



# Tracking Magic

BY CHER SMITH



**Cher Smith, age 6, naughty or nice?**  
Santa knows.

The magic happened for me in first grade, when I was 6. It was a frosty winter, the humidity higher than usual in Colorado. It was so cold that going outside and taking a breath caused my eyes to sting and the snot in my nose to freeze into sharp, albeit miniature, shards.

It was a miserable time to stand outside and wait for the school bus. As I stood there, I tried to keep my mittens dry and tried even harder to be as small a target as possible for flying snowballs. It didn't matter — it was too cold to make a decent snowball anyway.

But perhaps even more chilling than the flying snow were the rumors and taunts that swirled around me the same way that ice crystals circle in a halo around a streetlight. I heard the whispers, "She still believes in Santa Claus."

Mom reassured me. "Of course there's a Santa Claus."

Grandma dismissed my concerns. "Don't you worry about that, Sugar."

Grandpa cajoled me by singing "Santa Claus Is Coming to Town" and urging me to be good for goodness' sake.

It was Dad, though, who restored balance to my rocking world and handed me back the magic. "The military tracks Santa Claus on Christmas Eve," he said. "They couldn't do that if he didn't exist."

## Tracking Santa

It was 1955. The Continental Air Defense Command (CONAD) Operations Center in Colorado Springs was quiet even though it bustled with activity.\* Col. Harry Shoup was on duty this particular day in early December. On his desk were two phones: a regular phone and a red phone. Only two people in the world had the number of the red phone: Col. Shoup and a four-star general in the Pentagon. If the red phone rang, it meant a serious situation was brewing.

The red phone rang.

"Col. Shoup," he barked into the receiver, mentally preparing himself to hear the situation.

"Is this Santa Claus?" a little girl's voice asked shyly.

"This is Col. Shoup," he said again, a little annoyed that someone should play this kind of practical joke on him.

When the girl repeated her question, Col. Shoup realized that this must be a real call, even though the identity was mistaken.

It was a real call. Sears Roebuck had printed an ad for kids to call Santa and talk to him about their Christmas list. The problem? The number had been misprinted. One digit was off, routing each and every caller that night to Col. Shoup at CONAD.

The Colonel could have hung up on the little girl. He could have called someone at Sears and ripped into them about the mistake. But instead, the man who was known to have a soft spot for children, especially at Christmas, pretended he was Santa Claus. But as soon as he hung up the phone, it rang again and



The Santa Colonel, Harry Shoup, shows a child how he communicates with the radar sites and with Santa Claus on Christmas Eve.

kept ringing. He instructed everyone on duty that night to talk to the children.

That night began a tradition that is carried on today by the North American Aerospace Defense Command, as hundreds of volunteers answer the calls from children around the world wanting to know the location of Santa Claus.

The tradition grew slowly over the years, but it took off as though Rudolph himself were pulling it when NORAD Tracks Santa hit the Internet. For example, in November and December 2006, NORAD's Santa tracking website received nearly a billion hits from 214 territories around the world, while more than half a million people called the hotline, and volunteers answered nearly 12,500 emails from children around the world.

But while NORAD Tracks Santa has become a global phenomenon and a tradition for many families, not as many people know about Santa's biggest fan, Col. Harry Shoup, the man who became known as the Santa Colonel.

## Tracking the Santa Colonel

Shoup was a fighter pilot, very gruff, very strict, very military. But he had a soft spot for kids, especially at Christmas. Around

Christmas, he became more like a child himself.

"Dad didn't have a particularly good childhood," recalls Terri Van Keuren, daughter of Col. Harry Shoup. "It wasn't affectionate. It meant the world to him to give that to his kids. To him, Christmas is about childhood. He was always a big kid about Christmas."

"He put his all into us believing in Santa," Terri continues. "There was a man in our church who had long white whiskers, and every time he visited, Dad would exclaim, 'Here comes Santa Claus!' He always told us that Santa would bring us the toy of our dreams. He was a child at heart, and he wanted to prolong the magic."

The magic was prolonged for Terri at her dad's office, and her memory of that time is as clear and shining as church bells on a frosty morning.

