



# Operation Vittles: Mission with a Heart

By YNC Anthony Atwood

The young boy in ragged clothes climbed carefully over the piles of rubble. All around were the ruins of his war-torn city. The winter sky was a blanket of fog. The city was at peace—if the siege of starvation it faced could be called peaceful. Two rumbling sounds occupied his attention: the growl of hunger in his stomach, and the constant rumbling thunder of invisible aircraft flying low overhead. The boy was 12; his name was Manfred Knopf.

He reached his favorite observation spot on the edge of the tarmac just as

the next aircraft dropped out of the fog. The pilot somehow managed the precarious landing on the dangerously short airstrip. Within minutes, the Navy R5D cargo plane had taxied to a halt, been unloaded, turned and launched again, and disappeared into the fog. As Ensign Alfred N. Cave focused on the instruments, unseen below him young Manfred saluted.

It was fifty years ago, and the Berlin Airlift was underway.

V-E Day, 7 May 1945, brought an end to WW II in Europe, but not to unsettled conditions there. The conti-

nent was devastated from years of battles and bombings. Millions of displaced refugees wandered without food, shelter or a future. And the victorious Allies were not in agreement on how to handle the situation. The Communist regime of Joseph Stalin, bent on grabbing all the real estate it could, was tightening its hold over the eastern European nations that it had “liberated.”

In a prophetic speech, Winston Churchill warned the world that from the Baltic to the Adriatic “an Iron Curtain has descended across the con-



continent.” It was the beginning of the Cold War, which did not take long to heat up. Communist riots in Italy were followed by the outbreak of a vicious guerrilla war in Greece to subvert the government. A Stalin-backed resistance movement seized control of Czechoslovakia.

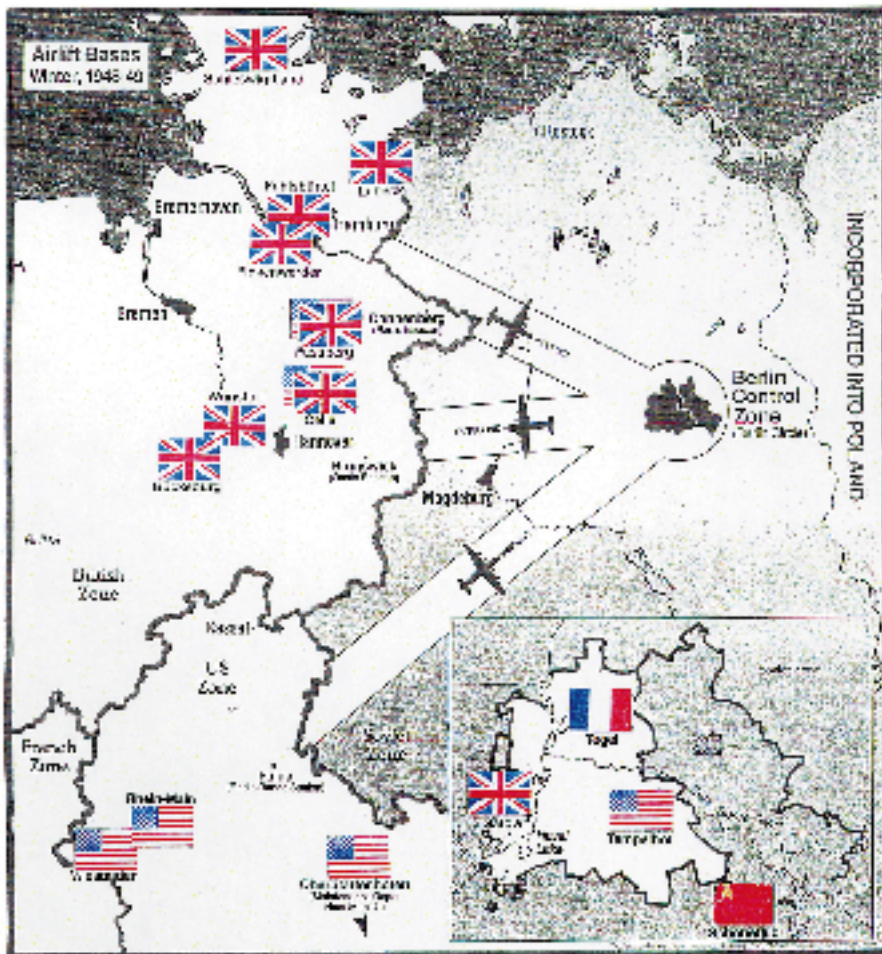
Berlin was next. The German capital had been the scene of some of the worst fighting of WW II. When the war was over Berlin was in ruins, with each of the Allied countries—America, Britain, France and the Soviet Union—occupying a section of the city. The countryside for hundreds of miles around Berlin was controlled by the Soviet army, and without permission no truck, train or bicycle could pass through the territory and enter Berlin. Without Stalin’s approval, not a single potato, loaf of bread or lump of coal could reach the war-weary Berliners.

