

'Watching the air lift at close quarters' from The Daily Telegraph (4 August 1948)

Caption: On 4 August 1948, Lieutenant-General Hugh Gray Martin, military correspondent of the British daily newspaper The Daily Telegraph, gives a personal account of the various stages in the organisation and the workings of the airlift to the western zones of Berlin.

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Watching the air lift at close quarters

Last week, thanks to the kindness of the British Army and British Air Force of Occupation, I was privileged to watch every stage of the Berlin air lift from the planning of it at headquarters to the delivery of the coal and food at Gatow and on the Havel.

Much has already been written about the air lift. My excuse for writing more is that I had so unusually complete a conspectus of the working of the whole machine.

Let me begin by saying that the air lift is no permanent solution of our difficulties, but must be regarded as a temporary expedient, designed to give us time to reach a settlement in the manner and at the moment most favourable to us. I stress the words "most favourable," since clearly we might find the depths of winter a highly unfavourable settling day.

This said, let me describe the extremely efficient organisation which, regardless of cost, wear and tear to aircraft and exhaustion of crews, is keeping Western Berlin alive.

When the crisis arose towards the end of June, it was Brigadier Geoffrey Lucas and Group-Captain Macdonald who were the creators of the Army/Air Transport Organisation (A.A.T.O.) at Wunstorf airfield in the British zone. Together they did the spade work.

Later, Brigadier Lucas had to return to his own very full-time job of Brigadier "Q" at Headquarters, B.A.O.R. Fortunately, there was a most suitable substitute available in Brigadier K. C. D. Dawson, who had wide experience of air supply with the Fourteenth Army in Burma. Dawson himself is certainly the first to acknowledge his debt to his predecessor. I mention these facts as there may have been some misconception as to what took place.

THREE CORRIDORS TO BERLIN

H.Q. of A.A.T.O. has now moved back to British Air Force Headquarters at Bückeburg. Here it provides a perfect example of an integrated inter-Service staff. The Control Commission of Germany is the civil contractor, responsible for delivering the goods to the airfields; the Army does the stevedore work; the R.A.F. fly the lift to Berlin, where the process is repeated in reverse.

As things now stand, the lay-out is this. By the southern corridor American traffic flies to and from Tempelhof; by the central corridor our York traffic flies between Wunstorf and Gatow; by the northern corridor our Dakota traffic flies between Fassberg and Gatow. Our petrol "cows" and passenger traffic from Bückeburg also follow the central corridor, while our flying-boats from Hamburg to the Havel follow the northern one.

Outside Berlin, just short of Oranienburg, our central and northern streams converge. In good visibility aircraft can land at Gatow every three minutes; in blind flying conditions about every 10 minutes. The Russians have shown no inclination to interfere.

Every week the British and American Air Forces estimate their potential lifts by each corridor for two weeks ahead, and report these figures to Major-General E. O. Horbert and his two fellow commanders in Berlin and to Bizonia at Frankfurt. After reaching agreement, the three commanders of the Western sectors give a broad breakdown of their respective requirements—in food, coal and Diesel generators—to Bizonia, which in turn is responsible for getting these requirements to the airfields.

For the moment the limiting factors are shortage of aircraft and of servicing facilities.

Weather apart, however, the long-term factor which will ultimately limit the air lift to Western Berlin is the capacity of its airfields, as supplemented by the Havel for the use of flying-boats.

For each airfield its theoretical saturation point is fixed. Obviously, however, up to this saturation point the lift can be increased by substituting larger for smaller aircraft.

The question, then, is how many aircraft and flying-boats, of maximal capacity, the Western sectors of Berlin can handle every day.

The answer is dictated by a variety of factors. The aircraft principally concerned are C.54s (Skymasters), Yorks and Dakotas in that order of carrying capacity. Clearly, then, the sooner the very gallant old Dakotas can be rendered superfluous the bigger will be the lift. How is this aim to be achieved?

Broadly, the Americans control the C.54s, and the British control the Yorks. Gen. Clay, as we know, has announced the imminent arrival of a large accession of C.54s. On the other hand, R.A.F. Transport Command's establishment of Yorks is working pretty well all out already, and if the British are to put more four-engined aircraft into the pool, these will probably have to come on charter from civil sources.

MORE TRAFFIC FOR GATOW?

The real answer to the problem will not be found by merely putting more four-engined aircraft indiscriminately into the pool. It is essential that these aircraft are used to the best advantage. Two factors arise.

First, the distance from the airfields in the British zone to Gatow is much shorter than the distance from the American airfields to Tempelhof, so the turn-round of British aircraft is shorter than that of their American counterparts.

Secondly, thanks to the foresight of the R.A.F., who had started to lay a 2,000-yard concrete runway at Gatow over a year ago, the saturation point at that airfield is never likely to be reached by any total of British four-engined aircraft available.

It follows that the most economical way to use a proportion at least of the American C.54s would be to operate these between British airfields and Gatow. Indeed, if it were possible to reserve Gatow exclusively for C.54s up to saturation point, that airfield alone in good flying conditions could comfortably deal with a daily total of over 4,000 tons.

Gatow and Tempelhof, used to the best advantage and supplemented by the Havel, could thus readily handle the target figure of 8,000 tons mentioned by Gen. Clay.

On the other hand, the American proposal to build a new airfield in the French zone as a supplement to Tempelhof bristles with difficulties.

The weight of the steel planking to be brought up for surfacing must sharply reduce the useful lift to Berlin. Moreover, the new airfield would be awkwardly placed, and traffic to and from it would be likely to interfere with the working of Gatow, the approaches to which are already circumscribed enough owing to the proximity of Russian airfields. It is to be hoped, therefore, that other counsels will soon prevail.

So much for airfields: we come next to the flying-boat base on the Havel. The day on which I visited it was the hottest I have ever known in Europe. My guide and mentor was Group-Captain B. C. Yarde, Station Commander at Gatow close by.

As we set out together in the A.O.C.-in-C.'s motor-boat, the Havel was looking its best—a glittering expanse dotted with white sails and rimmed by woodlands through which one glimpsed the lawns and gardens of once rich Berliners' suburban houses.

Presently a Sunderland flying-boat droned in, passing fairly close to that red sandstone monstrosity, the Kaiser Wilhelm Tower—a dangerous bunker in thick weather.

ONE FLAW TO GUARD AGAINST

We saw the Sunderland touch down in its silvery bow wave. As it sank back on to its rear step its bow wave vanished, to be replaced by a still more conspicuous wake. Soon it was taxi-ing to its berth, where it would tie up to a rubber "Short buoy" and unload into waiting lighters. These in turn would transfer their loads to the huge powered barges destined for Spandau.

The Havel is a big stretch of water. Though the centre must be kept clear for steamer traffic, our Sunderlands use only a corner of what is left.

There is plenty of room here for a biggish fleet of Master Mariners—American flying-boats—to operate as well, and there is every likelihood that a fleet of them will soon arrive. The Master Mariner is the boat the Americans used in the Pacific, and it has a lift greater than that of a Dakota.

Such, then, is A.A.T.O., the temporary expedient by which Berlin is being sustained. The lift is a joint effort to which the British so far have contributed about 46 per cent to the enterprise.

As in the days of Shaef, so again to-day, the guiding principle is to ensure the most economical use of joint Anglo-American resources.

This principle, however, does not always square with a very human desire to break records and to boost national prestige. Here, perhaps, is the one flaw in the organisation of the air lift.