The Berlin Airlift began on June 24, 1948 in response to the Soviet Union’s blockade of the capital city of Berlin. This action marked the beginning of the Cold War between the United States and Soviet Union. It was a time of political, technological, and military trial. Most of all it was a period of humanity. The German people were no longer the enemy, but the cold, hungry victims of a cruel and powerful government. What began as an act of division had ended as a way to unite wartime opponents.

To understand the reasons for the airlift you need to go back to the summer of 1945. The Allied Powers who had won the war in Europe met at the Potsdam Conference to discuss postwar Germany’s punishments and future. At the conference, the Allies divided the defeated country into four temporary occupation zones. Western Germany was divided into American, British and French Zones, while Eastern Germany became the
Soviet Zone. One hundred miles inside the Soviet Zone was the city of Berlin. During the conference, Berlin was divided into four sectors; American, British, French and Soviet. The Soviets gave each of the other allies a twenty mile-wide air flight path to their own city zone. No such arrangement was created for road, rail and barge travel. That oversight would come back to haunt the allies in June of 1948.

Relations between the Western Allies and the Soviet Union began to worsen soon after the Potsdam Conference. The reason was stated by Britain's Prime Minister Winston Churchill in this 1946 speech in Fulton, Missouri, ‘From Stettin on the Baltic to Trieste in the Adriatic, an iron curtain has descended across the continent.’ The Western Allies were not happy about Soviet control over the countries surrounding the Soviet Union. They were using those ‘satellite states’ as an ‘iron curtain’ of protection against foreign invasion.

Tensions increased when the Allies combined the economies of the British and United States zones into a Bizone. It later became a Trizone when France joined them. They issued a new form of currency to replace the Nazi Reichsmark, which continued to be used as Germany’s legal currency, even though the government it represented no longer existed. The German currency was inflated with nothing to buy, but black market cigarettes and illegal goods. To make things even worse the Allied Armies issued the Allied Occupation Currency, which the Germans did not trust, so they kept using the Reichsmark. The Western Allies came to the conclusion the only way to get the German economy started was with a new currency. The Soviets objected to this policy and attempted to challenge it in any way possible.

The United States had the new money secretly printed at the United States Treasury Department in Washington, D.C. They shipped the 23,000 boxes, weighing a total of 1,035 tons to the old Reichsbank in Frankfurt Germany under the code name of ‘Operation Bird Dog.’ The United States Governor of Occupied Germany, General Lucius D. Clay, was given the option to decide when the Deutsch Mark currency would be officially released. As of June 17, 1948, the Soviets had no idea ‘Operation Bird Dog’ existed. That would all change on June 18, 1948 when General Clay made the official announcement after the German banks had closed for the weekend. The new currency was distributed with each citizen receiving 40 Deutsch Marks. It would continue to be distributed throughout Germany over the next few days. ‘This currency reform was a comprehensive and complicated restructuring of wages, prices, public and private debt, exchange rates and banking regulations.’ After the Deutsch Marks were issued the Soviet zone was flooded with the worthless Reichsmark. That forced the Soviets to develop their own currency. They improvised a temporary currency by taking the old Reichsmarks and reissuing them with a Soviet Zone Monetary Reform Coupon attached to the corner. Eventually they introduced their own new currency, the Ostmark.

