

50 YEARS ON

AT ABOUT 5.30 a.m. on the morning of the 26th June this year, some 125 people assembled at London Heathrow Airport. All were easily identifiable by a badge with the British Berlin Airlift Association logo and respective identity tags. The group was made up of Ex-Servicemen, wives, widows and some civil airline crews. Most of the men knew one another yet some had not met for nearly 50 years. The party went through the formalities and boarded a British Airways plane to be flown to Berlin, Tegel Airport. Tegel had been in what was then the French Zone and had been hurriedly built during the Airlift to increase landing facilities.

The party had been invited by the people of Berlin to commemorate the 50th Anniversary of the Berlin Airlift. All expenses, hotel, catering and even the air fares had been paid for by the Berliners.

A digest of the history of the Airlift began in Yalta in 1945, when Winston Churchill, President Roosevelt and Joseph Stalin planned to chop up Germany after the war had been won. Berlin was about 150 miles from the Western sectors but each ally had an enclave in Berlin normally referred to as the British, French and American sectors. In 1948 the West Germans were about to introduce the new Deutsch Mark. Russia did not like this and it gave Stalin an excuse to grab the whole of Berlin and then proceeded to cut all rail, road and canal links with the West.

Thus Berlin was cut off from food and all other materials essential to life. It was under siege and the American Commander, General Clay wanted to fight his way to Berlin, thus starting World War 3. The British worked out a plan using the three air corridors, which could be used to feed and succour two million people in the Western Sectors. Thus the Berlin Airlift began on the 26th June 1948 and continued for over a year. The Germans called it the "Luft Brücke", the "Air Bridge". Our BA flight took about an hour and we landed at Tegel airport. During the flight the Captain welcomed us on board and informed all the other passengers of our presence. On our arrival and formalities over, we were well and truly welcomed with champagne and a fist full of invitations to various functions that would take place during our stay. All these invites were sponsored by companies, banks and of course the people of Berlin.

After the Airlift the people of Berlin were so delighted that they had not been absorbed by the Russians that an "Airlift Gratitude Foundation" fund was raised. This was started in order to support and educate the widows and children of those killed in the performance of their airlift duties but now, with only a few widows remaining and the children all adults, there still remained a large amount of money. In view of this, the fund controllers decided to invite parties of veterans to Berlin at no cost to them as a way of saying "Thank you".

Day 1. The tour began with lunch at Gatow airfield followed by the unveiling of a Memorial Plaque commemorating the years when it was known as RAF Gatow. Also a DC3 Dakota of the Royal Australian Air Force was officially handed over to the German Airforce as 'Station Guard'. During the ceremony a C54 Skymaster from the USA and a DC3 Dakota from the RAF flew low overhead in salute. They both continued to fly at various times throughout our stay.

Three bands officiated. The RAF Band, the French Air Force and German Air Force bands performed during the proceedings of flag raising and lowering. Wreaths were laid at the Plaque.

Our next function was to the presentation of the Erik M. Warburg Award ceremony. The award is to foster friendship between Berlin and the Western allies, known as the 'Atlantic Bridge'. This took place in the 'Konzerthaus am Gendarmenmarkt' which was a beautifully designed theatre. The entertainment was a concert given by combined US, French and German Bands and two choirs, one being the Berlin Children's Choir. The presentation of the awards to the eight recipients, one from the USA, UK, Australia, New Zealand, Canada, France, South Africa and one other, was made by the Mayor of Berlin. The concert and the singing were excellent. There was more music to come. We were driven to a huge square for an open air concert given by the Federal Government Youth Orchestra.

It was excellent in both quality and choice of music. During the performance a speech was given by a Minister Herr Klinker who in his last sentence asked the "Airlift fliers to stand up". We sixty or so elderly ex RAF and civilian aircrews stood up. There were thousands of Berliners at the concert and they clapped and cheered in such a spontaneous way that we were taken aback. The applause went on and on and on and on for what seemed like hours but was probably nearer to five minutes. Tears welled in our eyes and eventually we looked at one another and slowly sat down. The clapping, however, continued for some time and only slowly subsided and ceased. Their message of saying thank you was to say the least overwhelming. It was now past midnight and we were taken to the Hilton Hotel for more champagne and dinner. It had been a long but very memorable day.

Day 2 began with a tour of the Berlin City Hall, another speech by the Mayor of Berlin, more champagne and lunch then back to our hotel for a 'freshen-up' before being transported to the Zehlendorf City Hall. A welcome speech by the local Mayor was followed by another concert given by the RAF band, US Army band, Musique de L'air and the 3rd Luftwaffen Division. From here we were taken to a place some 600 yards from the recently completed Allied Airlift Museum. We were requested to wear our medals and march up the road to the museum. The atmosphere whilst we were marching was similar to the previous night at the open air concert.

There were thousands lining the street and they came up to us, shook hands, patted us on the back and always the words "Thank you, thank you" or "Danke, danke". Where ever we went their demonstration of gratitude was at times overwhelming. It is something that I shall vividly remember. The Museum was opened after several speeches from representative from the various countries involved, including our Minister for Defence, Robertson. He did not mingle with us after the event. The Museum is 'Guarded' by an RAF Hastings TG503. One that I had flown in after the Airlift. Another freshen-up and off to Templehof Airfield where there is an Airlift Memorial, which lists the names of all those who were killed in the course of operations. Sadly 18 RAF and 21 civil airmen were killed in accidents of one sort or another. A Memorial Service took place at 10pm and this was followed by a Ceremonial Tattoo by the German Federal Government Army. There were 150,000 people in attendance – can you imagine the applause? The Tattoo was magnificent but far too difficult and complex for me to describe, it really was impressive. It was well after midnight before we returned to our hotel.

Day 3 was relatively easy but included a three hour boat trip on the lakes and canals of Berlin and other minor visits to building projects. What an experience. As for the veterans, we chatted amongst ourselves, recalling old times and incidents and of course remembering those of our friends and aircrews who were sadly killed trying to fly food,

coal and suchlike to keep Berlin alive and away from Russian control. On our return flight as we awaited to board the aircraft, yes you have guessed correctly, we had more champagne as a lasting farewell.

There was one disappointment that we all commented on. Not one BBC or ITV camera to be seen. I was interviewed by three foreign TV stations and one radio station but no BBC or ITV. The total lack of interest by our own media in the prevention of World War 3 and of the biggest airlift ever undertaken leaves me very disappointed. It was most noticeable that the American and French contingents were well and truly televised. I list a few statistics concerning the British and American contributions to the Airlift.

British Tonnage Lifted –
RAF 394,509 – Civil 147,727
American Tonnage lifted – 1,783,572
Total Tonnage – 2,325,808

Tonnage by type of load –
British – food 241,713; coal 164,800 ;
military 18,239; fuel 92,282; other
25,202.

American – food 296,303; coal
1,421,730; military, fuel & other
65,540.

British tonnage lifted from Berlin –
35,843

Passengers lifted to and from Berlin
To – British 36,218; American 24,216
From – British 131,436;

American 36,584

British aircraft consumed over 35 million gallons of aviation fuel, flew more than 30 million miles and spent more than 200,000 hours in the air flying to and from Berlin.

RAF Lay-about (Retired)