1947-1949
An Insecure Peace

By Air Marshal Sir John Curtiss, KCB, KBE, FRAes, CBIM

The euphoria of victory in 1945 did not take long to evaporate as the expansionist and intransigent policies of the Soviet Union became obvious. Nowhere was this more critical than in the divided city of Berlin. The seeds of this major problem had been sown as far back as the Yalta Conference in 1944. Here the decision to divide the conquered Germany into four zones and more crucially to isolate the City of Berlin, which was itself divided into four Sectors, as an island in the midst of the Soviet Zone was a recipe for conflict. Worse still no mention was even made about Allied rights of access to Berlin.

The failure of the Potsdam Conference in 1945 was the beginning of disintegrating relations between the wartime Allies that was to result in the Cold War. It meant a rapid divergence between the views of East and West which three years later was to culminate in the Berlin Blockade, the division of Europe into two opposing power blocks and the formation of NATO.

There is no space here to detail all the various political and economic events that were to lead to the Blockade of Berlin but by January 1948 the Russians were already applying pressure on the Western Sectors of Berlin and, following the introduction of a new currency into the Western Sectors in June, all road rail and canal traffic came to a halt and, except for the air corridors, Berlin was effectively cut off from the West.

Despite the growing pressures on Berlin since the beginning of the year no contingency plans had been drawn up by the British or American Military Authorities. General Clay, the US Commander advocated sending an armoured convoy up the Autobahn to Berlin as he was quite certain that the Russians, although determined to take over all Germany would not risk a shooting war. No Allied politician was prepared to take that risk. All that was left was supply by air.

Flying Avro Yorks, Dakotas and eventually Hastings, nine Squadrons took part. Sunderlands flew onto the lakes in West Berlin, carrying amongst other things salt which other aircraft could not carry.

C-54 carrying coal crashes at Tempelhof. 39 RAF and 31 USAF lives were lost during the operation.

There was little confidence at that time that a city of two million people could be supplied from the air for what seemed likely to be an indefinite period.

The Berlin airlift - 1948/49

There was, however, one man on the Allied Military Commission, who believed it was possible and had drawn up plans accordingly. He was Air Commodore Waite RAF and he presented this plan to General Robertson, the British Military Commander who in turn sold it to General Cassius Clay the American Commander. The two Military Commanders were able to convince their political masters that it was, at least, worth while trying. There was no other practical option except of surrendering the whole of Berlin to the Soviet Union.

General Clay stated at the time that "When Berlin falls Western Germany will be next... if we withdraw, our position in Europe is threatened.... and Communism will run rampant." Clay and his Allied colleagues in Berlin saw the Russian blockade as an alternative to actual war and for the Soviets as a means of dominating Germany and ultimately all of Europe.

On 28 June 1948 the Airlift began. It was to continue for over a year and remains the most impressive airborne operation in history. At its height some 370 USAF, 156 RAF, and 20 civilian aircraft carried over 2 million tons of food, coal and fuel to sustain a beleaguered city of over 2 million people, through a hard winter, for nearly a year.

It cost 39 RAF, 31 USAF and 8 civilian lives and in monetary terms, it cost the United Kingdom £17 million, the United States $350 million and West Germany DM150 million. But on 12th May the Soviets lifted the Blockade and the Allies had won the first and most important bloodless victory of the Cold War.

Ernst Reuter, the brave and resolute Mayor of Berlin, summed up the magnitude of the Western achievement when he said "Without the bold initiative, courage and admirable devotion of all those who created and developed the Airlift, Berlin could not have withstood the pressure; it would have disappeared into the Soviet Zone. The consequences for the whole world would have been incalculable."

The RAF in the airlift

The whole of the RAF Transport Command were eventually thrown into the operation christened "Operation Plainfare"; The US called it "Operation Vittles".