"What I remember best is Dad taking us to his office," Terri says. "His building is now on the Olympic training site. It was a huge building with no windows — and no computers, of course. But there was a huge glass map of North America stretching from one end of the building to the other. Scaffolding had been erected behind it, so peo-

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\*CONAD became the North American Aerospace Defense Command, or NORAD, in 1958.



**Col. Harry Shoup sits in his fighter plane, ready to assist and escort Santa, should the need arise.**

[continued from page 17] ple could write on the glass. A number of offices faced the glass, so that the people in the offices could monitor the activity that was written on it. It was a thrill for me to see these people with pencils writing on the glass where any unidentified objects were and then erasing them as they became identified."

The Shoup family always spent Christmas Eve with the troops in this building, whether or not they were on alert. On that particular Christmas Eve in 1955, Col. and Mrs. Shoup took Christmas cookies over and discovered that someone on the scaffolding had drawn a sleigh on the map. A staff member wanted to know if the Colonel wanted it erased. He said no and instead called the radio station. "We have a UFO coming across Canada," he said. "It looks like a sleigh."

The radio station loved it and broadcast it.

And the media — whether radio, Internet, television or print — still loves it. Terri, who is currently working on a children's book about tracking Santa Claus, had her own 800 phone number for members of the media to call to find out where the Santa Colonel was. "I became Santa Central," she laughs. "I tracked the Santa Colonel for the media in the same way he tracked Santa for the kids."

Shoup became confused toward the end of his life, and Terri always accompanied him on media interviews to help keep the stories straight. "Some of his stories were pretty fantastic," she says, "but it

was important to him to keep alive the magic of Christmas."

There's no doubt he kept it alive. Shoup received letters and emails from all over the world, thanking him and NORAD for what they do. Terri printed the emails for him, and he carried them around with him as though they were important papers. To him, they were.



**Terri van Keuren and her dad, Col. Shoup.**

In 2002, Shoup became ill and he and his wife moved into an assisted living facility in Colorado Springs. Mrs. Shoup died in 2003 at the same facility. Terri, who worked as the activities director for the nursing home, had the chance to spend time with her dad. "I got to know him on a personal level, not just as his little kid. I needed that five years with him to become his friend."

December always brings lots of carolers to the nursing home. Terri recalls one particular Boy Scout troop singing for the residents. "And there's always one who wants to know how Santa can get around to all those houses," she says. "Dad said,

'It's the magic of Christmas — and don't forget that Santa's watching!'"

On March 14, 2009, the Santa Colonel left this earthly path behind to start a new journey. The memorial service was a traditional military one at the national cemetery in Fort Logan, with uniformed military folding the American flag and a 21-gun salute. At the end, four F-16s flew in formation over the cemetery with one peeling off and spiraling into the clouds in the missing man formation.

Shoup and his wife, Louise, had four children: Judy Hannigan of Corvallis, Oregon, Pamela Farrell of Firestone, Terri van Keuren of Castle Rock and Rick Shoup of Sherman Oaks, California. (Interestingly enough, Rick was born in 1955, the same year Santa tracking was born.) Shoup's family expanded with the addition of eight grandchildren and six great-grandchildren (a seventh was born after his death). And it is these children, grandchildren and great-grandchildren who keep the magic alive. It's the dream of the children to all volunteer at NORAD on Christmas Eve at the same time — something that hasn't happened yet. But the magic can be seen best in removing doubt about Santa Claus.

Now, just as my dad restored the magic to me those many years ago by telling me about the government tracking Santa's sleigh on Christmas Eve, so one of Shoup's grandsons keeps the magic going by telling others about the Santa Colonel. When asked why he believed in Santa Claus, he said, "If there's no Santa, then how did my grandpa track him on radar?"

### **And so the magic goes on**

This holiday season, the Christmas magic will be without its biggest fan. But never fear: The Santa Colonel will still be tracking the jolly old elf; and maybe, just maybe, NORAD will be tracking them both.

*Santa Claus is checking his list twice to see if Cher Smith has been naughty or nice this year. It's a toss up. Cher is Colorado Country Life's editorial elf. This is her fifth article for CCL.*