

THE AIRLIFT TO BERLIN

BY IRWIN R. ABRAHAM

After the successful completion of the Second World War in Europe, the four, main, Allied powers (the United States, Great Britain, France and Russia) divided German territory into four occupation zones with each taking jurisdiction over one zone. The City of Berlin, however, posed a unique problem. It was situated well in the Russian occupation zone and had served as the capital of Prussia, the German Empire, the German Republic and the Third Reich. It was thus an important objective for all concerned. After much discussion, a decision was reached that Berlin would also be divided into four zones and administered by an Inter-Allied governing authority. Access corridors, by highway, rail, air and river, were opened by the Russians through their zone so that travel in and out of Berlin could be easily achieved by the three Western powers.

Through the period from June 1945 to June 1948 the restoration of the American, British and French zones of Berlin made rapid progress. Along with this progress came the democratic way of life. Meanwhile, in the Russian Zone progress was not made. Life meant just existing. New construction and reconstruction were nowhere to be seen. The Communist authority was rejected with the Berliners supporting their own parties, and the Russians banned all elections and proclaimed new authority over all Berlin. On 21 June 1948, all shipments of the necessary staples of life were halted when the Russians erected barricades and closed all access roads into West Berlin. The Russians thus made it clear that the city was in their zone and that they would have the last word concerning its administration. Thus the Airlift to Berlin was born.

On 26 June 1948, determined that the people of West Berlin would still have the necessities for life, the U. S. Air Force began supplying all types of food, coal and equipment, flying the supplies into the city via the three air corridors provided earlier by the Russians. The Airlift thus begun, became famous under its code name, "Operation Vittles".

The task of the airlift was not only to feed and to give warmth in the winter to the people of West

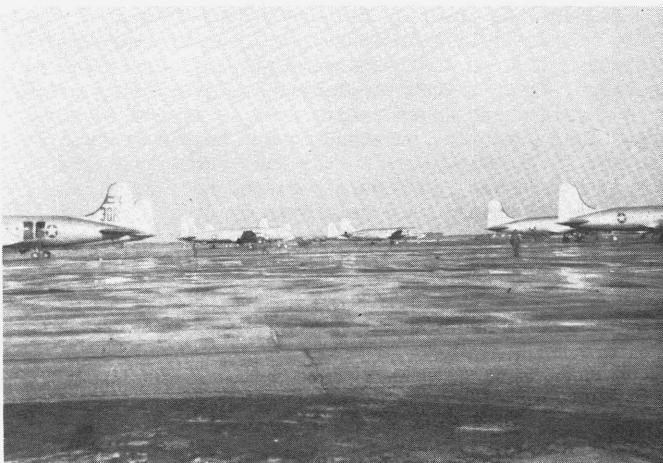
Berlin but also to keep them working. The first priority went to coal while the second was given to flour. Equipment and building materials came last. To help supply all these items, the Royal Air Force joined the airlift by supplying one-fourth of all aircraft used. The U. S. Navy sent two squadrons from its Air Transport Command. One squadron came all the way from Japan.

The aircraft most used was the work horse of the Air Force, the Douglas C-54 Skymaster with a full-load capacity of ten tons. A minimum of 5500 tons of food, fuel, clothing, medicine and building materials had to reach Berlin each day. This monumental task had to be achieved despite terrific obstacles such as tricky Runway 9W at Tempelhof, a tall chimney near the airfield that even Herman Goering had not been able to have removed and, during the winter, very bad weather. Despite these obstacles, the Berlin Airlift achieved a better safety record than many of the world's commercial air lines. The commercial organizations made a study of the airlift and subsequently used many of the ideas and techniques learned in the operation.

By late February 1949 deliveries of 8000 tons of supplies were achieved on some days. The flights were scheduled precisely. Every three minutes, 24 hours a day, in fair weather or foul, a cargo plane landed at one of the three airdromes in Berlin--Tempelhof, Gatow and Tegel, the latter having been built after the beginning of the blockade when another airdrome was needed to handle all the traffic necessary to maintain the tonnage needed to sustain the West Berliners. Seventeen minutes after arrival each aircraft was empty and ready for the return trip for more supplies.

Air supply was maintained from Hamburg and Frankfurt to Berlin via the air corridors over the Russian Zone which were twenty miles wide. The pilots were instructed to "stay in these corridors. PERIOD!" If an arriving plane failed to make a landing on the first pass at the runway, it had to return to base, refuel and wait its turn for another attempt.

