

*After World War II, the people of Germany were in great need of food and supplies. The United States wanted to help but could not reach the city of Berlin by land because of a blockade by the Soviet Union. Therefore, the United States used planes to deliver supplies in an action known as the Berlin Airlift. During the airlift, an American pilot named Lieutenant Halvorsen saw a group of children behind a fence at Berlin's Tempelhof Airport and had an idea. Read the passage and answer the questions that follow.*

from *Candy Bomber*

by Michael O. Tunnell

1 The lieutenant's eyes panned the thirty hungry faces, and his heart skipped a beat. These were the children he was here to save—children who'd grown up knowing little else but war. "I've got to go, kids," he said reluctantly. He knew the jeep was waiting to take him through the rubble-strewn streets of Berlin for more photos.

2 Fifty yards away from the fence, Lt. Halvorsen stopped. He couldn't get those youngsters out of his head. He knew because of the war they hadn't tasted candy in years. In other parts of the war-torn world, kids begged American servicemen for sweets, yet not one of these kids had asked him for something. He reached into his pocket and felt two sticks of Doublemint chewing gum. Turning back to the fence, he broke the sticks in half, wondering if it was a mistake to give the four puny pieces to thirty sugar-starved boys and girls.

3 Expecting the children to squabble over the gum, the lieutenant watched what happened in amazement: there was no fighting. The lucky four who had plucked the half sticks from his fingers kept the gum, but they ripped the wrappers into strips, passing them around so everyone could breathe in the sweet, minty smell. "In all my experience, including Christmases past," he recalls, "I had never witnessed such an expression of surprise, joy, and sheer pleasure."

4 Just then another C-54 roared overhead and landed, tires screeching on the runway. "The plane gave me a sudden flash of inspiration," Halvorsen remembers. "Why not drop some gum, even chocolate, to these kids out of our airplane the next daylight trip to Berlin?" Of course, the lieutenant knew he might never get permission from his commanding officer for such a stunt, but why not do it anyway? Just once. Surprising himself, Halvorsen hurried back to the fence and announced his plan to the eager children. He told them that if they would agree to share equally, he'd drop candy and chewing gum for everyone from his plane the next day.

5 There was excited whispering. Then after some prodding from the others, the blue-eyed girl asked how they would know which aircraft he'd be flying. That was a problem, of course. There were so many planes coming and going.

6 "When I get overhead, I'll wiggle the wings," said Lt. Halvorsen. It was the way he'd greeted his parents when flying a small plane over their Utah farm.

7 The girl wrinkled her nose in confusion. "What is viggles?" she asked in her accented English.

8 Lt. Halvorsen held out his arms and rocked them back and forth, making the children laugh. Now that they understood the signal, some suggested he leave right away and get ready for the candy drop.

9 After his jeep tour of Berlin, Lt. Halvorsen hitched a ride back home to Rhein-Main Air Force Base in West Germany on an empty cargo plane.<sup>1</sup> Because his next flight to Tempelhof was at 2:00 AM, he tried to get some rest. However, thoughts of candy kept him awake. American airmen received weekly ration cards to buy a few sweets, and his allotment wasn't enough for thirty kids. He needed to talk his crew into donating their rations as well. But candy was like currency in war-ravaged Germany, so they might not be willing to part with it. An airman could hire a German woman to do his weekly wash for a couple of Hershey bars. If he saved up his candy ration, he could even pick up a camera on the black market.<sup>2</sup> And that was in West Germany—in Berlin, a chocolate bar had ten times the value.

10 Nevertheless, when Lt. Halvorsen announced his plan, his crew quickly agreed to donate their candy, even though they might be making trouble for themselves by not asking permission. But how should they go about dropping the sweets? One package, though not large, dropped at 115 miles (185 kilometers) per hour would be a dangerous missile. Halvorsen decided on three smaller packages suspended on parachutes made from handkerchiefs.

11 Later the next day, as the lieutenant came in for a noon landing at Tempelhof, he spotted his thirty kids waiting, necks craned to the sky. He wiggled the wings of his Douglas C-54, and they went wild, waving and cheering and running in circles.

12 “Now!” Lt. Halvorsen cried to Sergeant Elkins, the crew chief, who thrust the three handkerchiefs into the tube for releasing emergency flares. The little parachutes shot out of the tube “like popcorn.” But had the candy drifted lazily into eager fingers or settled on roofs or even on the runway?

13 The answer came a few minutes later. Soon after German volunteers had emptied the Skymaster's cargo hold of its flour, Halvorsen started up the engines. The steady stream of air traffic demanded a quick turnaround—unload and get back in the air. As their plane rumbled down the taxi strip, the crew spotted three white handkerchiefs fluttering through the wire fence.

14 “The little parachutes were being waved . . . at every crew as each aircraft taxied<sup>3</sup> by,” Halvorsen recalls. “Behind the three with the parachutes were the rest of the cheering section with both arms waving above their heads and every jaw working on a prize.”



**In the beginning Halvorsen's fellow airmen kept Operation Little Vittles going by contributing their candy rations and handkerchiefs.**

<sup>1</sup> *cargo plane* — an airplane that carries supplies

<sup>2</sup> *the black market* — an unofficial, often secretive way to purchase goods

<sup>3</sup> *taxied* — drove on the ground



**Candy parachutes scatter from a C-54. Though Halvorsen initially jettisoned only three candy-laden handkerchiefs, later drops released hundreds or even thousands of parachutes at a time.**

15 During the next two weeks Lt. Halvorsen and his crew made two more drops to the kids, who waited patiently until they spotted the plane with the wiggling wings. The group at the end of the runway swelled in size each time. Then the mail began to pour into Tempelhof Central Airport: letters addressed to Onkel Wackelflügel (Uncle Wiggly Wings) or Der Schokoladen-flieger (The Chocolate Pilot). All the publicity made the crew nervous. “Holy cow!” Lt. Halvorsen exclaimed when he first laid eyes on the stacks of envelopes waiting for him at Tempelhof. Now he was certain trouble was knocking at the door. The sheer volume of mail was enough to tip off his superior officers about the candy drops. So Halvorsen and the rest of the crew decided that the next load of six parachutes would be their last—but it was already too late.

16 The day after what they thought was their last candy drop, the commanding officer summoned Halvorsen to his office at Rhein-Main Air Force Base. “What in the world have you been doing?” Colonel Haun demanded. He plopped a newspaper from Frankfurt, Germany, on the desk. “You almost hit a reporter in the head with a candy bar in Berlin yesterday. He’s spread the story all over Europe.”

17 Standing before the peeved superior officer, Lt. Halvorsen thought his flying days might be over. Then Colonel Haun said, “The general called me with congratulations, and I didn’t know anything about it. Why didn’t you tell me?”

18 The reporter had nicknamed the candy drops “Operation Little Vittles” and praised the pilot’s efforts. Apparently the US Air Force loved the good publicity, because Lt. Halvorsen was ordered to appear at an upcoming international press conference. The colonel was only upset that General Tunner had caught him off guard. “Keep flying,” he told Halvorsen, “keep dropping, and keep me informed.”