

# Navy Air in the Berlin Remembrances of an Enlisted Pilot

*Capt. Christensen, a naval reservist, wrote this article when he was a midshipman at the U.S. Naval Academy in 1964. The author's father, Wesley T.--whose memorabilia and accounts provided much of the material for this article--was a Chief Aviation Pilot flying R5Ds for Air Transport Squadron (VR) 8 from 1948 to 1949. He commanded the only all-enlisted flight crew in the Berlin Airlift, which included copilot Petty Officer First Class Joseph A. Popp and flight engineer Chief Petty Officer Ira Fox. Capt. Christensen dedicates this story to his father, who passed away in December 1994.*



Bearing the title "Berlin Airlift Champs," this VR-8 R5D returned to the U.S. with a jubilant crew.

In modern times, airplanes have played a large role in the lives of Berliners, but in 1948 Allied air power was the link to life for over two million West Berlin residents.

On 21 June 1948 the Soviets closed their occupation sector of Germany to ground traffic, citing a need for repairs to railroads and the autobahn. Isolated in the red zone, West Berlin was cut off from food and coal supplies. Five days later, General Curtis LeMay organized "Operation Vittles." Commanded by Major General William H. Tunner, USAF, the undertaking eventually employed 180

American aircraft. Similar operations were performed by the British and French. West Berlin's Tempelhof airport eventually landed U.S. planes at 3-minute intervals, 24 hours a day. Gatow airport handled British traffic to Berlin. French airlift planes landed at Tegel, in the French sector.

Twenty-four of the 180 American C-54s flying food and coal were better known to their pilots and crews as R5Ds. These men were Naval

Aviators of VRs 6 and 8, called to Germany in October 1948 to augment Operation Vittles--until then a solely Air Force operation.

VRs 6 and 8 were deployed in the Pacific as part of the Naval Air Transport Service (NATS) prior to being called to Germany. VR-8, stationed at John Rogers airport, Honolulu, Hawaii, flew passengers and cargo from NAS Moffett Field, Calif., to John Rogers and further



"Vittles" Navy flight operations were conducted on a 24-hour basis; floodlights were a big help in loading and fueling aircraft. Here, VR-6 R5Ds are readied for a night run from Rhein-Main airport in Frankfurt, Germany.

# Airlift

By Capt. Daniel W. Christensen, USNR

west to Midway and Johnston islands and Guam. From Guam, one of the many but far-flung specks in the Pacific, VR-6 extended the NATS run west to Manila, Tokyo and Shanghai. Squadron aircraft were of mixed cargo and passenger configuration with a few plush planes specially outfitted for carrying VIPs.

Commander James O. Vosseller, skipper of VR-8, received orders to move his squadron to Germany on 27 October 1948. To pick up the pilots and crews strewn across the Pacific,



**Robert H. Davidson checks the lashings on a 10-ton load of flour headed for Berlin's Tempelhof airport during Operation Vittles.**

planes flew to Johnston and Kwajalein islands and Guam. Layover crews resting between legs of their flights were soon on their way to Germany as the first planes left for Moffett Field two days later.

VR-6, under Commander C. C. Howerton, received similar orders on 30 October and commenced recalling crews and planes in the Far East. The first flights left on 1 November.

Transferring 20 planes with their crews, pilots and maintenance personnel was no small matter. Geographic differences between the old

and new bases further complicated the picture. In the Pacific, both squadrons operated in tropical and semitropical weather. Honolulu temperatures averaged in the seventies all year round, while Guam temperatures ran higher. Visibility problems seldom included fog, although pilots kept up their ground controlled approach (GCA) qualifications.

Germany promised to present opposite weather conditions and temperatures. Accordingly, Navy supply in Guam and Honolulu issued long underwear, wool socks, parkas and foul weather gear. Deficiencies were made up at Moffett Field and Jacksonville, Fla., as the squadrons flew to Germany.

Each departing plane was loaded with three crews, maintenance personnel and a spare engine. VR-8 traded its VIP aircraft to Hawaii-based Marines for cargo planes. In all, 12 aircraft from VR-8 and 8 from VR-6 left for California on the first leg of their journey. At 180 knots, Germany was a long distance away.

No time was available to move families stateside. A small measure of consolation came in the form of orchid corsages and invitations to Christmas dinner at the Pearl Harbor naval base, which were sent to each wife by Navy headquarters in Hawaii.

