

Air Commodore R.N. Waite C.B., C.B.E., R.A.F. (b. 1901 d. 1975)

## THE BERLIN AIRLIFT

(Compiled by Romilly Waite, romilly@free.fr)

In 1945 Air Commodore R.N. Waite had been in charge of disarming the German Air Force (Luftwaffe) for the British Air Force of Occupation (B.A.F.O.). R.N.W was awarded the C.B.E. for this work.

In December 1946 he was posted to Berlin as head of Air Section Combined Services Division, Control Commission for Germany, British Army of the Rhine. (B.A.O.R.). His duties there are described in the following letter to Air Commodore R.G. Gardner C.B.E., D.S.C. on the 12<sup>th</sup> September 1947.

“This is the most interesting jobs I have ever had. We are the leaders in all matters for the western zones and my team of three nations is now firmly consolidated against the machinations of the Soviet. The latter are constantly making difficulties so that the western powers shall find it awkward to maintain themselves in Berlin and just recently they have intensified their campaign.

Since January I have been trying to improve the communications to and from this sorry country and at last we have managed to persuade the State Department and our own Government to our own way of thinking. My little branch has now become the “Air Ministry” and the “Ministry of Civil Aviation for Germany”, in a manner of speaking, so I am a proprietor of civil airfields and air attaché as well as joint chairman of the civil aviation Panel which governs affairs for the Zones. One problem is to make decent travel arrangements for the thousands of foreign business men whom we must attract to Germany if our export business is to be successful: and in the next few months I hope to have as many as eleven foreign airlines on regular routes to our zone and also flying internal services for us.

The country is just showing the first signs of turning the corner but coal and transportation are still the major headaches. Foreign buyers just refuse to come here if we can only offer transport by broken down motor cars and the outside of passenger trains., which are often hours late and frequently have locomotive breakdown”.

Of the events leading up to the Blockade, R.N.W. was particularly involved in the following:

- a. April 1<sup>st</sup> 1948. The British and USA passenger train from Berlin to Helmstedt was held up by the Russians just before Helmstedt, the frontier of the British Zone. RNW, as Senior officer on the train had to take charge. (see RNW tape and transcript).
- b. The Yak fighter incident with the Hamburg-Berlin Viking Airliner crash. RNW was president of the enquiry 14<sup>th</sup> to 16<sup>th</sup> April and presented his report to the British Government. White Paper published by H.M.S.O.

Anthony Mann describes the situation just prior to the blockade in his book "Comeback: Germany 1945-52" (published Macmillan 1981)

The idea of mounting an organised operation to supply the essential needs of 2,200,000 West Berliners by air had at this stage not even been examined in detail, because experts had dismissed it as impossible. An impression has since grown up, and with constant repetition has become almost an article of faith, that the original project for the Berlin Airlift was American and that it derived essentially from General Clay himself. But, although the basic plan for the lift would never have stood a chance without Clay's enthusiastic backing, it was in fact the work of an RAF officer, Air Commodore R.N. Waite, at that time director, Air Branch of the British Control Commission in Berlin.

Two days before the total Soviet blockade began, Waite alerted RAF Transport command to the probability that "some form of air-lift" into Berlin would shortly be required. On 23<sup>rd</sup> of June he submitted to Major General Herbert, Commander of the British Sector of Berlin, a rough plan for an Anglo-American airlift to sustain the city.

Herbert told him it was out of the question.

Waite sat up all night with a slide rule, calculating cargo priorities, theoretical availabilities of transport aircraft and load factors. Next day he returned to Herbert with a more detailed plan filled with figures, and persuaded the General to get him ten minutes with Robertson. The British Military Governor looked the plan over and said he still thought it impossible, but he agreed to show the proposals to Clay later that day.

'Clay read through Waite's project and was at once full of enthusiasm,' Robertson told me three years later. 'He took a second look and then he said "Okay I'm with you!" Then he telephoned his Air chap to get busy immediately.'

RNW is also cited in Allan Bullock's book 'Earnest Bevin, Foreign Secretary' Voll II (published Heinemann 1981)

**On the 26<sup>th</sup> the airlift had begun. The idea of supplying the civilian population of Berlin, not just the garrison, originated with an RAF officer, Air Commodore Waite. He succeeded in persuading General Robertson that it really was practicable and the two went together to put the figures to Clay.**

**Clay preferred the idea of sending an army convoy up the autobahn, with orders to fight it's way through to Berlin if necessary; but he knew there was a group in Washington who wanted to pull out of Berlin altogether and he guessed that they would be willing to accept an airlift as a temporary measure which could always be dropped whereas they would refuse to agree to the convoy. This converted Clay and the airlift began on a small scale.**