In June 1948, Soviet troops began to block the roads. The outlook was grim: the United States could go to war, or evacuate the city and leave its people to starve under Soviet domination. But there was one trump card which Stalin had not counted on: airlift.

So began the Berlin Airlift, dubbed “Operation Vittles”—the most successful peacetime air operation in aviation history. Rather than give in to Soviet pressure, U.S. Air Force C-47s carried supplies from Wiesbaden and Rhein-Main air bases in Germany to Templehof Airport in West Berlin. By October, winter was approaching and the Air Force fleet needed assistance. Air Force General Lucius Clay conferred with President Harry Truman in Washington, D.C., about augmenting the airlift.

In Hawaii, Ens. Cave and his R5D flight crew walked into the air operations building on the sun-drenched atoll of Kwajalein Island in the western Pacific. As part of the Naval Air Transport Service’s Air Transport Squadron (VR) 8, they were on the return leg of their regular milk run: Honolulu to Johnston Island to Kwajalein to Guam and back. The Sailors in the ops office gave them a heads up: it was the last time VR-8 would see the Pacific for a while; they were going to Germany—on the double.

Their sister squadron on Guam,



Opposite page, Manfred Knopf (tall boy in dark shorts, third in from right) watches as an Operation Vittles aircraft arrives carrying life-sustaining supplies. Above, this map shows the corridors that participants in the Berlin Airlift flew to deliver their precious cargoes.

VR-6, was also ordered into Operation Vittles. Among the personnel swinging a loaded seabag aboard was a 20-year-old aviation machinist’s mate on temporary assignment from VR-8, AD3 Harry R. Crites, Jr. Along with the rest of the squadron, he turned to the mission. Naval Aviation was on call.

VRs 6 and 8 traveled to NAS Moffett Field, Calif., reconfiguring their squadrons as they went. They traded off high-mileage planes for newer R5Ds, snagging the latest radar, spare parts and winter gear, while linking up with squadron personnel reporting back from canceled leave. The squadrons then flew to the East Coast where VR-3 joined them to support Operation Vittles on the transatlantic leg across the pond.

Arriving at Lajes, Azores, they got the word that fog, which they would soon come to know well, had all but

closed their destination at Rhein-Main. Ens. Cave flew into France, while AD3 Crites and the rest of the 24-plane Navy contingent were diverted to other locations. In Berlin, Manfred Knopf and his family were down to a helping of dehydrated potatoes a day; his little sister, Marianne, was getting too weak to stand.

On 9 November, the first Navy plane arrived at Rhein-Main. It flew a load of supplies to Berlin in the fog the same night, then returned to Rhein-Main. One after another, the rest of the Navy aircraft joined them. VRs 6 and 8 were attached to the composite Air Force groups and assigned to sectors on the fringe of the airfield. There were eight Air Force squadrons at Rhein-Main flying C-47s and C-54s for the sole purpose of resupplying Berlin by air. Naval Aviation rolled up its sleeves and pitched in.



The plan for the airlift was simple: to provide an endless conveyor belt of cargo. The loaded planes would fly east in a dedicated corridor to Berlin. In the British sector of the city, the Royal Air Force would land at Gatow Airport. The French built an airfield at Tegel in their sector. Templehof Airport was reserved for the Yanks. After landing and unloading, the planes would return to their starting point, then reload and do it again. Simple. But the reality of flying and supporting hundreds of aircraft around the clock was as challenging as aviation gets.

