

# 61 years later, Berlin Airlift still evokes pride

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Veteran believes the audacious operation deserves more shelf space in history



In 1949, a C-54 Skymaster of the 40th troop carrier squadron at Celle Air Force Station in the British zone of occupied Germany awaits to be loaded for the Berlin airlift.

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ENGLEWOOD - Looking back on it, John Chadra sees no irony about the mission for which he was summoned in 1948.

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John Chadra

### Facts

#### THE BERLIN AIRLIFT

**1945:** After World War II, the United States, Britain, France and the Soviet Union took control of Germany, dividing the nation into four zones. Berlin, which was inside the Soviet sphere, was split in half, with the West controlling one side, the Soviets the other.

**Spring, 1948:** Hoping to take control of Berlin, Soviet dictator Joseph Stalin ordered a sea and ground blockade of West Berlin.

**June, 1948:** President Harry Truman responded by ordering an airlift of food, coal and other supplies to 2 million West Berliners.

**Easter, 1949:** The U.S. launched an "Easter Parade" – a record-breaking delivery of food and other supplies over two days.

**May, 1949:** Its effort to take full control of the city shattered by U.S. resolve, the Soviet Union ended the blockade, reopening ground and sea routes to West Berlin.

Just three years after American air forces risked their lives to bomb Nazi Germany, Chadra was given the job of keeping planes flying and saving the lives of millions of Berliners.

The Berlin Airlift became one of the U.S. military's finest hours -- saving a city from starvation without firing a shot.

"Never thought of it as helping our former enemy," said Chadra, 78, an aircraft mechanic, whose 41st Squadron operated just 20 miles west of Soviet tanks and barbed wire. "That was Hitler and his henchmen. Most of these people were innocent and they needed our help."

Chadra is eager to talk about the Berlin Airlift because he fears it has become a forgotten moment in history.

After World War II, Germany was divided into four zones, among U.S., British, French and Soviet forces. Berlin, 100 miles inside Soviet territory, was split between the West and the Soviets.

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But 61 years ago this week, in what was considered the first strike in the Cold War, the Soviet Union blockaded rail and sea cargo to West Berlin. It also severed food and electric supplies.

The only route in and out of the city was a 23-mile-wide air corridor. Options were few: The West lacked enough troops in Germany or will at home for war. Letting West Berlin fall would be a major capitulation to Soviet aggression, which had quickly supplanted Nazism as a threat in Europe.

That left one option: the air. Under President Harry Truman, the United States responded by flying in more than 1,500 tons of food and 3,500 tons of coal and gasoline a day to keep West Berliners alive.

Chadra forged an affidavit when he was 16 to get into the Air Force. He arrived at Celle Air Force Station as a mechanic in November 1948, five months into the airlift. It was a hive of activity.

"They were running a 24-hour operation, seven days a week," Chadra said. "No let up."

Chadra said the unsung hero of the operation was Gen. William H. "Tonnage" Tunner.

During World War II, Tunner led a daring effort to resupply Chinese forces fighting the Japanese by flying over the eastern Himalayan Mountains, or the "Burmese Hump." In Germany, Tunner quickly realized that the U.S. effort needed bigger planes to supply Berliners, primarily Douglas C-54s, which could carry more than 10 tons of supplies.

"Tunner brought in C-54s from anywhere he could get them," Chadra said. "Even commercial airlines. He got every plane in he could get his hands on."

Just how many Americans participated in the Berlin Airlift is hard to calculate, says W.C. "Dub" Southers of Duncanville, Texas. Southers, the secretary of the Berlin Airlift Veterans Association, which boasts 540 actual and honorary members, said: "The whole world was watching. We couldn't afford to fail."

The challenge was to supply each isolated resident with 1,700 calories a day. That translated into 164 tons of wheat and flour a day, 109 tons of meat and fish, five tons of whole milk for children and numerous other foodstuffs.

At Celle, Chadra's job was to keep the planes airborne. Working 12-hour maintenance and loading shifts in clusters of three and four consecutive days each week, Chadra watched the four-engine workhorses touch down every four to five minutes for loads. Scores of German citizens worked as volunteers, unloading the supplies.

Chadra's grind was relieved by occasional forays into the German countryside -- where he remembers giving candy bars to war orphans -- and R&R flights around Europe. What stands out the most is an intramural housing tussle between Chadra's 40th Squadron and members of the newly arrived 41st.

There wasn't enough room in the more hospitable brick barracks to accommodate them all. Unit commanders decided to let the men settle the conundrum on the softball field. The losers would be exiled to spartan Quonset huts. Chadra became a local hero by working the mound and smoking the 40th, something like 16-1 or 16-2.

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Germany was still digging out from World War II. Chadra recalled that the streets were clear, but in some places so much rubble covered the side of the roads that pedestrians walked in the streets. The Germans were hospitable, especially with food and drink.

"I got there weighing 175 and left weighing 215," he said. "It was that pumpernickel bread and beer."

On April 15-16 of 1949, nearly a year into the airlift, the United States began what was dubbed "the Easter Parade." Crews made more than 1,300 sorties, bringing in more than 12,000 tons of supplies in a single 24-hour period.

"We were taking off a minute and a half apart," Chadra said. "We really shoved it right up the Russians."

The spirit of that effort finally broke the resolve of the Soviets, who ended their embargo on May 12, 1949. Chadra doesn't even remember what he was doing.

The flights continued throughout the summer to build up inventories, just in case. Chadra was playing in an Air Force baseball tournament in the U.S. in August when he was told he wouldn't be needed at Celle any more.

All told, 277,569 sorties distributed 2.3 million tons of food and supplies to West Berlin. The U.S. Air Force lost 31 men in the operation, due primarily to pilot error, weather or mechanical problems.

Years later, Chadra returned to Germany as a civil servant, where he got a glimpse of the "balance of terror" and a future that might have been. His job was to test and certify 10-ton trucks manufactured by Germany's MAN corporation for transporting America's Pershing II nuclear missiles.

"They were massive," Chadra says, looking around for an analogy. "They were as big as this trailer."

Chadra says it is a shame that shooting wars grab all the headlines and that the legacy of the Berlin Airlift doesn't occupy more shelf space in history. Then again, its significance washed right over him when he was living through it.

"Maybe you have to have some perspective," Chadra said. "But now I realize I did something good, by fixing those airplanes and helping keep people alive. I'm actually proud of what I did."