So RNW was then sent to Military Head Quarters in the centre of Berlin to work with Major General Herbert. RNW became the Commandant of the 'Airlift' Headquarters. An Air Commodore in an Army office! There he describes his work to Air Commodore Gardner

"I shall be sorry to leave. Nobody could have a more interesting job than I have at the moment. As soon as the 'Airlift' begun General Robertson appointed the G.O.C. British Troops as the 'dictator' of our besieged sector and sent me over to him as a sort of Chief of Staff with a roving commission, which involves everything from the daily demanding, recording and forecasting of supplies for the city to co-ordination of the Military Government Troops and Civil organisations in the complete rearrangement of life for siege conditions. In the last six months I think I have had to work harder than for the past 28 years but it has been great fun working with the first rate team we have had in Berlin."

In a Daily Telegraph article August 1<sup>st</sup> 1948 by Edwin Tetlow the scene is further described with RNW working with the British Military Governor, General Sir Brian Robertson.

(Berlin RNW. Excerpt D. Telegraph article August 1<sup>st</sup> 1948)

General Robertson, the Military Governor, is rocklike in his steadfastness. In addition has an air of rectitude which never deserts him – the attribute of a man who knows he is for a just cause and is not to be cheated of it. Then he shows a capacity for rapping out the phrase that stings. No body will for get of forgive what is being done now”, he said to Germans the other day.

His serenity in the past two years has frequently baffled his Russian antagonists across conference table and it is baffling them still. Roads close, trains stop, and even bars come nomore, but Robertson stands fast when by all Soviet reckoning he ought to be writing the order to evacuate.

Air Commodore Waite is his perfect foil at this moment, when the sky is providing only link with the West. He bubbles with enthusiasm and imagination. Ideas are always flowing from him. It was he who put up the plan to include Sunderland flying boats in air-lift. It was so successful that Gen. Robertson asked London to provide more of them.

When I met Waite the other night his head was bowed over a tiny pocket book, and he was making drawings and calculations with the stub of a pencil. He was devoting his technical brain, sharpened by a long service career in every branch of flying, to the problem of getting coal into Berlin in the most economical way to save the taxpayer's pocket.

After CALTF (Combined Airlift Task Force) was set up RNW writes to AirCommodore Merer working at Buckeburg in the British Zone to congratulate him on their work (see the following extract)

From: Air Commodore R.N. Waite, C.B.E.,  
Headquarters Airlift,  
H.Q. British Troops Berlin,  
B.A.O.R. 2.  
31<sup>ST</sup> December 1948

I thought you might like to know how pleased everyone in Berlin seems to be for a magnificent effort the Task Force has made during the winter. I come in contact everyday with practically all sections of the British community and I have heard nothing but admiration for the performance of the airlift during the worst of the weather. It is really most heartening to find that, even after six months of siege, the people do not take the airlift for granted and expect it to do the impossible. Whenever there is a spell of shocking flying conditions, people do have real sympathy for the aircrews and the only parallel I know of is the attitude of the population of Malta when convoys managed to battle through with supplies. That may give you some idea of how the people, German as well as English, feel about your job.

We seem to have got the measure of most of the problems but some of the remainder are horrid. Broadly speaking they are:-

Coal and oil for industry and power.

Coal for German homes.

Materials for Industry.

Exports for industry-or cash for wages.

I cannot see how further coal economies can be made without stopping all industry: the unemployment figures are pretty big already. As we have received 1000tons a day less coal than the city burned in November and December, even after the present drastic cuts, the stock position has become very difficult from the point of view of distribution. Hence the cut in food demands for January so as to bring in more coal: and we hope to save more coal as soon as the enough diesel comes in for the power stations.

I suppose the real crux of the matter is coal for German homes. They have had roughly 50lbs of coal and 100 lbs of wood for sixty days burning and the cold is beginning to tell on them. No one knows how long they will stick it: but they have plenty of guts, especially when the alternative is Russian domination. Unfortunately, too many high-ups have virtually promised coal for houses but Heaven knows where the 20,000 tons even for so small an issue of 50 lbs per household is to come from.

Nevertheless it is an exciting battle, perhaps more so at this end than at yours, and the task force is not only doing a superb job but getting the proper appreciation for its efforts, which is a rare phenomenon in peacetime, so called.

Best of luck, more power to your elbow in 1949, and our very grateful thanks to 46 group for their share of the job.

Lady Elizabeth Wilson, wife of Sir Duncan Wilson, Senior Foreign Office official, wrote on the 40<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the Airlift.

**‘It was commonly known that Rex Waite ran the British side of the Airlift with superb efficiency. Rex was a very modest man and it may be less well known that it was he who had the imagination to see that the Airlift was a viable project’.**

In an aside she remarks

**‘God knows what would have happened without Rex’.**