At NAS Moffett Field, home of transport maintenance squadron VR-44, VR-8 swapped airplanes, getting rid of planes nearly due for overhaul. VR-6 acquired four additional aircraft from VR-44 to bring the squadron's strength up to the customary 12 aircraft. Seventeen officers and 15 enlisted personnel transferred from VR-8 to VR-6 as temporary crews for the additional planes.

Twenty-four planes left Moffett Field for NAS Jacksonville via Kelly AFB, San Antonio, Texas. During a four-day layover at Jacksonville, radar was installed in the big planes in anticipation of Germany's bad weather and adverse flying conditions.

Radar was relatively new to transport aircraft and only one plane of either squadron was equipped with it on the Pacific run. Unfortunately, even the new radar proved useless because its transmission frequencies interfered with Tempelhof GCA receivers. At Rhein-Main in Frankfurt, Germany, the fuses were removed and all planes flew with the dead

weight of inoperable radars.

From Jacksonville, the squadrons flew to Westover AFB, Mass. Pilots from VR-8 remember Westover weather being light snow and drizzle--very much a forecast of things to come.

Transport planes of that time did not span the Atlantic in one jump as they do now. Crossing to Europe was accomplished in a series of flights following a path of least resistance. Stevensville, Newfoundland, was the next gas stop. From there, the two squadrons flew to Lajes AFB in the Azores.

Rhein-Main airport was the ultimate destination; however, the planes encountered the infamous German ground fog. Fog proved to be the airlift's greatest hazard and as Navy R5Ds tried to fly into Frankfurt, the airport was closed to all but current airlift traffic. Unable to break into the GCA pattern bringing "Vittles" aircraft through the weather, Navy pilots diverted throughout western Europe. But, within 36 hours, all of the aircraft except one had found their way to Rhein-Main. Neither squadron was delayed by major maintenance problems en route.

Upon arrival, VR-6 was placed with the 1422nd Air Transport Group. Across the field, VR-8 was stationed with the 61st Troop Carrier Group. Taxiways and hardstands in the area were steel mats placed on the bare ground.

Officers and enlisted alike were quartered in the Betts barracks in Frankfurt about 22 kilometers from the base. The ex-German barracks, old stone buildings with narrow windows, provided adequate but not luxurious quarters for the new arrivals. The buildings had two and three decks, steam heat and community showers. Many believed that the boiler stoker in the basement quit working at sunset. Heat that ran full blast in the daytime disappeared completely at night. Through the windows, fog and occasional snow did nothing to brighten the picture.

After a 24-hour rest, Navy pilots commenced the Rhein-Main-to-Tempelhof run carrying coal, potatoes and flour. In the Betts barracks, an alert system operated to notify pilots and crews of upcoming flights. Once an operating schedule was established, crews could count on 24 hours

of rest between duty periods.

Airlift operations resembled three pipelines running to Berlin--two flowing in, one flowing either way. From the Royal Air Force Base at Fassberg, in the British sector, planes flew through the northern corridor to Gatow, the British base in Berlin. Flying west through the central corridor, British planes, once clear of the Russian zone, turned north to Fassberg. Americans turned south to Weisbaden and Rhein-Main.

In the south, five squadrons at Weisbaden and eight at Rhein-Main, including the two Navy squadrons, used a corridor through the Russian zone that was 20 miles wide and 7,000 feet high--the former dimension dictated by politics, the latter by operating limitations. Planes were stacked at 500-foot intervals and spaced three minutes apart at successive altitudes. Inbound loaded speed was 170 knots, while outbound pilots maintained 180 knots.

Weisbaden controlled U.S. operations and each squadron maintained its own operations schedule to meet commitments. Normally, blocks of 12 planes were released to take off at a designated time. No order was specified in the blocks, each plane taking its place in line as it warmed up. As each block approached the corridor mouth, its planes took up their pre-designated altitudes for the 45-minute flight to Berlin.

Loaded planes flying into Berlin were designated "Big Easy"--the B in Big indicating Rhein-Main-based aircraft. Those based at Weisbaden were designated "Able Easy." In contrast to the four-engined R5Ds and C-54s the twin-engined C-47s carried the name of "Little Easy."

