

able airlift structure. He appointed Brig.Gen. Joseph Smith, commander of the installation at Wiesbaden, as the Berlin Airlift Task Force Commander, but he was to perform these duties in addition to his other tasks. He did not even know of his appointment until the airlift had commenced, being told of it over lunch on Sunday, 27 June 1948. Smith was responsible for the designation of the airlift as Operation Vittles because, as he said, "We're hauling grub." The British chose to call their part of the airlift Operation Plane Fare, a pun (17) that must have given airlifters around the world a chuckle. At best, they planned that the operation could be sustained for 45 days. American crews flew the first formal missions on Saturday, 26 June, airlifting 80 tons of milk, flour, medicine, and other high priority cargo to the city on 32 C-47 flights. By Monday, the sustaining airlift was in full swing, but General Clay was not optimistic. He told Department of Defense officials that "with this airlift, we should be able to bring in 600 or 700 tons a day. While 2,000 tons a day is required in normal foods, 600 tons a day (utilizing dried foods to the maximum extent) will substantially increase the morale of the German people and will unquestionably seriously disturb the Soviet blockade." Even so, this would not provide coal for heat, raw material for factories, or fuel for engines.(18)

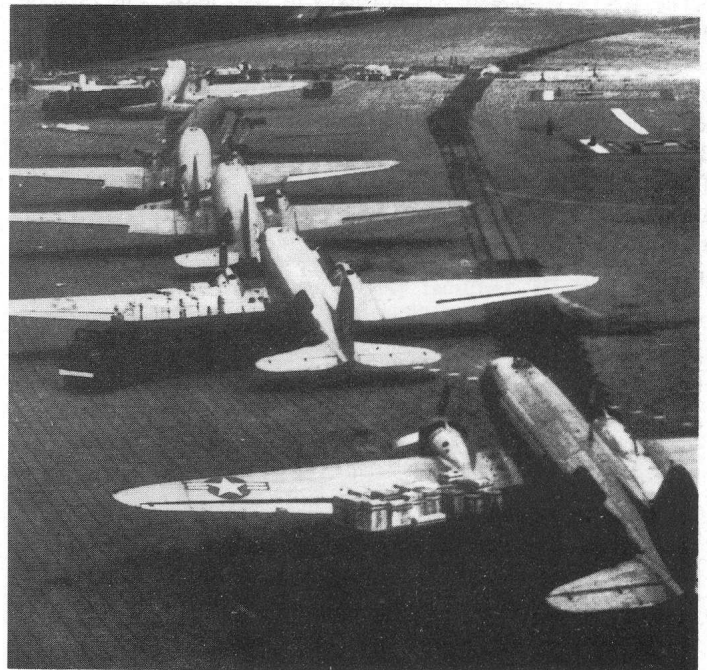


*German loaders (above) wrestle cases of supplies into position aboard a C-47. An air crew member (left) checks the placement. Venerable C-47s carried freight in the airlift early days, until supplanted by the C-54 as the main lifter.*

General Clay did not believe, as he saw what was happening, that a long-term airlift was possible to support the entire city. Airlifts had never been tried on such a large scale before, and the scrambling, hastily thrown-together organization operating it could not continue to function for long with any degree of efficiency. His choice of action was to use an armored column to break through to Berlin, but this idea met with mixed reactions in Washington, (19) probably because officials there did not share Clay's lack of faith in the airlift. There was some disagreement even in Washington, however. Assistant Secretary of the Air Force Cornelius V. Whitney told the National Security Council in mid-July that "the air Staff was firmly convinced the air operation is doomed to failure." (20) Notwithstanding, Under Secretary of State Robert A. Lovett noted that President

Truman and his chief advisors were determined to take any action short of war to hold Berlin. He commented, "We decided to stand firm in Berlin and not be thrown out, confident that we could do the job ultimately by the same techniques that we used in lifting approximately 70,000 tons in one month over the hump from India to China at very high altitudes."(21)

These government officials, regardless of the efficiency of the airlift, agreed with General Clay that it was only a stopgap measure. The long-term options they outlined were withdrawal from Berlin, some belligerent action that could mean war, or a negotiated settlement. The airlift was attractive, even as a stopgap, because it provided the bare essentials needed to supply Berlin's daily requirements. It allowed American policy makers the luxury of taking an "unprovocative but firm stand," all the while seeking a resolution to the blockade through diplomatic channels. (22) Relying on the airlift bought time, but if a settlement could not be reached by winter, many of President Truman's advisors thought that the nation would have to withdraw or risk war by ground resupply. Robert Lovett and James V. Forrestal, Secretary of Defense, agreed that a definite decision had to be reached by the time the German weather turned bad in mid-October. (23) Thus, although there was a question about its long-term viability, the airlift's early success ensured that Truman could pursue his diplomatic solution through the summer. Brig.Gen. Smith's command of the Berlin Airlift Task Force at Wiesbaden AB lasted approximately one month. During that time he was instrumental in implementing several basic decisions about the way the airlift would be conducted. The first of these was a landmark for airlift management. He directed that the airlift fleet managers aim at a goal of flying 65 percent of the possessed aircraft every day. This would allow, his maintenance and operations personnel suggested, proper management of the fleet and ensure it was adequately maintained.(24) Second, Brig.Gen. Smith directed that each aircraft in commission



*A line of C-47s (above) being unloaded at the semicircular ramp area, Tempelhof AB Berlin. Unloading took a long time; cargo had to fit through the small side door and be wrestled by hand from aircraft into truck. (USAF photo)*