Eight o'clock and fire in the hole. Hit the ramp and let's haul coal. Shift schedule was 12 hours on, 24 off, unless you happened to catch the "bastard block." With luck your aircraft would be on the ramp, preflight completed, loaded and ready to go after a quick walk-around. However, it was 2 to 1 that it had just left or was on the return trip from Gatow, which meant a one or two-hour wait and a cranky engineer to relieve when he got in. A view of the loading ramp, everything loaded and ready to start engines.

Berlin Airlift

You Haul 30 Tons of Coal And What've You Got? — An Empty APU And an Engine That's Shot*

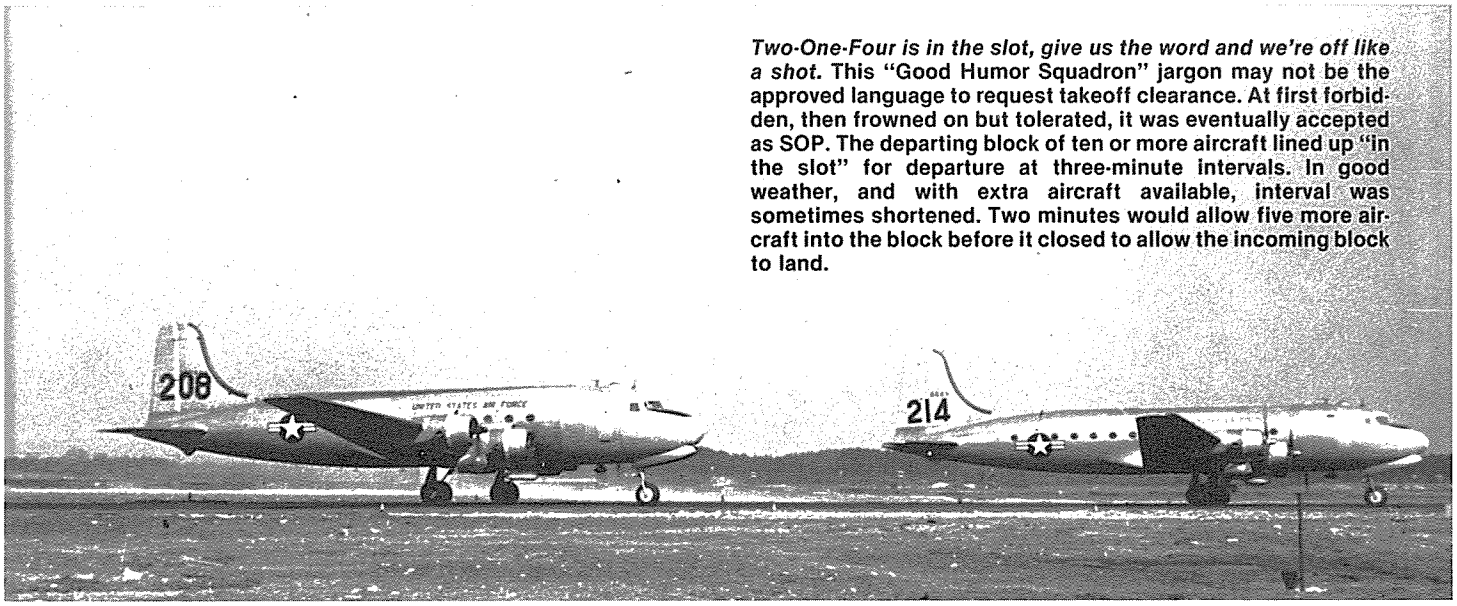
***With apologies to Tennessee Ernie Ford**

