

A Sentry's Story

By OldTexasWriter

Published on Stories Space on 29 Nov 2012

Sharing the Christmas Treasures

<https://www.storiesspace.com/stories/drama/a-sentrys-story.aspx>

Sam trudged along the now familiar path around the storage area. Two hundred paces along the fence line, one hundred paces to the corner of the first building, two hundred fifty paces along the back of the building, and seventy-five paces back to the fence line, and then another round was complete. Forty laps, maybe even a few more, would be completed before his shift was over. Such was the life of a military security guard. From 1600 to 2400 (4:00 PM to mid-night for most people)-- eight hours guarding the temporary storage containers behind the PX (military shopping center). Three swing shifts, 24 hours off, three graveyard shifts, 24 hours off, three day shifts, and then 72 hours off, only to start all over again with three swing shifts. Days of the week had no meaning. There were no weekends, only the constant rotation of the shifts, and the perpetual bad weather. Rain mixed with sleet and snow chafed his face. The cold wind moaned and whistled through the trees, around buildings and parked cars. Gloved hands tugged on his fur trimmed parka hood. The amber security lights gave a jaundiced glow to the newly fallen snow. Holding his hands in front of his mouth, he exhaled several times quickly, trying to capture the warmth of his breath to warm his face. He involuntarily shivered as he looked up at an overcast sky, blackening to night. Fighting the cold was hard. The older, more experienced soldiers had given him some tips they had learned. Their knowledge was based on first-hand experiences gained over time. One suggestion to keep warm was rather strange, and Sam had been very reluctant to give it a try. The older guards told him the best way to keep warm was to wear nylons under the thick OD green, cushion sole, wool socks to prevent blisters, and help keep warm. It took Sam some time to overcome his resistance to wearing nylons, but the chafing cold wind provided a strong argument in favor of the additional layer of protection. Even with the nylons, the multiple layers of clothing lost the war against the forces of nature. The tight fitting nylon panty hose failed to keep out the biting cold after three hours exposed to the constant gnawing wind. A damp, cold shroud enveloped his body, a damp cold that permeated not only the layers of clothing but seemed to invade the marrow of his bones. Sam pulled the top of the OD green glove liner down to check the time. 1900 only five more hours to go, maybe the sergeant of the guard would come by to inspect his post, and bring some hot coffee. Just thinking about a cup of hot coffee raised his spirits. He pulled the glove back up and adjusted the sling of his M -16 on his shoulder. Walking the long fence line with nothing to break the wind was the hardest part. Along the building

there were corners that blocked the wind. Walking kept his feet from getting frostbite. He walked around, and around, and around, and yet one more time around the storage area where all of the extra merchandise, for Christmas, was stored. Containers full of gifts to make sure the soldiers overseas had a Merry Christmas. During the shift change briefing the commander had explained the reason for the extra security. There were expensive items in the containers, and theft was always a problem. More important was the fact that terror groups had been attacking American military facilities. Sam remembered reading about the bombing of the Officers Club in Frankfurt just last week. Now he was out in the cold protecting the toys. "MERRY CHRISTMAS!" he shouted into the face of the wind. He knew that in some small way his efforts were helping to make some soldier's Christmas brighter. "Merry Christmas," he mumbled to himself, as a liquid (too hot and salty to be rain or melted snow) ran from the corner of his eye causing a stinging, burning sensation that blurred his vision. It was his first Christmas alone, his first Christmas in a strange place. It was the first Christmas he would not be home with his family. Christmas was a very special time for Sam. Christmas was a time of hope and cheer. He was happy to guard the gifts to help make Christmas special for some little boy or girl that was spending the season with their military family far from wherever they called home. Fatigue and long exposure to the elements filled his mind with random thoughts of every sort. While walking the frozen path, his thoughts would go over all the reasons he had used to join the Air Force. He relived the arguments with his parents, his fear of going to college, and the fear of being drafted, and perhaps being forced to go to a war zone. How strange, he thought--JOIN the Air Force to dodge being drafted into the Army. A few of his classmates and good friends who were not able to attend college were drafted. Drafted to go to war in some jungle he could not even locate on a map. No, he did not want to share their fate. When he enlisted he thought his reasoning was sound. At least it helped to explain why he was in such a hurry to leave home. At times he carried on conversations with himself, but he never got any answers to the questions that bothered him the most. The past year had been hard for him. Basic training took 8 weeks, advanced training took 3 months. Now the reality of one year in a strange country, being separated from his family and his girlfriend, all combined to make him reconsider why he had joined the Air Force. Staying awake and alert was a real challenge. Counting the number of passes was one way to help stay awake. Reversing the direction of his patrol also helped keep him awake. The temptation to huddle in a corner, protected from the wind, was great. That was one reason the sergeant of the guard inspected. Sam saw the sweep of headlights indicting an approaching vehicle, and he started to walk faster. He wanted to be at the gate before the vehicle got there. At least it was something to do, something to keep him awake. Sam stepped into the beams of the headlights to let the driver see he was on his way. Through the glare of the headlights he could see it was just a truck from the PX. The rain had turned to snow. The flakes swirled and danced in the bright headlights. Sam was disappointed to see it was just the truck from the PX. The driver showed the required documentation and the list of items they were sent to pick up. Sam made the necessary notation on the log. He knew them by sight if not by name, and had watched them load the truck many times. Sam unlocked the gate to let them drive past him. Big white flakes danced in the headlight beam, to the tune whistled by the wind. The store