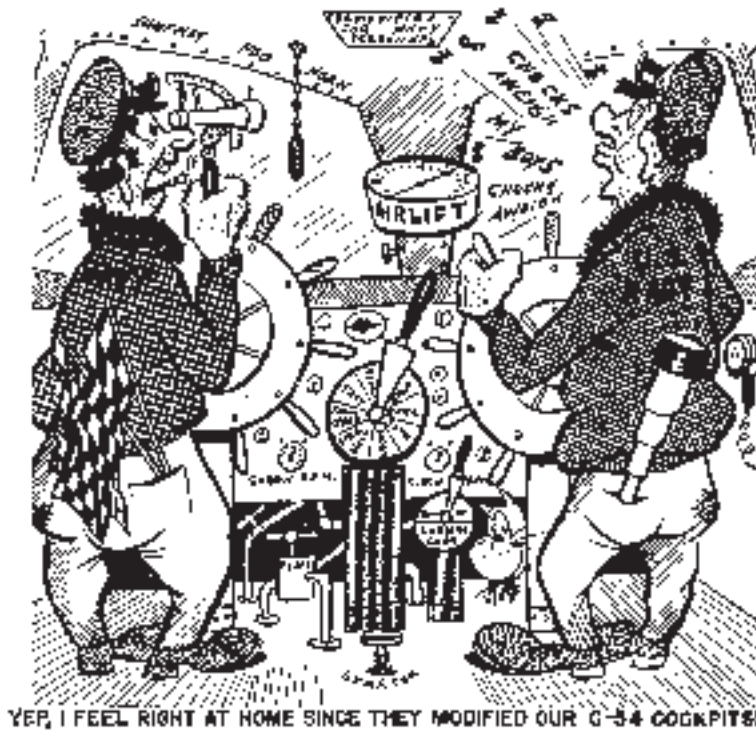
The city of two million people required monumental amounts of supplies. Loading and unloading with split-second timing was only part of the challenge; the maintenance on aircraft almost continuously in the air was another hurdle. To top it off, for months on end the weather required strictly instrument flying.

An aviator in VR-6 came up with his own acronym to describe their daily routine: T.T.T.T. The label summed up the mission: "Ten Tons to Templehof." The fog, rain and snow of winter turned the taxi ramps, hardstands and operations huts into a sea of mud. And it was an hour's bumpy

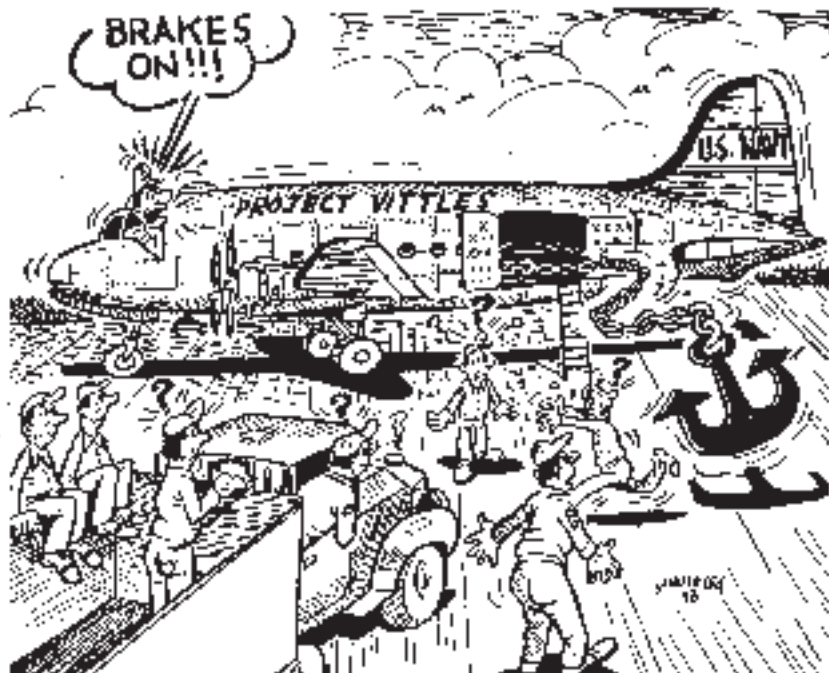
bus ride to the barracks they called home. But "Ten Tons to Templehof" was the reason they were there, so the Navy squadrons squared their caps and got to work.

