

THE
AMERICAN
St. Nick

WindRiver Publishing
St. George, Utah



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The American St. Nick

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The story of The American St. Nick is based on fact. Most of the events, people, and places portrayed in the story are factual; however, some of the people are fictitious and several of the names, events and places have been novelized to better portray the actual events.

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Library of Congress Control Number: 2003108955

ISBN 1-886249-08-3

First Printing, 2003

Printed in Hong Kong on acid-free paper

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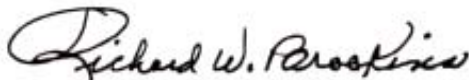
This is the story of an event that took place during the cold, dreary days in early December 1944 during World War II in the village of Wiltz, Luxembourg and was the beginning of a personal relationship with the people of Wiltz that has endured through 59 years.

The kindness of my GI buddies to the children of Wiltz who celebrated St. Nicolas on December 5, 1944, has been reenacted every year since the end of the war.

The people of Wiltz, and indeed of all Luxembourg have never forgotten the sacrifices of Americans to free them from tyranny.

As was said at the celebration in 1977, "If Luxembourg lived another one-thousand years, we will never forget the GI friends who shed their blood so we could live in a free Europe". That declaration and its spirit are alive today!

I extend my deep appreciation to Peter Lion for his caring rendition of this extraordinary story.



Richard Brookins

The American St. Nick



**American soldiers fighting in the Huertgen Forest
November 1944**

Courtesy of the US Army/National Archives



**General Eisenhower visits the soldiers in Wiltz;
November 12, 1944**

Courtesy of the Battle of the Bulge Museum, Wiltz



Richard Brookins, The American St. Nicolas, rides to the center of Wiltz accompanied by his two angels; December 5th, 1944

Courtesy of the US Army/National Archives



The American St. Nicolas greets a little boy in Wiltz; December 5, 1944

Courtesy of the Oeuvre St. Nicolas, Wiltz



**The American St. Nicolas Walking with Father Wolffe;
December 5, 1945**

Courtesy of the Oeuvre St. Nicolas, Wiltz



**The American St. Nicolas accompanied by Father Wolffe, at
the Wiltz Castle meeting another group of children;
December 5, 1945**

Courtesy of the US Army/National Archives



The children singing a song welcoming St. Nicolas in the Wiltz Castle courtyard; December 5, 1945

Courtesy of the US Army/National Archives



The American St. Nicolas in the Wiltz castle; December 5, 1944

Courtesy of the Oeuvre St. Nicolas, Wiltz



Richard Brookins' return to Wiltz began at the small Rochester, N.Y. airport. Though he usually had no trouble sleeping on airplanes, especially on long flights, Brookins now found it difficult to do anything but gaze out the window and think about Wiltz. With eleven hours of planes and airports ahead of him, he had plenty of time.

It had been four children, one grandchild, four promotions, two houses, four mortgages, eight cars, two dogs and a lifetime since he had last seen or even thought of the sleepy little town nestled in the Luxembourg countryside. In fact, the last time he had been in Wiltz was the day the Germans attacked the town at the beginning of the Battle of the Bulge.

Brookins stared out at the wispy clouds floating far beyond the jet's wingtip. In the attic of his mind, he opened the dusty footlocker where he'd stored away his memories of Wiltz and the war. He thought about the Christmas party and the happy faces of the children. He thought about the GIs who had given from their hearts and made the day special for the children. He also recalled the scramble to get out of Clervaux ahead of the attacking Germans and the hours of walking in the cold as he and Hugh Strauss had tried to get back to Wiltz. He wondered about the German soldiers he had to shoot...still hoping in his heart that they had made it. He thought about the ambulance that had offered to take him and Hugh to Wiltz, but only if they left their only weapon behind, and the laundry truck that finally got them back to town on a pile of clean clothes.

As the muffled rumbling of the jet engines droned on, Brookins continued to summon long forgotten memories of the turmoil he and Strauss encountered upon their return to Wiltz. The Germans were coming fast and despite the courageous efforts of the forward companies, it was obvious that the 28th Division was spread too thin to stop the German assault. After three days of fighting in the surrounding hills, the Division had no choice but to abandon its headquarters, and fall back. For Richard Brookins and the other soldiers in the Keystone Division, December 19, 1944, had been a sad and painful day.

