

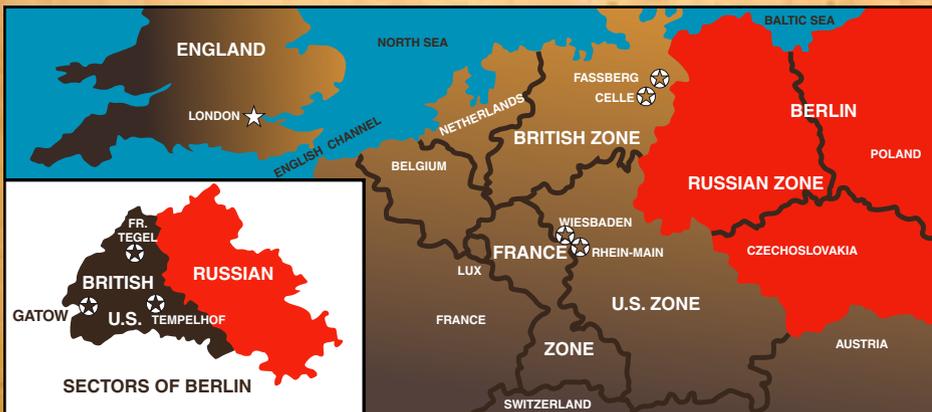
SALVATION FROM THE SKY

60 YEARS AGO THE FIRST AIRLIFT SAVED MILLIONS

STORY BY RANDY ROUGHTON

More than six decades separate two massive humanitarian operations supported by American Airmen. Each had different

levels of devastation, obstacles and reasons for the plight of the people in need. But both efforts shared the goal of helping another nation's citizens survive and the only route open for deliverance was through the air.



C-47 transport aircraft, each containing 190 sacks of flour, arrive at Tempelhof Airport, July 2, 1948. A pair of B-17 weather aircraft can be seen at the far side of the airfield along with a lone C-54 at the extreme right.



courtesy of The Harry S. Truman Library & Museum

Airmen recently helped in the humanitarian relief effort in earthquake-ravaged Haiti. About sixty years ago, there was another operation nicknamed, “The LeMay Coal and Feed Delivery System” in Germany. It was more widely known as the Berlin Airlift. The Air Force wasn’t even a year old when the Cold War began three years after the end of World War II. The Soviet Union blocked the Allies’ railway and road access to Berlin on June 24, 1948 to force acceptance for its plans for the future of Germany. The Berlin Airlift began two days later with U.S. Air Force C-47 Skytrains delivering milk, flour and medicine to West Berlin.

U.S. and British aircraft delivered more than 5,500 tons of supplies and 750,000 tons by the end of the year. Like Haiti 62 years later, the Berlin Airlift gave the young Air Force an opportunity to show how airpower can deliver more than bombs and missiles when needed. But unlike Haiti, the airlift called Operation Vittles by the Americans also had an important military objective – to prevent communism from spreading further in Western Europe, said a National Museum of the United States Air Force historian.

“It’s tough to compare the two although both were humanitarian efforts,” said Dr.

Jeffery S. Underwood. “The Berlin Airlift had not only humanitarian, but also geopolitical implications. Besides the humanitarian mission, it also showed the superiority of democracy over communism. We knew we had to win because if Berlin went down, the entire policy of containing communism would’ve been in jeopardy, from the end of World War II all the way to the dissolution of communism across Europe.”

Underwood earned a doctorate in American history from Louisiana State University and is the author of a book about World War II-era airpower called “The Wings of Democracy: The Influence of Air Power on the Roosevelt Administration, 1933-41.” The museum at Wright-Patterson Air Force Base, Ohio, also features an exhibit on the Berlin Airlift called “Berlin: City Held Hostage, 1948-1959: Humanitarian Triumph.” Underwood believes both missions, although more than five decades apart, show the effectiveness of airpower in humanitarian relief operations and the compassion of Americans.

“They were both humanitarian missions that demonstrated an element of airpower that most people don’t think about,” he said. “It’s hard for people to think of airlift as an aspect of airpower, but it’s a significant part of what

the Air Force does. Both of these humanitarian missions illustrate the willingness of the American people to help others. We have the national will to help in Haiti, just like we had the will to help the people of West Berlin. I think this is a good indication that some things never change about Americans.”

