The spring of 1948 began quietly enough. New cars were once again in the showrooms, a chaotic demobilization had ended, and the main excitement ahead, it appeared, would be the presidential election.

On June 24, the Republican Party confidently nominated Thomas E. Dewey for the White House. The Democrats, having failed to attract Dwight D. Eisenhower, resigned themselves to Harry S. Truman and defeat.

That same day, Soviet forces had halted all surface traffic into Berlin, citing “technical difficulties.” They also shut down electricity for the Allied sectors in the German city. Allied currency reform provided the proximate cause for this new Soviet provocation, but it was plain that dictator Joseph Stalin intended to end the curious status of Berlin, which had become a Western outpost deep inside Soviet-controlled territory.

Gen. Lucius D. Clay, commander of US forces in occupied Germany and Europe and a steadfast figure if there ever was one, announced that no Soviet action short of war would force the Americans out of Berlin. The question was how to make good on that promise, for the Western sectors of the city had a total of less than two weeks of critical supplies, and the small American force in Germany could not have put down the mighty Red Army.

Some farsighted fellow at the Potsdam Conference had inserted a provision for three air corridors into Berlin, and Clay now asked Lt. Gen. Curtis E. LeMay, the commander of US Air Forces in Europe, to exploit them with an emergency airlift. Looking around for someone to do just that, LeMay tagged Brig. Gen. Joseph Smith, Wiesbaden (Germany) Military Post commander. As he assembled this ad hoc operation with about 100 C-47 “Gooney Birds” left over from Sicily and Arnhem and pilots pulled away from their desks and other duties, a distinct chill settled over occupied Germany.

Life up to that point had been relatively pleasant for the
Western occupying forces, with nice old houses requisitioned as family quarters and cheap cigarettes, coffee, and other items widely, if unofficially, used as currency. A few cigarettes could get your laundry done, a carton or so might fetch a hunting rifle or even a piano. Cigarettes were far too valuable for the occupied, the Germans, to smoke until, that is, they reached the farmers. They, having life’s necessities, smoked them.

No Compromise

British officials agreed with Clay’s uncompromising stand and had, in fact, been a little ahead on preparations for an airlift. The other concerned ally, France, initially distanced itself from this challenge but only briefly. France, preoccupied with its struggle in Indochina, had almost nothing in the way of air transport available in Europe. They would make a significant contribution later on, however.

The West’s improbable answer to the hostile Soviet action got under way June 26. On July 4, with a maximum effort, US airlifters delivered 675 tons. It was clearly an all-out performance, one that could not be continued for long. An assortment of Dakotas (British C-47s) and converted bombers were delivering a similar amount. Since Berlin required a minimum of 2,500 tons of food per day to sustain the lives of the two million inhabitants in the Allied sectors, any serious long-term effort would require some major commitments.

One of the few persons on earth who truly believed air transport could solve this problem was Maj. Gen. William H. Tunner, and he was chafing to get involved. There was no similar enthusiasm to be found within the Air Staff. Any major diversion of air transport to Berlin would have a serious effect on combat capabilities, and there was a general view that this blockade might very well lead to war.

Tunner left on an inspection swing around Military Air Transport Service bases, leaving me with instructions to haunt the Pentagon and find out what was going on. He called each night, and he was not happy with my news, for there appeared to be no sentiment for a major effort and no mention of Tunner going over to run it.

Tunner had commanded “the Hump” operation from India into China during the last year of World War II. Army Lt. Gen. Albert C. Wedemeyer, Defense Department director of plans and operations, remembered this as he surveyed the situation in Europe. He, seconded by the undersecretary of the Army, William H. Draper Jr., urged that Tunner be sent without delay to take over the airlift to Berlin.

Tunner had commanded the operation, had been a heroic effort, but the end was clearly in sight, barring major reinforcements. Some of these reinforcements, in the form of C-54 troop carrier wings, were already on the way. However, US authorities had registered no specific requirement. We had made only tentative calculations.