The overwhelming job of saving over two million people from cold and famine ended on 11 May 1949 when



A typical scene of C-54 transports at Tempelhof Air-drome during the Berlin Airlift. (Photo - Auerback)



Under trying conditions, all landings were not normal as witness this nose gear collapse. (Auerback)



Navy crew of Douglas R5D celebrates end of the Berlin blockade on 11 May 1949. (Photo - USAF No. 71903AC)

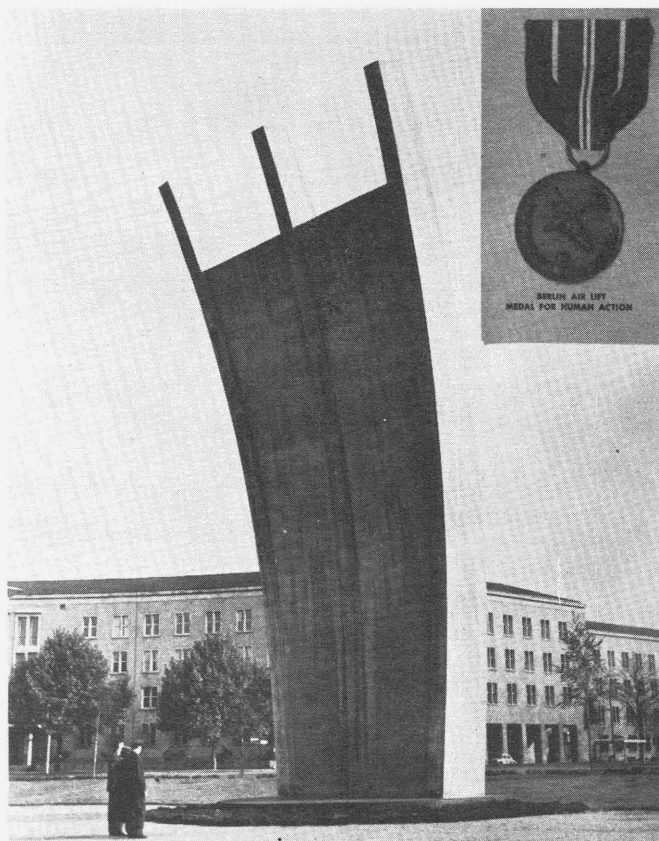
the Russians again opened the land and water corridors to Berlin. The attempt by the Russians to force their will on the people of West Berlin had failed, thanks to the airlift. Many records had been set during Operation Vittles including 2300 Ground Controlled Approach landings in one month. The blockade that began with a threat of extinction for the free people of West Berlin ended as one of the greatest tokens of friendship ever extended to any people anywhere. And the grateful people of the city erected a memorial in West Berlin to honor forever the members of the great airlift.

Members of the U. S. Armed Forces who participated in the Berlin Airlift were awarded the "Medal for Humane Action". Members of the Army occupation forces who served a minimum of 90 days while assigned to the airlift qualified for the Army of Occupation Medal with Airlift Device. Members of the Navy and Marine Corps who served a minimum of 90 days while assigned to the airlift qualified for the Occupation Medal with Airlift Device.

The Airlift Device was a gold-colored, metal miniature of the C-54 airplane with a three-eighths inch wing-span. It was worn on both the service and suspension ribbons of the appropriate occupation medal, with the nose of the aircraft pointed upward at a thirty degree angle to the wearer's right shoulder.

The Medal for Humane Action was established by Public Law 178, 81st Congress, 20 July 1949. It is a metal disk, one and one-quarter inches in diameter, depicting a C-54 Skymaster airplane within a border of wheat centering the coat of arms of Berlin. The reverse bears the inscription, "FOR HUMANE ACTION", across the top of the medal and above the eagle shield and arrows which were taken from the Seal of the U. S. Department of Defense. Below this are the words, "TO SUPPLY NECESSITIES OF LIFE TO THE PEOPLE OF BERLIN, GERMANY". The ribbon is mainly blue with black edges, followed by white, red, white in that order.

The medal was awarded to personnel who were assigned or attached to and present for duty for at least 120



Memorial to the airlift stands in West Berlin. At upper right is Medal For Humaine Action. (Photo -AF)

days during the period 26 June 1948 to 30 September, 1949, inclusive, with any units cited in general orders of the Department of the Air Force for participation in the Berlin Airlift or for direct support thereof. The geographical boundaries of the Berlin Airlift operation were defined as follows:

- 1) Northern boundary - 54th parallel north latitude.
- 2) Eastern boundary - 14th meridian east longitude.
- 3) Southern boundary - 48th parallel north latitude.
- 4) Western boundary - 5th meridian west longitude.

The medal was also awarded to members of foreign armed forces and civilians (United States and foreign) for meritorious participation in the Berlin Airlift. In each instance, however, an individual recommendation indicating meritorious participation was required.

Persons whose lives were lost while participating in the Berlin Airlift, or as a direct result of participation therein, could be awarded the Medal for Humane Action without regard to the length of such service, provided all other requirements were met. The Berlin Airlift Device was not awarded or worn with the Medal for Humane Action.

A blockade started, an airlift was born of necessity, and, for services rendered, a medal was awarded.

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"The Berlin Airlift", a chapter in the television series entitled, "Air Power", from which notes were taken for this article.