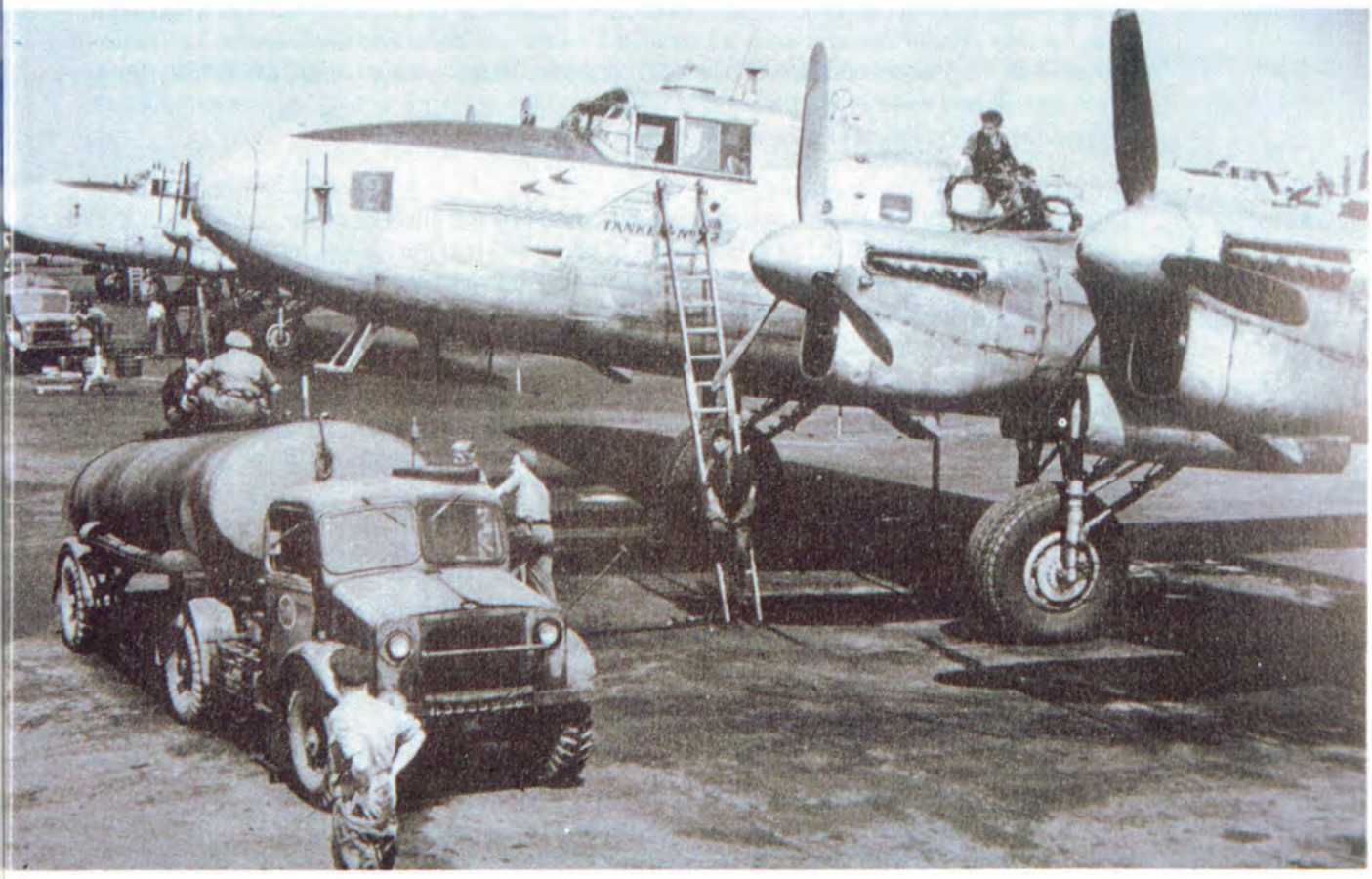
Flying Avro Yorks, Dakotas and eventually Hastings, nine squadrons took part; Nos 10, 30, 47, 51, 59, 242 & 511 Squadrons. Coastal Command was represented by the Sunderlands of 201 & 206 Squadron that flew onto the lakes in West Berlin carrying, amongst other things, salt which other aircraft could not carry.

A little over three years before, the majority of the aircrew had been bombing Berlin and the other industrial centres of Germany. It gave them all much satisfaction to be flying on a vital humanitarian operation.

In the early days, the organization of the Airlift was a little haphazard. When a loaded aircraft was ready it was flown to Berlin. Flying was only conducted by day but the summer days were long and four, even five round trips were flown each day.

Serviceability was a problem until the engineering and logistics organisation caught up with the greatly increased number of hours, landings and take off. Aircraft were being flown provided they had serviceable engines, a radio and a magnetic compass. The rest could be "red inked" and carried as acceptable defects by the crews.

The C54's came from as far away as Alaska and Hawaii and nearly every York and Dakota aircraft available was in action



During the first three months the aircrews became very tired, they were flying four to five sorties to Berlin every day and sleeping 60 in an attic with all the disturbance that entailed. Feeding was haphazard and poorly organised. However, by September more and more aircraft had arrived and although the RAF was always short of aircrew, conditions improved and once a 24hr, 7 days a week operation was in force crews seldom flew more than two trips on any one shift.

The C54s came from as far away as Alaska and Hawaii and nearly every York and Dakota aircraft available was in action. A number of civilian aircraft had also joined the Airlift, flying a variety of aircraft from Lancastrians, a version of the Lancaster bomber, and Haltons, a freighter version of the Halifax bomber. They carried liquid fuel and a number of awkward loads.

The increase in the number of aircraft, plus the urgent need to increase the tonnage delivered, required a much more precise scheduling operation demanding split second timing and no second change if the first approach into the Berlin airfield was missed.

As the different aircraft types had different cruising speeds, aircraft were organised into waves and a three minute landing rate in good weather became routine. In bad weather this was extended to five minutes. Radar beacons were set up on the routes into Berlin and every aircraft was required to arrive at the final beacon plus or minus 30 seconds. At first a Beam Approach (BABS) system was used in bad weather but before long the Ground Control Approach (GCA) was introduced to speed the landing rate under these circumstances.

Apart from a slight blip in the tonnage delivered caused by the onset of winter, some 235,000 tons were delivered by 26,000 flights in the month of April 1949 and the Soviets realised that, short of a shooting war, Berlin was not going to fall to them. On 12th May the Blockade was lifted and all surface access to Berlin was reopened.

The Airlift had to continue until the road and rail system was working at full capacity and sufficient stocks of food and fuel had been built up in West Berlin in case the Soviets decided to repeat the Blockade, although this was never attempted again. The last official flight into Berlin took place at the end of September.

The success of the Berlin Airlift was, above all, a great demonstration of Allied political will. It also showed the professionalism and dedication of the Allied aircrew and those that controlled the vast numbers of aircraft and the logistics needed to supply the City. Nor should the resolute determination of the Berliners in the face of considerable privations over many months be underestimated. If they had given up, the Airlift could not have succeeded.