The currency change was unacceptable to the Soviet Union, so on June 24th they restricted all vehicle, train and barge traffic in and out of Berlin. A day later they blocked all food shipments to Berlin’s non-Soviet sectors. A reduction of their armies after World War II had left The Western Allies unprepared for the blockade. The United States Air Force had only 275 planes in Europe and they were light bombers or fighters. The Soviets, on the other hand, had kept their large military, so they were in better equipped to face any conflict. Two-Thirds of their 4,000 aircraft were in Germany. The Allies had 6,000 troops stationed in Berlin, while the Soviets had 18,000 and thousands more in nearby cities. To balance the military numbers, President Truman sent sixty long-range B-29 ‘Superfortress’ aircraft, supposedly equipped with atomic bombs to English bases. The Soviets did not know atomic bombs were scarce and the B-29’s were not equipped to carry them. This lack of knowledge probably kept the Soviets from starting a war for Berlin. General Clay thought the Allies should use military action to gain access to Berlin, but President Truman was against it. ‘Truman made it clear to his colleagues that he was prepared to use A-Bombs against Russia, but only if it was absolutely necessary.’. In place of force, Truman wanted to use an airlift similar to ‘Operation Little Lift’ to get food and supplies into the city. ‘Operation Little Lift’ took place in March 1948, when the Soviets blocked Berlin for a short period of time. It delivered 300 tons of supplies to Rhein-Main Air Base by truck. Then volunteer C-47 pilots flew the supplies to Berlin. During the operation the Western Allies found the air safety agreement signed by the Soviets at the Potsdam Conference to be effective. The Berlin Blockade left the Allies no choice, but to use an airlift to get necessary supplies to the citizens of Berlin. When the airlift began it had a three week time frame.

‘Operation Vittles’ was the code name for the Berlin Airlift, which began on June 25, 1948. The airlift was placed under the leadership of Brigadier General Joseph Smith. Smith was a combat pilot who was not familiar with running an airlift. That led to problems later in the airlift. On June 26th, the first 32 C-47 planes
left for Berlin with 80 tons of milk, flour, and medicine. Then, on June 26 the first British Royal Air Force planes began flying supplies to Berlin under the name ‘Operation Plainfare.’ There were only two air fields in Berlin that could be used for the airlift. They were Templehof in the American sector and Gatow in the British sector. Each of these airports had one runway. Two other runways were made at Templehof later in 1948. France also added an airfield in Tegel in their sector later in the airlift.

By July 1948, C-54 planes were beginning to arrive in Berlin in larger numbers. Aircraft would fly into Berlin using the American air corridor to Tempelhof Airport and then return using the British air corridor. Then after reaching the British zone they would return to their own bases. The large number of flights, of varying sizes, into Berlin took carefully coordination to prevent disaster. Gen Smith and his staff created a complex flight schedule called the ‘block system’. It was made up of three eight-hour shifts of C-54 section to Berlin followed by a C-47 section. Aircrafts were scheduled to take off every four minutes. Each plane would fly 1000 feet higher than the previous flight. The pattern would begin at 5,000 feet and was repeated five times. This system was called ‘the ladder’ and allowed radar controllers on the ground to handle large numbers of similar planes more easily. In the first week of the airlift, ninety tons of cargo would be shipped daily. The second week the cargo was increased to 1,000 tons, which would have been okay if the airlift had only lasted a few weeks.

A month into the airlift, American officials decided it was the only alternative to war and it was extended. Going into the winter the transports would have to deliver not only food, but coal for heating. The bags of coal would be bulky and take up most of a plane’s space. As the airlift’s operation increased it exceeded General Smith’s capability. As a result, the duties of running the airlift were given to the Military Air Transport Service and a new commander Major General William H. Tunner. General Tunner had previously operated an aerial supply line during World War II that crossed the Himalayas, from India to China. After taking over the airlift, Tunner and his staff toured the bases to see what was going on. They discovered the flight and maintenance schedules to be inadequate for this type of operation. This became very obvious to Tunner on August 13, 1948 or ‘Black Friday.’

On ‘Black Friday’ the clouds seemed to drop onto the roofs of the apartment buildings surrounding the airfield. A heavy cloudburst hid the runway from the tower. The radio signals could not get through because of the rain. The tower and ground control operators lost control of the situation. A C-54 overshot the runway and crashed into a ditch at the end of the airfield and caught fire. Fortunately, the crew got out alive. Another plane landing with a maximum load of coal, landed too far down the runway. To avoid hitting the burning plane the pilot had to put on his brakes heavily in order to stop. A third plane landed on what the pilot thought was a runway. He discovered, too late, it was a runway under construction, which caused his plane to slide and flip over. As all this was taking place, planes full of supplies were sitting on the runway ready for takeoff and more aircraft were waiting to land. General Tunner was on one of the planes waiting to land. He gave orders for all planes to return to their home bases. The next day he had twenty experienced civilian air controllers ordered back to duty as reservists and sent to Germany. Another problem for Tunner was a lack of aircraft. He replaced the small C-47 ‘Gooney Birds with the plentiful C-54 ‘Skymasters’.

