Bridging the Gap: Three Airlifts, Two Countries and One Airline

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Abstract

For the citizens of a divided Berlin, the end of the Second World War was just the beginning of a period of dashed hopes, relentless tension and recurring hardships. When East German and Soviet authorities shut down the three land corridors between West Berlin and West Germany in 1948, the well-known Berlin Airlift began. This paper looks at three airlifts that were operated between West Berlin and West Germany: the 1952 "Little Airlift" which thwarted East German attempts to curtail manufacturing in West Berlin; the 1952 Refugee Airlift, which moved East German refugees, seeking asylum in the West, out of West Berlin; and the 1953 Food Airlift, which did for citizens of East German what their own government could not do - feed them. In all three cases, the United States was reluctant to take overt actions on the part of West Berliners. Instead, Washington relied increasingly upon non-state players, including Pan American World Airways, to take covert actions on behalf of its West German allies.

For the citizens of a divided Berlin, the end of the Second World War was just the beginning of a period of dashed hopes, relentless tension and recurring hardships. When East German and Soviet authorities shut down the three land corridors between West Berlin and West Germany in 1948, the well-known Berlin Airlift began. This was an overt reaction by the United States to a deliberately incendiary action on the part of Soviet and East German authorities. By 1951, the chill of the Cold War had settled on Berlin. Both sides understood that the divided city was the flashpoint that could ignite a third World War and that any sparring between combatants could occur only on the periphery. That did not stop East and West Berlin from engaging in a game of cloak and dagger, but, unlike 1948, the United States became reluctant to take overt actions on the part of West Berliners. Washington relied increasingly upon non-state players to take covert actions on behalf of its West German allies.

Americans faced a double dilemma. First, Cold War realities prevented them from taking direct and overt actions in support of the citizens of Berlin; any such response would likely incite Soviet retaliation. So, if the communists blocked access to West Berlin, the United States would have to turn to a non-state player, which meant that it would turn to would turn to a commercial air carrier. Therein lay the second dilemma. The United States does not have a national airline. Whereas every country in East and West Europe supported a national carrier, which essentially responded to the state's beck and call, no such formal relationship existed between the government of the United States and any of its commercial carriers. Washington would have to convince a commercial carrier to undertake the operation, and it would have to make it worth the company's time. Luckily, even though no formal relationship existed, the United States nevertheless always had its "chosen instrument" waiting in the wings - Pan American World Airways. The difference between Washington calling on Pan Am and other governments calling

on their country's national airlines was money: Pan Am had to answer to its stockholders, and Washington, therefore, would have to ensure that its costs were covered.

Between 1951 and 1954, East German and Soviet authorities tried multiple times to blockade West Berlin, albeit never to the extent they did in 1948. Each time the East tried to raise the pressure a notch, West Berliners looked to their allies for relief. This paper looks at three airlifts that were operated between West Berlin and West Germany: the 1952 "Little Airlift" which thwarted East German attempts to curtail manufacturing in West Berlin; the 1952 Refugee Airlift, which moved East German refugees, seeking asylum in the West, out of West Berlin; and the 1953 Food Airlift, which did for citizens of East German what their own government could not do - feed them. In all three cases, the United States turned to its chosen instrument, Pan American World Airways, to act as its non-state surrogate.

Berlin's fate had been decided in Potsdam in 1944. The beleaguered city was parceled out between the Soviet and Western allies. The Western sector was divided amongst the United States, Great Britain and France. Each of the three could name one commercial airline to fly into and out of West Berlin and connect that zone to the West. France designated Air France, but that carrier was never more than a minor player in the airlifts; Great Britain designated BEA, British European Airways, which shouldered some of the load; and the United States was represented by Pan American World Airways.

By 1951, the economic recovery of West Germany was underway, and West Berlin was enjoying a revival of its manufacturing and material production. The economic disparity between East and West was already noticeable and East German authorities seemed determined to disrupt the flow of these manufactured goods out of West Berlin and into West Germany. While the three land corridors stayed open, the East Germans imposed draconian documentation

requirements on shipments leaving the Western sector. The result was a rapidly growing backlog of goods that threatened to overwhelm warehouses and disrupt the economic recovery.