by Douglas I. Pirus – with photos by the author

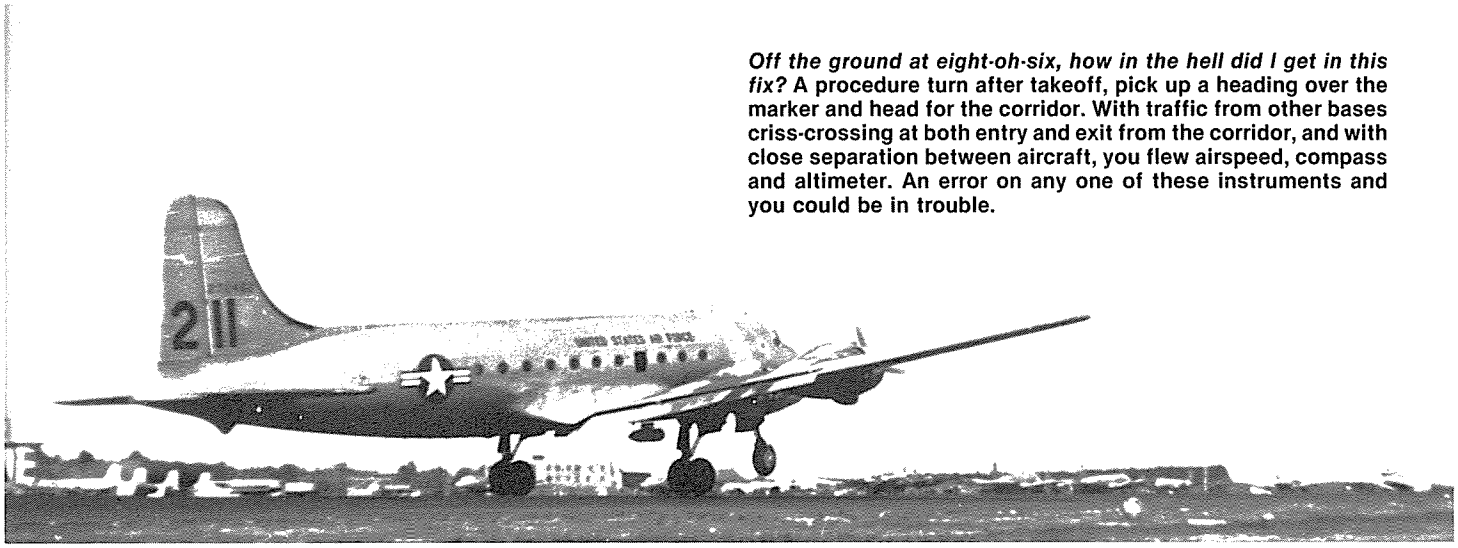
On this thirtieth anniversary of the Berlin Airlift, as we look back on what has been published about this operation we find volumes of material about how many tons of supplies were hauled, the logistical genius and planning, and the coordination of the many functions that made it successful. We find charts showing the immense supply lines that fed materials to the right places at the right times, and the logistical support that kept these lines flowing. We see figures of the number of hours flown versus down time, and tons-per-day that "went off the charts" of any previously conceived air transport planning tables.

We also hear tales of derring-do and heroic actions as well as the stories of compassion, such as dropping candy bars to the children in handkerchief parachutes. What is missing in all these reports are the stories of the men who made all this super-planned logistics work. The ground and aircrews who were the "tail-end-Charlies" in this logistical line, whose coal-dust sweaty brows carried this line of supply to its final conclusion, the coal bins of Berlin.

We pause now on this anniversary to pay an all-too-brief tribute to these men with an intimate glimpse into their daily routine. If this seems unfamiliar to some who were there, we hasten to add that this visit is to RAF Station Celle in the British Zone of Germany during the final six months of the Airlift. The unit is the 317th Troop Carrier Wing, and specifically the 39th Troop Carrier Squadron. No two places were the same, and no two times were the same. Fassburg and Celle were as different as night and day, and Frankfurt and Wiesbaden were in an entirely different world. Despite this, the Airlift was the Airlift, and our regret is that space does not permit a deeper look into the exploits of the men who made this operation possible.



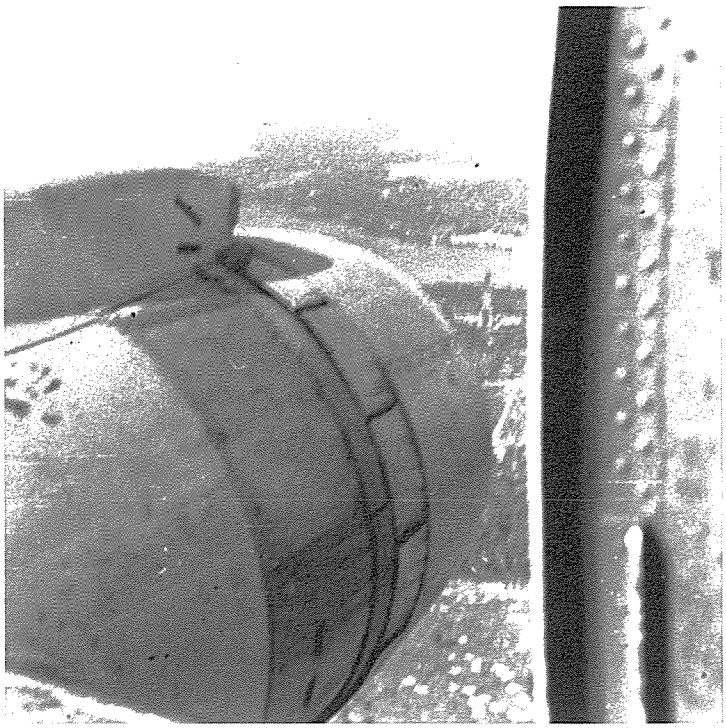
Two-One-Four is in the slot, give us the word and we're off like a shot. This "Good Humor Squadron" jargon may not be the approved language to request takeoff clearance. At first forbidden, then frowned on but tolerated, it was eventually accepted as SOP. The departing block of ten or more aircraft lined up "in the slot" for departure at three-minute intervals. In good weather, and with extra aircraft available, interval was sometimes shortened. Two minutes would allow five more aircraft into the block before it closed to allow the incoming block to land.