The Berlin Airlift was not just a military operation, but it was also a humanitarian mission. Many human interest stories came out of the airlift. John Provan told the story of an airlift pilot and a 13 year old boy who lived in Weisbaden. ‘The boy had just received word that his mother, who lived in Berlin, had suffered a heart attack. The boy managed to pass the guards and make his way to an aircraft, when a pilot discovered him.’ Provan continued, ‘He told his story to the pilot, who realized the boy was telling the truth. Making sure no supervisors were watching, the pilot lifted the lad into the aircraft and said: ‘Make yourself comfortable, son. In two hours you’ll be in Berlin.’ The most famous human interest story is that of airlift pilot First Lieutenant Gail Halverson. He was one of the American pilots flying round-the-clock missions from Rhein-Main Air Base to Tempelhof. One day he was at Tempelhof filming aircraft landings when he met a group of German children. He used his limited German to greet them and then answered their questions about the airlift with help of some of the children who knew English. Halverson talked to them for an hour before he realized that none of them had asked him for anything. He said in his autobiography, The Berlin Candy Bomber, ‘Hitler’s past and Stalin’s future was their nightmare. American-style freedom was their dream. They knew what freedom was about. They said someday we’ll have enough to eat, but if we lose our freedom, we’ll never get it back.’ Halverson continued, ‘These were kids, and they were teaching me about freedom. That’s what blew
me away.' As he was getting ready to leave he reached into his pocket and pulled out two pieces of Doublemint Gum. He debated whether or not to give them to the children. What if they would fight over them? Halverson broke the two pieces in half and passed the four halves through the barbed wire fence. He waited for the children to rush the fence and grab the candy, but they did not. Some of the children got gum and others did not. They asked the lucky ones for a piece of the gum's wrapper just to smell it. Halverson was impressed when the children did not beg, so he decided to do more for them. He told the children he was going to fly into Berlin the next day and would drop candy as he approached the airport. The children asked how they would know it was him. After making them promise to share, he told them he would wiggle his wings up and down. When he got back to his base he combined his candy rations with hose of his co-pilot and engineer. Then he made his first parachutes out of handkerchiefs, string and then tied them to chocolate bars and gum. July 18, 1948, would be the first drop of ‘Operation Little Vittles’. The longer ‘Operation Little Vittles’ went on, the more candy and handkerchief were donated and the more children were waiting at the airfield. Stacks of letters began arriving at Templehof base operations for ‘Der Schokoladen Flieger’ (the Chocolate Flyer), or ‘Onkel Wackelflugel’ (Uncle Wiggly Wings) proving ‘Operation Little Vittles’ was a success. Over 23 tons of candy had been dropped, using 250,000 parachutes and hundreds of Berlin’s children learned that the people of Britain, France and the United States cared about them. They and their country was no longer the enemy of the Western Allies.

The chapter of the Berlin Airlift began On Easter Sunday, April 17, 1949, when the airlift delivered 13,000 tons of cargo including the equivalent 600 railroad cars of coal. The ‘Easter Parade’ as it was known, set a record for daily cargo delivery. To achieve that record, everything needed to be perfectly coordinated and teamwork was very important. Step one was getting fuel and bulk goods loaded onto ships in the United States. Next the cargo was transported to Germany where it was unloaded. Then it was sent to the two airfields in the American Zone and two in the British Zone. Freight from the American Zone went to the Templehof Airfield and cargo from the British Zone went to Gatow Airport. This enormous delivery of cargo was a combined effort of the United States Air Force and the British Royal Air Force. ‘General Clay about to dig into a blueberry pie, listened to the steady roar of aircraft and said, ‘You know, I think we’ve licked them.’

The Berlin Airlift was not just a United States and Royal Air Force accomplishment. It involved the hard work of both military and civilian groups. For instance, the Navy in ‘Operation Sea Lift’ transported 100 million gallons of aviation fuel from the United States to Bremerhaven Germany. It also transported tons of food and supplies to Germany, so the Air Force could fly it into Berlin.

