

The Candy Bomber

by R. Scott Lloyd, published in the Deseret News, December 15, 2012 from "Bitter, Sweet Night for Mormon Tabernacle Choir at Christmas Concert"

A festive occasion began on a somber note Friday night as the audience for the annual Mormon Tabernacle Choir Christmas Concert observed a moment of silence for the victims of the shootings in Connecticut earlier in the day.

"As we gather tonight in celebration of the Christmas season, we are profoundly saddened by the heartbreaking events this morning at Sandy Hook Elementary School in Newtown, Conn.," said choir announcer Lloyd D. Newell. "We grieve with all those affected by this tragedy and especially for the families of the little children. At this hour of great sorrow, we pray the Spirit of our Father in Heaven will provide comfort and peace to all."

A featured guest at the concert was veteran newscaster Tom Brokaw, who coined the term "the greatest generation" with his best-selling book about Americans who weathered the adversity of the Great Depression and World War II. Small wonder that his contribution to the event would be a dramatic reading of one of the most memorable and touching events of the war's aftermath, the saga of the American "candy bomber."

Gail Halvorsen, the Utah native and U.S. Air Force pilot who became famous as the candy bomber for his benevolence during the Berlin airlift of 1948-49, was the subject of Brokaw's script.

To the background music of the choir and orchestra, he told the story of Halvorsen, using his nickname Hal.

"That snowy Christmas Eve, as Hal radioed for clearance to land, his mind wandered back six months to the day that changed his life," Brokaw related. "He had been standing at the end of the Tempelhof runway taking home movies of arriving planes when he noticed about 30 children on a grassy strip just beyond a barbed-wire fence."

For nearly an hour, Halvorsen responded to the children's eager questions about the planes and the airlift. He was touched that these children seemed unusual in that they did not beg for candy, as was typical of that time for children encountering American servicemen, but were simply grateful for what the airlift had given them.

On an impulse, Halvorsen dug into his pockets and found only two sticks of chewing gum. These he broke into four pieces and passed them through the fence.

"Without a word, the four children tore the gum wrappers into strips and passed them to the others one by one," Brokaw related, "each small nose that was pressed to the paper breathing the minty smell. Never had he seen such expressions of joy and wonder, even at Christmas."

Halvorsen and his buddies subsequently pooled their rations of gum and chocolate to support his idea of dropping candy from the air to the German children waiting below, each piece tied to a tiny parachute fashioned from a white handkerchief.

He told them how to recognize his plane: He would wiggle its wings. From that signal the beneficiaries

of his kindness came to call him “Uncle Wiggly Wings.”

His initiative drew the attention of the press and ultimately his superiors, who liked the idea. It was expanded into “Operation Little Vittles.” Candy and handkerchiefs poured in from around the world.

“The children made friends of their former enemies, and their parents’ hearts were softened,” Brokaw said. “The wounds of war began to heal.

“By December, the Little Vittles operation had gathered 18 tons of candy from American candy makers, and three more tons came in from private donors, the spirit of Christmas descending on people everywhere, lifting them up in the joy of giving.”

As Brokaw concluded the narrative, simulated snow began to fall from the ceiling in the Conference Center along with hundreds of candy pieces attached to handkerchief parachutes.

But the bigger surprise came a few minutes later, when Brokaw introduced Halvorsen himself, now age 92, who appeared on stage in his original 1948 flight suit and was swarmed by a crowd of children dressed in 1940s-style clothing.

Greeted by a standing ovation, Halvorsen accepted a gift of two sticks of chewing gum from Brokaw. He told the newscaster and the audience, “Two sticks of gum changed my life forever. Through the years I’ve had many wonderful gifts, but ... they pale in comparison to the fulfillment and the happiness of serving others, giving outside of oneself.”

He told of one dispirited child who on a cloudy day was surprised to encounter a chocolate bar landing at his feet, thrown from the passing airplane overhead. The boy later told Halvorsen it took him a week to eat the candy bar. “But then he said with a pause, ‘It wasn’t the chocolate that was important. What is important was that somebody in America knew I was in trouble and somebody cared.’”

Responding to a question at a news conference on Friday, Brokaw credited the candy bomber segment of the program to “the genius” of the Mormon Tabernacle Choir organization. “It was their idea,” he said, noting that he had “tweaked” the script a bit, but not much and that it was very well written.

“I was aware of Hal for a long time,” he said. “The candy bomber was famous in the kind of extended history of World War II that happened during the Berlin airlift. ... Mr. Halvorsen was a heroic figure in that, because he brought this sense of humanity to it.”

Brokaw reflected, “I had no idea that he was still with us — I met him when I got here — though I knew that he was going to be a part of this. And I only hope that all of us at age 82, much less 92, will be as spry as he is.”