

The full-scale Soviet blockade of Berlin began on 24 June 1948. The stated reasons for this cutting off of the western world's access to Berlin were "technical difficulties" on the railroad and highway. At the same time, the Soviets announced that "severe shortages of electric current" forced them to limit electrical power to only two hours daily in the western sectors of Berlin. (7)

From the Soviet perspective, the blockade of Berlin represented an opportunity to gain a genuine prize--the city itself--with little risk. Holding the western sectors hostage would force American, British and French occupation forces from Berlin. All of the alternatives open to the western allies appeared inadequate to meet this challenge. If they stuck it out in Berlin the allies would be unable to supply their respective sectors of the city. If the western allies tried to force supply convoys through the Soviet zone to Berlin the result could be war for which they would be responsible. Finally, if the allies tried to airlift supplies to the blockaded city, the Soviets--as well as many western observers--believed that the needs of more than two million Berliners could not be met by air transport, for the western zones of the city were importing 6,000 tons of coal and hundreds of tons of food everyday. Soviet leaders concluded that the allies could never win this confrontation in Berlin. (8)

A Makeshift Airlift

From early in the confrontation, however, General Clay anticipated the use of airlift to support any blockade efforts in Berlin. When the Soviet officials first started harassing military trains and vehicles bound for Berlin from the west in March 1948, he directed that an interim airlift be instituted to meet the needs of the American presence in the city. (9) When access to Berlin was slammed shut in June, Clay, as well as several other strategists, including former British Prime Minister Clement Attlee, suggested that a larger airlift be implemented to supply the entire city of Berlin until the crisis



Left: Brig Gen. Joseph Smith was the first commander of the Berlin Airlift. Later he commanded the Military Air Transport Service, 1951-58.

Below: Rations are loaded aboard a C-47 in the early days of the airlift. (USAF photos)



could be resolved through diplomatic channels. Seen as the most resourceful approach, Clay's request for this larger airlift was approved by American officials, and was quickly ratified by the British. (10)

On 25 June 1948 General Clay called Lieutenant General Curtis E. LeMay, Commander of USAFE, to discuss the prospects for an airlift to resupply the city with coal and food. "Curt," Clay asked abruptly, "can you transport coal by air?" For a moment there was silence on the line. "I beg your pardon, General," LeMay said, "but would you mind repeating that question?" Clay did. This time LeMay answered promptly, "Sir, the Air Force can deliver anything." (11) He was told to establish an airlift. His orders stated: "utilize the maximum number of airplanes to transport supplies to Tempelhof Airdrome, Berlin Strict adherence to existing air corridors will be maintained." (12)

Then Clay and LeMay considered the resources needed and those on hand to conduct an airlift. Headquarters USAFE had at its disposal 102 C-47 transports, with about three tons of capacity each, and two of the larger and more modern C-54s, which could carry about ten tons of cargo. The British also had at hand some C-47s, which they called Dakotas, that would be available for the airlift. (13) General Clay predicted that these aircraft would be incapable of airlifting into Berlin sufficient tonnage to supply anything more than the needs of the American and the French troops. Nothing would be available for the civilian population. (14)

Obviously greater airlift capability would have to be obtained. On 26 June 1948 General LeMay sent a personal message to Lieutenant General Lauris Norstad, Headquarters USAF Deputy Chief of Staff (DCS) Operations, discussing the airlift's requirements. He advised making available immediately about 30 C-54 aircraft, each with two crews to augment the forces already on hand. He promised to make arrangements for the reception of such a force. "I further recommend," he wrote, "that serious study be given to the possible conversion of the two troop carrier groups in my command at earlier dates that..." had been programmed in the USAFE planning documents. (15)

General LeMay's request received a prompt response; on 28 June the Air Force Chief of Staff informed him: "Approximately 39 C-54 Skymasters, passenger and cargo carrying aircraft, from the Alaskan, Caribbean and Tactical Air Commands of the USAF have been ordered to the Frankfurt area of Germany at the request of the Theater Commander, Gen. Lucius [D.] Clay, for increased air facilities to supply Berlin. When they arrive in Germany the airplanes will be under the operation control of Lt.Gen. Curtis LeMay, CG [Commanding General] of the USAF in Europe. The airplanes will begin leaving their bases within 24 hours, singly or otherwise as they become operationally ready for the mission. The Squadron from Alaska will fly [by the way of Westover AFB [Air Force Base], Mass. [Massachusetts], the Azores and the Frankfurt area. the Sqdn [Squadron] from the Caribbean will fly to Bermuda, the Azores and the Frankfurt area. The Sqdn from Bergstrom AFB, Austin, Texas, (TAC) will fly to Westover AFB, the Azores and the Frankfurt Area." (16)

These three squadrons carried both aircrews and support personnel, approximately 825 of them in all. Additionally, a fourth squadron of 13 C-54s from Hickam AFB, Hawaii, was sent to Europe. This move involved another 425 individuals, later augmented by additional C-54 aircraft and personnel.

At Wiesbaden Air Base, where USAFE headquarters was located, General LeMay and his staff worked resolutely to create a vi-