Rhein-Main loaded Big Easy aircraft from large flatbed and semitrailer trucks operated by the Army transportation corps. From West Germany and western Europe, food and coal flowed into Frankfurt by rail. A steady stream of trucks kept supplies moving from the railroad marshaling yards to the endless stream of waiting planes.

VRs 6 and 8 quickly fell into the established patterns. Men and machines alike lived for one purpose and were governed only by the needs of two-and-a-half million people in the blockaded city.

Squadron operations at Rhein-Main telephoned Betts to alert the

pilot, who in turn was responsible for notifying his copilot and engineer. Each crew was given an approximate time of departure and told which bus to catch for the ride to the base. Many felt that the bus run between the barracks and the airport was the most dangerous part of the trip. An hour with the German driver apparently rivaled corridor flights for thrills.

While the crew received a weather briefing, the planes received 10-ton loads of coal, potatoes and flour in 100-pound bags. After a few flights, dust from these cargoes accumulated everywhere, and the recently vacated cockpit seats remained the only clean spot on the airplane. Each plane was given 1,500 gallons of gasoline, predetermined to be adequate for one round trip to Berlin with enough reserve to make Weisbaden, the alternate field for Rhein-Main.

Surviving the hour bus ride from Betts, the pilots and engineer ("the mech" to Navy crews), received their weather "dope," block assignment and estimated time of release. A bus stood by to run the three-man crews out to the waiting planes.

After preflighting the plane and checking the load, pilots turned up their engines and called in to the Rhein-Main tower when ready to roll. A block was set up so that planes ready to taxi could go any time during a 10- or 12-minute period. Should a plane fail to report itself ready to go, it was scratched and another plane moved up in line. Mud oozed around the wheel hubs as 45 tons of loaded plane taxied over the perforated steel matting. At night, a hand-held lamp provided illumination on the ground.

On the first leg, aircraft entered the corridor over the Russian sector. Traffic from Weisbaden to Rhein-Main assumed assigned positions to facilitate the three-minute pattern at Tempelhof.

In the corridor, the weather increased the difficulties. There were no beacons over the Russian zone, and the R5Ds navigated by radio compass tracking. Changing altitude to avoid bad weather was impossible with other planes a bare 500 feet above and below. In the Navy planes, the radar sat useless. In clear conditions, an occasional Russian fighter would appear. Yaks and PE-2s sometimes flew formation with the loaded transports, finally breaking off in a



The only all-enlisted aircrew in the Berlin Airlift: left to right, Aviation Chief Machinist's Mate Ira Fox, flight engineer; Aviation Pilot First Class Joseph A. Popp, copilot; and Chief Aviation Pilot Wesley T. Christensen, aircraft commander. Christensen was commissioned in 1955 and retired from active duty in 1959 as a lieutenant (junior grade).

simulated strafing run. Perhaps seeing danger to themselves as well as to the Americans, the Russians never showed in bad weather.

When a loaded plane called Tempelhof control for landing instructions, GCA operators assumed control over the blind plane to bring it down. Pilots recall that after a few trips, the voices in the earphones became a determining factor in a blind landing. Hearing a voice in which he had confidence, a pilot would take his plane "all the way." Many times, the runway became visible only when a squeak and a bump announced that the plane was on the ground. Listening to an unfamiliar voice in which he placed no special confidence, a pilot might elect to go around and return to Rhein-Main when the runway failed to appear. The excellence of the GCA operators is attested to by Tempelhof's final approach. Two seven-story apartment buildings bordered the final. Many crews did not know about the buildings until weeks after they had commenced flying. In rare clear weather, occupants of the buildings and the aircraft were plainly visible to each other.

Approaching this hazardous situation, aircraft commanders reduced speed to 140 knots and dropped to 2,000 feet altitude. Here, the three-minute spacing became most critical with all incoming planes at the same altitude.

Inbound traffic executed a series of turns to align themselves with the runway. The GCA controller guided the

plane on his radar screen through two more right turns for the final approach between the apartments. During the entire time, the controller maintained a steady stream of talk. No acknowledgement came from the pilot, but in the event he heard nothing for 30 seconds, he executed an immediate missed approach procedure and headed back for Rhein-Main.

Following the "Follow Me" jeep, Big Easy aircraft taxied to the unloading apron. The trucks that met incoming planes were configured according to a loading report sent by the pilot on his way into Berlin. Medium, Bulky, or Heavy loads were met by an ordinary truck, a flatbed, or a truck and forklift, respectively. Most often, coal, flour and potatoes were unloaded a bag at a time, as it had been loaded at Frankfurt.

