

Special Issue of the Wochenschau from June 22rd, 2023

## How the sky literally opened up for the children in Berlin

A theme lighting on the occasion of the 75th anniversary celebrations "Berlin Airlift" on June 21, 2023



Gail Halvorsen approaching Berlin Tempelhof Airport

The "angel" who literally came down from heaven for the Berlin children was pilot Gail Halvorsen (born October 10, 1920). He was born in Garland, a farming community in northern Utah, into a family of Latter-day Saints. At the age of 19, a dream came true when he won a scholarship to the state pilot school and was able to earn his pilot's license at Brigham City Airport. After the Japanese attack on Pearl Harbor, he decided to join the army and became a C-54 transport pilot. He transported military goods to the South Atlantic from an air force base in Brazil. By the way, the Douglas C-54 Skymaster was the military version of the commercial Douglas DC-4 built by Douglas Aircraft, produced from 1942 to 1945.

After the war ended, Halvorsen remained in military service and opted for a career with the U.S. Air Force (successor to the Army Air Corps). His proficiency in flying C-54 aircraft led to his being assigned to the year-long Berlin Airlift that began in July 1948 in divided Germany. Halvorsen was one of dozens of pilots tasked with transporting food, clothing and other essential supplies from air bases in West Germany to the citizens of West Berlin. The reason for this relief action was the fact that the Soviet Union had prevented the transport of goods from West Germany to Berlin. This action by the Soviet Union went down in history as the "Berlin Blockade".

### What led to the "Berlin Blockade"?

The occupation zones of the three Western powers France, Great Britain and the USA, which had existed since the end of the Second World War, introduced the D-Mark with a currency reform in the summer of 1948. Its own currency signaled that divided Germany was drifting apart. The USSR saw the opportunity to take over the Western controlled sectors of Berlin, which lay as an island in the middle of the Soviet occupation zone. Dictator Josef Stalin cut all land routes and bet that the western powers would give up their remote outpost. Instead, on June 26, 1948, the three allies began supplying them from the air. By May 1949 they had flown to West Berlin 277,000 times and brought around two million tons of essential goods.

One of the many pilots was Gail Halvorsen. At that time, many Germans were still skeptical and in some cases dismissive of the victorious powers. But that should change at the latest with an inspiration from Gail Halvorsen, as his daughter Denise Williams-Halvorsen reported at the 75th anniversary celebration at the Frankfurt Airlift Monument on June 21, 2023, to which the Hessian Prime Minister Boris Rhein and another 600 invited guests attended.



Gail Halvorsen's 5 children and their spouses pose with the Ukrainian students from the Gail Halvorsen School Berlin.

### Daughter Denise told how it all began



Prime Minister Rhein speaks to Denise Williams

Among the guests of honor were all 5 of Gail Halvorsen's children with their spouses. Denise Williams-Halvorsen reached the hearts of everyone present in her speech, which was held in almost perfect German. The audience was particularly touched by a story about how the C-54 transport aircraft became the legendary "raisin bombers" (known in the USA as candy bombers):

„In July 1948, Gail took a short break after landing at Tempelhof Airport. He went to the end of the runway and wanted to film the planes taking off and landing so that one day he could show this to his future children. He met about 30 children at the airport fence, who talked to him for about an hour about the meaning of freedom and about being thankful for the food from heaven. They told him to keep flying even if the weather was bad because if they lost their freedom they would never get it back. Inspired by the children, Lieutenant Halvorsen passed the two pieces of chewing gum he had in his pocket to the children and watched as the children respectfully shared the wrapper with each other so everyone could smell it. He was amazed at the children's words about freedom. He was also impressed by the friendly way in which they shared the small gift among themselves. He told them that he would bring them sweets the next day when he will fly to Berlin again.

