

As Utah's Candy Bomber turns 100, his sweet story remains timeless

By Lee Benson, Columnist Oct 4, 2020, 3:00pm MDT



Gail Halvorsen, the Berlin Candy Bomber, poses for a photo in the backyard of his Provo home days before his 100th birthday. *Lee Benson, Deseret News*

PROVO — It's a sweet story that doesn't grow old, and the same might be said about the man telling it.

Gail S. "Hal" Halvorsen needs no prodding to talk about something he's been talking about for 72 years.

Relaxing in the shade of an apple tree in the backyard of the house he built in 1974 when he retired from the U.S. Air Force and returned to Utah, he enthusiastically launches into a retelling of the time he was called on the carpet by his commanding officer in the summer of 1948.

He had just returned to his airbase after flying a C-54 cargo plane to Berlin. Three years after the end of World War II, Germany was a divided country, the east part communist, the west part free. Berlin, the capital, was also divided, but with the geographic misfortune — at least for the free part — of being located in the east.

When the Soviet Union, East Germany's landlord, decided in June of 1948 to starve the landlocked free Berlin into submission by closing the roads and railways from West Germany that supplied the city with the necessities of life, America, Great Britain and several other allies, recognizing that the Soviets couldn't close the skies, launched the Berlin airlift.

Halvorsen, 27 years old and a World War II vet, was one of hundreds of C-54 pilots who daily filled the skies ferrying groceries and fuel from their base in West Germany to the Berliners.

But Halvorsen was also ferrying something else. The children of Berlin, he'd noticed, didn't have any sweets to munch on. The Soviet siege not only caused severe shortages of flour and coal, but also of candy.

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He'd made a deal with the kids who hung around the Berlin airport. On his approach he told them he'd wiggle his wings — a sign that he and his crew were about to throw several small parachutes from his plane filled with chocolate and gum.

For nearly a month he'd been at it, to the glee of an increasing number of German kids.

He hadn't asked for permission, on two grounds: 1) He suspected the bureaucratic red tape he'd have to negotiate would cause huge delays, and 2) they might say no.

But now, the jig appeared to be up.

On his return from Berlin, he was told that Col. James R. Haun, the commanding officer of Rhein-Main Airbase, wanted to see him in his office.

Here, Halvorsen, sitting in his Provo backyard and wearing the same uniform he wore back then, picks up the narrative.

“‘Halvorsen,’ the colonel asked when I came in his office, ‘What in the world have you been doing?’

“‘Flying like mad, sir,’ I told him.

“‘I’m not stupid. What else have you been doing?’”

Here, Halvorsen pauses for effect.

“That’s when I knew they knew. I got chewed out real good,” he says before flashing his trademark smile. “But at the end, the colonel said, ‘That’s a good idea. Keep doing it. But keep me informed.’”

The Berlin Candy Bomber had the clearance he needed to carry on.

Over the course of a little more than a year, from July 1948 to September 1949, Halvorsen and his successors would drop some 21 tons of candy on Berlin. That was a tiny portion of the 2.3 million tons of food and supplies delivered during that same period of time. But the candy drop drew an inordinate amount of worldwide attention, shining a spotlight on a spontaneous, voluntary act of selfless service that has inspired millions ever since.

Books have been written, documentaries have been filmed, poems have been composed, all in tribute to the Berlin Candy Bomber, a man who grew up hoeing sugar beets on his father's farm in the little northern Utah town of Garland.

A man who this Saturday will turn 100.

The last time Gail Halvorsen flew an airplane was this past December, shortly after he turned 99. Granted, he was the co-pilot. He's not above making some concessions to the aging process. But there he was, in the cockpit of The Spirit of Freedom, a genuine C-54, just like the planes he flew to Berlin, landing at the Wright Brothers airstrip in Kitty Hawk, North Carolina, as part of the special Candy Bomber reenactment that is held every Christmastime.

He plans to be there this December as well.

But first, there's a birthday bash to attend. This Saturday, Oct. 10, the Halvorsen family has planned a big party at a reception center in Mapleton. Originally, the guest list included friends from near and far, including a contingent of "kids" from Germany, long-ago candy recipients who are now in their 80s. But the COVID-19 pandemic has reduced the event to a family-only, mask-wearing affair.

Still, there will be plenty of fuss. Halvorsen's posterity numbers close to 100, counting five children, 24 grandchildren and 60-plus great-grandchildren. The festivities will include songs from the grandkids, the performance of a composition from a German composer, Steffen Schmidt, called the "Hal Suite," a ballroom dance exhibition, and, of course, a parachute candy drop.

The candy will be dropped from a helicopter flown by Jim Stewart of the Halvorsen Family Foundation. As for Halvorsen, this time, instead of being the pilot, he'll have a front-row seat to watch the goodies fall from the sky.

"I'm really looking forward to it," says the original Candy Bomber, who can't quite believe he's about to turn 100.

"Time flies so fast," he says. "And it gets a bigger jet engine every year."

Asked for the secret to living a long time, he says he's not sure what that is. He has more to say about the keys to a happy life, however. "Always have something to do," the Candy Bomber advises. "And watch for things you can do that make a difference.

"If you see a need, do something about it. It's the little things in life that put your footsteps where you end up."

Correction: An earlier version incorrectly said his birthday is Friday, Oct. 10 instead of Saturday, Oct. 10.