The volume of supplies delivered in Haiti was comparable to the number brought to western Germany during the Berlin Airlift. More than 17,000 U.S. military members, along with 19 ships and 120 airplanes, helped deliver more than 3.5 million pounds of supplies in support of Operation Unified Response in the 17 days following the quake. As of Feb. 1, American aircraft had delivered more than 2.1 million bottles of water, 1.9 million food rations, 1.6 million pounds of bulk food and 104,000 pounds of medical supplies, according to statistics provided by the U.S. Southern Command.

During the Berlin Airlift, allied aircraft delivered more than 2 million tons of supplies on 278,228 flights in the 464-day operation. In one week in mid-March 1949, the Allies air delivered more than 45,500 tons of supplies into West Berlin. Two months later, the Soviets ended the blockade although the airlift continued through September. In another humanitarian airlift, Operation Provide Promise helped the people of Sarajevo in Bosnia and Herzegovina by delivering 179,910 tons from 1992 to 1997.

Pilots flying into Haiti had the advantage of considerably better weather than their Allied counterparts faced in Berlin. Like all pilots today, they also benefitted from technological advances in airplanes and navigational systems. But the aircrews in Haiti dealt with the disadvantage of having one airfield at the Port-au-Prince Airport, although a second airfield was later added 30 miles away in Jacmel to support Canadian humanitarian assistance. Berlin Airlift pilots started with two airfields, but the number increased to nine.

Despite being limited to one runway and having to establish air traffic control before planes could land in Haiti with supplies, the military coordinated 280 flights a day at an airport that normally handled between five and 15. A combat controller with the 23rd Special Tactics Squadron at Hurlburt Field, Fla., compared what was accomplished in Haiti with the success of the Berlin Airlift in an Air Force news television interview.

“We were able to gain control of the airfield and perform as admirably as the men did over a 12-day period,” said Chief Master Sgt. Tony Travis. “If you just count the fixed-wing arrivals and departures alone, we averaged one takeoff or landing every 5.3 minutes. If you filter in the rotary wing aircraft, we averaged one arrival or departure every 4.2 minutes. If you take that into context with the Berlin Airlift, where they were working off of three runways and taking in arrivals and departures every three minutes, it’s quite amazing the men were able to do that on a single runway and taxiway. That was a chokepoint.”

Airmen deploying to Haiti likely saw a different level of devastation than was in Berlin at the time of the airlift. World War II ended three years earlier, so reconstruction was well underway at the time of the Soviet blockade.

“In Berlin, the people at least had living arrangements, where in Haiti it was immediate, absolute devastation from the earthquake,” Underwood said. “The situation in Haiti was probably more like Berlin in 1945, as opposed to 1948. But both areas depended on outside support and it was crucial for us to get supplies into both places.”

One factor that separates the two humanitarian efforts, other than different eras, was the element of danger. Berlin Airlift pilots obviously flew with less advanced and dependable aircraft than their successors in Haiti. Second, they didn’t know whether Soviet pilots would actually fire on them. Even without direct hostile activity from the



photo courtesy Travis Air Force Base Museum

An Air Force C-54 Skymaster flies over a group of German children during the Berlin Airlift.

Staff Sgt. Kevin Cloyd rinses the nose art on a static C-47 Skytrain on display at the Berlin Airlift Memorial site of the former Rhein Main Air Base near Frankfurt International Airport in Germany. Sergeant Cloyd and a team of approximately 30 volunteers from Ramstein AB spent three days cleaning display aircraft in preparation for the Berlin Airlift 60th Anniversary Celebration. Sergeant Cloyd is an aircraft maintenance crew chief at Ramstein AB.

Soviets, 101 aviators were killed during the 464-day operation.

“If a pilot were to wander from the flight path in Haiti, he would be reminded to get back on course,” Underwood said. “If he got a little out of bounds in Berlin, he could get shot down. There was a much higher element of danger in Berlin because a mistake might have led to war.”

The largest advantage for pilots flying in support of a modern humanitarian mission is that there is little doubt they can succeed. Aircrews flying into Haiti knew they could because it had been done before. The Berlin Airlift was one of the first major tests for a newly independent Air Force, not to mention one of the first big showdowns between the East and West in the Cold War.

“The biggest lesson from the Berlin Airlift is that airlift can be sustained for any length of time that our national command authorities want to maintain it,” Underwood said. “It was



photo by Tech Sgt. Corey Clements

a great example of airpower being more than fixing a bomb on a target or a missile on an aircraft. People often don’t get to see much of what the Air Force does, but they can see a C-130 or C-17 going into a country, or air traffic controllers helping people.

“There were a lot of differences between Haiti and the Berlin Airlift, but the goal was the same – helping people survive. One was in the face of a natural catastrophe and the other was Communist aggression.”