Alec Chambers and the Berlin Airlift

Compiled & edited by Vivien Moss

I was only a few months old in 1926 when my father Ted Chambers who had served in the Navy during the First World War, became the Landlord of the Barrington Arms in Shrivenham in. I happily grew up in Shrivenham and attended the village school, headed by Mr Dance and where all pupils stayed until they were 14 years old. My father, however, had hopes that I would go on to University. One evening I overheard a conversation between my father and Mr Dance who had come into the Barrington Arms for a drink. Listeners rarely hear anything good about themselves and I was no exception. When asked how he rated me as a pupil Mr Dance said that I was gifted in the hands rather than the head, I excelled at woodwork and would probably make a fair carpenter. Soon after this my father moved me to a boarding school, Swindon High, in Bath Road. I was a weekly boarder and comfortably gained all my school certificates. During this time my fascination with aircraft was growing, fostered by making models of different planes with my school friend. Returning home each weekend in the very early 1940s I became aware of the Avro Ansons at Watchfield aerodrome and the Tiger Moths at Fernham. Pictures of the flying boat, the short Sunderland and the Supermarine Spitfire delighted me. When the Lancaster Bomber took to the skies in 1942 I knew my future lay with aircraft and I firmly rejected any idea of University.

At this time my father had a regular guest, a Mr Cave who was the Chief Ground Engineer from Air Service Training Ltd. This company, in the 1930s, operated at two airfields – one at Ansty, near Coventry, the other at Hamble, near Southampton where Flying Navigation and Ground Engineers Schools were established. At the outbreak of WWII the Hamble division took over the operations of RAF Watchfield to develop the revolutionary Blind Approach training. When Mr Cave discovered my intense interest in aircraft he suggested that I applied to Air Service Training for a job. I was engaged as "an improver aero engine fitter" and obtained several qualifications. By this time the newly formed No 3 Elementary Flying School had also moved from Hamble to Shellingford. The School for the Blind Approach used Airspeed Oxfords and Avro Ansons. And this was when I decided to join the RAF. While waiting for orders to go to St John's Wood in London for Induction training I regularly did Home Guard duty in 1944 on Wednesday afternoons.

I was based at Hornchurch and when I was discharged from the RAF in 1946 I joined De Havillands at Witney which at the time was converting Mosquitoes into fighter-bombers for Israel. We worked on Rapides as well. I knew exactly what I wanted to do. I was really taken with in-flight refuelling to extend the range of a flight. Two men influenced my choice of career. The first was Sir Alan Cobham, a veteran pilot officer flying instructor from World War I and who became a Test Pilot for De Havillands. The second was the legendary Australian Air Vice-Marshall Donald Bennett who contributed his extensive and sound knowledge about in-flight re-fuelling. Air Vice Marshall Bennett had commanded the elite Pathfinder Force until the end of the war.

Anxious to gain a civilian licence as a flight engineer I applied to the Director of Education for a grant. Before I could be awarded my flight engineer's licence, firstly, I had to do a course in two sections, "Airframes" and "Engines". Proficiency had to be shown in both parts. This took me twelve months – the minimum time. Having achieved this I then studied for and gained a flight engineer's licence. These three certificates qualified me for in-flight refuelling and I joined Alan Cobham's company, "Flight Refuelling Ltd" at Tarrant Rushton, near Blandford in Dorset. Sir Alan Cobham had founded the company in 1945.

Before I describe my life further, I feel it might be helpful to outline Germany's predicament after surrendering from the Second World War in May 1945. Nazi Germany had surrendered after Hitler committed suicide in April 1945. Under the Potsdam Conference in July 1945 three of the Allies– Great Britain, the United States, and the Soviet Union – divided Germany into four military zones: British, American, Soviet and French. The capital city, Berlin, was also divided into four zones despite it being in the Soviet zone.