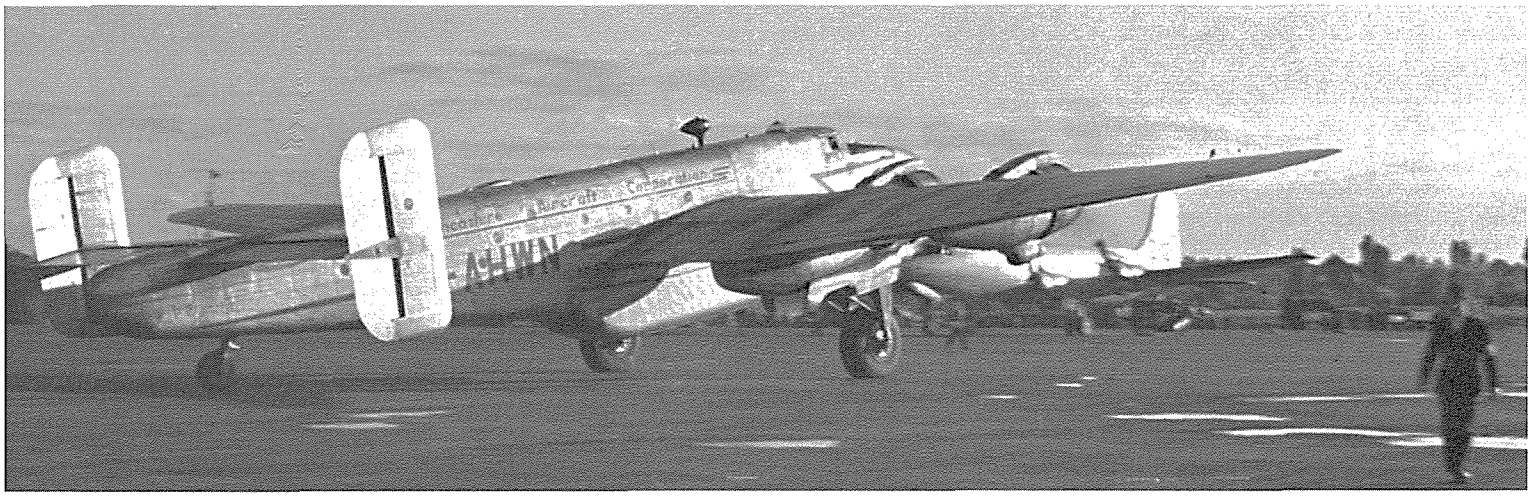


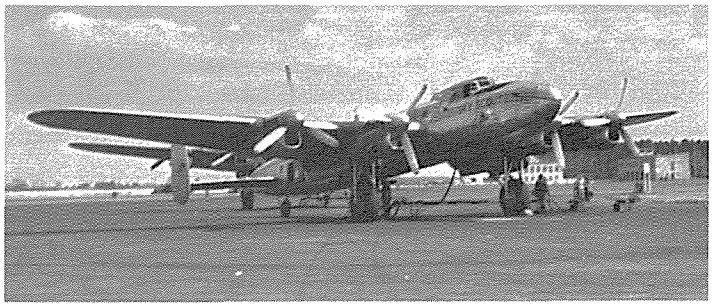
Off the ground at eight-oh-six, how in the hell did I get in this fix? A procedure turn after takeoff, pick up a heading over the marker and head for the corridor. With traffic from other bases criss-crossing at both entry and exit from the corridor, and with close separation between aircraft, you flew airspeed, compass and altimeter. An error on any one of these instruments and you could be in trouble.