They asked him how they would know that is him as the planes land in Tempelhof every few minutes. He told them and showed this with his hands: I will wag my wings and you will know that it is me. The children laughed (Denise was interrupted by applause). The children said: Get going, we will be ready. The next day, on his flight to Berlin, he saw the same group of 30 children. He waggled with his wings and dropped three boxes with candies attached to handkerchief parachutes. As he taxied to the end of the runway on his return flight, he saw the children waving their parachutes at him. That's how he knew that the parachutes with the candy had reached the children. Now he realized that he had to keep repeating this. And so „Operation Little Vittles“ was born.” (End of quote)

Right picture: Gail Halvorsen talking to the children at the airport fence.







### The Berlin children named Gail Halvorsen affectionately >Uncle Wiggly Wings<

Many other aircrews then took part in Operation Little Vittles. In total, by the end of the airlift in September 1949, the children of Berlin had received a total of 23 tons of chocolate, chewing gum and other sweets, which the pilots had dropped with parachutes they had made themselves. They were also assisted in making the parachutes by youth and members of the Frankfurt Ward's Relief Society. From then on, Gail Halvorsen was affectionately called "Uncle Wiggly Wings" by the Berlin children.

*Right: Halvorsen daughter Denise Williams with husband David*



### Ukrainian students from the Gail Halvorsen School Berlin

A secondary school in Berlin was named the "Gail Halvorsen School" in honor of Gail Halvorsen. This school is attended by many young refugees from Ukraine. A group of Ukrainian students was sent as a delegation to the 75th anniversary celebrations in Frankfurt, as can be seen in the photo in front of the candy bomber.



*Left: The Ukrainian students of the Gail Halvorsen School in Berlin take part in the anniversary celebrations as guests of honor (in the foreground with the white T-shirts).*



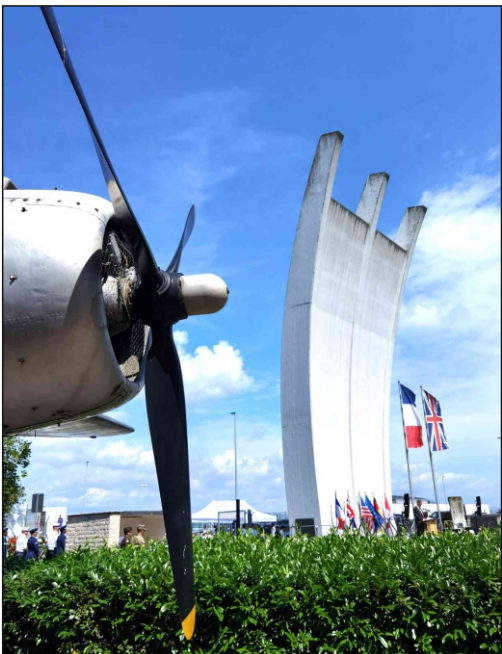
*Right: The Ukrainian students pose in front of a C-54 as flown by Gail Halvorsen.*

### Prime Minister paid tribute to Gail Halvorsen and his Candy Bomber colleagues

Hesse's Prime Minister Boris Rhein paid tribute to the self-sacrificing service of Gail Halvorsen and his many colleagues in the flight crews, of whom around 80 lost their lives in plane crashes. In his words, the Berlin Airlift "was burned into the collective memory of the Germans as a strong symbol of our allied friends' unlimited helpfulness, self-sacrifice and bravery." He added that the selfless and courageous actions of pilots like Gail Halvorsen, who passed away in February 2022, are a reminder "that even in the most difficult of times, we must fight for our values and stand together." He also stressed that solidarity sometimes takes a long time "and especially in the context of the unspeakable Russian war of aggression against Ukraine, the Berlin Airlift warns how important it is to stand up for freedom and justice unconditionally."



*Picture above: Prime Minister Boris Rhein speaks at the celebration. Bottom left: Wochenschau reporter Hans Malzl with US Chaplain Spike Richardson. Bottom right: Prime Minister Rhein greets one of Gail Halvorsen's daughters and her husband.*



*Left: The 600 invited guests to the 75th anniversary celebration of the "Berlin Airlift" were gathered in front of the Airlift Memorial at Frankfurt Airport.*

