

A MOVING CHRISTMAS STORY BY ONE OF OUR OWN

A TRUE
CHRISTMAS STORY

by

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USS Sam Houston, SSBN 609

Holy Loch, Scotland, 1964

It was mid-December 1964, and it was as cold as one would expect Connecticut to be at that time of the year. We boarded the buses, and after a while, we were on our way to Quonset Point Naval Air Station where an aircraft waited to take us to Scotland. We were going back a few days early this time.

The idea was to relieve the other crew so they could get home for Christmas. The faces of the men betrayed their remorse at leaving home at this time of the year. There was little of the usual horseplay and chatter we normally enjoyed on these trips. Instead, the men stared out the windows reflecting on the price they and their families paid for the security of the nation. Children would rush downstairs on Christmas morning to discover a bounty of presents. Their fathers would share that precious moment, unaware that somewhere out in the world's oceans, other fathers, crammed into a cylinder of steel, kept watch over the delicate world peace. On our watch, there was peace on earth.

Takeoffs always amused me. I chuckled watching men who would take a boat to test depth and think nothing of it, grip the armrest so hard their knuckles turned white. They sat rigid with their heads back and their eyes closed, perhaps making peace with their maker, while the plane rotated and climbed out into the morning sunshine. In a few minutes, we had reached our altitude and leveled out. Almost immediately, I noticed a couple of the guys begin to move around the plane having conferences with first one group and then another. Soon they approached us with their proposition. They proposed that although we had our duty to do, we need not sacrifice our customs and traditions. We couldn't be home for Christmas with our kids, but we could share with others. There was an orphanage in Dunoon with children in need of what we had to give. Soon the hat was passed, monies collected, plans made, and duties assigned. The balance of the flight seemed more relaxed, and it was not long before I heard someone question the masculinity of a NavET. I knew then that all was well!

When we arrived in Holy Loch, the usual change-of-command process went forward with a greater sense of urgency than usual. Clearly, the other crew wanted to go home. In no time, the process was complete, and we had the boat. When the opportunity for liberty came along, we dispatched a committee to the orphanage, and they returned with a list of children who would be invited aboard for Christmas dinner. The list included their names, age, and gender. Each child was assigned to

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a "Daddy for the Day" who was charged with escorting them around the boat and getting them to all functions. It's funny, but although I have not been able to put a name to the faces of the men who organized this event, I still remember the name of the child I looked after that day—Angus Naylor.

A second committee, armed with the list that indicated age and gender, went shopping for Christmas presents for the children. Soon, the local merchants became aware of what we were doing, and our money went much further than we had estimated. Our men returned with a huge supply of presents. Instead of the usual movie, we spent one evening wrapping the gifts. The role of Santa Claus went to our Hospital Corpsman, affectionately known as "The Quack." [Ed. Note: *The Quack, aka, David "Doc" Jenkins {HMCS(SS), Blue, 1964-1967}*]

A liberty launch brought the kids out, and that in itself was a thrill for them. Some were scared and others mischievous. We gave them a tour of the boat, then took them to the Crew's Mess where they enjoyed, perhaps, the best Christmas dinner of their lives. After dinner, they were treated to a Walt Disney movie—*The Amazing Mr. Limpet*, starring Don Knotts. When the movie was over, we took them up to the periscope stand where The Quack was decked out in an ill-fitting Santa Claus suit. He had a couple of helpers in some form of costume. This was when we discovered that British children believe in Father Christmas, not Santa Claus. One of the guys quickly explained we had invited our American Santa Claus to come over especially for them. As the child sat in Santa's lap, The Quack would ask their name and then repeat it loud enough for his helpers to hear it. This would send the helpers frantically searching among the huge pile of presents to locate the ones intended for this child who was kept occupied answering the usual questions concerning their behavior during the year. When found, a present would be placed in Santa's hand. He would present it to the child while the two of them smiled at the camera. In the end, each child received about three presents and a picture of themselves with the most ridiculous looking Santa Claus!

Soon, it was time for them to go, and the tears began to flow. Tiny little girls held tightly to their "Daddies" and cried out that they wanted to stay. Everyone was affected. We escorted them with their presents back to the Tender where the liberty launches waited to return them to the cold reality that we had given them temporary respite from. As the launch pulled away, the children waved, and all the "Daddies" waved farewell to them as I had seen them do to their own children a few weeks before. It was not lost on me that here were men who wielded on of the most powerful warships ever conceived, who struck fear in the Russian heart, who could unleash an attack never before seen on Earth. There, at that moment, these warriors of the deep wiped tears from their eyes; and there was truly

Peace on Earth

Suggestion to print this article by **Doug Antonelli** [ET2(SS). Blue, 1967-1968]
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