspan to the huge Stratofreighter with a 141 feet wingspan. The DC3 carried about 7500 pounds (3400 kg) of freight, the DC4 20 000 pounds (9070 kg), the Globemaster 50 000 pounds (22 700 kg) and the Stratofreighter 68 000 pounds (31 000kg) depending on the amount (weight) of fuel required for individual flights. When RAAF crews landed at Gatow, the Germans would unload our cargo in 15 to 20 minutes while we had a cup of tea at the NAAFI (Navy Army Air Force Institute) canteen.

We flew to a strict schedule in all types of weather, both day and night. A limiting factor was that our DC3s could not land when the crosswind component was greater than 20 knots (37km/h).

Our planes all had tail wheels, so crosswind conditions made steering difficult using engines and rudder on landing and taxiing. American planes had nose wheels, therefore they were easier to steer and were able to operate in crosswind components up to 35 knots (65km/h).

As the prevailing winds were predominantly east-west, the airstrips were built east-west. However, Mother Nature couldn't be controlled and she insisted on presenting us with strong crosswinds on occasions, causing interruptions to schedules.

WHAT DID WE CARRY?

We had to supply Berlin with life's necessities consisting of food, clothing and heating fuel for 2.5 million Berliners. In addition, we even brought in machinery for the construction of power plants and the like. We 'flew in' those commodities and 'flew out' displaced adults and children.

Berlin needed 30 tons of salt per day, but salt was difficult to handle, corrosive to metal and tended to seep from packages. Accordingly, flying boats were utilized to carry salt into the Western Zone as their hulls had been treated to resist corrosion. In winter, when the lakes were frozen, salt was carried in panniers in the bomb-bays of bomber aircraft.

Coal was a high demand product and Berlin needed as much of it as possible. It also created a big problem. Coal was loaded in 100 pound (45kg) bags but the dust got into aircraft crevices and into instruments causing huge maintenance problems. Then an airman came up with the simple idea of laying canvas sheeting on the floor of the aircraft

and collecting the coal dust. The idea worked so well that ultimately, more than 500 tonnes of coal dust was collected. That was enough to fill 50 DC4s.

Machinery was essential for progress in Berlin but size was a problem. Much of it was too big to fit into most aircraft. The solution was found in a World War 2 technique. An American engineer, H.P. Lacombe, came up with the idea of cutting the machinery into suitable pieces with an oxy-acetylene torch, loading them onto the planes, then rewelding at the other end. Without that knowledge the 81 crushers, rollers and tractors needed for work on Tegel airstrip would never have reached Tegel. Parts for the new powerplant, some weighing 32 000 pounds (14 500kg), were carried in the huge Globemasters and Fairchild Packets with their massive hinged back doors. Ingenuity and lateral thinking often saved the day.

CASUALTIES

78 airmen died on the Berlin Airlift and their names are recorded on the base of the Berlin Airlift Memorial. The three huge prongs of the Memorial represent the three Allied powers, British, French and American, who participated. There was one Australian killed, Flight Lieutenant Mal Quinn who was flying with the RAF. He crashed just inside the Soviet Zone when landing in bad weather at Lubeck.

Black Friday 13th August 1948 changed the course of procedure for the Berlin Airlift. Twenty DC4s were heading for Tempelhof, spaced 3 minutes apart. The cloud base had dropped to the level of the tops of high apartment buildings. Storm cells and sudden heavy rain prevented GCA controllers from identifying aircraft on their radar screens, so visual approaches had to be made in poor visibility. The planes were stacked from 3000 to 12 000 feet. One DC4 overshot the runway, crashed into a ditch and caught fire. All the crew survived and evacuated the aircraft. The next DC4 landed too far down the runway and blew all tyres as a result of heavy braking. The third DC4 landed by mistake on the auxiliary runway which was still under construction and it ground-looped. Planes were also waiting to take off. The thoughts uppermost in all crews' minds, apart from the ground chaos and the shocking weather conditions, were that if any aircraft strayed outside the corridor it could be shot down by YAK fighters or by anti-aircraft fire. In addition, disruption of the landing pattern without radar created a danger of air collision.

Fortunately, General Tunner was in the air at that time. He advised the control Tower that he was taking over. He ordered all fully laden planes not in the landing pattern to go back to base and he introduced a new overshoot procedure. Any laden aircraft missing its first landing approach did NOT go round for another landing attempt. It was to climb away and join the planes going back to base. From that day, there were no more dangerous stacks over Berlin. In our 220 trips to Berlin, we never missed a landing.

COMPASSION

"The Chocolate Pilot of Berlin", United States Lieutenant Gail Halvorsen received world-wide publicity and recognition for his great compassion towards the children of Berlin. He saw children at the perimeter fence of his airfield and he went over to talk to them. He gave them chocolate and chewing gum which he had on him. The children normally couldn't get such luxuries. They were so appreciative that Lieutenant Halvorsen made his generosity a habit. Then he and other crew members banded together to drop candy to the children of Berlin by way of handkerchief parachutes. Soon hundreds of handkerchief parachutes were carrying chocolate. A reporter christened him the "Candy Bomber" and

he became known all over the world for his compassion. One of the handkerchief parachutes was carried into space in 1995 and is now residing in the Johnson Space Centre.

HOW WERE WE REWARDED?

In 1998 we were awarded the Berlin Airlift Medal. I think we deserved it after 220 trips into Berlin.

The Berlin Gratitude Committee invited us in 1999 to the '50th Anniversary of the Berlin Airlift' The organization was superb and everything ran like clockwork. Moving ceremonies were arranged for us and we were ferried across Berlin on sight-seeing trips. The closing ceremony was held at the Berlin Olympic Stadium, the scene of the 1936 Olympic Games.

FINALE!

We had seen Berlin destroyed. Now a new city with a big heart has been born, rising like a Phoenix from the ashes.