

NEWS

Ace pilot earns his final wings

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Best known as the Berlin Candy Bomber, retired Air Force Colonel Gail Halvorsen took off on his final flight with his new set of wings on Feb. 16. The beloved pilot gained fame for dropping candy to German children during the Berlin Airlift from 1948 to 1949, but he touched many lives throughout his 101 years on earth.

Halvorsen was born on Oct. 10, 1920, and grew up in Utah and Idaho on small farms. Growing up with his face in the dirt and planes flying overhead, he dreamed of one day taking flight himself. He earned his pilot license in September 1941 through the Civilian Pilot Training Program and joined the Civil Air Patrol.

After joining the Army Air Corps in June 1942, Halvorsen trained as a fighter pilot with the Royal Air Force in Miami. He spent World War II ferrying transport planes across the South Atlantic and remained in the military when the war ended.

Halvorsen returned to Miami in 2015 to attend the No.3

British Flying Training School ceremony at G.A.R. Cemetery.

Halvorsen was stationed in Alabama when he was selected to become a Berlin Airlift pilot. These pilots dropped food and other supplies to the people of West Berlin who faced dire straits due to a blockade set up by the Soviet Union in an attempt to starve the city and take away the people's freedom.

Overall, Halvorsen flew 126 Berlin airlift missions, but none may have been more meaningful than those candy drops he flew.

It all started at Tempelhof airport when Halvorsen noticed a group of German children watching the planes land through the barbed wire fence. He later told people that he was used to children following him and begging for candy, but he noticed these children were much more subdued.

When retelling this story, he'd recite how all those children asked was that the Americans not abandon the airlift "because they could go without enough food for a bit, but if they lost their freedom, they might never get it back."

All he had on him at the time were two sticks of gum, but the

children were so appreciative when he gave it to them to share that he promised to return the next day and drop more candy to them as he landed his plane.

It's a promise he kept, many times over.

He told the children he'd wiggle his wings, so they'd know it was him, earning him another moniker, Uncle Wiggly Wings. He attached candy and gum to small parachutes made of handkerchiefs and dropped them from his C-47.

Halvorsen knew it went against Air Force regulations to drop the candy, but he felt he had to do it anyway. When his colonel found out about the candy drops, he got an earful but his commanders approved of what he was doing. It served as the catalyst for what would become known as "Operation Little Vittles."

The operation touched many Berlin children's lives, giving them hope in a life besieged by war.

On his memory wall, several of those children, and their children, write about the impact he made on their lives.

One named Horst wrote, "I was one-off [sic] those kid's that has been lucky to fetch a little parachute with candy goodies and that was in Berlin. I met Gail the first time at a [sic] LDS Fireside about 14 years



Gail Halvorsen

ago and he called me a friend. I still cherish the things he has done, especially starting the candy drops above Berlin."

However, it wasn't just those children who received the candy whose lives were touched.

"Gail, you were a light to a youngster from East Berlin, who could hear the roar of the planes, and knew that they brought HOPE, in addition to the reported candy drops, even though we were not the recipients," wrote Brigitte.

Halvorsen's friends, many of whom affectionately call him Hal, remember him always demonstrating a positive

attitude and looking at the bright side of every situation.

"I had the honor of flying with Gail a lot over the last 25 years with the C-54 'Spirit of Freedom' with Tim Chopp as pilot, Gail as co-pilot and me in the middle as flight engineer," said Kevin Kearney, an aircraft maintenance technician at the Berlin Airlift Historical Foundation. "Gail lived his life to the fullest."

Kearney retold a story of when Halvorsen had fallen out of a tree on his farm and then fallen out of his barn. He'd injured himself in both incidents and he was in his mid-80s.

Kearney said he asked

Halvorsen why he did those things at his age.

To which Halvorsen replied, "What am I supposed to do? Hide under the bed and hope nothing bad happens?"

"That's the way he lived," said Kearney. "Age was just a number."

Kearney said, "One memory that really sticks out was from our European Tour and the Airlift Days in Berlin." "All day long, older Germans came to Gail clutching these scraps of cloth with tears in their eyes. They were parachutes that they received candy on as a child 50 years earlier. That's how much Gail's effort meant to them, that they would save this tiny scrap of cloth. As Gail said, it gave them hope."

Many of Halvorsen's friends and acquaintances said he taught everyone the importance of gratitude and service before self. Many believe his actions truly changed the course of history, softening hearts and turning prior enemies into friends.



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