Besides the trucks, three other vehicles met each incoming plane. An emergency repair crew stopped to check on minor equipment failures. A weather jeep brought information for the return flight and a lunch wagon sold coffee, donuts and hot dogs--Christmas dinner for some flight personnel. Crews stayed with their planes, munching a snack, reading the weather report or dickered for souvenirs with one of the stevedores. A favorite item to buy was a hand-crafted aluminum model of an R5D mounted on a wooden stand and suitably embellished with squadron number, "Operation Vittles-1948" and your name, all for six cartons of cigarettes.

Some 17 minutes after landing, Big Easy was now empty and warmed up for the return flight. A plane was diverted to Weisbaden if Rhein-Main proved to be below GCA minimums. In Weisbaden, Rhein-Main planes were loaded and sent back to Berlin. Crews were never sure where they might end up in their 24 hours of duty.

Though new to Germany, Navy men did not let strange surroundings affect getting the job done. VRs 6 and 8 performed to the everlasting credit of Navy air. Month after month, the two squadrons topped Air Force squadrons in statistics. During the first two months in Germany, Navy pilots flew a total of 3,036 trips. On 16 December 1948, VR-8 flew 51 trips to Berlin, achieving an efficiency of 222 percent or 122 percent over the squadron's officially rated capacity. VR-6 was never far behind and, in the final summation, both squadrons out-flew any Air Force unit there.

The lion's share of credit belongs to the mechanics; Navy planes eventually averaged 13.1 hours per day in the air. An Air Force spokesman credited Navy maintenance for the squadrons' enviable record during the eight-month period in Germany.

Preventive maintenance was the watchword for flight line operations. Changing tires and spark plugs was accomplished on the mat hardstands while planes were readied for another flight. Mechanics previously accustomed to layover periods measured in days now had to work on the planes as they landed and were loaded for a return trip. A three-shift maintenance schedule kept mechanics on duty around the clock. To stave off the wet, freezing cold, ground crews rigged canvas line shacks warmed by gasoline hot air heaters that had been reworked to give maximum output. In the middle of VR-8's muddy hardstand area, a similar jury-rigged structure served as the head.

Parts, always scarce, sometimes became critical by their absence. In one instance, an incoming plane was robbed of a landing gear bracket which was transferred to a loaded plane ready to go. One time, VR-6 maintenance personnel swapped a needed fluorescent light from plane to

plane. The cycle perpetuated itself until a new part was found.

No attempt was made to clean the planes' interiors, which were covered with grime. Fuselage holes, where the emergency windows had been removed as a way to ventilate the explosive coal dust, added to the run-down appearance of "Vittles" aircraft. Crew members stayed in the cockpit while flying. Anyone going aft held on against the suction from the open windows.

Facilities for more extensive maintenance were also jury-rigged. At first, Navy planes were sent to Burtonwood, England, for their 200-hour checks at the Air Force maintenance facility there. But ground crews soon improvised nosebays and engine tents--inadequately heated by the gasoline heaters--which enabled them to provide required maintenance services at Rhein-Main. No doubt, this capability was a determining factor in the squadrons' outstanding records.

Both Navy squadrons did not come through the airlift unscathed, however. Taking off from Rhein-Main, a VR-8 R5D pierced a tire on the steel runway mat. Over Tempelhof the wheels refused to come down and the plane was sent back. Neither Tempelhof nor Rhein-Main could afford a fouled runway at any time. The crippled plane flew to Bavaria, dumping out bags of food and coal on the way, and landed wheels up and flaps down at an air base.

It is an established fact that the Navy did its share during the Berlin Airlift--and more. The reason why is open to conjecture. Some authorities advance a competition factor regarding Navy performance statistics. No doubt, the two squadrons were aware of their own presence in an Air Force environment. The theory cannot be discounted. As already noted, maintenance played a key role. Morale and intangibles must account for a big slice of the whole.

Whatever the reasons, Navy personnel returning from Frankfurt could be justifiably proud of their record. Always in competition with Air Force aviators, their feelings were probably best summed up by an article in the New York Times, which stated, "... Air Force--132 percent...Navy--155 percent."

**"Big Easy 55" of VR-8 landed on her belly during an Operation Vittles flight to Berlin.**

