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Little Things Mean a Lot

Lt. Christian nosed the Big Easy down the taxiway toward takeoff position. We were soon in the air. Being a passenger seemed very strange but fun. The weather was beautiful as we took our place in that long string of airborne grocery stores. All seemed well with the world. The Berliners were going to receive a record number of tons that day but it would still be well below the amount needed for survival. Could we provide an even greater amount when the weather got really bad? Looking up ahead in the corridor we could see some airspace where a few more planes could be squeezed in, but could the two airfields in Berlin handle the required increase? At this time the pilots were not aware that the planners were way ahead of us in considering an additional airfield. Stalin's bet that we couldn't do it looked good to the odds makers. Most thought the airlift would certainly fail with the onset of the normal Fall and Winter weather. There were a few pilots in that group who were also believers. Tunner's Chief of Staff, Col. Milton, now a retired General, has said that General Tunner was the only one who knew the job could be done by air.

We soon took our place in the line up in the sky for a landing at Tempelhof. The aircraft swept over the tall apartment buildings on the end of the runway and in the next ten minutes we welcomed aboard the eager, friendly Berliners to extract the plump sacks of dried potatoes. I never got tired of the warm, genuine greeting extended by those grateful souls who burst through the cargo door to relieve the big bird of its precious cargo.

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I rushed into Base Operations and called the number for the sergeant with the jeep. In two minutes it was all arranged for a pick up on the flight line in one hour. Just enough time to get pictures of the airplanes popping over the apartment buildings across the field and to get back.

I hurried along inside the barbed wire fence and in about 20 minutes I had covered the two miles and was looking through the barbed wire fence at the apartments. The grassy open place across the fence, just before the apartments, was a little wider than it looked from the air. The terminal building and the runway were at my back. The end of the pierced steel plank runway was very near and the terminal building was all the way across the airfield.

The first thing that caught my eye was about thirty kids in the middle of that grassy strip watching the planes swoop over the roof tops to a landing just behind where I was standing. Now the children were watching me, an American pilot in uniform.



The airlift became a game for the kids to pass the long siege hours. Their bricks are in the shape of the Tempelhof hanger.

By the time my Revere movie camera had recorded a few feet of film with aircraft seemingly popping out of the chimneys, half of the kids were right up against the fence across from me.

It didn't take long to exhaust my German vocabulary with, "Guten Tag, we gehts?"

I was immediately greeted with a torrent of responses that were geared to someone with a greater command of the language. We were soon joined by the rest of the children.

It was a mixed group. Most of them were between the ages of 8 and 14 and evenly split between boys and girls. They were not especially well dressed but their clothes had been kept in good repair. Some were patched. All were clean.

After a few giggles and animated discussion between themselves, they appointed two or three as spokespersons for the group. Children were taught English in the schools and several of the kids spoke it quite well.

The group was there because they had a tremendous investment in the outcome. Besides, it was interesting to see such a concentration of aircraft dedicated to their survival. Some children were timing aircraft arrivals and could tell of the weekly increases in the number of landings.

One of the first questions was, "How many sacks of flour does each of the aircraft carry?" There had been some discussion about how many equivalent loaves of bread came across the fence with each aircraft. Were we really flying in fresh milk for the younger children? What about the other cargo? How many tons? One question came one right behind the other.

Then I received a lesson about priorities. They were interested in freedom more than flour. They fully recognized that between the two there was a real relationship but they had already decided which was preeminent. I was astonished with the maturity and clarity that they exhibited in advising me of what their values were and what was of greatest importance to them in these circumstances.

In the months between the time the aircraft over Berlin changed their cargo from bombs to flour the children had witnessed an accelerated change in international relations. These young kids began giving me the most meaningful lesson in freedom I ever had. Here

I was, an American, almost bald-headed at the age of 27, yet I was learning about something I obviously took too much for granted.

One of the principal spokespersons was a little girl of about 12 years with wistful blue eyes. She wore a pair of trousers that looked as though they belonged to an older brother and a pair of shoes that had seen better days on someone half again her size.

"Almost every one of us here experienced the final battle for Berlin. After your bombers had killed some of our parents, brothers and sisters, we thought nothing could be worse. But that was before the final battle. From that time until the Americans, British, and French came into the city we saw first hand the communist system. We've learned much more since that time. We don't need lectures on freedom. We can walk on both sides of the border. What you see speaks more strongly than words you hear or read." Her sentences came out with difficulty and not just as quoted but with the same points of emphasis.

A boy, not much older and standing near continued, "We have aunts, uncles, and cousins who live in East Berlin and in East Germany and they tell us how things are going for them. When they are here they use our library to read what is really going on in the world. They can say what they think when they are over here among family or with known friends."

It was soon obvious that these young people had been schooled and tested in a laboratory far more rigorous than any classroom situation. The lessons they had learned were deeply implanted over the scars left by the trauma of war.

None had asked if I had been in one of those bombers in former times. I certainly wore the uniform they had been taught to hate; a symbol of death from the skies. Yet in none of their conversation or in their tone of voice was there a sign of resentment or hostility. It was freedom, not flour, that they were concerned with that warm July afternoon in 1948.

Those who had parents, or a single parent, or only brothers or sisters, all believed that someday there would be enough to eat, but if they lost their freedom they feared they would never get it back.