When Brookins and his family stepped off the plane in Luxembourg City they were greeted by Karl Mueller and three other members of the Oeuvre St. Nicolas. Brookins had only spoken to Karl a few times

and he didn't know any of the other men, yet he was welcomed as if they had known him all their lives... as if he were some distant cousin or uncle finally returning home after being away for years. In a way, these men *had* known Brookins all their lives, if only from the museum pictures and the story that had been passed down over the years.

The members of the Oeuvre St. Nicolas drove the Brookins family to Wiltz. Along the way, Brookins stared out at the rolling hills of the Ardennes and tried to catch a glimpse of something he might recognize. Aside from the countless pine trees and hardwoods that stretched skyward, Brookins saw nothing except the occasional roadside monument or plaque dedicated to the soldiers who fought and died on nearby battlefields. Such tributes now dotted the countryside honoring those who gave their lives to secure freedom for the people of Luxembourg.

Brookins and his family were taken to the Hotel Du Commerce, where they stayed for the week, and where a reception and dinner were planned in Brookins' honor the night before the big celebration.

Throughout the week, Brookins spent his days getting reacquainted with the town he'd know for only a few weeks in 1944. Everywhere he went people from the town would stop to meet him and shake his hand. Many of those who greeted him spoke some English; others spoke only German, French or Lëtzebuergesch; but regardless of the language, they all knew how to say "American Saint Nicolas."

On the day of the reception, Brookins made it a point to visit several places in and around Wiltz. His first stop took him to the Wiltz Castle and the mu-

seum. He took his time looking at the displays that portrayed major events of the war years. There were photos and artifacts from major battles, as well as displays honoring the people of Wiltz who organized the General Strike. The museum also included photographs detailing the events of December 5, 1944, when the American St. Nicolas arrived in Wiltz.

Brookins spent a good amount of time reading the captions and staring at the pictures. He remembered what had happened that day, but he could not remember anyone taking pictures. The evidence was neatly arranged on the wall in black and white photographs, but no matter how he tried to peer through the mist of time, he could not recall seeing anyone with a camera.

As the photos sparked more memories, he chuckled over how nervous he had been riding in the Jeep and meeting the children. He recalled being afraid that if he made a mistake, the people would never forgive him. As he studied the display, he remembered wearing the bishop's miter and how tight it had been. He remembered all these details, but he just could not remember seeing a camera.

After his stop at the Castle, Brookins and Frank McClelland, who had arrived a day after Brookins, visited a large stone memorial dedicated to the soldiers of the 28th Infantry. As relatives, townspeople, local military personnel and members of the press looked on, Brookins and McClelland placed a large wreath at the base of the memorial. The wreath was a solid circle, three feet in diameter and made entirely of roses: white on the outside, with red roses arranged in the shape of the 28th Division's keystone shoulder

patch in the center. After placing the wreath, Brookins and McClelland took a few steps back and paused to remember their fellow soldiers, many of whom never made it out of Wiltz.

Brookins' final stop before the reception was the American Military Cemetery in Hamm, just outside of Luxembourg City. More than five thousand American soldiers were buried there, in razor-straight rows that radiated out from a central monument, a white stone cross or Star of David marking each neatly manicured grave. Many of the men were victims of the fighting during the Battle of the Bulge. At one end of the massive field lay the grave of General George S. Patton, whose U.S. Third Army had been headquartered in Luxemburg City and who had died shortly after the war.

Brookins walked among the graves, reading the names of the soldiers, until he came across one more memory...the grave of Edgar Stine. Eddie was another of Brookins' friends who stayed behind in Wiltz; one who never made it out. Tears welled up in Brookins' eyes as he read Eddie's name chiseled into the stone cross.

"We won, Eddie...we won," Brookins said softly. He bent down to place some flowers on Eddie's grave. He wiped the tears from his eyes, and after a few minutes of remembering his good friend, turned and walked away.

By the time Brookins arrived back at the hotel, he had put away the sorrow and pain of the day's visits, choosing instead to think about the reception that night and the St. Nicolas ceremonies the next day.



The dining hall of the Hotel Du Commerce was filled to capacity that evening with dignitaries, local clergy and school teachers, representatives from the US Ambassador's office, and some of the townspeople who were there the first time Brookins played St. Nicolas. There was also a camera crew on hand to film the entire event for NBC news.

