

Angels Among Us

An Original Christmas Story

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December, 1944.... Somewhere in Germany....

Consciousness was coming slowly to Captain Clifford Brandt. He could hear voices and tried to respond, but he seemed to have lost control over his own body. Eventually he managed to open his eyes. It took a minute or two for them to focus. Head movement was agony so he just stared at the ceiling. From the slope of the roof and shape of the windows, Clifford guessed he was in a church. He eyed the water stains and tarp-covered holes and thought, "It's not exactly the Sistine Chapel." The smell that assaulted his nostrils was one of mold and blood and antiseptic. From the moans and whimpering he could hear, he gathered he was in some sort of makeshift hospital.

Somehow he knew that he was awaking as a POW, but the pain in his head was blocking out any memories. And then he heard voices in German coming from the next room. That's when it all came flooding back to him.

There had been a surprise attack by the Germans. Massive Tiger tanks and supporting infantry had charged out of the Ardennes Forest. The American forces were routed, and Clifford's unit was trying to get to the cover of a tree line when an explosion hurled him up and through the air like a rag doll. When he came to, two Germans, one with a rifle and one wearing the International Red Cross insignia of a medic seem to be arguing... apparently about him. The last thing he remembered until now was being kicked in the side by the gun-carrying soldier.

"So, here I am," thought Clifford. "A prisoner of the Third Reich. Ma," he sighed, "Don't expect me for Christmas." And he drifted off again.

Sometime later, Clifford was awakened by a hand on his shoulder. He opened his eyes and tried to focus on the face just inches from his own. It was the German medic he'd seen when he was captured. He had blue eyes and curly blonde hair. A light was shown quickly into Clifford's right eye and just as quickly moved away. The same to the left.

"Good, good," the medic murmured. "No apparent damage to the brain. You are lucky."

"Where... where am I? I mean, is this a POW camp?"

"No, Captain. You are in what passes for a hospital these days. We have taken over this small church near Dusseldorf. You have wounds to both legs and one to your left arm, and a few cracked ribs, but all that will be fine. However you have had a serious blow to your head. I think, my friend, that you are very lucky to be alive. And it would be a pity to die on Christmas Eve, no? So just relax and try not to spoil our good work. What is your name?"

"Brandt. Clifford Brandt. Captain, US Army. Serial Number 181174077." A small smile crossed the medic's face at the military officiousness of the response.

"Thank you, Captain Brandt. I am Obergrenadier Helmut Engel. It is a pleasure to meet you, but I wish it were under more accommodating circumstances."

Clifford eyed the young German medic. "Where did you learn English?"

Helmut laughed "Well, let's just say I speak many languages. It... comes easy for me, I guess. Now get some rest," and he moved off.

Clifford tried to move his head and follow the medic, but he was overcome with pain and nausea. After several minutes, he felt the presence of someone near his bed. He opened his eyes and saw a German officer staring at him, his eyes blue and hard and sporting a monocle.

"Ich bin Leutnant Reinhard Steiner, Wehrmacht. Welches Einheit sind sie mit?"

The American hesitated a moment, then said clearly, "I don't speak German."

The German frowned, and in a very thick accent replied, "I heard you speaking *auf Deutsch* to that medic a few moments ago."

"You mean your medic, Engel? Herr Leutnant, I don't know what you heard but he spoke in English to me and I to him."

Steiner eyed him suspiciously, then impatiently shook his head. "Fine. Then tell me what unit are you with?"

The young American softly said, "Clifford Brandt. Captain, US Army. Serial Number 181174077." Steiner's face reddened.

"Captain, do not doubt that we have methods for dealing with uncooperative prisoners and glean the information we desire."

"Yes, Herr Leutnant--we have heard about your methods. Captured soldiers shot while *allegedly* trying to escape. Camps where political prisoners have a strange way of dying. For your sake, sir, I hope those are just rumors." Steiner, narrowing his eyes, leaned down to Clifford and spoke in a fierce whisper.

"Listen to me, American." (He spat out the word as one would a bad piece of meat.) "Your army has been routed and is in full retreat and you are alone. You will tell me what I want and you will do it now. Now!"

"Clifford Brandt. Captain, US Army. Serial Number 181174077." Steiner sighed deeply.

"All right, Captain Brandt, I will leave you to recover for now. But do not tax my patience too far. You will tell me what I want to know or you will not live to see 1945." And with that he did a smart about-face and strode off, his black jackboots clacking loudly on the wooden floor.

Clifford sighed and closed his eyes. Despite his bravado before Lieutenant Steiner, he was frightened. He wanted to pray, but praying was not natural to him. And then he thought of his mom, and he tried what she used to do.