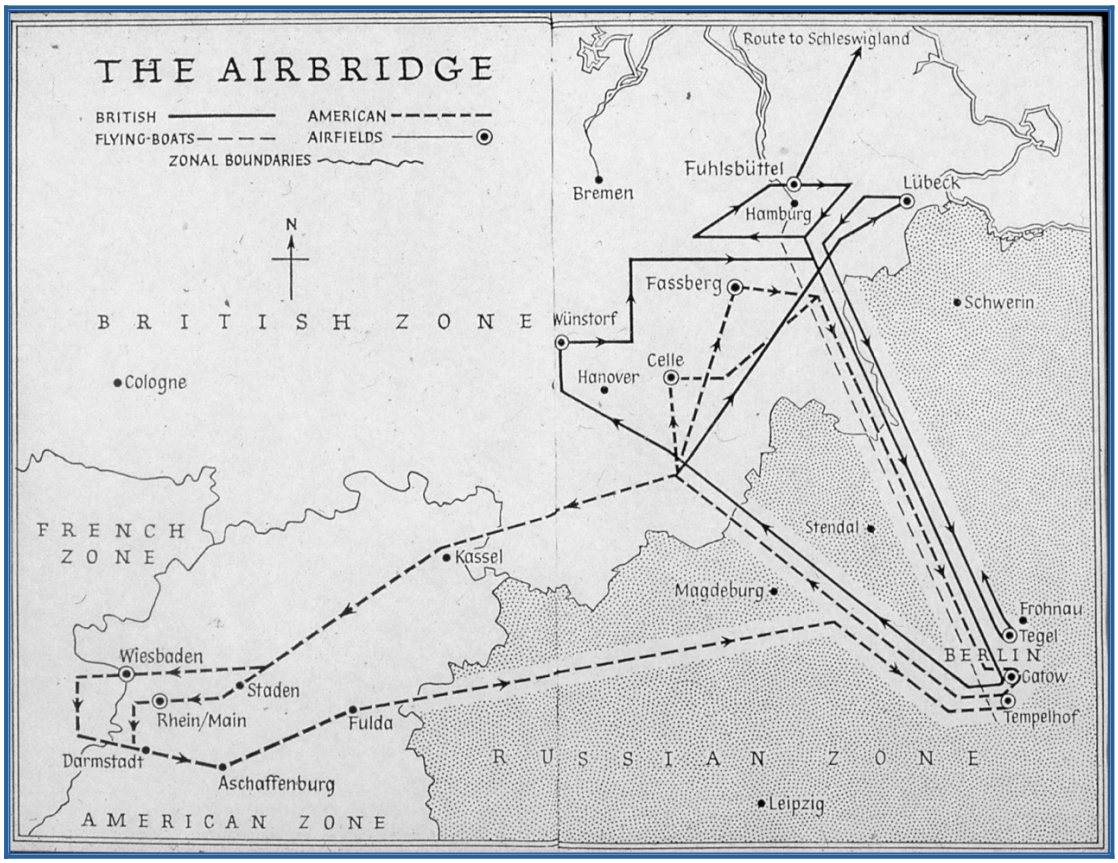
RAF Air Commodore R N Waite is regarded as the father of the Berlin Airlift. As Head of the Air Branch for the Control Commission in Berlin he was in charge of disarming the Luftwaffe after the war and the plight of the West Berliners affected him. Berlin was almost flattened. It was desolate and ravaged with former buildings standing gaunt and broken with piles of rubble on the ground. The 2.3 million inhabitants were hungry, for food was

in very short supply, and there was a lack of fuel to power homes for warmth and cooking.

From January 1948 the Soviets started gradual and persistent interference with restrictions on traffic between Berlin and the West with new rules every few days. For example, 26 rail wagons of Berlin mail for the West were seized in early June 1948 and a week later 5 coal trains for West Berlin were stopped because their new type documents "were not in order". On 24th June 1948 the Soviet Union blocked all road, rail, canal and river routes to Berlin from the western zones and traffic from the West with supplies of food and fuel were unable to gain access to West Berlin. This hostile action became known as the Blockade and marked the beginning of the Cold War. The aim of the Soviets was to force the Western Allies to yield West Berlin to them.