The room erupted with cheers and applause as Brookins and his wife and family stepped into the room. A bit unnerved by the attention, Brookins smiled awkwardly and waved to the crowd. As he glanced around the room, his attention was drawn to a corner where he spotted a small man with a round face, wide smile and bright eyes. Brookins hurried over to embrace him.

"You son-of-a-bitch, I knew you'd make it," Brookins said, his voice cracking with emotion.

"I wouldn't have missed this for the world," Harry Stutz answered. "I would have been here sooner but the weather in Chicago was a mess. They kept delaying my flight out. I just got in this afternoon."

"It's been crazy here too. People have been coming up to me since I got here; shaking my hand, hugging me, and showing me pictures from the war. It's amazing. I had no idea this was such a big thing."

"I guess they never forgot about us, eh?"

"You can say that again. You know, Harry, this is all because of you, really."

"Well, we were all involved, remember?"

"Yes, I know, but all this...this attention, the ceremonies, this whole Saint Nicolas thing is because of you...it was all your idea. You're the one who should be getting all this attention, not me."

“Well you seem to be doing a fine job for all of us,” Harry grinned.

Brookins smiled. “Well in that case, I should get over to the head table...but we’ve got a lot of catching up to do later.”

“I’ll be here,” Harry said, “Now go on Saint Nick...do your thing.”

Following dinner, several members of the Oeuvre St. Nicolas delivered tributes to Brookins, Stutz, McClelland and the other men of the 28th Infantry. Then it was time for everyone to mingle and meet the American St. Nicolas. One by one everyone in the room stepped up to meet Brookins. They would shake his hand and tell him what an honor it was to meet him, and Brookins would politely listen to their stories and recollections; what the American St. Nicolas meant to them and their children; or how they never forgot what he and the other soldiers did for them throughout the war.

After most of the people had met and talked with Brookins, a member of the NBC camera crew asked if they could have a few minutes to interview him. Brookins, who by now was reveling in the festivities, was more than happy to accommodate, but as he followed the reporter over to where the crew had set up the lights and camera, a man and two middle-aged women stopped him.

“Excuse me, Mister Brookins,” the man began. “These women would like to meet you, but they do not speak English.”

“Certainly,” Brookins said smiling at the already beaming women.

“I can interpret for them,” the man added.

One of the women spoke in French, and as the interpreter listened carefully Brookins smiled and nodded, awaiting the translation.

"She says you probably do not remember her or her sister," the man related.

"I'm sorry I don't," Brookins said. "Were you here in 1944?"

The interpreter thought for a moment, and then spoke to the women. The two women looked at each other with surprise and laughed. The second woman spoke to the translator, but before the man could respond, Brookins had pieced together bits of the conversation and a look of surprise spread across his face.

"My angels!" he blurted out with a smile.

No translation was necessary as Brookins and the two women, Greta and Anna Shultzmänn, exchanged hugs and kisses and tears.

"These were my angels," Brookins said to the interpreter. "I can't believe it! It's so good to see you again," he said hugging them both.

"I remember," Anna recalled through the interpreter, "The word went around town that the Americans were collecting all their rations to give a party for the children. Then the Mother Superior came into our class to tell us about the party and that two of us would be chosen to be St. Nicolas' angels."

"Yes, it was such an honor to be chosen," Greta said. "I remember you lifting us into the Jeep and we drove through the whole town. Then we went back to the castle for the party."

"Yes and there was hot cocoa," Anna continued through the interpreter. "And everyone sang songs. It was such a wonderful day. Then when we were

ready to go home, Saint Nicolas came over to us angels and gave each of us a kiss.”

Brookins smiled as he recalled the moments the women were talking about.

“Well, I can remember that I tried to talk to you both all day and you didn’t say a word. I’m glad you decided to talk to me now,” he joked. “I don’t suppose you’d want to be my angels again tomorrow?” he teased.

The women laughed after they heard the translation, and shook their heads.

The thought occurred to Brookins that, like the other children in 1944, Anna and Greta had seen him not as a soldier, but as the real St. Nicolas. What a delight it must have been from a child’s perspective, to be St. Nicolas’ helpers and to have him treat them in such a special manner.

“I have to go over there to talk to the camera crew,” Brookins explained to the women. “Will you wait here until I’m done?”

The women nodded and once more the three of them exchanged hugs. Then Brookins walked over to where the camera crew had set up the lights.