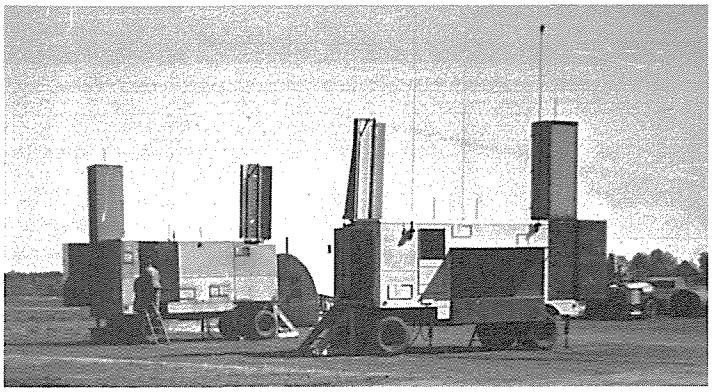
On a clear day . . . you could see that you had not been flying the New York to Baltimore run all winter. The 1936 Olympic Stadium was one of the few identifiable scenic landmarks on the Celle to Gatow run that said "Berlin."

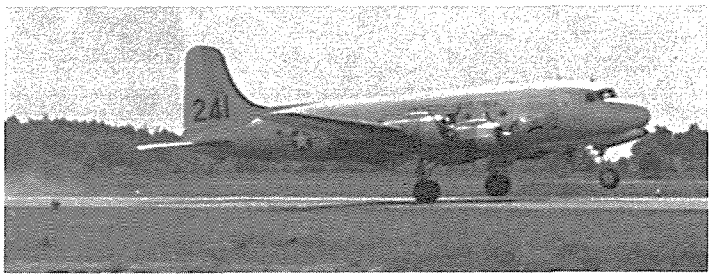
Watch it chaps, find a hole. Here comes a Yank with a load of coal. The "Good Humor Squadron" felt that they had won the war when the usual crisp and proper British operators at Gatow finally broke down and began to answer with the same kind of responses as those being tossed at them. Entering the pattern on a clear day like this allowed room for levity but when the weather closed in it was back to business as usual. On a GCA approach, in near zero-zero weather you were dead serious, or very possibly dead.











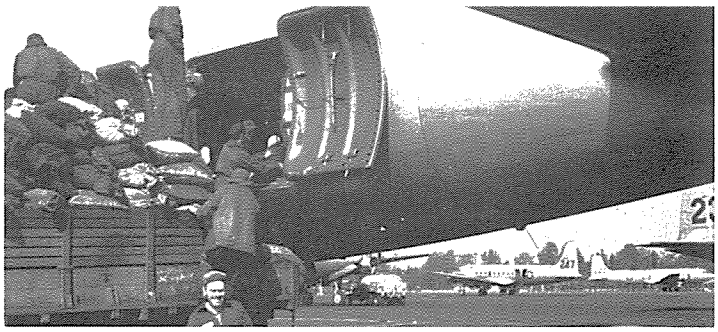
Hey guys, the neighborhood's going to pot, I see the Limeys are cluttering up the ramp with their junk heaps again. Like Celle, Gatow was in the British Zone. We shared the field with units from several British bases which flew a variety of cargo in a variety of aircraft, ranging from Gooney Birds to Avro Yorks and Tudors. The Avro Lancaster shown here was a tanker conversion hauling gasoline. The Handley-Page Halifax appears to be a tanker conversion from the bulge under the bomb bay, but this could have been a cargo container. Half an hour for unloading, time for a cup of coffee at the mobile canteen and back in the air in time to clear the ramp for the British block so that they would be clear by the time our next block arrived.

GCA, all the way. Even in good weather most landings were worked by GCA, giving the operators a chance to sharpen up. Although not what would be called Category III today, no one will deny that the GCA operators here were the best in the world. A missed approach at the Berlin terminal point was more than a simple go-around. Climb back into the departure pattern, get to cruise altitude and head back to Celle with your load and credit for half a mission. The sweetest words at a time like this were, "You may take over and land visually." This landing is brought to you through the courtesy of your friendly local GCA station, cheers!

On the ground and it may not be grease, but you gotta admit that we're all in one piece. Incoming block would usually be in the pattern as soon as the departing block cleared the runway.