On 29 July 1951, Pan American Airways Vice-President General Harold R. Harris received a telegram from his regional office in Frankfurt indicating that the office of the United States High Commissioner for Germany (HICOG) had contacted him. The telex indicated that "1200 tons [of manufactured goods] accumulating approximately 90 tons per day" and that the HICOG "for certain reasons lift PAA [Pan American Airways] preferred over air force direct participation."[1] The unspecified reason that HICOG preferred the lift of goods to be executed by Pan Am was that the East Germans would interpret any participation by the US Air Force as a deliberate intervention by Washington and risked further escalation. The telex further recommended that Pan American immediately add two additional flights overnight between West Berlin and Frankfurt, while specific contract terms to move the backlog of goods out of West Berlin were negotiated. Two days later, General Harris assured the State Department that Pan American "was very anxious to get this thing rolling and lend every assistance."[2] At the time, Pan American was deeply involved in the airlift of troops and supplies into Korea, and Harris hoped that aircraft could be transferred from Korea to Berlin. But that proved impossible. The paucity of additional aircraft would plague Pan American throughout this effort, as the post-war resurgence in air travel had left few surplus planes.

One week later, on 8 August 1951, Harris received a letter directly from John J. McCloy, the US High Commissioner for Germany. In that letter, McCloy reiterated that "for reasons which I consider essential in the present political situation in Germany … a formal contract for

[1] Pan American World Airways Archives, University of Miami, Ascension II, Box 290, Folder 5, telex to General Harold R. Harris, 26 July 1951.
[2] Pan American World Airways Archives, University of Miami, Ascension II, Box 290, Folder 22, transcript of telephone conversation between General Harold R. Harris and Geoffrey W, Lewis, 28 July 1951.

such service [the airlift of manufactured goods] must be made directly between the Berlin Senate and the commercial airline."[3] While McCloy didn't elaborate on the specific reasons, one can reasonably infer that the Truman administration hoped to avoid direct involvement by the United States, which it feared the Soviets would see as inflammatory. If the Berlin Senate contracted directly with Pan American, the United States could maintain a position of plausible deniability.

Even though the airlift was a tactical response to Cold War pressures, it was also a commercial venture. Pan American had bills to pay and aircraft to maintain. Harris was skeptical from the start about contracting directly with the Berlin Senate; "I am saying we are not going to do that, We are going to contract with HICOG because we haven't got a Chinaman's chance of ever suing the City Magistrate to collect any dough he may owe us, and that's a pretty impossible situation."[4] Impossible or not, Pan American ended up contracting with both the Berlin Senate and the US High Commissioner's Office. The formal contract for the airlift was signed on 15 September 1951 between Pan American and the Berlin Senate, and a day later a contract with HICOG guaranteeing payment to the airline as well as making good any loses due to currency fluctuation. And with those two signings, the *Kinder Luftbrücke,* or "baby airlift," took flight.

Making good on the contract was another matter. Pan American was strapped for aircraft, and the demands of the cargo lift continued to increase. In November 1951, a Pan American telex noted that the company was "under considerable pressure from HICOG to increase … Berlin cargo lift to ninety tons per day … now averaging forty tons."[5] Pan American reached out to a number of US carriers to act as sub-contractors - including TWA, Seaboard World Airways,

[3] Pan American World Airways Archives, University of Miami, Ascension II, Box 290, Folder 22, letter from John J. McCloy to General Harold R. Harris, 8 August 1951.
[4] Pan American World Airways Archives, University of Miami, Ascension II, Box 290, Folder 22, transcript of telephone conversation between General Harold R. Harris and Geoffrey W, Lewis, 28 July 1951.
[5] Pan American World Airways Archives, University of Miami, Ascension II, Box 290, Folder 2, internal telex from Pan American Berlin office to Pan American New York Office, 23 November 1951.

United States Overseas Airlines and TransOcean Airlines - all to no avail. The airlines were going through a boom time, awaiting new aircraft to supplement aging fleets, and had little capacity to spare. Pan Am would have to shoulder on alone. The office of the HICOG became so concerned that, as a Pan American internal telex noted, "owing [to]our difficulty in providing increased lift authorities now talking about bringing in military which we of course wish [to] avoid."[6] Despite the difficulties, this was good business for Pan American which kept planes full, crews busy and guaranteed revenue flowing in. Further, Pan Am was receiving priceless public relations goodwill, and was reluctant to share that. Even though the carrier did try to find third party capacity, it was averse to sharing the limelight.