What they referred to as freedom was the idea that they could be what they wanted to be, to choose their course in life without being told what they would be, that they could really have open access to a free press, and speak freely their thoughts on a subject without fear.

Very high on their priority was to be able to travel if and when they had the means.

The wistful blue-eyed girl made the point that they could get by with very little for quite awhile if they knew they could depend on us to stick by them and do the best we could.

The conversation, labored as it had to be given the language barrier, coupled with its interest, had consumed much more time than I had allowed. My thoughts returned to the jeep and the driver and my worry was that he would not wait. More than an hour had already passed.

My thoughts were interrupted again by the little girl, "You must not believe that Berlin weather is always like today because if the blockade is not lifted by late fall it may be impossible to bring us enough, even the littlest amount to save us. The weather is very bad in early winter."

She said more but her words were washed away by four Twin Wasp R-2000 engines directly over our heads, responding to a pilot's demand for a little cushion to break his decent before impact with the runway. The added power was enough, but even then you could see the main landing gear struts almost bottom out.

I scarcely heard her words before the airplane. My thoughts were on the jeep. In a moment I whirled to go, then paused long enough to thank them, to reassure them that more planes and crew members were coming every day, and to marvel to myself about what I had heard and learned from those so young.

How much their aspirations matched the advertised goals of our great land. These were the enemy? Or was it just their leaders or the system? Were any of these Hitler's youth? Somebody was. What did they really think of the situation now? Were they being honest with me or telling me what I wanted to hear? Too much to ponder, I had to run.

My preconceived prejudice was melting like the proverbial January thaw. The children got to me more than the flour "unloaders" had.

"Sorry kids, I must go," I waved over my shoulder. My overriding thoughts were to get that jeep and make up for precious lost time. It would be nice to get back to Rhein-Main in time to have one or two hours sleep before our flight shifts started again. In that frame of mind it was unlikely that a totally different outside thought could get inside my head and affect my course of action, but it did.

At first it was hard to identify the intruder. It was ever so soft, so small a probe as to be indistinguishable. But there it was. By now I was 50 yards away, headed for the jeep, but my mind was still back at the fence.

What really makes those kids so different? The query was soon turned away and my mind was fixed hard ahead on the jeep. Again the probe got in with a little more persistence. It was quickly answered. They are mature beyond their years. They have been through experiences and come to conclusions that are not representative of children at this point in their developmental cycle. That complicated answer, good as it seemed, didn't take care of it.

But why are they really different, in what other way? persisted. The question demanded closer scrutiny. I stopped in my tracks.

They had forgiven a previous enemy in uniform, but that wasn't it. Then the answer came with a rush.

Not one of almost 30 kids, most of whom hadn't had any gum or candy for two or three years, was willing to become a beggar and ask, verbally or by body language, if they could have some chocolate or gum. They must have wondered and believed that I had at least a taste.

I was sure that the image and memory of candy and gum, the special prize of any child, must have been held tightly in their minds. For years it hadn't been for real, tightly held in their fists or secured in their pockets.

They were so grateful for freedom and our desire to help them with these meager food supplies that they refused to tarnish their feelings of gratitude for something so nonessential and so extravagant.

For all to refuse the beggar's role without exception or pre-agreement made it the more remarkable. I do not believe grown-ups would have shown the same restraint. The gentle probe now concerned getting to the jeep, but it didn't have the same quality as its predecessor.

The contrast that gave the moment meaning was my experience during the war and afterward. In South America, Africa, and other countries, an American in uniform was fair game on the street for kids with a sweet tooth. Thousands of American G.I.s filled the special craving of countless little ones and did so willingly, even by design. It became a conditioned response: a group of kids, their immediate, strong request, hand in the pocket for pre-placed goodies for such an

encounter, and the pleasure of dispensing same. Here there had been no request.

Against the Berlin backdrop the difference was staggering. I had been there for over an hour. They had ample opportunity to ask. Not one had given the slightest indication of his or her thoughts.

Instinctively I reached in my pocket. There had been no preparation for such a moment. All there were was two sticks of Wrigley's Doublemint gum.

Thirty kids and two sticks, there will be a fight, I rationalized, making a last ditch attempt to resume my course to the jeep.

That was not a satisfactory answer. Such a little thing, two sticks of gum. Will you share it with the kids is the question? Scrooge could not answer that question in the negative, but that was not the issue. The issue was time.

I glanced over my shoulder. The children were there, even pressed against the barbed wire fence, still waving as is the European custom, until the departed guest disappears down the road.

Now was the moment of truth. To the jeep or back to the fence? I didn't know it but if I chose the fence my life would never be the same again. My father had taught me that good things would happen if you did something for someone without expecting anything in return.

I turned abruptly and headed for the fence.

The Commitment

Within the first three return steps the children stopped waving. They expectantly awaited my arrival at the fence. Then they saw my hand come out of my pocket and something, unmistakably, was in it!

Their interest and intensity of expression changed in a flash. There were some who jockeyed for a better position to discover what I had. My fears began to rise that the pushing would take an ugly turn but it was too late to turn back. I was committed.

In the last few steps to the fence I broke the two sticks of gum in half and headed for the children who had been the translators.

Their hands were now through the barbed wire. There was no need to await my verbal offer. My actions had already telegraphed my intent and they had accepted.