"Oh God," he whispered, staring at the ceiling, "I know I haven't been as close to you as I should have been. You know how it is. My dad wasn't much of a church person and he taught me self-reliance is the only way to get through this life. My mom, on the other hand, talked with you all the time. You remember, right? Not with bowed head and folded hands. She'd have normal conversations with you when she was peeling potatoes or washing the dishes or beating the rugs, just anything. It was like you were sitting there in the room with her. That was real praying to her. Dad and Luke and I would tease her about it, but she never seemed to be embarrassed or defensive. And it sure got her through the cancer that killed Dad just a few months after his fiftieth birthday back in '38. And it was also what kept her sane when she and I found, three years later, that Luke was killed on the *Arizona* on December 7th.

"I thought it would kill me, but we just held each other and cried and somehow lived through it. You know Luke and Dad are buried under the big maple tree in the grove behind our house and she sits by the graves and talks to them and You all the time. I could have gotten a deferment, but she told me to follow my heart and do what I felt I had to do. And I knew I had to answer my country's call.

"So, God, here I am. A wounded POW and no idea whether Steiner is telling me the truth or not about the state of things now. I hope it's not too late, God, but I am putting my life in your hands. Please, give me the strength of faith that I see my mom has. Let me be brave in the face of my enemies. And Lord, if this is it for me, continue to be the rock that my mom bases her strength on."

Just then a nurse came by and gave him a shot and in a few minutes, Clifford was asleep. And in his sleep the sounds of battle and Steiner's threats mingled in his mind.

"Hey, Captain Brandt. C'mon, wake up." Clifford opened his eyes and painfully turned his head to the right and saw an American soldier with a bloody bandage on his head beckoning to him. "You, ok, Captain? We been worried about you."

“Billy Clancy, is that you? My vision’s kinda blurry.”

“Yep, it’s me. You been out a while. We wuz wondering if these Kraut doctors were really doing anything to help you.”

Clifford smiled for the first time in days. “Yeah, Clance, I’m ok. Feel like I’ve been ten rounds with Joe Louis, but I think I’ll live. What happened? Are any of the others here? Did we really get badly clobbered back there?”

“Yeah, we got pretty well pounded, and they are bragging how they have Bastogne surrounded, but apparently they haven’t taken it yet. Oh, say - you’ll love this story. A few days ago some German general sent a message under a flag of truce to General McAuliffe in Bastogne demanding that the 101st should surrender because they are surrounded by superior forces. You know what McAuliffe said to them? One word - ‘Nuts!’ That’s right, ‘Nuts!’ Ain’t that a hoot?”

Clifford smiled, but it turned to a grimace as he tried to sit up.

In a whisper, Clancy said, looking over his shoulder around the room, “Easy, Captain, easy. Don’t be too quick to show them you’re better. Once we are well enough to be moved they’ll just send us to some stalag somewhere deeper in Germany. This may not be the Ritz, but it beats heck out of a POW camp.” Clifford nodded and lay back and closed his eyes.

“Heck of a way to spend Christmas Eve, huh Clance?” What would you be doing tonight if you were back home?”

Clancy said, “Well... let’s see. I guess my dad and I would be listening to the radio. Maybe ‘Gangbusters’ or ‘The Shadow’ or ‘Fred Allen’... sumpin’ like that.”

Clifford looked at him, and said gently, “No church?”

Clancy shrugged. “Nah, I never had much use for religion or God and all of that. I mean my ma died when I was just a little feller. My dad and my aunt always took care of me and somehow church was never a part of our life when I was little and I’ve never seen much reason to change my mind. How about you, Captain? What would you be doin’ if you were back home?”

Clifford lay there and thought for a moment. “My mom and I would be decorating the tree. And then we’d go to the midnight service at the little church a few blocks from our house. Mom would be singing in the choir and I’d sit there just trying to stay awake,” he chuckled. “I loved the carols and the decorations and the candles, but the message...well, it just never got through to me. But, ya know Clance, I have been thinking lately that there has to be something I am missing. I mean...well...think about it. Two thousand years ago a baby is born in a barn in some backwater town that no one had ever heard about, and the only people who witness it are his parents, a bunch of shepherds and some animals. Oh yeah, and three kings or Wise Men or whatever who came from some far off land and only knew about this baby’s birth because they followed a star. And from that incredibly humble beginning, millions of people are still talking about him, singing about him and worshipping him. The more I think about it, the more I think that there has GOT to be something to that.”

Just then there was commotion in the hallway that led into the ward. Lieutenant Steiner and a group of German officers entered the room. Leading the group, Steiner strutted over to Clifford’s cot.

