

SANTA / A SOLDIER / A FATHER

By

Rodger Newell

As far back as I can remember, starting about age three or four (we were in Japan then), on every Christmas Eve just after dinner, Santa would come to our home. Santa would talk to my sister and me, my younger brother too years later, about what we had done that year good... and not so good. He knew! We were always good enough though that Santa would give us all an apple. Mom too but not Dad. He was an Air Force officer and always on duty that night. Then, Santa would tell us to go to bed and go to sleep so he could come back and put the presents under the tree. But he would not come back until we were asleep.

On Christmas Eve day when I was about seven or eight, by then on Cape Cod Massachusetts, I was playing with my friends and was so very excited. My friends asked why I was so excited. I told them, Because I am going to see Santa tonight! They wanted to know where I was going to go to see Santa. I told them, At my house. They said, "At your house? He's coming to your house?" I said, "Yes! Isn't he coming to your house?" They said, "No." And we all just kind of looked at each other. I remember wondering why not...not that they were bad and we weren't, just why not?

The next year on Christmas Eve, neighbors came over to our house. They were the families of my sister's friends and my friends, my brother was only about one or two then. Of course, Santa came, and every one was so excited! Santa knew everybody by name, and was talking about what they did that year and what they wanted for Christmas. Then he gave us all an apple,

and told us to get to bed and go to sleep so he could come back and put out our presents. Then cried, “Ho! Ho! Ho! Merry Christmas!” waved to us and left.

Everyone was excited and talking and I got up and walked past the opening to the kitchen. When I saw out the window over the sink Santa walking by. As he did he reached up and pulled his hat off and his wig came off too.....it was my dad!!! It was my DAD!!! Wow, how cool!!! You might think I would be disappointed because it was my dad and therefore Santa wasn't real. But I still, to this day, believe in Santa. He is the symbol of the spirit of Christmas giving and spreading joy!

I didn't tell anyone what I saw, but waited til I could talk to dad alone. He asked me not to tell anyone because he wanted it to be a surprise when he came to peoples' houses, and he didn't want a lot of publicity about it. He just wanted to make people happy. My mother told me years later that for all of the thirty years he was in the service, if he was stationed in a combat zone or where there were no families, he would volunteer to take a mission or stand a watch so another officer could attend the Christmas Eve celebration. If he was where there were families he would spend the evening going to homes. He never went to a Christmas Eve party.

In 1967, if you opened the front door of our car, the interior light came on. This was a problem for Santa to be seen getting in and out of a car in residential areas on Christmas Eve. So, Dad decided to volunteer me to drive him that night. When the Colonel volunteers you....you were pretty much volunteered. When he told me I was to drive him, I told him I thought what he did was super cool, but I had hoped to see my girlfriend that night. He asked me if I would introduce him to her parents, and he would explain what he did and see if she could ride along. I did, he did, they said, “Yes”. We made their house the first stop because she had younger

siblings, and she came with us when we left. We left her house before 6 pm. After Dad made all his home stops, we got her home about 11pm. I noticed we put 125 miles on the car that night! We did a lot of back and forth around town as he would start with the homes with the younger children and work towards the older, so he could be there before their bed time. Of course, they didn't live in a "straight" line. These were homes of military officers, NCO's, and those with stripes on their uniforms not just air force either. Also, people in the private sector who Dad knew or interacted with. The military is always on watch twenty-four seven. After he went to the homes, he would go to those on duty at the base: air police, base fire station, base hospital staff and patients, and those on the flight line. All would get a visit from Santa! All night Dad would tell me what street to take, where to turn, and which house to stop for. But... there was something I did not notice that night.....

October of 1970, my father had three heart attacks within thirty minutes while on duty. As Christmas approached, he explained to his doctor, a captain, what he did, and the doctor/captain, told him that he couldn't do that. (This next part the doctor told me about.) He told me that the Colonel said to him, "Captain, you didn't hear me! This is what I do." The captain replied, "Colonel, Sir, if you carry that heavy bag of apples, Sir, it will kill you. Sir! You can't do that. Sir!" To which the Colonel replied, "CAPTAIN, you didn't hear me! This is what I do! You can either help me figure out how I do it, or I just do it. If it kills me, it kills me, and I'm OK with that!" That is how important it was to him. The solution was this: there was an elf that grew too tall to work in the elf factory, and he was helping Santa that night. Six foot four inch me! I wore red pants, a pink shirt, and a red tie, and not only did I drive him that night, but I carried his bag into the homes for him.

What followed was a wonderful and magical experience!

He started the night, as he did each year, with two cases of apples, each with about a hundred apples. By the end of the night, he had given out almost all of them!

All night, Dad would direct me to a home. He would ring the door bell, and when the door was opened, they would see Santa and me and be greeted by a hearty “Ho! Ho! Ho! Merry Christmas!” After being so pleasantly surprised, there would be a whispered “Who are you?” followed by a whispered either “Colonel Newell” or “Wally Newell”. Then, “Oh how wonderful! Come in, come in!” We would enter, and Santa would greet everyone by name, talking about what each did that year, and what each wanted for Christmas, children and adults. The way their faces lit up with joy, and wonder could only be described as magical!! Then, apples would be given and children told to go to bed so he could return with their presents. With a farewell “Merry Christmas” we would be on our way to the next....and the next....and the next....and the next....and I began noticing what I had not in 1967.

He was directing me to each home, what turns to take, and at which house to stop, even if the porch light was not on to see the address. He knew all the names, what each had done that year, and what each wanted for Christmas. “How did he do it?” I wondered! Never a missed turn, house, name, or what they wanted! He did not have a book or a list that he would refer to! It was amazing, magical....had he morphed into the real guy?! After all Santa knows!!

He did this starting in the late 1940's into the 1950's in Albuquerque, New Mexico; Riverside, California; Salina, Kansas; Spokane, Washington; Tachikawa, Japan; and Falmouth, Massachusetts. In the 1960's; Grandview and Belton, Missouri; Colorado Springs, Colorado, and Goldsboro, North Carolina. And early in 1970's; Goldsboro, North Carolina and Melbourne

Beach, Florida. How many lives were touched: How much joy did he bring along with the apples? How many may still remember?

A decorated veteran of three wars: WWII, Korea, and Viet Nam, Lt. Col. Wallace Bruce Newell loved his country. I was with him one day when someone said, "Since you are a career officer, you must love war." My father responded, "No! I have fought in three wars. I hate war, but I hate the alternative more!"

My father was a loving family man who, along with my mother, made time to be involved in Scouting with his two sons. We both attained the rank of Eagle Scout.

My father, a decorated Veteran, and a man who had the will and always found a way to spread joy and happiness where he could with apples, and maybe a little bit of.....Santa?