At about this time, a call came from LeMay’s office, and Tunner sent me over to see what the general wanted. He wanted to know how many C-54s we would need for the mission. I told LeMay I would hustle back to airlift headquarters and get right on it. He had a different idea. LeMay, direct as always, motioned to a chair and table in the corner of his office and told me to do it there. Maj. Gen. August Kissner, LeMay’s chief of staff, came in with pencils, paper, and a slide rule, and I was left to my thoughts while LeMay entertained some foreign visitors.

I scratched away and came up with a total of 225 C-54s, using some planning figures that I knew to be in Tunner’s mind. Clay was waiting for the answer. LeMay took my work sheet and placed a call to Berlin, meanwhile giving me a wave of dismissal. I lingered in the outer office long enough to hear LeMay give Clay not my total, but my subtotal. I
didn’t dare barge back in. Instead, I hurried back to Tunner and told him what had gone on. He approved the figure of 225 and ordered me back on the run to correct the inaccurate statement that I had overheard. LeMay then placed a second call to Clay, said something to the effect that we had made some corrections, and gave Clay the right number. Hanging up, he said: “Thanks, Milton”—a rare encomium from that taciturn man.

That summer, the C-47s were retired in favor of the augmented force of C-54s, and Tunner began to eye bases in the British zone, where the distance was a third shorter and the flat terrain allowed for shorter climbs. British authorities readily agreed to make room for the more productive C-54s and chose Fassberg, an old Luftwaffe training base on the Lueneburg Heath. Our initial reactions were favorable. The base had fine permanent buildings, a gymnasium with an indoor swimming pool, and a visiting officers’ quarters, complete with a huge armchair, rumored to have been reserved for Hermann Goering, the Luftwaffe chief and No. 2 Nazi official in Hitler’s Germany.

Fassberg in Danger

The initial results at Fassberg more than justified the move. However, as initial enthusiasm ran down, real difficulties began to develop. The combination of depressing surroundings, divided authority, and an impersonal functional organization patterned after the airlines—one that worked against any sense of unit esprit—proved too much. The operation at Fassberg began to come apart.

The cure was simple and the results dramatic. The Air Force reorganized the pilots and mechanics into squadrons and started to make recreational runs to Hamburg and Copenhagen. The Royal Air Force turned Fassberg over to the US Air Force, with Col. Theron “Jack” Coulter assuming command. His wife, movie star Constance Bennett, showed herself as one of the most formidable scroungers in any service. The mess halls and the barracks were spruced up with new furniture and the latest movies shipped by USAFE supply services. Fassberg, very nearly a Berlin Airlift disaster, became a showpiece.

Britain followed up its gift of Fassberg with an offer of another base at Celle, an attractive town near Hanover. An old fighter base, Celle was without runways or, it seemed, room for a runway, but the facilities were excellent. The British said not to worry and, drogooning the locals, gave an insight into how the British Empire came about.

As the summer went on, the airlift began to lose the happy informality of its early days. One horrendous foul-up over Berlin put an end to the sleepy air traffic control system that had served Berlin well enough before the blockade. The weather was bad that Friday, Aug. 13, and Tunner was due in Berlin. He was, in fact, overdue, as his airplane milled around in the stack with an undetermined number of others. Meanwhile, new arrivals were en route along the corridors, generating a chaotic condition that infuriated Tunner.

As it turned out, the day was a blessing. Given such an unmistakable warning, the Air Force moved when it still had time to straighten out the procedures before the bad weather set in around Berlin. The job was splendidly done by Maj. Sterling Bettinger, who got some professional air traffic controllers back in uniform before the weather turned really sour.

Tunner’s Rules

Admittedly, the new procedures instituted after that infamous Friday were calculated to make any air traffic controller’s job easier. Exact airspeeds were specified for climb, cruise, and letdown. Tunner declared a new rule forbidding second tries at a Berlin landing. This made for a smooth and continuous circuit, eliminating the need for holding patterns. These factors, plus the arrival of the new CPS-5 radar, made it in all likelihood the best ordered air traffic situation in history.

Another edict required all pilots to make their approaches under instrument conditions, regardless of the weather. The Ground Control Approach teams, given this continual exercise, became wonderfully proficient. There was a particular final approach controller, a Sergeant McNulty as I remember, who could make you believe, by gentle corrections interspersed with compliments, that your rotten job of flying into Tempelhof was one of aviation’s milestones.