The four pieces were quickly placed. There was a short gasp as one boy engaged a fence barb in his forearm because of the excitement. In all my experience, including Christmases past, I had never witnessed such an expression of surprise, joy, and sheer pleasure that I beheld in the eyes and faces of those four young people. Nor do I remember seeing such disappointment as was evident in the eyes of those who came so close. The disappointed looks were transitory and tempered by their much more difficult trials and disappointments over the past months. The pleased looks of the four were frozen in time.

There was no fighting or attempts to grab away the prize given to the four who were busy carefully removing the wrapper. No chance could be risked that the smallest piece might fall to the ground.

The quiet was broken with a rising babble from the rest. They were requesting a share in the tin foil or the outer wrapper. Strips were torn off and passed around. The recipients' eyes grew large as they smelled the bits of wrapper and recalled better times.

After a brief moment they placed the tiny wrapper in their shirt or trouser pocket as though it were a \$50.00 bill. There was someone special in their lives who would believe their story if there were some evidence.

My eyes were sending me a message that my brain couldn't understand. What an impact from just a tiny piece of wrapper, let alone the expression of the four who had received the contents.

I must have been a sight, standing there in wide mouthed amazement. What I could do with 30 full sticks of gum! They could have the wrapper and all, quickly went through my mind.

Immediate thoughts of when I could come back to the fence were answered by: It will be a long time. You'll be flying without any sleep for twenty-four hours and that can't be repeated soon.

Just then another C-54 swooped over our heads, across the fence and landed. Two little plumes of white smoke came off the main tires as they touched down on the pierced steel planked runway and squealed up to speed. That plane gave me a sudden flash of inspiration.

Why not drop some gum and even chocolate to these kids out of our airplane the next daylight trip to Berlin? We will have such a flight the next day, this suggestion came to mind so fast it caught me unawares.

You will get in a heap of trouble if you are caught, came a quick and rational response.

This whole blockade is a violation of human rights. Compared to mass starvation this shouldn't get me any more than a minor court martial, I answered myself.

Why not get permission? You know how long that will take? The airlift will be over by then and it is just a one-time thing, besides, we'll only be about 90 feet in the air, answered my desire.

To my own astonishment and dismay I found myself in the next moment announcing the plan for all to hear.

At first their response was cautiously reserved for fear they had misunderstood. I took the opportunity to add, "I will do this thing

only if the persons who catch the packets will share equally with everyone in the group."

By now, those most proficient in the language had confirmed this crazy, unbelievable proposition to the others and the noisy celebration had already begun. Added to the celebration were shouts of "Jawohl! Jawohl! Jawohl!" from everyone in answer to the requirement to share. Then it became very quiet.

The little girl with the wistful blue eyes was prodded to be the spokesperson. "They want to know which aircraft you will be flying. Such a small package would be too easily lost, especially if you come late and we have tired by watching all day in vain," she excitedly stammered out while gazing intently into my face.

My face had a frown. There was no way to know what specific plane I would be assigned on any flight, let alone that special one. It would be a four engine C-54 for sure. If I did know which airplane, there would be no way to identify it from all the rest of them coming over the apartment building. Then another flash of inspiration from my days flying over the farm in Garland, Utah.

Why not wiggle the wings? The thought passed through my mind like a lightning bolt. That was the answer!

"You kids watch the aircraft approaching Tempelhof, especially when they pass over the field. When I get overhead I will wiggle the wings of that big airplane back and forth several times. That is the signal," I said with noticeable enthusiasm.

Now the frown was on blue eye's face and several others standing nearby. Now what is wrong, I wondered. It seemed so good and so clear.

"What is viggler?" she asked with a wrinkle on her nose. With both arms extended I gave a demonstration that could have won an Oscar. It did bring some laughs. The enthusiasm continued to build.

There just didn't seem to be anything more to discuss. Action was clearly the next step. A few suggested that I leave and get the project started. My thoughts quickly returned to the jeep.

Luckily, the driver was still waiting. I was very late.

The young driver was from Boulder, Colorado, smartly dressed in his well-tailored uniform and spit-and-polish boots. "Did you get your pictures, lieutenant?" he asked. "You bet! Sorry it took so long." I replied

with no hint that something else more important had occurred and was about to burst my calm exterior.

The jeep motor caught immediately and we exited Tempelhof gate at a brisk pace into a scene of man's inhumanity to man. England, Japan, Russia, and countless other countries could give like evidence.

