



2025 History Essay Contest

Homeschool Highschool Winner

Operation Little Vittles

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Following World War II, the people of West Berlin wondered if their former enemies, the United States and Great Britain, could be trusted. Both countries had devastated the lives of many Germans during the war. For, only three years prior, the Allies had executed frequent bombing raids on the city, leaving over 2 million people, namely women and children, living in dire conditions. Now the people of West Berlin, hoping to evade preemption by communist Soviet Union, were depending on the United States and Great Britain for provisions to survive. More importantly, they were relying on the Western Allies to defend their most valued possession: freedom. Amidst the trials and uncertainties of living under the Soviet blockade, the children of West Berlin were given an unforeseen hope in what would be known as Operation Little Vittles.

The Potsdam Conference of 1945, whose goal was to determine the future of postwar Germany, had partitioned Germany into four occupation zones, each placed under the control of one of the former Allies. The city of Berlin, Germany, had also been divided: the eastern section given to the Soviet Union and the western to the United States, Great Britain, and France. After imposing communism on East Berlin, the Soviet Union sought to bring West Berlin under their dictatorship as well. On June 24, 1948, at the refusal of the Allies to withdraw from the city, Joseph Stalin, dictator of the Soviet Union, commenced a blockade of West Berlin, preventing food, coal, and other vital supplies from being imported by land or

water routes. The Soviet Union reasoned the desperate people would rather succumb to communism than starve, which would result in the Western Allies relinquishing their occupation. The plan of the Soviet Union was sabotaged, for on June 26, the British Royal Air Force and the United States Air Force initiated the Berlin Airlift, a joint effort to deliver goods to West Berlin by plane.

One of the American pilots commissioned to fly supplies from Rhein-Main Air Base in West Germany to Tempelhof Air Field in Berlin was 28-year-old Lieutenant Gail Halvorsen. Since arriving in Germany, Lieutenant Halvorsen had been anticipating the chance to tour Berlin and photograph the historic sites. Though his schedule left him little spare time, he at last was given the opportunity in July, 1948. “Often it is small and simple events that change the course of our lives,”¹ Lieutenant Halvorsen said in reflection of that warm day in July. While awaiting the arrival of his tour jeep at Tempelhof, Lieutenant Halvorsen noticed a group of about thirty boys and girls standing behind the barbed wire fence. “Guten Tag, wie gehts,”² he said, greeting the children in German. The kids responded, inquiring about the food and cargo the American pilots were importing to sustain them and their families. “How many sacks of flour does each of the aircraft carry?”³ one asked. Before long, the children turned to speaking of their reliance on America and her allies to keep them liberated from the Soviets. Though the children cared about the food, it was their freedom they clung to more. “These young kids [gave] me the most meaningful lesson in freedom I ever had,”⁴ Lieutenant Halvorsen recounted.

As he turned to go to the waiting jeep, he paused, as a sudden realization struck him. Kids who encountered a serviceman often asked for sweets stashed inside his uniform. Nonetheless, these children had not voiced any such desire. Thrusting his hand into his pocket, Lieutenant Halvorsen discovered the only candy hidden there: two sticks of Wrigley’s Doublemint chewing gum. He turned back toward the air strip, questioning whether it was prudent to hand a group of thirty kids such little candy. As he neared the fence, he split the sticks of gum in half then passed them through the barbed wire to four lucky children. The others displayed looks of disappointment, though refrained from attempting to seize the priceless

¹ Halvorsen, G. (2020). *The Cander Bomber: Untold Stories*. Cedar Fort, Inc.

² Ibid

³ Ibid

⁴ Tunnell, M. (2010). *Candy Bombers: The Story of the Berlin Airlift’s “Chocolate Pilot”*. Charlesbridge.

treasure for themselves. Rather, they requested to each be given a small strip of wrapper, so they might savor its sweet smell. “I had never witnessed such an expression of surprise, joy, and sheer pleasure,”⁵ Lieutenant Halvorsen said, recalling the moment.

The demeanor of the children struck Lieutenant Halvorsen profoundly. Despite having endured atrocious suffering and deprivation during the war, the children displayed remarkable discipline. They had not succumbed to begging for candy; rather they acknowledged the importance of their freedom. Lieutenant Halvorsen knew nonetheless, that the implicit longing for chocolate or gum was hidden in the heart of each one of the children. It had been months since many of them had delighted in its sweet taste. “Why not drop some gum, even chocolate, to these kids out of our airplane the next daylight trip to Berlin?”⁶ Lieutenant Halvorsen thought. He then shared his plan with the children, telling them that as he flew over, he would wiggle the wings of his plane to signal his approach.

Upon completing his tour of Berlin, Lieutenant Halvorsen returned to Rhein-Main. He reasoned that if he and his crew combined their weekly rations, he could obtain enough candy to distribute to the children. His crew members consented to his plan, and three parachutes were assembled. Lieutenant Halvorsen made small packages of gum and candy; he then suspended each one with string from a handkerchief. The following day, July 18, as Lieutenant Halvorsen was flying into Tempelhof, he wiggled the wings of his plane, indicating that he was drawing near. At that moment, his crew chief, Sergeant Elkins, released the candy parachutes from the emergency flare chute of the plane to the expectant children below. After unloading their cargo at the air force base, Lieutenant Halvorsen and his crew promptly departed. As they took off, they could see the children excitedly waving the parachutes in their hands.

