



Santa In OD Green

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It was a cool, wintry Saturday before Christmas Eve in 1968. Looking out the window, Reece Adler stood in the third-floor room of a renovated World War Two German Army barracks. He sipped a cup of hot coffee as he watched snowflakes fall. So pristine and white, they mesmerized him. He imagined them as tiny parachutes floating to the ground.

He had written his parents earlier to let them know his specialized airborne company had relocated from Mainz-Wiesbaden on the Rhine River to the Idar-Oberstein Army garrison on the Nache River. Like Mainz-Wiesbaden, Idar-Oberstein had a ring of Minneapolis-St. Paul on the Mississippi River. His parents descended from German and Italian immigrants. Reece's high school years included four years of German language and culture. So Germany felt somewhat familiar rather foreign to him.

He was familiar with German foods through the Adler side of his family—hasenpfeffer, blood sausage, wiener schnitzel, sauerbraten, sauerkraut, beef rouladen, and

spaetzle. Because he knew the language, he could converse conversationally with Germans—stumbling occasionally when he ran into an unfamiliar German dialect.

Reece also knew something of German Christmas folklore—the saintly St. Nickolas or the crotchety Belsnickel—and how the son of a German immigrant—Thomas Nast—created the traditional image of Santa Claus that Americans know. And when the local carolers at the Christmas Market in Idar-Oberstein sang, *O Tannenbaum*, Reece sang along. Unlike him, many soldiers at Christmas time got depressed and yearned for home. So, at least for the men in his squad, Reece played the Santa in OD (olive drab) green.

So it wasn't mom's home cooking, but the Army cooks outdid themselves on holidays, Christmas Day being the biggest. They packed chafing dishes with roasted turkey or ham slices, mashed potatoes, sweet potatoes, stuffing, peas, and corn. For dessert, they laid out baked pies and cakes. Soldiers could return to the serving line more than once.

Reece took another sip of his coffee before he opened his locker and took out several large boxes, some Christmas cards, and a letter from home that had arrived a few days ago. He delayed opening them, especially the boxes, because he knew they contained Christmas cookies, banana bread, and fruitcake. Reece planned to share his homemade goodies with his squad but waited to tell them. They'd want to eat everything immediately, leaving nothing to enjoy on Christmas Eve. A few days ago, Specialist Austin asked him if his mother's Christmas goodies arrived. And, of course, Reece said, "No, not yet."

Reece read his mother's letter first. She always told him what she baked, how many cookies she made, and

how she packed everything. She worried the cookies would arrive in bits and pieces. Reece couldn't bring himself to write her and say it didn't matter because soldiers devoured homemade goods. Not even a hungry mouse would find a crumb once they got done.

So Reece did an inventory. Two loaves of banana bread, check. A loaf of Aunt Mary's fruitcake, check. A dozen pistachio biscotti, check. Two dozen snickerdoodles, check. Two dozen Russian tea cakes, check. Two dozen peanut butter blossoms, check. Two dozen soft sugar cookies, check. Three dozen buttery Spritz cookies, check. And one dozen soft ginger cookies, check. Reece smiled. Merriam-Webster's dictionary would need a unique definition of "plenty" for anyone to comprehend its usage by an Italian mother.

On Sunday, December 24, Reece and the soldiers from his squad used a vacant room on the third floor to set up folding tables and a dozen or so chairs. On one table, Reece erected a tabletop Christmas tree with silver garland, a string of colored lights, ornaments the size of red cherries, and a shiny gold star at its top. He borrowed it—okay, commandeered it—from a storage room at the NCO club. For effect, he set out a scented pinecone. A radio would be tuned to the traditional Christmas music the armed forces radio broadcast.

Earlier, he had informed the duty officer of the Christmas Eve party. And he invited him to come by during an inspection round for Christmas cookies and hot cider. Alcohol wasn't allowed in the barracks. But anyone with half a brain knew how to get around that.