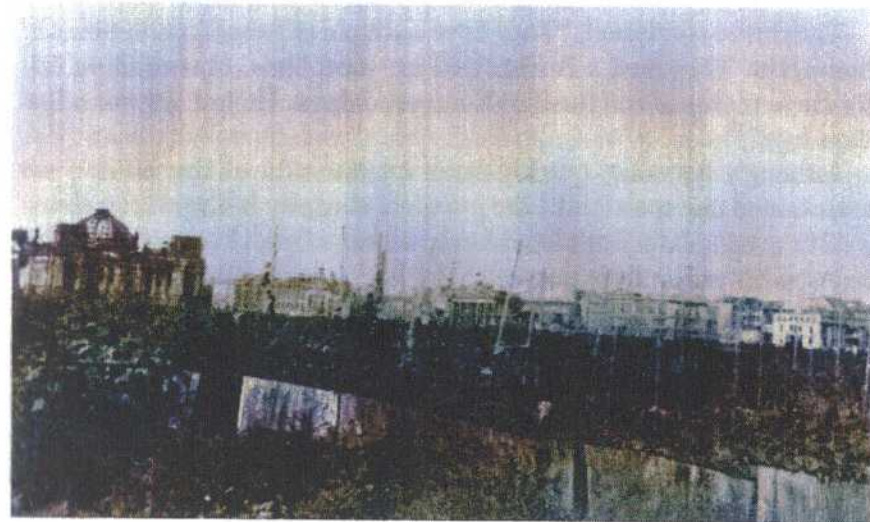
We wove our way in and out of the rubble-strewn streets. In between the streets, gutted buildings without roofs or windows stared up at the open sky in an unchanging trance, a web of twisted girders fell crazily across bomb craters that dotted the city's face like small pox scars. Down the Unter den Linden we arrived at the Brandenburg Gate.

Even in its tattered war-torn cloak, the majesty of the 1791, eight-story edifice, mounted on its twelve enormous Doric columns was splendid to behold. Gotthard Langhaus designed it after the Propylaea in Athens.³⁶ The chariot, quadriga, astride the top of the gate, proceeding toward the East, listed to one side with pieces of the chariot, wheels, charioteer, and four horses lost amid rubble, remaining and removed. It would be ten years later until the structure was fully restored, and 13 years before it would be blocked from the West with an ugly grey wall.

Our jeep was parked in front of the Brandenburg Gate in the middle of the Unter den Linden, the once-bustling great highway, the East-West Axis. It was the site of the last active airstrip that was to serve Hitler directly. Light planes had come and gone bringing special documents, passengers, or material, using the highway from there to the Victory Column as their runway.

In early April, 1945, the removal of Reichsminister Albert Speer's ornamental bronze lamp posts and the trees from beside the great highway had been the subject of furious debate between the Reichsminister and the Commandant of Berlin, General Reymann. The removal of these obstructions, both so symbolic of the sophisticated heart of Berlin, was necessary to make room for the wing span of larger aircraft to assuage the death throws of Berlin. By then it was far too late. The argument was academic.³⁷

From there we drove the short distance to the Reichstag, the center of the City and prime target for the competing Soviet Generals Zhukov and Koniev. It was a stupendous ruin, originally dedicated to the German people, set fire first by Hitler's Nazi henchmen in 1933, a



Top photo is the Brandenburg Gate and the bottom photo is the Reichstag, through the gardens planted to aid the Berliners' survival. Pictures were taken on my visit with the jeep, just after speaking with the children at the fence. (July, 1948) Moments later we were pursued by the Russians.

flaming foot stool on his ascendancy to power. It was to become a more raging funeral pyre to the Third Reich, not far from Hitler's final resting place, the Bunker.

In a few minutes we were driving past the Brandenburg Gate again and were soon at Hitler's Bunker. There was not much to see.

We wouldn't be there long. The driver suddenly exclaimed, "Jump in the jeep quick, let's get going."

I didn't need a repeat of the message because of the urgency with which it was delivered. By the time I had thrown my leg over the seat on the passenger side he had the engine started and the wheels churning dirt and gravel. My curiosity was running a close second to my pulse rate. A look over my shoulder revealed a pursuing jeep with Soviet markings, driven by an apparent madman in a Russian uniform. He was being encouraged by a comrade of like demeanor and dress in the passenger seat.

"Why are they chasing us?" I demanded.

"It happens that the Bunker is on their side of the border and lately they don't take very kindly to Americans and airlift pilots in particular," he replied somewhat apologetically. "I was watching for them at the Brandenburg Gate. Didn't think they were out today."

The driver continued, "They have a couple of Americans in jail over there now. They had a British Officer, John Sims, in a stinking cell for three nights at the Russian Kommandatura. He just got out a few days ago."³⁸

Although we were quickly back on our side of the border, we maintained our speed until the pursuers abruptly broke off the chase.

"It's getting late. Let's head back to Tempelhof," I suggested. I was relieved but still a little peeved that I hadn't been made aware of the sensitivity of the situation. There would have been some disappointed kids and a real angry Lt. Colonel Haun if my afternoon in Berlin had turned into an overnight.

Back on the ground at Rhein-Main I found that our crew was on the schedule for a 02:00 hours departure the next morning, back to Berlin. A little quick arithmetic indicated that we should have one trip at a reasonable hour in the daylight.

As I crawled into the loft John was sound asleep. How we could sleep up there, so near the Rhein-Main final approach, with an aircraft whizzing by every few minutes, was not really a mystery if one

considered our flight schedule. If I hurried there might be two hours sleep available for me.

Tired as I was, sleep wouldn't come. It seemed like a whole week of unreal events had been crowded into the last 12 hours. How to keep the commitment I had made to the kids was the current prime stimulant. We could buy a very limited amount of gum and candy. The amount was strictly controlled by a ration card. There wasn't enough available on my card to do justice to the kids. I needed Pickering's and Elkin's rations as well. How would they react to my request, and more particularly to the reason for it? At least the Base Exchange was open for such purchases 24 hours a day.