Three more candy drops succeeded the first. At the fourth drop, a chocolate bar nearly hit a reporter on the head. The following day, an article appeared in the newspaper recounting the story. After hearing of this incident, General William Tunner, deputy commander of the Berlin Airlift, called the commander of Lieutenant Halvorsen, Colonel James Haun, at Rhein-Main to inquire about the candy

⁵ Ibid

⁶ Ibid

drops. Consequently, Colonel Haun spoke with Lieutenant Halvorsen in regard to this undertaking. Though upset at Lieutenant Halvorsen for not having asked his permission, Colonel Haun encouraged Lieutenant Halvorsen to continue his parachute drops to the children.

Not long after the reporter labeled the candy drops, “Operation Little Vittles”, was the name officially assumed by the US Air Force. With the increase in his publicity, Lieutenant Halvorsen was requested for appearance by several television networks in the United States. Only two months after the commencement of his candy drops, Lieutenant Halvorsen flew to New York where he was interviewed on the *We the People* television program. The ABC and NBC networks and The New York Times also held conferences with him. At dinner one evening with Lieutenant Halvorsen, John Swersey from the American Confectioners Association agreed to contribute candy to Operation Little Vittles. A little over a month after returning to Germany, Lieutenant Halvorsen received a shipment of 6,500 pounds of gum and candy.

Candy was now pouring into Rhein-Main from all across the United States, England, and even Australia. Americans who read about Lieutenant Halvorsen in the newspaper or saw him on television contributed supplies. Radio stations in the United States played requests if a listener sent a handkerchief to Operation Little Vittles. Students who gave handkerchiefs often received the addresses of children in West Berlin to correspond with them through letters. In order to manage the donations, twenty-two schools in Chicopee, Massachusetts, collaborated to form the Center for Operation Little Vittles. Candy and handkerchiefs were sent to Chicopee before being delivered to Germany. The Center for Operation Little Vittles collected and assembled a total of 100,000 parachutes.

After receiving approval from General Tunner, Lieutenant Halvorsen began making daily candy drops at Tempelhof Air Field. The group of children quickly grew, imposing the risk of an injury. As a result, Lieutenant Halvorsen altered his flight pattern, releasing parachutes over schoolyards, hospitals, and cemeteries of West Berlin. By the beginning of October, twenty-five to thirty other pilots were dropping candy. The Officers’ Wives Club and the Non-commissioned Officers’ Wives Club at Rhein-Main sorted the parachutes into numbered boxes; each number corresponded to a coordinate on a map of West Berlin. This ensured that the entirety of the city would receive a visit from one of the “candy

bombers”. On one occasion, Lieutenant Halvorsen and other pilots in his squadron dropped 425 parachutes over West Berlin.

Mail from West Berlin children streamed into Tempelhof, addressed to “Uncle Wiggly Wings” and “The Chocolate Pilot”. Many of the children had lost family members in the war and life at home was very difficult. They desired so much to receive candy, along with the hope it would bring. Letters, such as the one sent from Mercedes Simon, requested a personalized candy drop. Mercedes, whose father had gone missing in the war, wrote that her chickens had stopped laying due to the noise of the planes. In spite of this quandary, she told Lieutenant Halvorsen to drop a parachute in her yard and “...all will be ok.” Unable to locate her chickens from the air, Lieutenant Halvorsen mailed her a package of candy instead.

Other gifts and letters that Lieutenant Halvorsen received were given in gratitude for his candy drops. A young girl entrusted Lieutenant Halvorsen with the teddy bear that had brought her much consolation during the bombing raids. Manfred and Klaus Meisner shaped book ends for Lieutenant Halvorsen from fragments of the ruined parliament building. One father wrote that he had discovered a parachute atop his roof and had given it to his son for his birthday. Likewise, Klaus Rickowski stumbled across a parachute on his way to school. He managed to salvage it by way of jumping into the duck pond. The following January, Lieutenant Halvorsen was commissioned to transfer to Mobile, Alabama. Though saddened to leave the children of West Berlin, he knew that Captain Larry Caskey and Captain Eugene Williams would take good charge of Operation Little Vittles in his place. On May 12, 1949, the Soviet Union lifted the blockade on West Berlin, resulting in a victory over communism and the termination of the Airlift four months later. Operation Little Vittles also ended, having dropped 250,00 parachutes and 23 tons of candy over West Berlin.

In July of 1969, while serving as commander at Vandenberg Air Force Base in California, Lieutenant Halvorsen was asked to visit West Berlin to celebrate the 20th anniversary of the Airlift. As he had often done before, Lieutenant Halvorsen dropped candy over Tempelhof, this time though, to the children of the kids who had first experienced the joys of his parachutes. The following January, Lieutenant Halvorsen returned to Tempelhof to take command of the 7350th Air Base Group. The four years he was stationed in West Berlin allowed him the blessing of connecting with many of the German children who had caught one of his parachutes during the Airlift.

Operation Little Vittles provided the children of West Berlin with more than just candy. Lieutenant Halvorsen and the other pilots brought a light of hope with each parachute and package of candy they delivered. Every chocolate bar and stick of gum that dropped from the sky was an assurance that the United States would preserve their freedom. While visiting Berlin in 1998, Lieutenant Halvorsen encountered a sixty-year-old man who had caught a parachute fifty years prior. "...the chocolate was not the most important thing," the man told Lieutenant Halvorsen. "The most important thing was that someone in America knew I was in trouble and someone cared. That meant hope." He paused, tears welling in his eyes. "Without hope the soul dies. I can live on thin rations, but not without hope."⁷

⁷ The Candy Bomber. (n.d.) *The Berlin Candy Bomber*: <https://wigglywings.weebly.com/the-candy-bomber.html>

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