



Impact Statement

Ethan Han, Grade 11

Sweet Drops in Berlin, 2026

Oil on canvas board, 16 x 20 inches

Sunny Hills Highschool, Fullerton, CA

Unsung Hero: Colonel Gail S. Halvorsen

My decision for my Unsung Hero comes from what I've been learning in my AP U.S. History class. After studying World War II and the atrocities committed by the Soviet Union, I started thinking more about both the destruction and the moments when people showed humanity. When I looked through the categories, I immediately chose wartime because it's such an important and still relevant topic. Out of all the heroes, Colonel Gail S. Halvorsen stood out to me. He was the only pilot and his nickname, the "Candy Bomber," caught my attention right away. I found the title ironic because "bomber" usually represents destruction, but in his case, it represented kindness and hope.

What made Halvorsen so inspirational to me is his overwhelming empathy. He showed a different kind of strength by choosing to be kind during a time when most people were just trying to survive. Being a pilot during war is already difficult, and most would have kept any extra supplies for themselves, which is understandable. But Halvorsen gave anyway, simply because he cared. He helped children living in a divided and damaged country, and even though what he gave was small, it meant everything to them. His actions show that real heroism isn't about power or recognition, but about choosing to care for others, even in the hardest situations.

It all started around 1948 when the Soviet Union had blocked all routes around West Berlin, trying to starve the city and force it to surrender during the early Cold War. Because of the state that Berlin was in the United States and its allies launched the Berlin Airlift, flying in food, fuel, and supplies every single day just to keep the city alive.

While visiting Tempelhof Airport, he met a group of German children who had very little, but he saw patience and gratitude in them even in this tough situation, and not begging. He gave them two sticks of gum, and they carefully shared it with some of the children passing the wrapper around just to smell it, which touched his heart with their kindness. Watching this he wanted to do more, Halvorsen promised to drop candy from his plane, using handkerchiefs as small parachutes. The next day, he kept his promise, even signaling to the children by "wiggling" his plane's wings earning him the nickname "Uncle Wiggly Wings." Halvorsen's act of kindness quickly grew into an official operation called "Operation Little Vittles," and other pilots and even American citizens joined in and even candy and handkerchief companies started to help as well. Over time, more than 23 tons of candy were dropped, using over 250,000 handmade parachutes.

At a time when Germany had recently been the enemy in World War II, his kindness helped rebuild trust between Americans and the people of Germany, especially children. The candy drops became a symbol of hope during a period of fear and hardship, showing that kindness could exist even in times of conflict. Many children who experienced these moments remembered them for the rest of their lives, often describing them as a turning point in how they viewed others and the world. For my painting I started off with finding a picture that was able to capture Halverson's personality in one moment. I wanted it to be obvious for people to see his kind and eager and bright personality. Although it was a black and white photo, using some references, I was able to display Halverson fully in color. I also thought painting him in black and white would be underappreciating for his works. I then found a photo of a flying C54 plane during the war which would have been used to undergo the candy dropping missions. Displaying the plane and Halverson in color and as realistic as possible was important to me because I wanted my audience to look and imagine themselves seeing this plane "wiggling" its wings and dropping candy representing hope.

I added children after researching their attire and reference images. I wanted to capture a moment as the candy was dropping down so they were all reaching up with their hands ready to receive the sweets dropping from the plane. One of the children is reaching down in the debris to collect candy. I think this also represents an opposite meaning because the debris was from war and chaos, but in the midst is candy representing hope. The building silhouettes in the back are to show that these children gathered in cities with buildings that were abandoned and destroyed.

For the sky, I chose dark blue sky in the top which matches with the plane and pilots who dropped the candy, then it becomes red which represents the difference between the pilots and the children in Berlin, at one point they were enemies, but below it is yellow and white representing hope and I wanted the viewers' attention to be drawn to the children as well. Finally, I added small handkerchief parachute and hanging from there is small candy. I used vibrant primary colors to make it pop since it was displaying them from the sky. With all these components, I was able to create a painting with Halverson looking over at the children of Berlin reaching up for the candy that he had dropped in World War II.

Before learning about Colonel Halvorsen, I imagined helping others needing to be a dramatic and big change but once learning about this Unsung Hero I realized that rather small actions like dropping a few pieces of candy to children can grow into something a lot more meaningful and timeless. This made me think how I can do these small actions to help my community; friends and family to leave a lasting impact as well. I want to share my piece to friends and family for them to receive this message as well as to learn about the heroic actions of Colonel Halvorsen.