If we put three rations in one package and they lost it, they would lose all. The one package wouldn't be very big, but going 115 miles an hour it could make a big impact if it hit one of the targets too directly. At that altitude they wouldn't have time to duck.

It made some sense to split the drop into three packages. It made even more sense to put a handkerchief parachute on each package to slow the fall and mark the treasure. There was an emergency flare chute right behind the pilot's seat that was within Elkin's reach. He could push it out just as we passed over the roof of the apartment house on the final approach.

That decided, I dozed off just in time to be awakened. "Glad you made it back, Hal," yawned John matter-of-factly. "Have a good trip?"

The sales job on my two buddies was effective because their hearts were as big as usual, but the goods weren't obtained without some words of prophecy.

"You are going to get us in one big mess of trouble," said John. Elkins cast a similar vote as they somewhat reluctantly forked over their neatly packaged and fragrant rations of chocolate bars and packages of gum. The sight and smell of it, and the thought of the kids, sent a thrill all through me. If they thought half a stick of gum was great wait until they got some chocolate and gum with wrapper!

A firm pact of utmost secrecy was mutually taken and we were on our way to Berlin. The first flight was in the dark, and being pre-Tunner days, we had some unusual traffic delays.

The second flight was just right. We were going to arrive over Tempelhof on prime time, just before noon.

We strained our eyes to catch sight of the kids as we approached Tempelhof at 1500 feet. Sure enough, there they were, all together in a little knot in the middle of the grassy strip in front of the apartment building. They appeared to be scanning the heavens.

"Looks like they haven't told another soul," I said with a grin. "Reckon there is about the same number as yesterday."

With that I rolled in left aileron and fed in a little left rudder. The wing went down and just as the nose started to turn I fed in right rudder and right aileron, almost crossing controls to keep the wings wiggling and the nose straight ahead.

The recognition was instant. That little band literally blew up, waving, jumping, circling, and sending, we were sure, a few silent prayers. In my minds eye I could see the little blue-eyed girl in those oversize



Rhein-Main, preparing for the first drop to the Berlin children at the fence. The other two parachutes were already aboard. (July, 1948)

shoes and trousers. My bone-tired weariness was completely gone.

We swung around the pattern, briefed Elkins again on how he would do it on my signal, and quickly we were on the final approach. The three loaded handkerchiefs were attached to the goodies by strings about 14 inches long. The handkerchiefs were folded in a special way ready to drop. By now the kids were out of sight behind the apartment building.

Excitement and concern for what we were about to do was growing in the cockpit. What if we dropped the packages on top of the



An artist's conception of a recipient.



Some of the waiting children

apartment or beyond the barbed-wire fence, onto the runway?

“What if an aircraft waiting for takeoff would happen to see the parachutes and get our tail number?” asked John with a frown. “Give me full flaps and 2400 RPM,” I replied. No time to change our minds. We were committed.

The apartment house came under the nose of the airplane in a blur. For an instant the group of kids were visible, still waving, all turned toward the building, faces skyward.

“Now, Elkins,” I shouted. With a quick thrust he had the little packages out of the flare

chute and almost as quickly we were on the runway.

The question on all of our minds was where did the parachutes land? We would have to wait for the answer.

Unloading seemed to go slower than usual. Little was being said. Everyone was deep in their own thoughts and concern for what the results of this impulsive act would bring.

Operation Little Vittles

The engines coughed to life and Tempelhof tower came through crystal clear, “Big Willy 495, you are cleared to taxi to takeoff position. Call when number one.”

In moments we were proceeding down the taxi strip inside the barbed-wire fence, headed for the takeoff position opposite the apartment buildings. As we made the last right turn we could see down the barbed wire all the way to the buildings. There was the answer!

Protruding through the fence were three little parachutes extended by several animated arms attached to three vibrant bodies. The little parachutes were being waved without discrimination at every crew as each aircraft taxied by. 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. The long trousers quickly identified blue eyes. She was radiant!

“Guess they got it O.K. and it looks shared,” beamed John’s deep voice. “Sure does, I must have hit them right on the head,” said Elkins proudly.

“Wish they wouldn’t wave like that,” I added somewhat seriously as I slid back my side cockpit window to give the children a return wave.

Pickering, noticing my reserve added, “Don’t worry, you didn’t have a name tag on when you talked to them. You didn’t give them your name, did you?”

"No I didn't, and I didn't take my hat off, so they don't know I'm almost bald-headed," I answered with a little more hope. "They don't know who we are."

The next daylight trip we noticed a few more in the group on the end of the runway, all waving at each aircraft, landing, taxiing, and about to take off. We figuratively held our breath each day, waiting for a summons that didn't come. We were grateful for that.

Several conversations were overheard in the mess hall and base operations between pilots wondering why the kids were making such a fuss on the end of the runway. We renewed our pledge of secrecy.

A few days later, after we had finished unloading our cargo of coal, we couldn't get number 2 engine to turn over. The starter motor was out. Very little maintenance was done in Berlin. If we weren't able to start the engine we could feather the prop and take off on three engines then start it in the air. That was strictly an emergency procedure to be used as a last resort.

We were about to ask for Operations approval when up drove a maintenance jeep. "Those engines take a Jack and Heintz 1015 starter motor and we sure don't have any. There isn't enough wind out there for Operations to give you a three-engine try. We've got something better in the person of Ebert Herman," said a grizzled, old master sergeant.