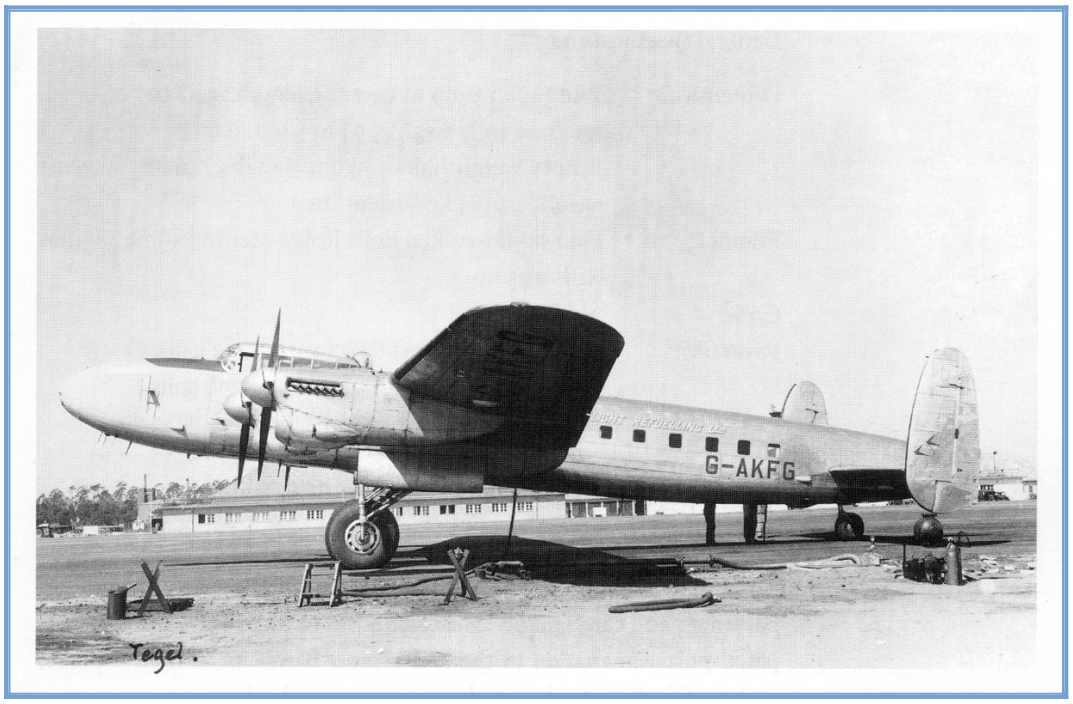
The only way the Allies could reach the starving people of Berlin was by making an Airbridge. Whilst the Soviets could and did block the road, rail and water transport, they could not block the skies. Air Commodore Waite calculated that we could lift some 5,000 tons a day including food, coal and diesel and formulated a plan to supply Berlin by air. This he then sent to President Truman who approved it and ordered the US Air force to allocate its entire transport capacity to the mission. In Britain the Foreign Secretary Ernest Bevin, had doubts about its efficacy. However, the Prime Minister, Clement Atlee, agreed to supply 25 aircraft which were all that were available. The French were supportive, too, but could not offer anything. The American Military Governor in Germany, the tough General Julius Clay, had recommended going into Berlin with an American Armoured column of 200 vehicles to show the Russians that they meant business. Fortunately, this recommendation was not followed. Clay, too, had reservations about the success of the Airlift but President Truman knew that the Berlin Crisis was a political war, not a military war and the last thing anyone wanted was another war.

At the start of the Blockade, Berlin had just 35 days of food left and 45 days worth of coal. Eventually, a combined effort by the Royal Air Force, the United States Air Force and a few civilian contractors managed to sustain the city from the air with food, fuel and other necessities such as medicines until the Blockade was lifted nearly a year later. In 1948 Berlin had three airfields: Gatow in the British sector, Templehof in the American sector which had been recently re-built by the Americans assisted by some 14,000 pick and shovel ladies. I have to say the sight of these ladies doing such physical labour distressed me. Tegel was the third airport in the French sector of the city. France offered Tegel for use by the Americans and the British. Gatow had been the training centre for the Luftwaffe and was the equivalent of RAF Cranwell. Six air corridors had been requested to these airfields but only three were agreed. They were only 20 miles wide with a ceiling of 10,000 feet.



