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University of Dayton

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BERLIN CANDY BOMBER TO HIGHLIGHT AVIATION SYMPOSIUM AT UD: ‘I'D LIKE TO GO TO IRAQ AND PARACHUTE SOME CANDY BARS’

DAYTON, Ohio — The Berlin Candy Bomber wishes he could offer a symbol of hope to the Iraqi people — much like he did for the Germans after World War II when he parachuted candy to children in occupied Berlin.

“The world is so different now that you can’t compare, but I’d like to go to Iraq and parachute some candy bars over schools and children’s hospitals after we have begun the occupation and are getting people’s lives back on track,” said retired Air Force Col. Gail Halvorsen in a telephone interview from Amado, Ariz. “During the Berlin Airlift, the children looked at us as if we were angels from heaven. They needed food and freedom, and we had both.”

Halvorsen, 82, will travel to Dayton to headline the University of Dayton portion of an April 3-5 “Aviation and the Human Experience” symposium sponsored by the Miami Valley Higher Education Consortium as part of Inventing Flight 2003’s yearlong tribute. The group includes Central State University, University of Dayton, Sinclair Community College and Wright State University.

“This symposium is an important event in the celebration of the centennial of flight,” said Janet Bednarek, chair of the history department at the University of Dayton and an aviation historian. “People are very familiar with the war-fighting side of the aviation story. We looked for other ways that aviation has carved a legacy.”

Halvorsen will talk about his humanitarian mission over the skies of Germany from 10:45 a.m. until 11:45 a.m. on Thursday, April 3, in Boll Theatre on UD’s campus. It’s part of a
daylong UD symposium, “Humanitarian Uses of Aviation.” The cost is $35 for the general public and $5 for students, including lunch. To register, call (937) 775-5517. Other sessions will feature:

- Roger G. Miller, author of To Save a City: The Berlin Airlift, 1948-1949, considered one of the best books on the Berlin Airlift;
- Frank Perfetti, pilot for Angel Flight, nonprofit organization of pilots and volunteers who arrange free private air transportation for patients who cannot afford commercial transportation; and
- Chief Warrant Officer Four Frank “Pappy” Badder, an Army pilot who has flown numerous disaster relief missions during forest fires, earthquakes and floods.

Halvorsen and Miller will sign copies of their books outside Boll Theatre after the sessions end at 3:15 p.m. Halvorsen has written The Berlin Candy Bomber. Miller’s books also include Seeing off the Bear: Anglo-American Air Power Cooperation During the Cold War.

Halvorsen has reenacted his candy bomber airdrops on many occasions, and in September 1989 he flew over Templehof with a television crew from “Good Morning America” commemorating the 40th anniversary of the last Berlin Airlift flight. In 1994, he flew on an Operation PROVIDE PROMISE C-130 mission over Bosnia and dropped candy parachutes to children.

Halvorsen is surprised how his story still captivates people. “I became the candy bomber by accident,” he said.

When the Soviets created a blockade around Berlin, Halvorsen and other American pilots started airlifting food, medicine and other supplies to the city as part of “Operation Vittles.” One day the 27-year-old pilot met and talked for about an hour with a group of 30 children across a barbed-wire fence at Tempelhof Base. He was taken aback when not one child put out his hand and asked for candy or gum.

“These kids didn’t have enough to eat, yet they didn’t ask for anything,” Halvorsen said. “They wouldn’t lower themselves to beg for chocolate. Every day they prayed for dried carrots and dried potatoes to stay alive. They taught me the importance of freedom, of putting principle before pleasure. I wanted to give them something.”

When he reached in his pocket, Halvorsen found only two sticks of gum. He divided it and passed four pieces through the barbed wire. “The ones who got it looked as though they received an old-age pension for life,” he remembered. “The others looked so disappointed. Some kids put the paper wrapper up to their noses and smelled it.”

He promised the children if they would come back the next day and stand in a spot -more-
between bombed-out buildings, he’d drop enough gum for all of them — if they’d share it. “I told them I’d wiggle my wings. ‘When you see an airplane looking funny, you’ll know that’s me.’”

Halvorsen’s Air Force friends gave him their candy rations and for three weeks he quietly dropped little parachutes of candy to the children before getting caught. “I thought I was going to get court martialed. A photo had run in the paper, and my boss saw it. I deserved to be chewed out, but he said to keep dropping the candy,” Halvorsen said.

American candy manufacturers shipped thousands of pounds of candy. “Altogether we dropped 23 tons of candy,” he said. “The lesson I learned was service before self. Helping somebody else equates to fulfillment. Is what you’re engaging in benefitting humanity?”

Besides Halvorsen, some other notable figures are coming to Dayton to participate in the joint symposium. Tom Crouch, premiere biographer of the Wright brothers, will headline a 6:30 p.m. dinner on Friday, April 4, in the David H. Ponitz Center at Sinclair Community College.

Earlier in the day, Wright State University will highlight “Aviation in Art and Culture,” including an exhibit of the work of aviation artist Matt Jefferies, who designed the Starship Enterprise for the Star Trek series; a talk by Russell Munson, an aviation photojournalist who will present images from Route 66; and a performance by the Dayton Contemporary Dance Company.

Central State University will focus on “Race and Gender in Aviation” on Saturday, April 5. World War II pilots John Leahr and Herb Heilbrun — one a Tuskegee Airman, the other a bomber pilot for whom the former provided air cover — will talk about that experience. Kathryn Sullivan, astronaut and CEO of the Center of Science and Industry in Columbus, will share her views as a woman astronaut. A panel, “Women in Aviation: From Barnstorming to Bombing Missions,” will focus on challenges faced by women in aviation. Allan Taylor, a collector of Tuskegee Airmen memorabilia, will talk about his collection, which will also be featured in the National Afro-American Museum. The museum will also include a traveling display that focuses on women’s experiences in aviation.

The cost for the three-day symposium is $125 or $35 per each event. Students can register for $15, or $5 per event. To register, call (937) 775-5512.

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For media interviews, contact Janet Bednarek at (937) 229-2848.