"What can he do?" I quizzed.

"He and a couple of sharp mechanics can start you with a bungee cord," he said matter-of-factly.

It turned out that Ebert had developed a way to attach a bungee, a heavy elastic cord, to the tip of a prop, stretch it to a given limit, and quickly release the prop. Warm as the day and the engine were, it should work.

I watched with great interest as Ebert and crew went about their job. With all switches ready in the cockpit they released the prop with a twang. The engine coughed twice and was soon running smoothly.

"I'll be darned," muttered Elkins, "I've seen everything now."

A week quickly went by. The crowd of kids was noticeably larger and still enthusiastic. When we were able to buy a new week's ration we knowingly looked at each other. On the spot we again pooled our resources, came over Tempelhof, wiggled our wings, caused a celebration, and delivered the goods on target.

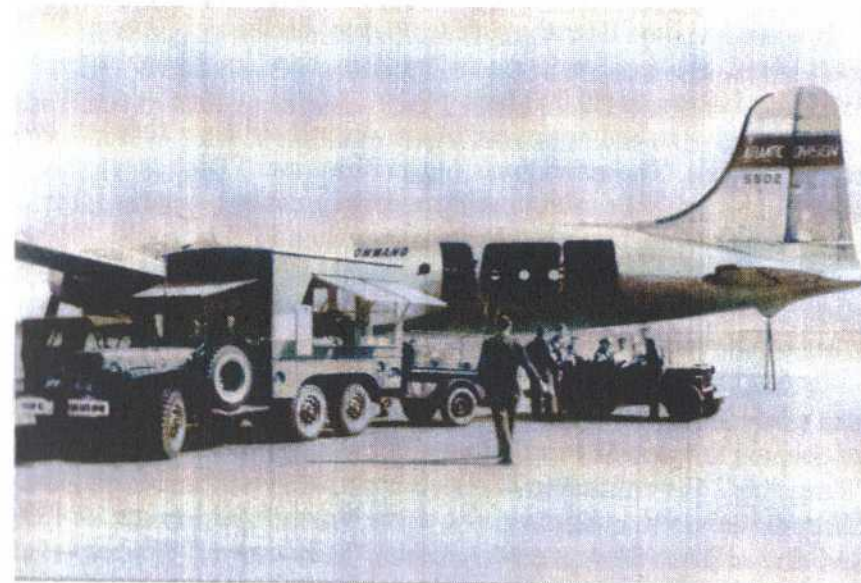
Another week went by and the group on the end of the runway was now a good-sized crowd. We knew that a lot of kids in the group hadn't received any goodies and we set about to correct the inequity.

Every time we wiggled the wings of that airplane we were treated to a remarkable spontaneous demonstration of sheer joy. This third group, swelled by newcomers, gave us the biggest demonstration yet.

A few more days went by and the forerunner of things to come, a dense fog bank, swept up from the south and fell over our West German bases at Rhein-Main and Wiesbaden like a down comforter. We literally took off on the gauges from Rhein-Main to Berlin. By the time we got over Fulda, the weather broadcast said the stuff had blanketed most all of Western Europe.

"Wonder what will be open on our return flight?" asked John. "This stuff is practically zero zero."

The mobile snack bar established by General Tunner and the personal service of the weatherman, who provided plane-side briefings, were welcome additions to operating procedures. In turn, we were to stand right by the aircraft and depart the second the big semi-trucks cleared our tail.



The traveling snack bar and the weatherman's jeep at Tempelhof.

That flight the weatherman wasn't there. With limited fuel it was essential to know where we had the best chance of getting in upon returning to West Germany. After waiting a few more minutes, I told Pickering I was going to run into Base Operations and see if I could get a quick look at the weather map.

As I came into Base Operations there was a large planning table just inside that would accommodate extended maps, charts, and flight-planning materials. At the moment it was stacked high with what appeared to be mail. Strange use for the table, and a stranger way to treat mail, I thought as I sidled up for a better look at this unorthodox display.

It only took a glance to freeze me in my tracks. The letters were addressed to "Uncle Wackelflugel [Wiggly Wings]" and "The Schokoladen Flieger," Tempelhof Central Airport, Berlin.

I flew back out the door without the weather but with an even larger burden.

"Holy cow, guys," I blurted out. "There is a whole post office full of mail in there for us!" The three of us decided not only to lay low for a while but to quit. We had done more than was expected and this was the point to stop.

It was a few days later that our flight over Berlin on 12 August 1948 took place, the near mid-air collision in the cloud, holding over Wedding beacon at 10,000 feet.

Our resolve to not make any more drops held firm through two ration periods. The crowd was bigger than ever. That meant there were quite a number who hadn't received a sweet surprise.

Again we looked at each other knowingly and Elkins said, "What are you guys doing with your rations these days?" In a moment it was determined that we had all saved our rations for both periods. A short conversation resulted in, "Just one more drop and that is absolutely all."

It took about six overloaded handkerchiefs to handle all the goodies our pooled rations required. We had them on the flight deck ready to drop on the next day trip. The weather was good as we approached Tempelhof. The crowd was easily picked up at a pretty good distance. The reaction to the wiggling of the wings was reward enough for the last drop. Elkins, now an expert, called, "Bombs away!" We were soon on the ground and in the unloading process.