There was a requirement for a fleet of "tanker" aircraft to take liquid fuel and coal. When Sir Alan Cobham realised that neither the United States nor the Royal Air force had any tanker aircraft he immediately offered his aeroplanes and crew as a civilian contractor. Sir Alan's Company, Flight Re-Fuelling Ltd was the first civilian contractor to be involved in the Berlin Airlift. In 1945 Sir Alan had taken over some ex-RAF Lancaster Bombers, had modified them as "tankers" and "receivers" and had commenced in-flight refuelling trials. They needed to be fitted with "Rebecca" radar sets which had the same radio frequency as the military aeroplanes.

I was happy to volunteer immediately for duty in Sir Alan Cobham's planes. We used the Lancaster Bombers which had all been stripped of their original fittings. We likened this stripping to turning aircraft back into saucepans! The huge bomb bay could hold two tanks of liquid fuel, one of 600 gallons, the other 400, a total of 1000 gallons weighing 10½ tons. We were a crew of four, Pilot, Flight Engineer, Radio Operator and Navigator. The RAF had 90 Dakotas while the Americans had 100 which were scattered all over Europe.



The German people in Berlin were almost starving and their first requirement was for food to keep them alive. But in addition to this was their need for fuel for warmth and the means to cook the food. The British reckoned the average adult needed about 1,700 calories a days and calculated they would need about 5,000 tons delivered to Berlin each day. At a low point in the early days of the Blockade Berliners were existing on about 8oo calories a day. The Americans estimated that they would need about 2,500 tons of coal and liquid fuel as well. Liquid fuel was either petrol or the diesel. We transported fewer containers of diesel because it was heavier than petrol. About 200 kilogrammes of solid coal filled each kitbag. The kitbags used were those left over from the war and were strong enough for the job. All this amounted to about 1,300 missions daily. The call went out worldwide for more pilots. By the end of July 1948 4,500 tons of supplies of food and fuel were being delivered daily by the Americans using the Templehof airfield. A regular supply of coal was necessary to help the different industries get back into production.

Our mission was to fly from Blandford to Wunstorf, in the British zone about 180 miles from Berlin. Wunstorf had been one of Goering's crack fighter stations. This was where we collected the diesel for Berlin and had a coffee break while the drums were being loaded. Then it was off to Gatow along the 20 miles wide air corridor over the Soviet sector, flying under 10,000 feet. Gatow was about an hour away and was a wide and good airport, situated as all German airports were, close to the railway. It had huge underground storage tanks and ten hangars. The fuel was transferred from the aircraft into a series of these underground storage tanks by the ex-Luftwaffe mechanics in about twenty minutes, giving us just enough time for a coffee break. Later it was then pumped via a length of PLUTO pipeline to tanks at the Havel river

docks and transferred to barges for distribution via Berlin's waterways around the city. According to Hansard: "By early 1949 every motor vehicle in West Berlin was running on fuel flown in by British civilian pilots".

Our Lancaster and Lancastrian operations commenced operations on the 8th August 1948. Sometimes we were diverted to Fassburg, slightly north of Celle in the Ruhr valley after the Lancaster had been filled with about 100 tons of coal for the heavy engineering works. The coal was placed in strong, former RAF kitbags or tough canvas bags weighing about 200 kilos

We flew from Wunstorf from July 1948 until March 1949. From then the Douglas Dakotas that also used this airfield were moved to Lubek and Wunstorf became an all "Avro"airfield with our Lancasters, the RAF Yorks and Tudors. Gatow airport was a former RAF station and had been modernised at the beginning of the Airlift – the runway had been extended to 2,000 yards. Together with Templehof in the American sector and Tegel in the French sector, Gatow played a key part in the Berlin Airlift of 1948. 150 Dakotas plus 40 Avro Yorks were used to fly in food and fuel to Gatow. By July 1948 the RAF was flying in 995 tons of supplies each day. Overall, the Berlin Airlift operated from 24 June 1948 to 30 September 1949.

Initially I think the majority considered the Airlift to be a "3-week wonder". We were young men and spoke of how we should make the best of it, with as much flying as we could wish for, cheap alcohol, supplemented with affrays in the local nightclubs and bars. What was not to like! At first we returned to the UK every 6-9 days for servicing and re-stocking the coffee! However when it was established that the Airlift was a long term commitment our routine became a 3 weeks rostered duty with 2 flights each day, then 6 days leave in the UK. We had a 4 man crew consisting of the Pilot, Navigator, Radio Operator and Flight Engineer. At the end of our time there were a dozen Lancasters operating by Flight Refuelling Ltd in the airlift. They carried out 4,438 sorties and delivered 27,114 tons of supplies. On the 1st June 1949 we were the 100,000th Tanker to land in Berlin! Photo shoot, bouquet of flowers and a packet of "Lucky Strike" each and a mention in the Official Diary.

