

# The Skylift – facts and movie



## 1. The Skylift in general

### **The beginning of the skylift**

From 1948 on, Berlin was a strictly separated island from the western zone of occupation. The shortest distance to the border between the FRG and the GDR was 166 km. So about two million inhabitants of Berlin had to rely on the airborne supply or on the supply with ships. Because of West Berlin's small size, self-supply was not possible. In June 1948, things between the western states and the USSR became worse and finally caused a total blockade of Berlin on the 24<sup>th</sup> of June in 1948. Primarily, the skylift should have been a first answer to the Soviets' provocation. A short time later General Clay wanted to open the way to Berlin with tanks. However, Washington didn't allow this because they didn't want to risk a new conflict. So he got full support for the operation "Vittles", i.e. the skylift.

## **The skylift begins**

From all over the world aircrafts were set in motion towards Germany. Anyway the 2.1 million inhabitants from Berlin needed ca. 13,000 tons of eatables and combustibles every day. Since only old twin-engined planes were available at the beginning, the efficiency of the airlift was questioned. The Soviets also didn't take them seriously in the first weeks.

On June 26<sup>th</sup>, just 500 tones were flown to Berlin. At the end of the airlift the capacitance had been raised 30 times. By October 1<sup>st</sup>, however, the old machines had almost completely been replaced by the C-54 Skymaster (being able to transport six times as much). Only two days after the beginning of the airlift, the English joined in and flew with their C-47 to the airport Berlin-Gatow. Also British water planes were used and landed on the lake Wannsee and the river Havel.

## **The last months of the skylift**

The first months of the year 1949 showed the Soviets that the blockade had been "beaten" by the skylift. In spring it worked at its best. In March almost 200,000 tons and in April over 235,000 tons of charges were flown to Berlin.

On May 5<sup>th</sup> in 1949 the end of the blockade was signed by the four Great Powers for May 11<sup>th</sup> at midnight. But the airlift was kept up till October 6<sup>th</sup> of the same year to fill up Berlin's stocks as fast as possible.

The planes had been put into groups of about 12-15 machines according to their maximum speed. They were directed to Berlin at different heights. So up to 5 different groups could fly along one corridor - one after the other. This was the first time in aviation when they managed to get several planes safe to the ground within a short period of time. Modern airplane control was designed here.

## **Some dates about the operation "Vittles" or "The Big Lift":**

- Considering the total number of the flights (almost 30,000), "only" 126 accidents happened. The accident rate was amazingly low, there were only 79 fatalities (31 Americans, 40 Englishmen and 8 Germans).
- The daily transport record was set on April 16<sup>th</sup> with 12,940 tons (comparable to 22 trains with 5 wagons each).
- Every month ca. 60,000 ignition plugs were changed .
- The costs for the airlift amount to ca. 32 billion Deutsch Marks, without the value of the goods and the airlift costs in the west.
- Altogether 57,000 people were working on that project.
- The total number of flight hours makes a flying time of over 35 years.
- Costs: ca. \$ 200.000.000
- The complete distance of all airlift flights amounts to 75 million kilometres.

## 2. The Movie - Action

One year before the war is over, Luise Kielberg's husband Alex has to go abroad. When he is pronounced dead, she is devastated. Four years later, when the Four Powers have taken over Germany, she meets the amiable American general Turner at work. He is in charge of the airlift, a system making up for the Soviet Union's blockade. Later, beset with traumatic memories of war, Alex, who had been declared dead, comes back to everybody's surprise.

## 3. The movie - Actors

**“Bettina Zimmermann“ as “Luise Kielberg”:**



Since the death of her husband Alex, Luise lives only for her 12 year old son Michael. But survival in Berlin in 1948 is very hard.

However, she fights – with courage and commitment – and gets a position as Turner's secretary.

Although she thinks, she isn't ready for a new relationship, she falls in love with the general. Just as they've found each other, Alex comes back.

Heavy-heartedly, Luise decides in favour of the father of her son.

Yet the war has changed Alex – his despair almost pushes Luise back into Turner's arms.

After a difficult and lonely time, Luise comes to life again as Turner's power and love give her energy. But she knows that she has to make a decision.

**“Ulrich Noethen” as “Alex Kielberg”:**



The man, who comes home after years in Soviet war captivity, is no longer the husband who was loved so much by Luise.

The man who said to her when he left “I want the best part of our life still to be before us“, seems to be left in the war.

Afflicted and embittered because of his dramatic memories of the war, he doesn't find back into his life and he builds a big wall around his pain. By kneeling into his work as a doctor, he keeps away from his family.

Only when Alex hears about his wife's love affair, he begins to fight for his marriage.

### **“Katharina Wackernagel” as “Leni Genthin”:**



Leni is Luise's best friend. The happy hairdresser makes ends meet with her small saloon also in bad times and has also other promising plans, too. When she falls in love with Harry and when he proposes marriage to her, their luck seems to be perfect. But when Harry dies in a plane crash, it's the end of the world for her.

### **“Henning Baum” as “Harry Keynes”:**



Harry is a co-pilot who always knows what to say and do. With Leni he wants to start a family as soon as possible. But things take an unexpected course...

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