In time, the Soviets relented and notched back down the restrictions. On 17 May 1952, Pan American received notification from the Berlin Senate that the contract was being cancelled as of midnight, 27 May 1952. Pan American received another letter from High Commissioner McCloy which acknowledged the airline's leadership in the airlift, which "has made a fine record since its inception on July 27, 1951 and has in my opinion aided materially in relieving Soviet pressure on Berlin." He noted that as a result of the airlift, the Soviets have been forced to concede "a very substantial improvement in the ability of Berlin shippers to effect shipment," and that consequently the airlift was to be terminated.[7] In a press release, the airline noted that between August 1951 and June 1952 the airline flew 1,259 cargo flights between West Berlin and West Germany, transporting 22,100,000 pounds, or a little more than 11,000 tons, of goods.[8] It was a significant effort by an American non-state player in support of a US ally, which

[6] Pan American World Airways Archives, University of Miami, Ascension II, Box 290, Folder 2, internal telex from Pan American Berlin office to Pan American New York Office, 29 November 1951.
[7] Pan American World Airways Archives, University of Miami, Ascension II, Box 290, Folder 5, letter from John J. McCloy to Pan American Frankfurt Regional Director Nelson David 19 May 1952.
[8] Pan American World Airways Archives, University of Miami, Ascension I, Box 36, Folder 2, Pan American World Airways Press Release,

demonstrated the importance of commercial air service in crossing both political and national borders. The allied powers in West Berlin had found a way of scuttling Soviet and East German blockade efforts through indirect means. Short of shooting down a commercial airliner flown by civilian pilots and filled with civilian passengers, there was little the Soviets and East Germans could do to stop the movement of critical manufactured goods.

Having failed to stem the flow of manufactured goods out of West Berlin, the East German and Soviet authorities watched as the flow of East German citizens into West Berlin reached floodwater proportions, and West Berlin officials stood by as refugee camps became inundated. A number of events precipitated the flight of East Germans to West Berlin. Prior to 1952, East Germans could cross the border directly into West Germany with relative ease; but the Soviets shut down those border crossings, leaving but a single point of entry open: the crossing from East Berlin to West Berlin. Now, East Germans "heard a rumor that after Aug. 1 this one 'hole in the iron curtain' would be repaired."[9] East Germans also feared "induction into the People's Police or labor corps … presumably to form the nucleus of East Germany's new army."[10]And finally, the East German government had announced the start of confiscation of private property, further aggravating economic discontent amongst its citizens. For many, the only recourse was flight to the West.

The 1952 - 1953 refugee airlift, or "Freedom Airlift" as it was dubbed, was again carried out by commercial carriers. In July 1952, the federal government of West Germany reached out to Pan American and the two other carriers serving West Berlin and requested that for refugees the carriers lower their rates. Unlike the "Kinder Airlift," where additional planes and crews were sought, this time the West German government sought to buy reduced-price tickets on

[9] "Eastern Refugees Pour Into Berlin," *New York Time*s, 30 July 1952.
[10] Ibid.

scheduled flights. The 15 September 1952 agreement signed between Pan Am and the Berlin Senate called for reduced fares for refugees, and a guarantee of "66 seats blocked for refugees per day from Berlin to Hamburg and an allotment of 22 seats per day from Berlin to Frankfurt."[11] If more seats wereavailable, they would be offered as well; there was no shortage of bodies to fill them. The challenge for the airline and for the Berlin Senate was that in addition to providing an airlift for refugees, the airline also had to continue providing scheduled air services for the citizens of West Berlin.

The refugee crisis was becoming dire. In August 1952, more than 15,000 refugees fled into the city; in September, that number was just slightly less at 14,000.[12] By the end of the year, refugees continued to stream in at the rate of 15,000 per month, and over 100,000 had fled to the city during the entire year; and things were about to get worse.[13]

On 27 February 1953, a single day record of 2,500 East Germans flowed into West Berlin. For the month, no fewer than 38,300 had arrived, and since the first of the year, over 63,000 had sought asylum. The city was desperate.[14] Pan American announced that in the same month, it had carried "a record number of 11,817 passengers from isolated Berlin to Western Germany … [including] 3,717 refugees, nearly a thousand more than the previous month."[15] Doing the math, only a meager 10% of arriving refugees were being airlifted out by the carrier. Pan American promised to increase the daily capacity again, yet at the same time tried to keep competitors out. Even at the reduced rate, this was good business, guaranteeing 100% full flights out of the divided city.

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[11] Pan American World Airways Archives, University of Miami, Ascension II, Box 290, Folder 22, *Agreement between Pan American World Airways and the Berlin Senate*, 15 September 1952.
[12] "14,000 Flee East Berlin in Month," *New York Times*, 5 October 1952, p. 19.
[13] "100,000 East Germans Go West," *New York Times*, 31 December 1952, p. 4.
[14] "2,500 Flee To West In Day," *New York Times*, 28 February 1953, p. 3.
[15] Pan American World Airways Archives, University of Miami, Ascension II, Box 290, Folder 22, internal memo, 9 February 1953.

