

## Assessment

The Berlin Airlift was significant for a multitude of reasons. At the level of foreign relations it demonstrated the resolve of the United States to meet a challenge from the Soviet Union. American allies around the world witnessed the airlift as a triumph of will, and among Berliners it raised morale and built resistance. According to Phillips Davison: "It changed people's attitudes toward the western powers, raised their esteem for western strength, and reassured those who were anxious. It contributed toward a feeling of partnership, and served to establish a bond between Berlin and the West. It represented a blow struck in the cause of peace, freedom, and democracy. Above all, it made people feel that resistance could succeed."<sup>(68)</sup> Its value as a morale booster to allies cannot be overestimated.

Neither can the value of the Berlin Airlift as a tool to impress the Soviet Union be exaggerated. At no time in its history up to 1948 could the Soviets have mounted such an extensive operation. The sheer size and extent of the airlift, the requirement of close coordination, and the resourcefulness of allied leadership all impressed the Soviet leadership. Soviet leaders in the late 1940s respected strength, and the airlift was an outstanding example of allied muscle flexing. Stalin was amazed.

At the Air Force doctrinal level the Berlin Airlift had several ramifications as well. It demonstrated, for example, that if proper support were available any amount of tonnage could conceivably be moved by air anywhere in the world with minimal consideration for geography or weather. The airlift had been a further proving ground for air transport. It brought valuable experience in operational techniques, in air traffic control, and in the maintenance and reconditioning of aircraft.

Current airlift doctrine stems from the Berlin Airlift on many points. The airlift also highlighted the important fact, which has become so commonplace since 1949 as to be trite, that military airlift is an instrument for achieving foreign policy objectives not only in wartime but also in peacetime. The editor of Air Force Magazine reflected upon this fundamental truth in September 1948 by writing, "For the first time in history, the United States is employing its Air Force as a diplomatic weapon." He continued: "Today, in keeping with its coming of age as the nation's first line of defense, the USAF has taken on two big assignments in international affairs....One is what has been called 'the return of the American Air Force to Europe,' the arrival of two groups of Strategic Air Command B-29s in England....The second is the Berlin Airlift... The first chapters of the 'role of air power in diplomacy' are being written here."<sup>(69)</sup> That airlift was a more flexible tool for executing national policy than either bombers or fighter aircraft became apparent for the first time during the Berlin Airlift.

From the twin perspectives of organization and hardware, Operation Vittles contributed new insights as well. Turner thought that the organizational structure of the airlift was not the best for efficient execution. He remarked, "Far more successful than the Russians in hamstringing the Berlin Airlift were the same old bugaboos I had experienced in India--divided command for one, and conflict between senior officers dedicated to the technical and strategic functions of the Air Force and those of us who had built up some expertise in air transport."<sup>(70)</sup> He advocated for the remainder of his career the importance of designating a single major command as the sole manager of airlift for the Air Force.



***This C-54 left Rhein Main at 1845 on 30 September 1949. Sister aircraft flew overhead in salute. The success of the Berlin Airlift proved the efficacy of air power in support of national objectives without the use of force. (USAF photo)***

Impetus for this idea gained momentum over the years, with Turner always an able and forceful advocate of the concept.<sup>(71)</sup> It was later achieved on 1 December 1974 when all Tactical Air Command airlift resources were consolidated with those of the Military Airlift Command.

Airlift personnel also ended their role in the Berlin Airlift with a commitment to the procurement of large transport aircraft that could carry more tonnage in fewer missions. By the end of the operation, Turner noted, he had as many aircraft available as could be accommodated in the flow. "There was a limit to the number of airplanes you could get into an airport in one day," he recalled, "so the answer to that was larger airplanes." he worked to obtain larger transports for the rest of his career and observed in his memoirs that the C-124 was conceived during the Berlin Airlift as a means of hauling more cargo in fewer trips. Its 25-ton capacity far outstripped any airplane involved in Operation Vittles. With 100 of them and an 80 percent in commission rate, he thought an airlift could deliver 8,000 tons daily to Berlin without breaking a sweat. The cause of more effective airlift had to be lobbied for, he thought.<sup>(72)</sup> This philosophy has prompted additional airlift acquisition programs up to the present.

Operation Vittles was thus a magnificent effort. It accomplished its mission of totally supplying the needs of a major city for more than a year. It defeated the Soviet Union's blockade in one of the first major confrontations of the Cold War without leading to war. It taught Americans untold lessons about the way to establish and manage a large-scale airlift. Since the Berlin Airlift's conclusion, there have been numerous examples of the use of airlift in achieving foreign policy objectives in a noncombat setting. One of the most dramatic was the airlift to support the Israelis in the Yom Kippur War of 1973.

Whenever the United States does not want to become a combatant but wants to support a given foreign policy objective, military airlift has been present for use. More than any other legacy, the Berlin Airlift helped teach U.S. leaders the value of airlift to project a presence anywhere at any time.