“Well, American, have you reconsidered telling me what I want to know?”

Clifford struggled to raise his head and torso off of the bed. He studied the grim faces of the Germans, but said in a steady voice, “*Herr Leutnant*, the Geneva Convention only requires me to give my name, rank and serial number. Therefore, all I will tell you is I am Clifford Brandt. Captain, US Army.181174077.”

Steiner, his face flushed in anger, was about to raise his swagger stick when Helmut Engel stepped to Clifford’s side. “Forgive me, *Herr Leutnant*, but this is the man that we received orders about earlier. The one that the SS wanted to question? You remember? They said not to touch him until they arrived tomorrow.” Clifford wasn’t sure which bothered the Lieutenant more, Clifford’s insolence or his embarrassment in front of his fellow officers. With a final glare at Clifford, the group

stalked out of the room, except for one – a stout grey-haired officer. He stepped forward and bowed formally to Captain Brandt.

“Captain, I am Major Ludwig Shenk. I apologize for Leutnant Steiner. He is, how you say it, high strung? Now, Captain, Helmut here, and my wife Maria who I hope you shall meet shortly, have convinced me that you and Private Clancy should be our guests at a holiday party we are having downstairs. Will you join us, gentlemen?”

“Certainly, Major. It will be our pleasure. Thank you.”

“Excellent,” replied Shenk. “We will expect you in fifteen minutes.” He bowed again and left the room.

Helmut came over to Clifford and grabbed his wrist and looked at his watch to check his pulse. Clifford whispered to him, “Helmut, what do they want from us?”

Helmut smiled and shrugged. “I think they just want to try and relax for at least this one night. If they are truly honest with themselves, this war will soon be over, at least in Europe, and it won’t go well for Germany. Maybe they’re just trying to win some points with you, the enemy. I don’t think they have ulterior motives, if you are worried about that.”

Clifford shook his head. “I don’t get it. The German attack I saw last week makes me think they are still an undefeated enemy. And why does a German major give a hoot about what a lowly medic thinks he should do?”

Helmut smiled. “I guess my powers of persuasion are pretty good. That, and I may have led him and the rest of the officers here to believe that I am Hermann Goering’s nephew.” Clifford started to laugh but choked it off.

“Yeah, I guess that would grab their attention. So is the SS really coming to talk to me?” Helmut just winked. Clifford, in confusion, shook his head.

“So who are you really and what are you doing here?” Before Helmut could answer, Clancy sat up and leaned close to them.

“Captain,” Clancy whispered, “when did you learn to speak German? I’ve known you for two years and you never could before.”

Clifford frowned. “What do you mean ‘When did I learn to speak German?’ I don’t....” He was cut off by the arrival of two nurses to assist the wounded soldiers in getting downstairs.

Holding a primitive set of crutches towards Clifford, Helmut said “Gentlemen, we have been invited to a party downstairs. It’s not polite to keep them waiting”

With the help of Helmut and the two nurses the two Americans were able to get down the ancient staircase to the party. There Clifford was greeted by two other wounded Americans as well as Major Shenk’s wife, Maria. He also noted that there were several wounded German soldiers eying him with frank contempt. The room was sparsely decorated with candles and pine boughs, but the pine scent was enough to bring back memories of happier, safer Christmases for Clifford. He suspected he wasn’t alone in those thoughts.

Major Shenk spoke loudly to his aid, “Schneider, bring some chairs for our guests. And Maria, some refreshments.” The Americans sat, those that could, on the floor and Clifford and Clancy on chairs that were none too steady. The dozen or so Germans, including their wounded, sat on the few church pews that had survived the war’s fury. The Germans had put together a small feast, if one could call it that, made up of rations from their own supply as well as those taken from the American prisoners. A bottle of schnapps appeared and small amounts were poured into the tin cups used in the mess kits of both armies and passed around. And from somewhere their hosts produced some *pfeffernusse*, a German cookie that, while not the perfect desert to go with schnapps and old rations, seemed to fit the occasion.

Clifford saw Shenk nod to Helmut and he stepped to the middle of the room, and everyone quieted.

Looking at Major Shenk, the young German private spoke. “Herr Major, with your permission, sir?” Shenk nodded.

“Ladies and gentlemen, we find ourselves in the midst of a terrible global war, and yet we here are trying to establish our own small beachhead of peace. We are trying to extend an olive branch, praying it will be accepted in the manner intended and not met with a sword. Who started the war or its causes are not our concern tonight. Rather, we are here to, in our own way, celebrate a miraculous gift given to us nearly two thousand years ago. The gift was in the form of a small baby, born in poverty and simplicity, but whose birth shook the foundations of the mightiest governments then known to man. As foretold in the Scriptures, ‘For unto us a child is born. Unto us a son is given. And His name shall be called Wonderful Counselor, The Almighty God, The Everlasting Father, The Prince of Peace’.”

