

# CONSTRUCTIVE AIR POWER

## The Story of the Berlin Air Lift

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**Editors Note :** With our relations with the Soviet Union relaxing as a result of the dramatic changes in the governments of Eastern Europe, the story of the Berlin Airlift is quite timely. It deals with a time when the United States and the Soviet Union almost went to war over control of a narrow strip of land connecting Berlin with Western-held Europe. It is a story of tenacity and determination that in retrospect preserved the free world up until this day. The Airlift undoubtedly stiffened the resolve of our western allies and played a big part in preserving democracy. It is appropriate also because some of our members participated in the airlift.

When the United States entered World War II, it was "with only the basic types of military aircraft, the bomber and the fighter," said Maj.Gen. Robert M. Webster, Commander of the Military Air Transport Service (MATS), to a National War College class in 1947. He added quickly, "I feel that we have come out of that war with an additional type, the transport plane, and that we should think in terms of bomber-fighter-transport since they are all equally important--and they must be properly balanced to each other if we are to be prepared to conduct successful war operations." (1)

The importance of airlift capability that Webster and most other Army Air Forces officials recognized during World War II was reinforced during the first years of the Cold War in Europe. During that period, the flexibility of airlift as an instrument for the execution of United States foreign policy, short of actual combat operations, was demonstrated repeatedly. This flexibility to respond to challenges without armed response was never better accomplished than in breaking the Berlin Blockade in 1948 and 1949.

### Origins of a Crisis

The airlift to break the Berlin blockade originated because of the unique situation in Europe at the end of World War II. Agreements between the allies had divided Germany into four zones, one each for the French, British, American, and Soviet allies. These agreements allowed the Soviets to occupy German territory well to the west of Berlin, while Berlin itself was placed in the hands of the four allies with each receiving a zone in the city .(2)

The creation of a western allied presence in a city outside its normal zones never worked well, although during the immediate postwar years the spirit of allied cooperation made the supply of the various sectors of the city possible. The western powers' right of access to Berlin was never expressly agreed to by the Soviet Union but was implicit in the agreement that established four-power military forces in the city. The only understanding reached on this issue involved a verbal commitment between

Marshal Georgi K. Zhukov, the Soviet commander in Germany, General Lucius D. Clay, and Sir Robert Weeks, representing the American and British governments. Marshal Zhukov promised in 1945 that the western powers would have the use of a major highway and a rail line. (3) General Clay had not pressed for a written commitment from the Soviets, although tempted, because he believed that it would imply limitations on American rights in Berlin.

On 30 November 1945, the Allied Control Council in Berlin approved the only written agreement for transportation to the city from the west. It provided for three 20 mile-wide air corridors between Berlin and the western part of Germany to be dedicated to French, British, and American aircraft. Flights in these corridors



*Airlifters (above) rejoice at news the Berlin blockade has ended. Airmen of US Navy Squadron V6 greet an R-5D (C-54 ) crew as it returns to Rhein Main from delivering supplies to Templehof in Berlin. (USAF photo)*

could proceed without advance notice at all altitudes below 10,000 feet. The agreement also set up a "Berlin control zone, extending 20 miles in every direction from the center of the city, which, in effect, allowed air access to any part of the city although it might have been part of the Soviet sector." The airspace over Berlin was controlled by a four-power Air Safety Center, which was also mandated in the agreement. Representatives of the Soviet Union, the United States, Great Britain, and France agreed to this air transport accord because of the importance of regulating air traffic over Berlin.(4)

Soviet-American relations at the highest diplomatic levels deteriorated throughout 1946 and 1947, largely because of differences over the type of governments to be established in post-war Europe. Some of these manifestations spilled over into the governance of Berlin. For example, in early 1948, Soviet deliveries of coal to the western controlled zones of the city were temporarily halted. (5) In April, American, British, and French trains were intermittently stopped at Soviet guard posts and their commanders harassed by military officials. (6)