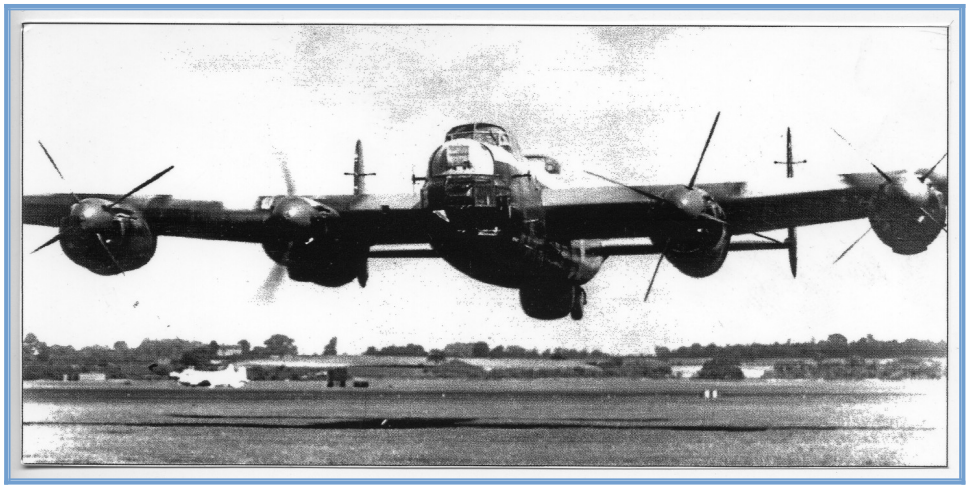
When we examine our relations with the Berliners I would suggest that most of us had no hard feelings; mine were sympathetic in view of the awful living conditions and general shortages of most essential commodities. We had excellent relations with the ex-Luftwaffe air mechanics whom we employed to assist in the servicing of our aircraft and engines. They were reliable and good at their job. The Lancasters and the Lancastrians were regularly serviced every 100 flying hours. One American pilot who had landed enormous sacks of flour in the early days spoke of how the first German mechanic helping to unload the cargo had tears in his eyes as he took the first heavy sack. There was no need for words.

Daytime Sorties

On arriving at Wunstorf airfield the Pilot, Navigator and Radio Operator would go to the Ops room to be briefed on Take off time, the weather, Beacon times and possible Russian activities. I, as the Flight Engineer, would go to the Flight Lines and consult with the Ground staff on the state of our allocated aircraft and then do my own inspection and check that ALL tanks had been filled. Take off times were at 3-minute intervals. After Take off we would climb to our flight level of 3, 300feet and set course for the first Beacon (Egestorf) at 180 mph. On arrival there the Navigator transmitted to Control our time of arrival and whether we were on time or plus or minus a few seconds early or late. We then continued to the next Beacon (Dannenburg, Restorf). We listened carefully to the transmissions of aircraft well ahead of us and whether they were late, no doubt due to the change in wind direction and speed. If they were late we would decrease our speed and conversely increase it if they were early for it was essential that we arrived at the final Beacon (Fronhau) on time or within a 20 second bracket and handed over to Gatow Approach control for our "let down on to the airfield". Initially, if we were not on time or there were problems at Gatow we were instructed to orbit the Beacon whilst Control endeavoured to find a "slot."

This was fine in clear weather but in cloud it was a potential recipe for a disastrous mid-air collision over the city. On the occasion that American Major-General, W H Tunner flew in and saw aircraft orbiting Fronhau, he ordered them to return to their home base and instructed that in future there would be NO orbiting of the Beacon. If you were not on time at the Beacon you returned to your home base. Aircraft were landing at Gatow every three minutes at that point.

Once the Ground Control Approach was installed, a talk down system of radar approach (you are above/below/ left/aright of the glide path/ increase/decrease rate of descent/to Look ahead and Land) we always requested a GCA approach on the assumption that we would both benefit in confidence and skills!



