

Berlin Airlift Rugged

THE STORY of how Navy transport squadrons VR-6 and VR-8 stepped into the Berlin Airlift and began setting records for freight carrying has been told. Behind the scenes is another story, not too glamorous, but just as necessary to keep the planes flying, the story of engineering.

On a few hours notice, the squadrons were uprooted from Hawaii and Guam and sent halfway around the world to feed Berlin. When they arrived in the middle of winter, conditions in Germany were rugged. Let VR-8's Engineering men tell their own story:

The tasks confronting us were: reorganization to fit the need of the job, establishment of shops, nosebays, working and office spaces and the immediate and pressing requirement of keeping 12 aircraft in the air. After balmy Hawaii, even the elements appeared hostile as we combatted the cold and *MUD*. Concrete taxiways and hardstands were something you encountered further towards the center of things; we are on the end of the line.

Circumstances at times seemed perverse and cruel: our beautiful spares procured for us by Moffett Field from the resources of the Navy at a high priority and guarded constantly while enroute were lost. We were forced to turn them in to Air Force Supply; one plane taxied into a cletrac necessitating that engines 1 and 2 be changed and putting the vitally-needed cletrac out of commission.

The electric lights were so dim that we could not read; the telephone service was erratic, and many a night was spent with no illumination other than that provided by flashlights. What could happen next? We ran out of flashlight batteries and were unable to procure them for a prolonged period.

We live 10 miles from our base of operations, commuting by bus. Unusual fogs

have grounded the busses on at least four occasions so the duty crew were unrelieved for 24 hours. The engineering officer started for operations office, a 10-minute walk. He arrived at the passenger terminal four miles away four hours later. He explained that his gyro slipped 90° in the dense fog and that he had no idea where he had been.

We had no fresh water, we had an outside "Chic Sale" head, and we had no coffee mess. Also we were without the transportation necessary to visit the more enlightened areas. If an impression of a gloomy, starkly desolate working area has been created in the reader's mind, the actual conditions existent in November and December undoubtedly exceed the impressions created.

Statistics reflect the concerted efforts and toil of all hands. However, while the overall picture takes into account this all out effort, it conceals the sacrifice of the individual men working in relays because the bitter cold numbed fingers after 10 minutes; sweeping ice and snow from wings with brooms dipped in alcohol; sheltering spark plugs and leads from the sleet with articles of clothing while the water searched for and found openings in the clothing.

YEARS OF NATS training in precision flying certainly paid off in Germany where they enabled VR-8 pilots to consider as commonplace the final approaches between apartment houses in Berlin when the weather is at or slightly above minimums. The squadron had been flying into Templehof three weeks before the ceiling lifted sufficiently to permit the crews to get startled glimpses of the apartment houses through the cockpit windows.

All has not been easy for the crews. With the quarters 22 kilometers away in Frankfurt, the problem of getting back and forth to the flight line is not too pleasant. Rather, it means standing up in a crowded bus for an hour before and after a flight to Berlin.