



NORAD TRACKS SANTA: A FESTIVE TRADITION

DECEMBER IN AVIATION HISTORY

The Cold War was full of turbulent times. A new atomic age and the fear of Communist incursions across the world was enough to send the West into paranoid fits. Across the globe, however, the fear of nuclear war was almost certainly somewhere in the mind of every individual. However, that does not mean that there was nothing to bring light to a world on the edge of darkness.

The proponent of defense in the skies over North America was established in 1958. The North American Aerospace Defense (NORAD) Command is a joint-national organization between the United States and Canada. The Colorado Springs installation is perhaps one of the most well-known and notorious facilities in North America. NORAD grew out of the former Continental Air Defense Command (CONAD), and it is CONAD that made a small gesture a widespread publicity event.

In 1948, the U.S. Air Force issued a communication that was picked up by the Associated Press on 25 DEC. The communication read that an early warning radar network in the north had detected Santa's sleigh, being pulled by eight reindeer. It claimed to have detected the Head Elf himself at 14,000 feet and heading due-South. It was the first time a communication from the U.S. military was issued regarding the jolly man in red. Later in 1955, however, is when the tradition began to take hold.

There are various stories as to how CONAD had adopted the idea of "tracking Santa." Most of these stories revolve around the misprint of a Sears Department Store ad in a Colorado Springs newspaper misprinting a phone number to speak



begin answering calls after realizing the printing mistake. From then on, this officer was tasked with providing updates on Santa's location and assuring children that CONAD was providing defense and support on Santa's delivery route. The tradition was born.

Shoup and other senior members within CONAD noted the positive publicity opportunity that such an activity could provide. The following year, CONAD publicly published a number for individuals to track Santa's whereabouts. Finally, in 1958, with NORAD's creation, the NORAD Tracks Santa program was solidified. Over the years there have been modifications and changes to the operation as technology and resources have evolved. In 1981, a dedicated phone number was created for the program, and this number was published across the U.S. and Canada.

Throughout the Cold War and into the present day, regardless of airspace condition and threat level, NORAD has provided updates to children on

with Santa. Air Force COL Harry Shoup answered the first of these errant calls to CONAD. After alleviating the child's worries, he began to assure other children who began calling that he was Santa (earning him the nickname of "the Santa Colonel"). Shortly thereafter, he pulled another officer aside to

Santa's status from 1—24 DEC. This included during conflicts in Vietnam, Cambodia, Laos, Iraq, Afghanistan, and Libya. Volunteer phone operators handle phone calls from over two hundred countries and territories around the world providing updates. NORAD has even given updates on Santa's pre-delivery rituals and battle rhythm and published updates from fighter pilots in both the U.S. and Canadian Air Forces who have made visual contact with Santa's sleigh.

Volunteers today continue to answer over 130,000 phone calls, 12,000 emails, and numerous social media inquiries by parents and children alike wanting updates. The program continued in 2020 and 2021 despite the COVID-19 pandemic. Alleviations to volunteers were provided by mobile applications which could provide updates to those interested as well. Volunteers from all walks participate in the program to include officers from all branches of military in Canada and the U.S. and high-profile government officials (such as First Lady Michelle Obama in 2009-2016).

With all the effort provided by NORAD, enemies of Christmas simply do not stand a chance.

REFERENCES

1. NORAD. "Why We Track Santa." *NORADTracksSanta.org*. 24 DEC 2011.
2. NORAD. "NORAD Tracks Santa" *NORAD.mil*.
3. Kaplan, Karen. "How NORAD Became the World's Official Santa Tracker." *L.A. Times*. 24 DEC 2015.
4. Cotton, Anthony. "NORAD-Calling Santa-Trackers Receive Surprise Update from First Lady." *The Denver Post*. 24 DEC 2014.

1901	The Wright Brothers make their first flight in a heavier than air machine at Kitty Hawk.	17
1943	The P-51D Mustang is sent into combat for the first time over Belgium.	01
1951	Chuck Yeager sets a straight-wing, level speed record of 1,648 mph in the Bell X-1A.	12
1961	The AC-47 makes its combat debut in Vietnam and is the USAF's first gunship.	15
2002	A USAF MQ-1 and Iraqi MiG-25 engage each other, becoming the first drone-versus-pilot dogfight.	23

Volunteers serving America's communities, saving lives, and shaping futures.

