President Clinton Dedicates C-17 "The Spirit of Berlin"

50th Anniversary of Legendary Berlin Airlift

With German Chancellor Helmut Kohl at his side, President Bill Clinton dedicated "The Spirit of Berlin," a new U.S. Air Force/Boeing C-17 cargo plane, during a morning ceremony today in Templehof, Germany. The event marked the 50th anniversary of the Berlin Airlift, the historic effort to defeat the Soviet blockade of the city of Berlin.

"The constant drone of an airplane every 90 seconds became a symphony of freedom," Clinton told the crowd of 7,000 invited guests at Templehof airfield, the site he called the first battlefield of the Cold War. "The airlift was no flight of imagination, this was our best investment."

The Berlin airlift was the first large-scale, peacetime use of airlift in executing national policy. The first missions were flown to Berlin on June 26, 1948, airlifting 80 tons of milk, flour, medicine and other cargo - the payload equivalent of one Boeing C-17 - on 32 Douglas C-47 flights.

"The experience of the airlift caused us to join together as allies, and we still are today," said Chancellor Kohl. Kohl went on to give special mention to the airlift veterans in attendance and the families of those who did not return.

"Millions of Americans have been stationed here since then to defend our freedom," Kohl said. "The Americans got rid of the barbwire and created the climate for our reunification."

David Spong, vice president and general manager for the Boeing C-17 program, was among the invited guests and dignitaries at the ceremony. "It's an honor to watch two world leaders dedicate our aircraft," said Spong. "The C-17 carries a great tradition with it, and our commitment to building quality aircraft will be just as important in the 21st century as it was 50 years ago."

The Berlin Airlift proved enormously successful. Crews delivered a total of more than 4.4 billion pounds of food, fuel and supplies to Berlin in 15 months and transported a total of 227,655 people into or out of the city. At the height of the airlift, aircraft were flying 3-4 minutes apart, 24 hours a day, 7 days a week. Planes were so closely spaced over Berlin that they resembled a flying freight train. Approximately 75,000 Americans, British, French and Germans participated in the effort.

The airlift also demonstrated the peacetime utility of transport aircraft, unlike fighters and bombers that could only be used during time of war. Its success led to the present era of big cargo aircraft, including the C-17 Globemaster III.

Also present for the ceremony was Gail Halvorsen, a U.S. Air Force pilot who became known by grateful Germans as "The Candy Bomber" for his unauthorized airdrops of sweets via mini-parachutes.

"My first flight in 1948 carried 20,000 pounds of flour, but I learned that freedom was more important than flour," he said.

Following his flight aboard a C-17, Halvorsen remarked, "Boy, we could have done the job with 25 airplanes instead of 225. The C-17 is a great airplane - it's good to see one surpass expectations."

###

98-73

For further information:
Rick Sanford
(562) 593-7512