Taxiing out for takeoff, the testimony to our proficiency was displayed all along the barbed wire fence. As we nosed the aircraft down the runway and smoothly shoved the throttles to the wall we made a solemn pact that this really was the last of the drops.

The next day on arrival back at Rhein-Main from Berlin, an officer met our airplane. That was not a normal procedure.

Without much of an introduction the officer led off with, "Col. James R. Haun would like to speak with the pilot." If there had been any doubt in my mind whether I was the pilot, my crew buddies put that question to rest.

The military secretary announced my arrival to the Colonel. I felt my marginal blood pressure cross the border. I wasn't kept waiting.

"Halvorsen, what in the world have you been doing?" came what seemed to me a very stiff query from the good Colonel Haun.

"Flying like mad, Sir," came my best reply.

"I'm not stupid. What else have you been doing?" came a better question.

Then it was that I knew that he knew. For a moment it seemed like that long thin thread leading from the sugar beet field in Garland, Utah to Berlin was about to break. "Oh well," I thought, "there must be something in the world besides flying."

This fine commander who had accepted my transfer from the C-74 squadron in Mobile in order that I could join the airlift was now in a position to correct the error. He was much firmer than I had ever seen him before.

"Didn't they teach you in ROTC at Utah State to keep your boss informed?" came a burst that cast questions even on my earliest military training, let alone a great University. More seriously, it also indicated that he had been going over my file. How else would he know where I had those two quarters of college work? Things looked grim.

Then in one motion he reached under the desk, as though he was reaching for a whip, but came up with the *Frankfurter Zeitung*, a newspaper, and put it where I couldn't miss it.

"Look at this," he invited. "You almost hit a reporter in the head with a candy bar in Berlin yesterday. He's spread the story all over Europe. The General called me with congratulations and I didn't know anything about it. Why didn't you tell me?"

My reply was rather weak, "I didn't think you would approve it before the airlift was over, Sir."

"You mean to tell me that after we had dropped thousands of sticks of bombs on that city and the Russians are now trying to starve the rest of them to death, that you didn't think that I would approve dropping a few sticks of gum?" he ended incredulously with volume to spare.

"Guess I wasn't too smart, Sir," I admitted.

"General Tunner wants to see you and there is an International Press conference set up for you in Frankfurt. Fit them into your schedule. And Lieutenant, keep flying, keep dropping, and keep me informed." he smiled for the first time as he finished and shook my hand.

I left the office in much better condition than I had entered. "Wished I had the nerve to ask him exactly how he really knew it was me," I wondered. "The newspaper man must have got my tail number yesterday and thought he was doing me a favor."

The newspaper article had probably saved us and the operation. The press dubbed the project, "Operation Little Vittles" taken from the big operation, Vittles, and so it remained.

Pickering and Elkins were waiting for me. "Are we going to have a new pilot?" Elkins asked. It was a rhetorical question. They already guessed all was well from the look on my face.

The next trip to Berlin the three of us went into Tempelhof Base Operations with our arms full of bags to pick up the mail from the Berlin kids. We didn't have time to read it and even if we had we couldn't. Some letters were written in English but most were in the native tongue.

Colonel Walter S. Lee, the Base Commander at Rhein-Main, provided two German secretaries and a place to call home for the operation. There would be no change in our flight responsibilities so the extra help, plus many other volunteers, were essential and appreciated.

The secretaries began the work of sending out replies to the letters. There were about four form letters that took care of most. The rest were given special treatment. With the help of the secretaries those letters that needed special care were translated and given to me for action or reply. Gisela Hering, a native German secretary, was the main helper that kept things moving.

With the secret out, I would come back to the old barn and find my cot covered with cases of candy bars and chewing gum. They could have brought their owners several German cameras on the black market. Handkerchiefs for parachutes would often be stacked along side the goodies. Because of the great value of these materials on the black market I was especially concerned that these and other donations were put to their intended use. I stopped paying the ladies at the Zeppelinheim fence with candy and gum for laundry.

We soon ran out of handkerchiefs and used old shirt sleeves for candy bags and shirt tails for parachutes. That phase was short lived. Our supply officer, Capt. Donald H. Kline, was able to obtain twelve beautiful silk chutes about three feet in diameter. They would handle a very healthy load.

Looking them over and being short on parachutes, I naturally wanted them back to use again. Most everyone laughed at my idea. "Boys and girls will have those things made into shirts and unmentionables before you get out of town," several said almost in unison.



*Displaying one of the larger silk chutes used.
May 1963.*

I had Gisela write twelve notes in German that said, "Please return this parachute to any American Military Policeman that you see so it may be used again." Next to it I wrote in English, "Please return this parachute to Tempelhof Base Operations for Operation Little Vittles."

We had enough rations to make the most of these beautiful pieces of cloth. "You'll never see them again," said Lt. Bill Christian, a usually upbeat and optimistic friend. But that afternoon, we watched

the crowd celebrating as the larger chutes billowed and serenely sailed on a gentle breeze to different parts of the group. I could even almost hear an "AH!" from below at such a sight.

That afternoon, on a subsequent flight, I ran into Operations to see if some might have been returned. My expectations were not very high so it was a double pleasure to find six of the twelve waiting for me. Eventually that group was reduced to one. It is in the Air Force museum at Wright-Patterson Air Force Base, Dayton, Ohio.