Ernst Reuter, Lord Mayor of West Berlin, made an appeal for more American aid in moving the mounting numbers of refugees. "I appeal to you as a member of the community of free men in [the] world in which freedom is threatened by communism … in [the] dark days of the airlift (1948-1949) American tenacity and courage enabled us free Berliners [to] maintain our freedom. These days are equally dark."[16] In April, Pan Am carried 19,797 refugees to the West, almost 4,297 more than in March and a four-fold increase over February. Yet still the airline could not keep up. This finally forced the carrier to recognize that it could no longer go it alone. In an internal memo from June 1952, the airline's president conceded "we might as well face the fact that we can't keep non-scheds from getting business during the peak months."[17]

"Non-scheds" were a segment of the commercial aviation industry that grew rapidly following the end of World War II. Having no commitment to any fixed schedule, the companies could deploy planes on a contract basis for varied durations and use. They were a logical answer to West Berlin's problem and would have cut significantly into Pan American's revenue, which is why the carrier was loath to see them enter. Pan American could have contracted with the likes of Flying Tigers, Seaboard World Airways and Trans America; but chose to delay the search for as long as possible. In the end, a few non-scheds were brought in, but Pan American had managed to drag its feet long enough to minimize that participation.

Why didn't the West German government simply transport the refugees over the land corridors? Both ground and rail transportation could have carried far more people on a daily basis than the 48 daily round-trips offered by Pan American. For citizens of West Berlin, this was at best a time-consuming option fraught with delays; "To go from West Berlin by car, bus or rail, a traveller must first secure an East German visa, display a passport, pay a road tax or transit

[16] "An Appeal from Ernst Reuter," *New York Times*, 17 March 1953, p. 17.
[17] Pan American World Airways Archives, University of Miami, Ascension II, Box 290, Folder 2, internal memo, 18 June 1953.

fee, be subject to search, and, at times, wait out delays of uncertain duration."[18] For refugees from the East, without a valid passport, visa, or money, this was no option at all. The only way to leave the city without having to face Soviet checkpoints was to fly.

Pan American personnel who flew the endless parade of Freedom Airlift flights told tales of a tired and beleaguered people. Pan American captain Thomas J. Flanagan noted that the refugees "wolf the food aboard the airplanes as if they had just sat down to a meal at Maxim's in Paris … [they were] a pathetic sight."[19] For many, it was the first opportunity to savor plentiful, flavorful food in many months. Used to an East German system of shortages and rationing, and to the hardships of the refugee camps, many were afraid they would have to pay for the food, and often were unable to eat the variety of foods presented. For most, Pan American's clippers were their first taste of freedom.

Over time, the flow of refugees into and out of the city stabilized, and many of the ninety refugee camps scattered throughout West Berlin, closed down. The Freedom Airlift continued, and its operation became routine. Yet no sooner was one crisis averted than another was to challenge the city and airline. This time Pan American was called upon to transport food for East Berlin; having carried hundreds of thousands of people out of the East, the carrier was now called upon to transport emergency shipments of wheat to help feed those who had remained. In June 1953, US President Dwight Eisenhower had offered to give $15,000,000 worth of food directly to East Germans; East German and Soviet authorities brusquely turned down the offer. So instead, food was distributed from West German stockpiles, with the understanding that those stockpiles would be replenished through American aid. James B. Conant, US High Commissioner for Germany, in a reply to Soviet High Commissioner for Germany Vladimir S.

[18] Pan American World Airways Archives, University of Miami, Ascension I, Box 36, Folder 2, Pan Am Marks 25 Years of Air Service to Berlin, 9 June 1973.
[19] "Pathos Tinges Refugee Airlift, A Story of Poverty and Fears," *New York Times*, 15 August 1961, p. 9.

Semynov, wrote "I hope you will not place any obstacles in the way of the distribution of this food by German to Germans," effectively minimizing any direct US involvement.[20]

While the majority of the food was canned and nonperishable, some the wheat, grains and vegetables were flown from the United States. In response to the urgency of the situation, Pan American's Director of Central European operations, R. J. Forhan, offered "to rush the food by air from Hamburg to Tempelhof (Berlin). It will be flown without charge to the Bonn government." In light of the urgency to get the airlift started, "Pan American closed its passenger bookings from Hamburg … to allow maximum cargo space."[21] East German officials did not interfere with distribution of the food; tens of thousands of East Germans made the trip into West Berlin, and were rewarded for their efforts with a "suitcase or knapsack full of cans of lard and condensed milk, bags of flour and dried beans or peas."[22] Few knew that the same planes that had ferried fellow East Germans to the West were now flying life saving foodstuffs back to the East.