would close in one hour, and they were here to pick up more stock. He decided to loiter around the gate until they left. After all, the SGT might be on his way, and he was really ready for some hot coffee. In the distance he could hear the driver and his partner joking around while they tossed boxes from one container into the back of the truck. After an eternity of about 15 minutes, Sam heard the doors slam shut and the truck motor start. He opened the gate before they had to stop, and noted the event on the clipboard. After the paper work was complete, he scanned the road to see if anyone else was approaching. All he could see was the jaundice glow of the accumulated snow under the security lights. Two thirds around the next lap, he heard something fall in the shadows between the containers. He turned on his flashlight and pointed the beam in the direction of the sound. Two red eyes glared back at him. A long moment passed; at long last the huge, furry body turned and disappeared under the wooden pallets. "Shit! That rat was bigger than some cats," exclaimed Sam, as he fought to control a quiver running down his spine. Rats were just another good reason to keep walking. He definitely did not want something like that to start gnawing on him. In the shelter of a storage container, Sam paused for a moment to check the time again. It was only 2120. In the wind shadow of the containers he thought he heard something, but was not sure what it was, or where the sound was coming from. Sound on the wind carried long distances, and he was not really sure what he heard. The thought of coffee returned to his mind, and he started off in the direction of the gate. Sam continued to hear small bits of sound, as he worked his way back to the gate. He was eager to get something to warm up. At the gate he craned his neck to see if there were any vehicles approaching. In the dark distance he saw a cluster of tiny lights, and then he heard for the first time, a sound he could identify. Was it, "Jingle Bells?" The small cluster of lights turned in his direction. The group passed near a security light. Even at a distance it was clear there were 8 young girls escorted by two women. It was "Jingle Bells" sung in a very high--pitched, girlish manner. It was clear they were heading his way. When they were just a few yards away from the gate, one woman stopped them, and busied herself with some object she was carrying. The other woman started to conduct the choir in a new song. Sam could do nothing, but stand watching the small group. The first line of "God Rest Ye Merry Gentlemen" rang in his ears, as the musical troupe advanced upon his position. One woman stepped to the gate and handed Sam a large paper cup full of steaming hot chocolate, and a plastic bag of brightly decorated cookies. Sam looked at the cookies, and remembered how, many years before, when he was a small boy, he and his brother would help decorate cookies. They would spend hours before Christmas helping their mother decorate cookies. He remembered one special Christmas. It was the first time his mother asked him and his brother to help decorate the cookies. She let him and his brother "paint" the sugar cookies. It was just food coloring and a little water. They used Q-tips to apply the color to the soft un-cooked dough. He could almost smell the heavenly aroma of the freshly baked cookies as they came hot out of the oven. His mother gave them to all the families in the area as special Christmas cards. Sam's mother always said, "You send cards to people you can't go visit. You take something special to people you can visit." He remembered how that one Christmas had set in motion an outpouring of goodwill, and a community came together to help those that needed help the most. Now he was receiving a special gift from a group of girls, all

daughters of service members. Now he understood what was meant about how the military "Took Care of its Own." Standing in the halo of the security light, bundled in snow jackets, cheeks red and flushed from the cold, the 8 girls raised their voice in song. Whatever they may have lacked in talent, they more than made up for in enthusiasm. Sam took a sip of the hot chocolate. The hot sweet liquid seemed to melt him from within. He felt a joyous glow spread through him. He opened the gate to shake everyone's hand, and even joined in as they started to sing "Silent Night." He found it very hard to sing. There was something, about the size of his heart, caught in his throat. It seemed to swell as he continued to try to sing the words of this very special Christmas carol. Fighting back tears, his lips trembled, as visions of all the wonderful Christmases he could remember flashed before his eyes. Now he had one more to add to that collection of VERY SPECIAL CHRISTMAS TREASURES. As miserable as he had been, all the long, lonely days and nights, all the fear of being on his own was swept away, as if by magic. Now Sam knew what his mother was trying to tell him about Christmas. "Christmas is not packages under a decorated tree, Christmas is not in any one place, Christmas is not anything that you can see," his mother had always lectured. "Christmas is really in your heart." At the end of the first chorus the girls paused, bowed deeply, and started to sing "Jingle Bells" again as they turned to leave. Epilogue Now during this time of increased alert, take some time to think about the guards. Maybe you can visit them as they protect us, and bring to them a bit of joy and cheer, and most of all, share with them the Treasures of Christmas.