“I know you want to get back to the festivities, so we’ll make this as quick as possible,” the crew’s producer promised as Brookins sat down.

“That’s all right,” Brookins said as a technician placed a microphone in front of him, “Ask whatever you want...I’m just happy to be here for all of this.”

“Let’s get started then,” the producer said.

As the camera rolled, the producer asked Brookins to describe what it was like the day the Germans retook the town of Wiltz. Brookins thought for a mo-

ment and then explained how the attack had caught the Americans by surprise and how he and the other soldiers felt ashamed at being forced to retreat and abandon the people they had come to know so well. To make matters worse, the men had learned that some of the people at the party had been killed and the town of Wiltz destroyed in the fighting that followed the assault.

The producer nodded and asked Brookins if part of the reason he came back was to make amends with the people of Wiltz. After thinking about the question for a moment, Brookins shook his head and explained that he wanted to come back to Wiltz because he felt grateful to the people. They had such tremendous loyalty to American veterans and America in general after all that had happened during the war. He added that he felt proud because in some small way he represented all the men who had helped with the Christmas party, especially those who couldn't be there because they'd lost their lives defending the town.

The cameraman interrupted the producer just as he was preparing to ask another question. "I'll need another reel," he said, quickly swapping out the film.

Brookins' thoughts drifted as he watched the man reload the film. He thought back to the many times he had swapped out reels of film while showing movies to the troops, but before his thoughts could take him too far into the past, the cameraman was ready again.

The producer asked Brookins about the party and what it was like to play Saint Nicolas in 1944. Then

he asked if Brookins had been surprised to learn of the town's annual reenactment.

"I sure was!" Brookins exclaimed, "I had no idea that any of this was going on until several months ago when I got a call from the St. Nicolas Day Committee. You have to remember that it was just one day out of the whole war. Don't get me wrong, it was a wonderful day and we all...that is, the GIs and the kids and everyone...had a great time, but there was still a war going on. We had our jobs to do and we moved on. We never did come back to Wiltz after the Germans attacked. I had pretty much forgotten about Wiltz and the Christmas party. So when they called and asked me to come back, well, at first I didn't believe it, but now, after all this..." Brookins paused as the words began to catch in his throat, "I never knew it meant so much to the people here."



**Richard Brookins returns for the 50th anniversary
celebration of the American St. Nicolas in Wiltz;
December 1999**

Courtesy of the Oeuvre St. Nicolas, Wiltz



**The American St. Nicolas along with his angels, riding
his sleigh through Wiltz; December 1999**

Courtesy of the Oeuvre St. Nicolas, Wiltz



The American St. Nicolas greeting the children and handing out presents; December 1999

Courtesy of the Oeuvre St. Nicolas, Wiltz



The American St. Nicolas on his throne; December 1999
Courtesy of the Oeuvre St. Nicolas, Wiltz



Joseph Steiner was a ten-year-old boy in Wiltz when he first met the American St. Nicolas in 1944. He, like most of the people in Wiltz, never forgot that day and the generosity of the American soldiers. It was an *event*, a Christmas story, passed down through the generations and retold countless times in homes throughout Wiltz and the surrounding towns. Now forty years old and a father himself, Steiner waited in the cold with his two children and more than three thousand other people to see the American St. Nicolas once again arrive in Wiltz.

Off in the distance of a clear December sky, the small crowd that had gathered on the outskirts of town could see a helicopter approaching. It was Karl Mueller's idea to make the arrival of the American

St. Nicolas, on this 30th Anniversary a special one. He contacted the nearby U.S. Army base and persuaded them to join the festivities by flying Brookins into town in one of their helicopters. As the helicopter approached, the rumbling of the engine and the high-pitched thump of the blades grew louder, as did the excitement of the onlookers. They watched as the aircraft gracefully eased its way down from the sky and landed in the middle of an open field. The pilot cut the engine and as the rotor blades stopped turning, one of the doors in the passenger compartment opened. A loud ovation rose from the crowd and echoed through the hills as the unmistakable figure of a man dressed in a gold trimmed cape, and a red bishop's miter, with a puffy white beard and a crozier, emerged from the helicopter. For the first time in more than thirty years, *the* American St. Nicolas was back in Wiltz.