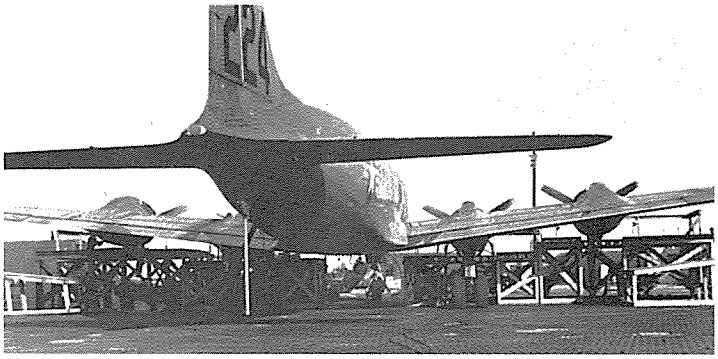
Eine moment, mein herren, ve're not finished loading. No, the truck is not chasing Number 203, just falling into formation to follow it into the loading ramp. Before the engines stop turning the truck will be backing up to the door.

"Toelpel!" (Butterfingers). The real "backbone" of the airlift. Every pound of the thousands of tons of coal hauled into Berlin was hoisted onto the aircraft on the backs of German laborers (and they hardly spilled a chunk).

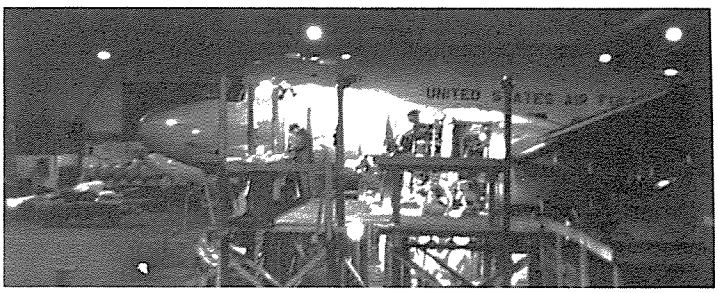


Fill 'er up with ethyl, check the oil, tires and water, and where's the key to the rest room? While the coal was being loaded the engineer topped off the tanks, checked the APU and Aux oil tank, made a thorough walk-around to see if everything was still hanging together, and then checked the load tie-downs. After all these good deeds he was free to grab a cup of coffee at the line mess before time to start up for the next block. Block-to-block times were approximately 3½ hours, with three separate blocks running concurrently. With no mechanical trouble one could put in three blocks in one shift, but more often than not some minor problem caused a missed block. On the last block of the day the forms were transcribed, the APU refueled, and a thorough preflight check made before turning the aircraft over to your relief. Then to sweat out your relief; if he were an "eager beaver," bucking for an Air Medal he would be tramping the ramp when you pulled in, maybe a half-hour before the shift ended. If not, and the block was called before he showed, it meant flying the "Bastard Block," getting back about three hours after you were due for relief.

Two-two-four negative, we've got a smoker. Mechanical status would be reported while inbound to give the line crews time to prepare for whatever emergency maintenance might be required. Unless it was serious you would still go onto the loading ramp, and as soon as the engines stopped, cowling would fly in all directions. Simple problems such as a mag or generator change, or even a tire change would normally be handled without missing a block. For more serious problems the aircraft would be shunted to the backline for work, and if corrected put on reserve to pick up a spot in a subsequent block. If the loading crews were the backbone of the Airlift, the line crews were the adrenalin that kept things rolling at top speed. The high utilization figures, approaching an average of 10 hours per day, indicate that not many aircraft missed a block for unscheduled maintenance.



On the dock, around the clock. Much of the success of the line crews' ability to keep 'em flying was due to regular and thorough dock inspections. Inspections were made at each fifty-hour interval with the second (100-hour) being a bit more detailed. Much of the work was done by German mechanics, many of whom were ex-Luftwaffe personnel, working under the supervision of GI mechanics who performed the more exacting jobs. Every 200 hours the aircraft were flown to Burtonwood Air Depot in England for a complete and thorough inspection and replacement of high-time accessories. To complete the maintenance cycle, every 1000 hours the aircraft were returned to the ZI for a complete reconditioning or IRAN (Inspection and Repair As Necessary).



Sure I vass dere, Scharley. The author models the latest fashions for the well-dressed airlift flight engineer. Note the large pockets for stowing chewing gum, candy bars, tools and an extra roll of tape. A unique feature is the fur collar of the jacket, specially designed to collect hydraulic fluid and engine oil, which when mixed liberally with coal dust will provide one with ring-around-the-collar guaranteed to last for at least six months. Not shown are accessories which include a "loot" bag, a flashlight and hell hole key. The "MESS" does not refer to the model, but rather designates the Flight Line Mess Hall where one could get one meal (fried eggs) during each shift, providing he was not stuck head down in the accessory section changing a starter.