

Berlin Airlift reunion of sorts

Two ex-residents meet general who played key role

By Aaron Mackey
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As teenage residents of West Berlin during what many consider to be the first battle of the Cold War, Guenther and Gisela Petzold never knew how close the Berlin Airlift came to collapsing.

It wasn't until years later, after the couple married and became U.S. citizens, that they learned of the difficulties surrounding the operation and how their neighbor played a critical role in the airlift's success.

While the Petzolds didn't get to know retired Gen. T. Ross Milton until the trio met at an Oro Valley affair, they certainly benefited from his actions during the pivotal standoff between the Soviets and Western allies.

The flour, coal and other supplies dropped by Allied air crews not only kept roughly 2 million residents of the split city well fed and warm, they also provided a sense of normalcy to a generation who had witnessed years of destruction.

"It meant our life," said Guenther Petzold, who, along with his wife and Milton, spoke about those days during a presentation Monday in advance of the airlift's 60th anniversary.

When the Soviets blockaded supply routes into West Berlin in June 1948, German residents in the city were confident that the Allied forces would get needed supplies into the city through the air, Guenther Petzold said.

After all, this was the military force that only three years earlier had filled German skies with fighters and bombers.

"To us, having seen these bombers come by the hundreds



Retired Gen. T. Ross Milton, left, who served as chief of staff for the general in charge of the Berlin Airlift in 1948, and Gisela and Guenther Petzold, who were both Berlin residents during the airlift, came together Monday at Splendido, a Rancho Vistoso retirement community.

JAMES S. WOOD / ARIZONA DAILY STAR

and thousands, it was unthinkable that the Americans couldn't do it," Guenther Petzold said.

But less than a month into the operation, the plan to provide supplies to Berlin was in danger of falling apart, Milton said.

Serving as the chief of staff for a general who took over the mission, Milton landed in Germany in July 1948 to find over-stretched air crews, poorly maintained aircraft and bad airfields incapable of handling the mission.

What the Germans thought to be a mighty air fleet was reduced in post-World War II days to a handful of obsolete transport planes, and even those were hard to come by, Milton said. "Everyone was exhausted," he said of the initial effort. "There was just no way this could go on any further without considerable reinforcements."

Commanders didn't want to part with aircraft from the states, fearing that the resources would be needed in a war against the Soviets that many saw looming.

Milton's boss, then-Maj. Gen. William H. Tunner, needed bigger aircraft, more pilots and a better way to coordinate flights.

He got new aircraft, thanks to hand-scribbled computations by Milton, and then devised a system that eventually enabled aircraft to land in Berlin around the clock.

The key to the airlift's success

BY THE NUMBERS

2.3 million

Tons of supplies delivered to Berlin during the airlift.

189,000

Number of flights flown in support of the airlift.

92 million

Miles flown by pilots during the airlift.

Source: www.globalsecurity.org

was a strict adherence to flying via instrument guidance and flight rules that were governed by controllers on the ground.

The tight procedures allowed for what Milton described as a conveyor belt, where airplanes with supplies were landing in Berlin once every three minutes.

"That was what really made the airlift work," Milton said. "It made for a very well ordered, remarkably easy air operation."

Though the airlift dropped millions of pounds of food, a majority of the supplies were coal and other materials such as medicine and newsprint.

"The goal of the airlift was not just to feed people but to maintain the city," Milton said.

While there was a noticeable drop in quality of life after the



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West Berlin children at Tempelhof airport watch an American military plane bringing in supplies to circumvent the Russian blockade. The airlift began June 25, 1948, and continued for 11 months.

blockade — including Soviet authorized blackouts that allowed for only two hours of electricity a day — the airlift helped residents feel connected to the outside world, Gisela Petzold said.

More than giving hope to be-

leaguered residents of the city, the airlift allowed the U.S. to assert itself in the face of Soviet aggression, a non-violent move that may have helped stop another war, Milton said.

"Looking back on it, it was

probably one of the most important things that any of us got involved in," he said.

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