Another group that supported the airlift was the United States Army. Their troops trucked a total of 1,900 tons of goods to waiting aircraft. They also handled rail operations in Bremerhaven. These units were staffed mostly by African Americans since the military was not desegregated at that time. The Army also provided 500,000 duffel bags needed to transport coal inside the cargo planes. Housing, furniture, clothing and other services for airlift personnel were provided by the Army Quartermaster.

France could not provide the airlift with planes, equipment or crews, since it was involved in the Indochina conflict. They did provide the land for the Tigel airfield, which the American forces and German citizens built. Another service they provided was using a confiscated German plane, to fly in 200 tons of fine food and wine for French Officers in Berlin.

German civilians were responsible for a large part of the Airlift’s success. They worked hard to support the Allied mission. The Berliners helped to support the Allied forces building the Tegal Airfield in the French Sector. Construction was completed in less than 90 days. It was built by hand, by thousands of mostly female laborers working around the clock. The Germans unloaded the majority of cargo at all the airfields. During the airlift the Soviets found many ways to annoy the Allies. They used searchlights to blind the pilots flying at night. The Soviet’s jammed the Allies’ radio signals and released balloons to block Allied takeoffs. Allied planes were ‘buzzed’ by Soviet aircraft, which made the Allied pilots uneasy, but many of them had flown in the war and were able to keep going. ‘By the spring of 1949, it was obvious tactics of harassment had failed to deter the American and British airmen involved in the airlift of supplies to Berlin.’ There were a total of 733 reported incidents of Soviet harassment during the airlift.

The ‘Easter Parade’ and the airlift in general embarrassed the Soviets. They realized they were losing the propaganda war. On April 14, 1949, TASS the Russian news agency conveyed the Soviets willingness to end the blockade. The four powers began negotiations and a settlement was reached on the Western Allies’
terms. Then on May 4th, the Allies announced an agreement had been reached. The Berlin Blockade ended at a minute after midnight on May 12, 1949. As soon as the Soviet’s opened the road a group of British vehicles drove through to Berlin. The First train from West Germany arrived in Berlin that same day. An enormous crowd gathered to celebrate the end of the blockade. The airlift would continue until September 30th when the Allies felt comfortable the blockade would not be reinstated.

When the Berlin Airlift ended the statistics revealed impressive numbers. The U.S. Air Force had transported 1,422,000 tons of coal, 296,000 tons of food and 65,000 of miscellaneous goods for a total of 1,783,573 tons. Another 542,000 tons of cargo was delivered by the British Royal Air Force. A total of 75,000 people, both military and civilian were involved in making the airlift a success.

The Berlin Airlift was the first time a large scale military air transport was used to accomplish diplomatic objectives. ‘Not only did the Soviet Union suffer the defeat of the Blockade breaking, but the Allies had witnessed a change in attitude by the Germans themselves. Before, the Allies had been considered, a Besatzungsmacht (an Army of Occupation).’ When the airlift was over the Germans considered the Allies not as enemies, but as protectors.

When The Berlin Airlift ended on May 12, 1949, the Cold War between the United States and Soviet Union was still in effect. Politically, the United States had achieved success by standing up to the Soviets without starting another war. The Soviets, on the other hand, suffered a political defeat with the blockade. They implemented the blockade to protest and evict the Western Allies, but in the end the Allies were still there dictating the terms. Technologically, the Allies used the A Bomb, or the threat of using it, to scare the Soviet’s out of starting another world war. The United States and British Military used their aircraft, equipment and personnel to keep the citizens of Berlin from freezing and starving to death. The Soviet’s chose to use their military to block roads, rails and waterways and cut off life giving supplies into the city of Berlin. Most importantly the German people no longer viewed the United States as their enemy, but as their defender and friend. In contrast, the Soviet Union was seen as the oppressive government that tried to starve them and took away their freedom. What began as an act of division by the Soviets, ended by the Western Allies as an act of unifying the United States and Germany.

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