

How the Candy Bomber's Orem drop came to be and how it happened

Cathy Allred, Daily Herald | JUL 3, 2015

The mechanics for a candy drop and logistics to make it happen



Gail Halvorsen, also known as the Candy Bomber, discusses logistics with Dave Hansen, center, owner and pilot of the PV-2 Harpoon bomber behind them, and Scott Swain, right, at the Heber City Municipal Airport on Friday, June 26, 2015. SPENSER HEAPS, Daily Herald

HEBER CITY — There must be angels working for the "Candy Bomber," World War II pilot Gail Halvorsen.

Stopping short of calling the Freedom Festival candy drop a miracle, a pilot told how challenges fell by the wayside to make the Friday candy drop happen at SCERA Park.

Owner of a vintage World War II bomber and patrol aircraft, pilot David Hansen said people contributed time and money in three different time zones to make one of the Candy Bomber's last drops happen.

The right plane

Hansen used his PV-2 Harpoon airplane to transport Halvorsen and his parachute-equipped candy bars on the flyover at the park.

When Hansen received a call from Freedom Festival organizers two weeks ago, his Harpoon was scheduled for an event in Minnesota and then an air show in Missouri.

“To fly it all the way back to Utah and back to Missouri is a costly thing,” Hansen said. “I mean you are looking at thousands and thousands of dollars to do that just in fuel and oil even if we don’t charge for the plane.”

A Harpoon is a gas guzzler, burning 150 gallons of fuel and three gallons of oil per hour. At \$6 a gallon for plane fuel and \$3 per gallon of oil, Hansen estimated the cost at \$8,500 to get the war plane from Minnesota to Utah and on to Missouri.

His customers in Minnesota had planned on giving Hansen enough fuel to get the Harpoon to Missouri. When they found out why he would need his tank topped off, they said they would fill the Harpoon’s tank and donate oil after the Minnesota air show.

“So that got me two-thirds of the way here,” Hansen said. “In other words, we are not charging for the plane, we are not charging for the flying, if you can just get us back to where we need to be, we’ll do it.”

They needed \$6,300 more.

“Colonial Flag, they stepped up and said they would get us home,” he said.

The Draper-based company also helped cover the cost of the two vintage escort planes that were part of the drop Friday, a T-6 Texan and a Navy SNJ, both advanced trainer planes.

Flying always involves the Federal Aviation Administration, and a candy drop over SCERA Park during a holiday weekend is not exempt. The authorization process to conduct a special flight usually takes between six and nine months to complete, Hansen said.

The event organizers began seeking FAA approval about the time they first contacted Hansen.

“The FAA is trying to help get it done,” Hansen said June 29. “Giving them two weeks to approve will be interesting.”

The FAA on Wednesday gave the OK for the event.

“I’ve never actually heard of them doing that so quick,” Hansen said. “Somebody must be well connected. It’s certainly not us.”

The opportunity

Halvorsen flew in a bomber Friday instead of a transporter plane like he piloted during the Berlin Airlift. It was the first candy drop for the Harpoon crew.

“We have never done a candy drop,” Hansen said. “We have done petal drops, you know, rose petals over veterans memorial services and such.”

Flying a candy drop with Halvorsen wasn’t on Hansen’s bucket list, but now that he has participated in it, he calls the Candy Bomber his hero.

“He chose to do something that he felt was the right thing to do regardless what his commander might want him to do,” Hansen said. “It was the right thing to do. That type of action is what makes our nation great.”

The volunteer pilots for the escort planes were Barry Hancock and Matthew McNamara.

“I’m excited,” said McNamara before the drop. “It’s an historic thing that we’re doing. It’s going to be fun to be a part of it.”

He is a commercial pilot and works for SkyWest Airlines based out of Salt Lake City.

“One of the things I love about flying historical airplanes is that I get to talk to the guys and gals who were a part of one of the most pivotal times in human history,” he said.

“To hear the history directly from the people who lived it, to me is exciting. When you read a history book, it’s very dry. There is no emotion to it, but when you talk to these people you get the emotion that goes with it.”

The crew

Typically during the war there was a seven-man crew on a Harpoon: a turret gunner, a tunnel gunner, a radar operator, a radio operator, a navigator and two pilots. When there was a five-man crew, they went to multi-tasking. A co-pilot doubled as a navigator, and a radio operator could become a gunner as needed.

During the candy drop, there were seven on the crew, although without the gunners: a pilot, Steve Guerned; a co-pilot, Hansen; Halvorsen, two volunteer crew members who put candy in the shoot, and the sponsor.

A media representative doubled as an observer keeping an eye out for unexpected planes, balloons and birds.

“When we are flying we are concentrating on this, we are not looking for extraneous traffic that might be up there,” said Hansen before the flight. “We’re going to make them work because we can’t have passengers, we have crew. If they can’t act like a crew member, we don’t want them in the airplane because we have no passenger seats. We only have crew seats.”

The drop

When the bomber arrived at the drop site, spectators saw Halvorsen at the co-pilot’s window.

The crew used a window in the belly of the bomber located a few feet behind the exit door to drop the candy through a hopper. Called a recon window, the window was removed, and a wooden box with a funnel was placed in the window space instead.

The pilots were limited to a certain area for the candy drop. Safety was a concern for the elementary school-aged children who were catching the candy parachuting down from the plane, especially if the candy bars landed in the street instead of the chosen field.

“We still have to experiment on how many candies come out in ‘x’ number of seconds,” said Hansen before the flight. “We’ll actually go down and fly the route on Wednesday in a smaller aircraft at the same speed as the Harpoon.”

From the preflight test, the crew figured out how many seconds passed for the plane to fly over the SCERA field, how many candy bars dropped from the hopper in as many seconds, and how many flyovers would be needed to be made for the 1,000 bars to be dispersed.

“It’s much more complicated; most people think we can just throw it out the window,” Hansen said. “Once you pull the door out, it all goes; and it can’t keep coming out once we pass that area.”

Another technical issue was the heat. There are no air conditioners in a Harpoon, and chocolate melts.

“It’s going to be hot, so those candies will have to stay in coolers,” said Hansen before the flight.

“Hopefully, we’ll make a little bit of difference and we’ll be able to share a little bit of history with our kids.”

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