In December 1952, the West German government awarded its Order of Merit to Pan American President Juan Trippe for "extraordinary services to the peaceful recovery of the Federal Republic of Germany," the first time this award was ever given to an American.[23] The airline continued to service the West German city throughout the Cold War, establishing an "airline within an airline" when it formed the Internal German Service (IGS) division. The IGS had its own planes, its own crews based in Germany, and was a lifeline to West Berliners in good

[20] "Rush to Get Food Mounts in Berlin," New York Times, 31 July 1953, p. 1.
[21] Pan American World Airways Archives, University of Miami, Ascension I, Box 36, Folder 2, internal memo, 28 July 1953.
[22] "Rush to Get Food Mounts in Berlin," New York Times, 31 July 1953, p. 1.
[23] Pan American World Airways Archives, University of Miami, Ascension II, Box 290, Folder 21, telex from Pan American district office in Frankfurt to New York Corporate Offices, 1 December 1952.

times as well as bad. Even when a crisis was not brewing, West Berliners preferred the thirty minute flight "via Clipper" over the arduous land journey.

Pan American's involvement in the three airlifts is complicated. It would be easy to attribute its actions to a heightened sense of nationalism. But that would be simplistic. It would also be wrong to assume that whenever the US government beckoned, the carrier answered the call. Pan American was a business, and in all three of these airlifts, the carrier saw money to be made, insisted that its costs and currency fluctuations be covered, and that it had a fair chance at a profit. Further, as the carrier scrambled for lift capacity, it was unwilling to jeopardize its other global operations that were on sound footing and producing revenue for the corporate coffers. Throughout the Freedom Airlift, the carrier was pressed to add more capacity as Berlin was inundated with refugees from the East, and Pan American continually failed to do so. Yet it also lobbied to keep other carriers out. Finally, one must consider Pan American President Juan Trippe. He was a ruthless businessman who loved to bask in the limelight. When Trippe agreed to many of these high profile assignments for his airline, he was keenly aware of the publicity value to both the carrier and to himself.

There is a vast historiography on the 1948 Berlin Airlift, but little on the three events discussed in this paper. I drew primarily on two repositories of primary material. The first is the vast collection from the Pan American Corporate Archives now housed at the University of Miami. In this repository I found internal communications between departments within the airline, letters between the airline and HICOG, as well as communications between Pan American and other US carriers. These documents provided the most complete picture of the airline's reasoning for getting involved, its justifications on a business level, and its operational statistics. I also relied on the news media coverage of these three airlifts. Unlike the Berlin

Airlift, these three airlifts were rarely front page and never above the fold. Two interviews published well after these events complemented these sources.

Perhaps the most remarkable feature of these three airlifts is how little has been written about them. One could argue that for the American airline, it was business as usual, poised to answer the call when state agency needed to maintain a cloak of indirection. The US government understood that it was best to avoid directly confronting and antagonizing the Soviets and their East German allies by initiating another military airlift in aid of West Berlin. The United States attempted to let off steam from the Berlin pressure cooker. So it called on a non-state player to act as its surrogate; by guaranteeing Pan American's financial integrity through mail subsidies and route awards, it enabled the airline's commitment to Berlin. No stranger to airlifts, Pan American would answer the call in Korea, Vietnam and Iran; as Iranian insurgents stormed the American Embassy in Tehran, the United States summoned Pan American to airlift out terrified Americans.

Pan American is often referred to as a "Cold War Warrior," having linked the isolated city of West Berlin to the rest of Western Europe. It thwarted East German and Soviet authorities when it helped carry manufactured goods out of West Berlin in 1952, when it flew East German refugees to the West in 1952 and 1953, and when it flew food into the city to help do what East German authorities could not - feed East Germans. Always a businessman, Juan Trippe weighed the costs, risks and rewards for the carrier and managed to come out whole. Which is more than can be said for the carrier's later years, when its role as America's "Chosen Instrument" was largely eliminated. Perhaps it is only fitting that in 1991, when the Soviet Union finally fell and Germany had been reunited, the carrier declared bankruptcy and later that year ceased operations; another Cold War Warrior was laid to rest.