It didn't take the children in Berlin long to hear about our parachute shortage. The letters we received began to include parachutes the kids had caught that were returned for refills. Those who hadn't caught any made parachutes of their own. The parachute usually had a companion piece, most often a map.

The secretaries gave me a letter from Peter Zimmerman who was about nine years old. His letter included a crude piece of cloth of about the right size, with four stout strings attached to the four corners. He had seen a real one first hand, moments too late to claim it.

His map was a classic. The letter went on to say that he couldn't run very fast and wasn't doing too well. "Please note the map," he had written. "As you see, after takeoff fly along the big canal to the second highway bridge, turn right one block. I live in the bombed-out house on the corner. I'll be in the back yard every day at 2 PM, drop it there."

In good weather conditions the tower would allow me to fly special deliveries after departing Tempelhof and to join outbound traffic when they could fit me in. Most pilots like to fly low sometimes and I was no exception.

There was a polio hospital in West Berlin that was full of kids with severely limited mobility. It was visited on a regular basis by an American health officer, James J. Gibson, to make sure the children received what they needed from the airlift. On one of his rounds the Doctors handed him a packet of letters from the kids for delivery to me.

The letters were pretty much the same, not an expression of self-pity but an expression of thanks for the daily flights in good and bad weather to support the needs of their beloved city. They went on to mention, almost apologetically, that they were unable to run or walk in an attempt to catch a little parachute.

The main point they all wanted to make was for me to disregard the quiet sign on the streets outside the hospital. The doctors had promised it would O.K. to fly low over the hospital and drop the goodies in the yard. The doctors would bring the parachutes, with the attachments, to the children's beds.

"We have read about your drops and heard of it on the radio. Every time we hear an airplane close, we hope it could be Uncle Wiggly Wings. Could you try especially for us?" they pleaded.

Something would have to be done. The hospital was located in an awkward place for airlift traffic and an excursion in that location probably wouldn't be approved.

A little girl seven years old wrote to me. Her name was Mercedes Simon and she had a problem.

"We live near the airfield at Tempelhof and our chickens think your airplanes are chicken hawks and they become frightened when you fly over to land. They run in the shelter and some moult with no more eggs from them."

The final paragraph was the pay off.

"When you see the white chickens please drop it there, all will be O.K."

Your little friend,
Mercedes



I couldn't find the white chickens and enlisted the help of squadron buddies. They couldn't find the white chickens. We made some extra drops around the Tempelhof approaches but didn't hit the chicken yard.

Have not received any chocolate yet!

But I ain't want thank you for your good will and love!

So I'll be sending you a few draws in Eisenhower to

Berlin
and me!



Peter Zimmerman



Peter Zimmerman's complaint, "No chocolate yet."

We carefully followed the map to Peter Zimmerman's house. Kids in the back yard. Bon Bons away! Next week a letter from Peter, "Didn't get any gum or candy, a bigger kid beat me to it." The next try was futile. His letters had always contained pencil sketches of animals or landscape scenes. One picture depicted an aircraft with little parachutes coming out of it. The words, "No chocolate yet," were written on the tail section and suggested his continuing plight. The last letter didn't have any of these works of art, only:

"You are a Pilot? I gave you a map. How did you guys win the war anyway?"

We gave up on dropping candy to Peter. I packaged a good assortment of candy and gum, took it with me to Tempelhof and mailed it to him through the West Berlin Post.

The thoughts of the 300 kids in the polio hospital were back on my mind. Supplies were coming in fast and furious. The newest contribution was a case of Paris brand bubble gum.



The first big carton of bubble gum. The hospital kids were supplied from this box.

I gathered up a good supply of Clark and Hershey bars, plenty of bubble gum, and hitchhiked back to Berlin for the second time.

James J. Gibson, Jr. met me at the aircraft and in 30 minutes we were at the hospital.

Thinning sugar beets in the dust with a twelve-inch hoe was not conducive to blowing bubble gum bubbles, and I never was a baseball pitcher. At least I could blame my ineptitude on those excuses. How was I going to show these kids that the gum had this special quality? Bubble gum was unknown to them.

Reluctantly Mr. Gibson disclosed that he had practically been a bubble-blowing champion. All he needed was a few minutes practice in the back room. His only handicap was a small wiry moustache!

The chocolate was really appreciated but the bubble gum was the hit of the day. It wasn't long until we could hear bubbles popping up and down the wards. The bright, excited chatter of the children was enough to diffuse some of the concern the nurses had for sticky pillowcases and sheets.



If my heart had been full before it was now overflowing with the reaction and spirit of these marvelous young people who couldn't chase a parachute.

One day I stopped at the mail room at Rhein-Main, hoping for a letter from Alta or the folks. It had been over two weeks without any mail from them. I was taken aback when the mail room clerk asked me a second time for my name and then my I.D. card. The reason was soon apparent.



Visiting children at TB and Polio hospital.



The clerk went to the back room and returned with a half bag of State side mail. "Bring the bag back when you get through, Lieutenant," he said with some wonderment. Others who hadn't received a letter that day gave me some hard stares. I didn't know any more about it than they did although it was likely related to Operation Little Vittles.



One of the many mailbags full of envelopes with handkerchiefs for parachutes.