They soon began to break records. Flights to Templehof were packed with staples: pallets of powdered eggs and potatoes, bags of flour, sacks of coal. The flour left a powdery white residue inside the planes, and the

loads of coal blanketed the interiors in dingy soot. To guard against igniting the coal fumes, the windows were removed from the aircraft. The planes were soon as battered as one would expect them to be, resupplying an entire city. A thick grime of coal dust and flour covered bulkheads, overheads and instrument panels—everywhere except the seats where the crews sat. For the first few weeks, fly-



These Operation Vittles cartoons by Air Force T/Sgt. John H. Schuffert poke good-natured fun at the crews flying Navy R5Ds—equivalent to USAF C-54s.



ing entirely by instruments, Ens. Cave remembered, "I was just a dumb ensign flying copilot, and with the fog I had no idea where we were landing. Then, one afternoon the fog lifted a bit as we were coming in. I glanced to my side and saw people looking back at me from fifth floor apartment windows. It was not until then that we realized our approach was down a corridor lined on both sides with apartment houses. Where we stopped was only a stone's throw from more tall buildings in front of us. It was a revelation."

Manfred Knopf and the rest of the Berliners observed them with hope and admiration: "Night and day they came, and it was amazing to watch them; it was very dangerous. It was also very cold and we were so hungry. Without the powdered potatoes and the coal, we would not have survived.

They were risking their lives for us.”

On 11 December 1948, a VR-6 R5D was returning to Rhein-Main after delivering its load of supplies when it crashed into a mountainside. Of the 31 American servicemen who gave their lives in the Berlin Airlift, AD3 Harry R. Crites Jr., was one. A street on Weisbaden Air Force Base was named after him.

Logistically, the Navy squadrons shone during the airlift, and the Navy ground crews and “mechs” were key players. Situated at the end of Rhein-Main airfield, with a tent for a head



**AD3 Harry R. Crites, Jr., was one of 31 U.S. servicemen killed while supporting the Berlin Airlift's humanitarian mission.**

and freezing temperatures, the airdales demonstrated the Naval Aviation can-do spirit. They worked around the clock, cannibalizing parts from plane to plane and doing whatever it took to keep them flying. Navy pilots flew 45,990 hours, carrying 129,989 tons of cargo. On 16 December, VR-8 alone flew 51 trips into Berlin.

In February 1949, VR-8 led all Air Force and Navy squadrons with an average of 120 percent efficiency utilization of aircraft. VR-6 was right behind with 117 percent. Not content to compete at workload alone, the airdales took it to the playing field. They organized a basketball team they called “The Tars” and proceeded to

slam-dunk their sister service in an informal basketball tournament. The worse the flying and working conditions became, the higher Navy morale soared.

The airlift's Navy component was a unique team. An all enlisted aircrew flew in VR-8. Chief Aviation Pilot Wesley T. Christensen, aircraft commander, flew with Aviation Pilot First Class Joseph A. Popp and Aviation Chief Machinist's Mate Ira Fox, flight engineer. The squadron personnel officer was the only Navy WAVE on duty east of the Azores and the first to see service in Germany. VR-6 provided the medical doctor and staff, who set up a dispensary in the barracks that served 2,400 airlift personnel. Together, they made Naval Aviation history.

Manfred Knopf will never forget. “We would not have survived without the airlift. Those fliers were a courageous bunch. And those great fellows who kept the planes flying saved us.”

After eight months of nonstop air-



**VR-6 flight and ground crews celebrate the end of the Berlin blockade.**

lift operations, the Soviets gave up. The siege was lifted. On 25 August 1949, VRs 6 and 8 were relieved from attachment to the 1st Airlift Task Force. Berlin was free.

Operation Vittles was complete. ✈

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### **Spirit of Freedom** ©

**T**he Berlin Airlift Veterans Association is an organization of airlift veterans and interested fellow aviators. Throughout 1998 and 1999, the association will deploy a piece of Naval Aviation history as part of the Berlin Airlift 50th anniversary events. The *Spirit of Freedom*, a Navy R5D, flew with VR-3 which supported the airlift. Fully restored and operational, the aircraft is owned by the Berlin Airlift Historical Foundation and operated as a flying museum and memorial.

For 50th anniversary event information, contact LCdr. Tom Key, USN (Ret.), 100 Valencia Mesa Drive, Fullerton, CA 92635.