



From a Red Ball to a Red Eye: The Berlin Airlift

FROM THE ARCHIVES



Rock Island Arsenal and Oppenheimer

Rock Island Arsenal contributed electrical and electro-mechanical bomb components to the Manhattan Project at Los Alamos. The AEC began drawing support from RIA in 1947, within months of its own creation. Over the years, RIA has manufactured non-nuclear components for various atomic weapons. From 1947 until 1952, the Pattern Division in BLDG 106 and the Forge and Heat Treat Division in BLDG 222 cast the armored steel casings of the MK-III and MK-IV atomic bombs. The MK-III and MK-IV were essentially reengineered versions of the Fat Man bomb. RIA also worked on components for the Honest John, Little John, and Davy Crockett systems for the Army.

MONTHLY TRIVIA

- 1 What was the approximate cost (in dollars) of the Berlin Airlift for the British and Americans?
- 2 Who was the pilot known as “Uncle Wiggly Wings” that would drop candy during the Berlin Airlift?
- 3 What was the structure that the Soviets constructed to prevent people from defecting?

ANSWERS FOR MAY/JUNE 2023 QUESTIONS

- 1 Approximately when did the loss of American shipping begin to wane during the Battle of the Atlantic?
▶ 1943
- 2 What was the original date that the Allies had planned for the D-Day Invasion?
▶ 5 JUN 1944
- 3 When was Operation *DRAGOON* supposed to have been kicked off in Southern France?
▶ In-tandem with *OVERLORD*



It’s been customary for quite some time for confirmed kills to be tracked on the side of aircraft. A-10’s rack up quite a number if you know anything about them. We’ve seen quite a number of interesting ones, including an F-15 kill from a simulated run during a Red Flag exercise, but...cow? We really need to know what happened here for science. If you have information, we hope you shared it.

Number of issues since last typo: 0

Following the defeat of the Axis Powers in World War II, the Allies established their own occupational jurisdictions within Germany. There were six jurisdictions for the old German territory, but four made up the core of Germany. The United Kingdom occupied the northwest quarter, the French a sliver of the southwest, the Americans occupied the south, and the Soviet Union occupied the east. Within Soviet territory lay the capital of Berlin, which was a special military district occupied by these four powers. France occupied the northwest of Berlin, the United Kingdom to the west, the United States to the south, and the Soviet Union to the east. Special permissions were required to travel in German territories, especially to and from Berlin.

The destruction in Berlin was significant, and anti-communist sentiment was so great that protest votes resulted in an anti-communist regime rising in Berlin in 1946. Further tensions resulted in the Soviets clamping down on supply routes flowing into Berlin. By April of 1948, most rail and road lines were subject to search by the Soviet commander in charge of the Berlin district. The Americans quickly adapted to compensate for this setback, switching to airborne deliveries of cargo and materiel. At its peak, this “Little Lift” reached 20 flights per day and put the Americans in a well-prepared state for what was to come later in June with a surplus of 18 days’ worth of supplies.



On 18 JUN, to bring life back to the German economy, the Allies introduced new currency to replace the old Reichsmark, which had undergone severe inflation ever since the interwar. The Soviets staunchly opposed this, instead attempting to increase the printing of the Reichsmark and other Soviet backed currency. After the idea of the new Western currency took hold in Berlin, Stalin looked to force the Western Allies out of Berlin altogether. The day after the currency’s introduction, the Soviets once again shut down all surface-based modes of transportation that connected West Berlin to West Germany. This impacted not only passenger and commerce travel, but also the supply of materiel and resources. The only routes not blockaded by 24 JUN were by air. To further exacerbate the issues in the West, the Soviets halted all food

supplies to the non-Soviet portions of Berlin. Shortly thereafter, electricity was cut off to these same locations as most electrical power sources were in Soviet controlled territory.

West Berlin was faced with being totally isolated from the outside world by the end of June, despite the surplus made available in early May.

With food and supplies running low fast and two million Berliners depending on resupply, the mission was essential, dire, and daunting. Operation *VITTLES* was the Western Allied response to the Soviet Union which consisted of both an American (and later British) convoy of air-delivered materiel as well as a counter-blockade of Soviet resources. In what appeared to be a potential tinderbox for a third World War, multiple parties presented different views on how to handle the operation. Some went so far as to include bomber missions with fighter escort; however, this plan was shut down in Washington almost as soon as it made it to the table. The response, instead, was a continuous convoy of air-delivered materiel resources that tapped and harnessed the delivery power of the U.S. military. From June 1948 through September 1949, tens of thousands of sorties were conducted to resupply Western Allies in Berlin.

At its peak, the airlift had flights arriving at Tempelhof Airport every 45 seconds and up to 13,000 tons of cargo per day. As the airlift continued, its efficiency increased with improvements in cargo management, air transportation methods (newer aircraft), and stockpiling of materiel. The flights coming into Tempelhof became such a public spectacle that Berliners would gather to watch the flights come in every day. In some cases, air crews would toss candy and treats out of the side of aircraft to children below. The mission of the Soviets to force the West to back down appeared to have failed, and by May 1949, the blockade had been lifted. The Americans, despite this, continued air delivery of materiel through the end of September. This was largely to impress upon the Soviets that American capabilities to sustain its Allies was not so easily disrupted and could continue if necessary.

Today, the Berlin Airlift remains the largest airborne resupply operation ever conducted and is also one of the largest strategic logistics success stories ever in American military history.

Multicultural Observance



“I need not repeat the figures. The facts speak for themselves.... These men could not have been armed and equipped as they are had it not been for the miracle of production here at home. The production which has flowed from the country to all the battlefronts of the world has been due to the efforts of American business, American labor, and American farmers, working together as a patriotic team.” --
President Franklin D. Roosevelt, Navy Day speech, October 27, 1944



History is being made every day at this command.

Headline Photo: C-47’s and Navy R-4’s at Tempelhof Airport in 1948 during the Berlin Airlift.

Featured Photos: Left, C-54 landing at Tempelhof with Berliners flocking to watch.

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Contact: usarmy.ria.asc.list.history@army.mil | Bldg. 390, 1 Rock Island Arsenal, Rock Island, Illinois, 61299

Kevin Braafladt : Command Historian | Mark Struve : Assistant Historian | Kaleb Bemis : Archivist