The party started at 1700 hours. The entire squad was present and accounted for. The supply of Christmas

goodies held its own against the repeated assaults of spirited soldiers. The camaraderie among them was high in *spirits* in more ways than one. Suddenly, the duty officer walked in. All activity came to a complete stop. He hadn't come for cookies but to tell Reece a search party was underway in Old Town Idar-Oberstein for a missing six-year-old boy. The locals called for help with the search. Since it would take a while to assemble the rest of the company, Reece's squad be-came a rapid-response team.

It was a fifteen-minute drive to Old Town in the back of a deuce-and-half truck. The local Polizei had set up a command center at the Christmas Market where the boy had been last seen with his grandmother in the crowded marketplace. She had taken her grandchildren Hans and Erika to see the holiday displays and to hear carolers. The boy stood nearby, fixated on a Nativity scene, while Erika held her grandmother's hand as she spoke to friends she encountered. Hans wasn't there when she looked where he stood moments ago. When she called out his name, he didn't reply. She hailed a police car.

Reece and his squad reported directly to the police officer in charge. He didn't have a search and rescue canine to deploy. He explained the situation and gave Reece a police band walkie-talkie and flashlights. Much of Idar-Oberstein was terraced into cliffs populated by trees and parks that overlooked the Nache River. The cliffside church, Die Felsenkirche, stood out among the prominent features seen in Old Town.

The Germans in the marketplace were either elderly or children. They could not move fast and endure a fast pace up the trails on the cliffs. So, the police officer as-

signed that search area to Reece and his squad.

“Okay, men, listen up,” Reece said. “We’ll be searching the cliff trails. The boy’s name is Hans. We’ll walk in a line on and off hiking and walking trails ten to fifteen paces apart. Now and then, I want you to call out *Hans, Wo bist du?* That’s German, short and sweet, for where are you?”

“Hey, Reece,” one of his men said. “This is one helluva Christmas Eve party.”

They all laughed and headed for the first trailhead.

Almost three hours had lapsed since Hans was last seen, and no one found a clue as to his whereabouts. Occasionally, someone in his squad let a colorful word if he slipped or was brushed in the face by a branch. Yet no one bellied ached. Reece began to feel the early stages of fatigue in his leg muscles. His squad had to be feeling that, too. They pressed on, but Reece knew he and his men couldn’t keep up their fast pace much longer. They’d have to slow down and rest.

How far could a six-year-old go, and where would he go? Reece thought. Hans didn’t have a flashlight. If he had come this way, he may have lost his footing and tumbled down the cliff. Floodlights lit up *Die Felsenkirche*—the Rock Church. *Did the boy go there, and why?* Reece radioed the police officer in charge and asked if anyone had checked the church. “*Nein,*” he said.

Reece and his men reached a clearing on a paved trail toward the church, about another 800 yards away. He could see how tired his men looked.

“Take ten,” he said. “I’m going to search the church.”

As he walked up the trail, Reece glanced over his left shoulder and saw all his men were right behind him.

As they entered the church, they saw a brilliant Nativity scene to the right of the altar. The inner lights were subdued. Their footfalls echoed in the church as Reece and his squad walked down the central aisle.

“*Hans, Wo bist du?*” Reece said. He repeated it several times as he neared the altar. So did a few others in his squad. Suddenly, a tiny hand reached over the back of the front pew nearest the Nativity scene. It was Hans!

Reece asked, “*Hans, Wie geht’s (How are you)?*”

“*Schläfrigi (sleepy),*” he said.

He came to see the Nativity in the church because he had heard his grandmother say it was bigger than the one in the marketplace, and he had fallen asleep.

Reece said, “*Bitte komm mit mir (Please come with me).*”

Reece radioed the police officer in charge. “We have Hans,” he said.

When the officer relayed that to those still in the marketplace, Reece heard a loud, triumphant shout on his radio. A police car with Hans’s grandmother arrived for Hans. She hugged him dearly, her eyes filled with tears of joy. She looked at Reece and his men and said, “*Danke! Danke! Danke schon!*”

At that moment, they felt what it truly meant “to give rather than receive.” A duce-and-half truck came for them. During the ride back to the garrison, Specialist Donovan said, “Reece, do we all get an extra ration of cookies?”

“You bet your sweet ass!”

Reece looked at his wristwatch and said, “Merry Christmas!” It was past midnight!