We then taxied to the de-fuelling centre to discharge the cargo of fuel which usually took some 20 minutes enabling me again to dispose of a quantity of coffee! This centre was "oval" in form with storage tanks, pumping facilities and some 18 fuel discharging points around the perimeter. (There is a splendid model of this facility in a museum in Berlin!)

We then called Gatow Tower for permission to join the queue for our return flight to Wunstorf. The return flight over the East German or Russian zone was relaxed and not always at 1,000 feet. Low flying would get us the "beat up" treatment by the Soviets. On other occasions we would catch up with the aircraft in front and fly in low formation until we reached the border and then we resumed our best behaviour. On occasions we would be buzzed by a Yak 9 or two from the Russian airfield some 30 miles north of the corridor at Perleburg.

Once when we were returning from Gatow around 4.30am we made a "navigational error" and gave Perleburg a "wake up" call from about 100 feet above the main runway. Our Polish Captain absolutely detested the Soviets and grinned, saying "I loved that," as we watched the startled Guard running for their AA guns and running around the rows of Yaks and Stormovics Tank destroyers before we hi-tailed it back to Wunstorf. Other features in the zone was the lack of activity on the River Elbe, not even a fisherman on the bank and certainly no boats or barges. The twin tracked railway possibly running from Hamburg to Berlin was now a single track with a passing loop for east/west trains. The other track had been transported to Mother Russia! At first crews did 3 trips a day equating to some 14+ hours. Eventually Flight Refuelling Ltd had 30 crews to 10 + aircraft at 2 trips a day. This of course considerably reduced fatigue.

Night Flying and in Cloud

Night flying called for constant alertness to the surroundings. The night approach to Gatow was sometimes accompanied with a few Russian searchlights! I think we were really sharpened up in cloud or murky weather, concerned with the positions of the accompanying aircraft. A severe and sudden buffeting was indicative of the fact that either we had just overtaken an aircraft in close proximity or conversely we had been overtaken! All night approaches were by GCA and it was with great relief when the cloud was down to 400 feet to hear: "Look ahead and land.!" And to be over the threshold of the runway.

FRS Lancaster/Lancastrian aircraft

The Lancasters were the 4-engined heavy bombers suitably modified as Tanker aircraft to carry such fuel as diesel or petrol (for air-to-air refuelling). The enormous bomb bay which originally carried 10 ton bombs, could now

carry 10 tons of liquid fuel. Every available space in the aircraft was utilised and when filled to capacity it was almost impossible to squeeze past. The total capacity would have been about 10.5 tons. The Lancastrians were a mixture of Canadian built MK 10s and ex BOAC models. All were equipped with radar/radio aids, GEE, BABS, REBECCA, Radio Compass and Radio Altimeter which enabled us to meet not only the Visual Flight Rules (VFR) but also the Instrument Flight Rules (IFR). The target had been to have a tanker force of 31 aircraft by 1st January 1949 but this was not achieved. One of the reasons for the delay in the "modified" aircraft coming on stream was due to the fact that the majority needed to be fitted with "Rebecca" radar sets which were difficult to find and when found most required servicing. We were fortunate to have as our Air Interception Officer "Jimmy" Rawnsley one of the most decorated men in the RAF. In world War II he had been the navigator for "Cats Eyes" Cunningham, the leading night-fighter pilot of the war. "Jimmy" and his wife lived in the accommodation at the bottom of the Control Tower at Tarrant Rushton. They were most kind to us single men with invites to supper etc. He designed our airborne tanker/receiver radar system. This enabled a tanker aircraft to detect a receiver at a range of 120 miles.

In the Spring of 1949, the New York Times reported that the planes were shipping more food and fuel than ever before to Berlin: "All aircraft records were broken today when American and British airmen flew 8,246 short tons of food and coal into Berlin on 922 flights. This record was established on the 290th day of the airlift."