The mayor of Wiltz, members of the Oeuvre St. Nicolas, and Father Wolffe all greeted Brookins. They exchanged handshakes and Brookins was ushered over to a parade float built just for the occasion. On the horse-drawn float stood an ornate sleigh adorned with shimmering garlands and flanked on either side by two little girls dressed as angels. Brookins stepped onto the platform and to the delight of the crowd, started waving. This time, Brookins was well aware of the camera crew filming the event. He waved to the camera and then nodded to the man holding the reigns of the horse team. The man gave the reigns a tug and the float slowly moved forward.

The narrow streets of the town were lined with more people eager to catch a glimpse of the Ameri-

can St. Nicolas as he made his way to Wiltz Castle and the official ceremony. The route through town was exactly the same as it had been more than thirty years earlier. As the float journeyed through the streets, Brookins waved to the spectators and tried to make eye contact with as many of the children as possible.

"Merry Christmas," he repeated over and over again as he passed out candy to the children, this time tossing it to them from the sleigh.

The ride through town took a bit longer than the Oeuvre St. Nicolas had planned, but after thirty minutes, the float finally glided up to the Castle's amphitheater, followed by a procession of people from the streets. An anxious crowd waiting at the amphitheater erupted in joyous cheers at the sight of the American St. Nicolas. An amazed Brookins waved to the crowd for a few moments before stepping down from the float. While a band played and the crowd sang songs in praise of St. Nicolas, Brookins strode up onto the stage where a group of dignitaries, including Harry Stutz and Frank McClelland, were waiting. When the songs ended and the subsequent applause subsided, Karl Mueller walked up to the microphone and addressed the crowd in English.

"What a wonderful day it is here in Wiltz, to have *the* American Saint Nicolas, the very first, Mister Richard Brookins, here with us to celebrate," Mueller said proudly, and then paused as the amphitheater once again erupted in applause and cheers.

"We can never forget what these American soldiers did for us, and especially for our children."

Mueller paused again as the crowd punctuated his remarks with applause.

“Now, let me introduce Father Wolffe for the blessing.”

Father Wolffe was already on his way up to the podium. The priest was older, rounder and slower than the last time Brookins had seen him, but his eyes were still bright and focused, and his memory sharp. He arrived at the podium just as the applause began to subside. He adjusted the microphone, nervously cleared his throat a couple of times and began reading in English.

“If Luxembourg would stand another thousand years,” he began, “we would always be grateful to the Americans and their most brave and valiant nation.”

Another ovation rose from the audience and continued for almost a minute until the priest finally raised his hands to quiet the crowd.

“May God bless you all and keep you well this Saint Nicolas Day,” Father Wolffe said as he gestured the sign of the cross first to the left, then the middle, then to the right side of the hushed amphitheater. After clearing his throat one more time, he turned back to the microphone.

“It is my pleasure and honor to introduce Mister Richard Brookins...the American Saint Nicolas.”

Everyone in the amphitheater stood, cheering and applauding loudly as the American St. Nicolas made his way to the podium. Brookins hadn't been nervous about reenacting his role as St. Nicolas; not when the helicopter approached the landing field and he could see more than a hundred people waiting for

his arrival; not when the NBC camera crew began filming and he knew there was a better than average chance that the images caught on film would be seen all over Europe and maybe even in the United States; and not even when the float made its way into the Castle courtyard to the delight of more than three thousand people. It wasn't until Brookins began the short walk to the podium that he felt his stomach tighten and his breath quicken. The same anxiety he had felt stepping out of the Jeep in 1944 seized him again as he reached the podium and waved to the crowd. He glanced behind him, scanning the faces on the stage until he saw Harry Stutz, who smiled and nodded encouragingly, just as he had thirty years ago. Brookins took a deep breath, and turned back to the crowd, ready to deliver one last surprise for St. Nicolas Day.

He reached into his pocket and took out the notes he had rehearsed a hundred times over; then, with his hand trembling, he adjusted the microphone and began to speak.

The thousands of people gathered in the amphitheater fell silent with astonishment as the American St. Nicolas spoke to them, for the first time, in their own language.



Since 1977, Frank McClelland, Harry Stutz and Richard Brookins have each returned to Wiltz numerous times to visit life-long friends, and every year on the Sunday preceding December 6, the small storybook town holds its annual St. Nicolas Day celebration. Each year Richard Brookins is invited to recreate his role as the American St. Nicolas.

December 2004 marks the 60th anniversary of the American St. Nicolas in Wiltz.

Richard Brookins plans to be there.