Across town, at Gatow, things were no different except for the accents. There the RAF was in charge and thus host to the C-54s from Fassberg and Celle. Sometimes the long nights in the Gatow tower were lightened by some irreverent American radio calls. There was the anonymous poet who gladdened the British traffic controllers with his inbound report:

Here comes a Yankee
With a blackened soul
Heading for Gatow
With a load of coal.

With the exception of December’s battles against a heavy fog, one that brought back memories of the Great Fog of 1944 and the Battle of the Ardennes, the airlift
became almost routine. Visitors who came for a look at this famous defiance of Stalin were slightly disappointed by the orderly and measured way the airplanes came and went through Berlin.

There was, however, one bit of excitement, and it was provided by the French.

The Allies had constructed a third airfield, located on a former panzer drill ground in the French sector. The labor force which carried out this project was recruited from the local populace, and it was made up of a most unlikely mix of women and men, young and old, most of whom gave no indication of having ever before done manual labor. However, no group had ever worked harder and with such goodwill. Aggregate for the runways came from the rubble of air raids, and the heavy machinery, too large for our aircraft, had been sliced up by acetylene torch at Rhein–Main, carefully marked, and welded back together at Tegel. At last, everything was ready for the start of operations, except for one thing. In the midst of the traffic pattern stood a 200-foot-tall radio tower, one that belonged to Soviet-controlled East Berlin.

British and American diplomats proposed a diplomatic solution to the problem. It called for the Soviets, in return for compensation, to dismantle the obstructing tower.

French forces thought this notion preposterous. And so, one morning, soon after Tegel opened for business, Brig. Gen. Jean Ganeval had a platoon of engineers march to the tower, lay some charges, and blow it flat. Direct action, the French said, is what the Russians understand. Tegel made a substantial contribution to the airlift and is today, in its modern form, Berlin’s principal airport.

Early in the airlift, Britain agreed to the concept of a unified command structure with Tunner commanding and Air Commodore J.W.F. Merer as his deputy. One RAF officer, Group Capt. Noel Hyde, an unforgettable fellow who had spent four years of the war engineering escapes from Axis POW camps, came down to represent RAF interests and act as chief of plans. The rest of our staff remained as before, and there was never a time when there was any friction between the two Allies. Relations between the temporary duty Airlift Task Force and USAFE were not quite as congenial after the arrival of LeMay’s successor, Lt. Gen. John K. Cannon, but it wasn’t important. It was just one of those things.

**Still Vivid**

Even after the passage of 50 years, it is easy to remember the tension of that period. Scarcely three years had passed since we had thought of Germany as enemy territory. It still caused a flinch to lumber across, at vulnerable altitudes, those dangerous places we remembered so well. Now we had a new adversary with 300,000 troops within a day’s march of the border separating East and West Germany and nothing to stop them if they invaded.

Well, almost nothing. The United States did have a monopoly on the atomic bomb and the means—B-29s—to deliver it. Indeed, early in the crisis, Washington had deployed a squadron of B-29s to the UK, without fanfare. Even so, it was evident that Moscow got the message. Our strategy, as it would be for many years to come, was one of all or nothing if it came to war.

For reasons that have never been made clear, the Soviet Union made no serious attempt to sabotage the airlift. Fighters occasionally made passes at the lumbering transports, but that was it. It would have been simple to jam the GCA frequencies and the navigational beacons, but it was never done. For want of a better answer, we have to credit the presence of those American B-29 bombers in the UK.

The Berlin Airlift was the first real event of the Cold War. Many people in high places thought it was the first event in World War III. It gave credence to the need for the NATO Alliance and it was reassuring evidence that the United States had a firm ally in Britain. Berlin, a shattered city in 1948, was an island under siege. Now, it is once more the elegant capital of a unified Germany. And while there are many things that contributed to this present happy state in Berlin, the airlift, 50 years ago, was a vital show of Allied resolution and competence at a very dangerous time.