Soon after this the Soviets negotiated an agreement to lift the Blockade on 12 May 1949. At one minute after midnight the lights were switched on in Berlin (powered by a Soviet power station), trucks started to rumble through the city when all the barriers were removed to transport resources by ground, and there was great jubilation and dancing in the streets. Berlin was tasting freedom. The Airlift did not end until the 30th September that year. The population still needed feeding and the industries, particularly the heavy engineering works deprived of coal for so long needed to be re-established. Between the 25th June 1948 and the 1st August 1949 two million, two hundred thousand occupants of West Berlin were supplied with 2,325,808 short tons of supplies in 266,600 flights according to Ann and John Tusa in their detailed work "The Berlin Airlift2" page 374.

I remained with Flight Refuelling Ltd until September 1950 .I shall always remember the camaraderie and friendships of the crew. We were there for each other at all times. We worked together and played together. We saw more of Germany when the barricades were removed and at times stayed in an hotel. One night after we had retired to bed in the spa town of Baden Niendorf the kitchen caught fire and there we were in the small hours fleeing to safety wearing almost next to nothing. Being youngsters we regarded it as an adventure. We had a mixture of emotions in Berlin and one poignant thing for me in was seeing some German "hausfraus" rummaging through a large pile of rubble to find bricks that could be used to re-build their

demolished homes. They were carefully brushing off the dirt and powder before stacking them to be used to re-build their homes.

One day we thought we'd like to go to the Theatre in Hamburg to see "Carmen" We
presented ourselves at the kiosk, still in our uniforms, to pay for the tickets and to our great surprise were escorted to the best seats in the House by the Manager who refused to let us pay. When the audience clapped us we realised we were being treated as VIPS. There were other incidents like this with the Germans showing their appreciation. I also met Gail Halverson, the pilot known as the "Candy Bomber". One day, he gave sticks of gum he had in his pocket to some of the thirty or so children standing behind the wire fence at Templehof airfield, watching the planes take off and land. The children's ragged appearance and the rapturous look on the faces of the lucky recipients led him to promise he would drop some gum and chocolate to the children the next time he flew. When the children asked how they would know which was his plane, he told them he would wiggle the wings of the Skymaster as he approached them. His crew joined him in donating the allowance from their ration cards, even though the scheme was in defiance of regulations. As promised, he wiggled his wings, before dropping the sweets attached to tiny cotton parachutes made from handkerchiefs. He and his crew continued to pool and drop their rationed resources each week, until the scheme was uncovered by officialdom through the receipt of letters at the base addressed to Onkel Wackflugel (Uncle Wiggly Wings). The venture was officially sanctioned and became a larger operation, code-named Little Vittles. A school in Berlin is now named after Gail Halverson.

I have always felt privileged and pleased to have been involved in the Berlin airlift. It was satisfying when our missions were successful and I acknowledge the part played by our conscientious unseen mechanics who kept our aircraft serviced and safe. In this great humanitarian airlift just after World War II ended, it was inevitable that there were some casualties. On a more sombre note, Britain lost 17 men and the Americans lost 32.

A Lancaster returning from Wunstorf on 22nd November 1948 crashed near Andover killing seven of its 8 eight-man crew. A civilian York plane crashed on its approach to Gatow killing 3 men in March. A week later a Halton from the Lancashire Corporation came down near Schleswiglaand and 4 civilians died. There were 3 more when a Dakota crash-landed near Lubeck on 22nd March. We all ached with compassion for the casualties and their families.

I have made many life-long friends in my involvement in this huge humanitarian mission from the RAF, the USAF and other civilian contractors who provided aircraft and crews. The friendship, help and camaraderie was such a bonding process. It should come as no surprise that with frequent returns to Berlin during the last 70 years that I've also made some wonderful German friends. Fassburg is now a Tri-Service training Centre. The 50th, 60th and 70th commemoration displays I attended there in 1999, 2009, and in 2019

respectively with my family, were spectacular with all serving personnel resplendent in their colourful uniforms. We were royally welcomed and looked after exceedingly well.

Not only did the Airbridge feed the starving population of West Berlin but it also enabled the inhabitants to re-start their industry by providing them with oil and coal. I realise that if the Russians had got what they wanted – domination and control of West Berlin - then Europe would be very different from how it is today. Ann and Johm Tusa's "The Berlin Airlift " on page 374 say: "the aircraft had kept the western sector of Berlin alive, given West Germany the confidence to found a new State, and given Western politicians and diplomats the chance to avert war and find a settlement to the Berlin crisis".