“The baby Jesus would grow to preach, to all who would listen, a message of peace and love and forgiveness. He would disturb and irritate the rulers of His time, but ignored their threats while reaching out to the ones thirsty for what he was saying. I look around here this night and I see on faces, both German and American, the yearning for an end to our bitter struggles and the overwhelming desire to start down that path leading to peace on earth and good will for all mankind. Tonight, in this place, here and now, let us take the first steps down that path.

“Herr Major, again with your permission, I would like for those of us who know it to sing one verse of *Stille Nacht* and then have our American friends sing one verse of that song in English, *Silent Night*.”

Major Shenk stood up as did everyone else that could. “Please,” he said to Helmut, “you lead us.”

The young German cleared his throat and sang softly.

Stille Nacht, Heilige Nacht.

Alles schläft, einsam wacht.

Nur das traute, hochheilige Paar.

Holder Knabe im lockigen Haar,

Schlafe in himmlischer Ruh.

Schlafe in himmlischer Ruh.

When Helmut and the Germans had finished there wasn’t a sound in the room. And then, haltingly at first Billy Clancy, in a clear Irish tenor voice began singing and was soon joined by the others.

Silent Night, Holy Night.

All is calm, all is bright.

Round yon virgin, mother and child

Holy infant, so tender and mild

Sleep in heavenly peace.

Sleep in heavenly peace.

Clifford watched with amazement as Clancy led the singing. He felt light-headed and he was glad that he was sitting because he wasn’t sure his legs would support him. The last note hung in the air and then faded into the shared silence.

The room erupted in cheering and clapping and handshakes were exchanged all around. Clifford noticed tears in the eyes of the German women... and a few of the men too, on both sides of the room. For the next several minutes there was much talking and toasting and sharing of greetings. The exchanges between the warring parties was shy at first, but soon the noise level rose and more quickly than anyone there could have imagined, the war faded into the background, the distrust evaporated—at least temporarily.

Billy Clancy sidled over to where Clifford sat and knelt down to whisper in Clifford’s ear.

“Captain, did you notice that when Helmut was speaking everyone was listening...listening like they were understanding every word? Do you think that all the Germans in this room are fluent in English?”

Clifford looked at Clancy and some tumblers in his mind fell into place. Lieutenant Steiner and Clancy both thinking Clifford spoke German after overhearing him speak to Helmut. Steiner’s incomprehensible knuckling under to Helmut’s lesser rank. And just now Major Shenk also thinking Clifford spoke German. What was going on here? Clifford turned to ask Helmut about it, but Helmut was not to be found.

“Clancy, where is Helmut?” Billy and Clifford’s eyes darted around the small room. Helmut was nowhere. Clifford called out to Major Shenk.

“Herr Major, do you know where Helmut has gone?” Shenk glanced around.

“No, I do not know. Perhaps he had a bit too much schnapps and has gone upstairs to lay down. I will have someone check.” He motioned for a portly sergeant to find Helmut. In a few minutes the sergeant came back and reported Helmut was nowhere to be found. He stated he had looked outside, where it was a bitterly cold, but starry night. There were no footprints in the snow or on the ground in any direction but not far from the church he found a German uniform with a Red Cross on the sleeve... the uniform of a medic. It was just lying in the snow, as if the body inside it had simply disappeared.

Major Shenk frowned, and said to no one in particular, “*Ich verstehe das nicht*. I don’t understand. What happened to him? Where did he go? Why would he leave?”

Clifford thought for a minute and then slowly smiled. “Herr Major, do you believe in angels?” Shenk shook his head as if to clear it of cobwebs.

“*Nein*. No. I don’t know.”

Clifford asked, “Do you know Helmut’s last name?” Shenk’s eyes slowly widened.

“Engel,” Shenk whispered.

“Right,” Clifford replied. “It was Engel. Now I will admit that I know almost no German, but isn’t that the word for ‘angel’ in your language?” Shenk’s face had paled and he merely nodded. For a few moments there was absolute silence in the room.

Then Clifford spoke, with a halting voice, “My friends, I believe that we have had an angel among us.”

The party broke up soon after that. The Americans returned to their beds and captivity, the Germans to their stations and *their* captivity. But all who were there would never forget that night. For one moment, one fleeting magical moment, peace on earth was a reality... at least in a small church, in the middle of a war, near Dusseldorf, Germany.

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