

# Christmas Eve 1944

Jason Lester Atkins

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I spent Christmas Eve 1944 riding on the top of a freight train while it made a work trip through the mountains of West Virginia. The trip was the result of a set of weird circumstances which provided me with memories that have boiled out of my mind every Christmas Eve since!

It all started at 11:00 A.M. on December 23, 1944, with a blast from the Ships Bullhorn:

**"Jason L. Atkins report to topside immediately!"**

I ran to the Administration deck on the double. A waiting Yeoman passed me an "I.D." slip to the Chaplain's office. Still didn't know why I was there but the adrenalin began to flow. It was not a good sign to be called to Chaplain's quarters. That call usually had to do with someone's tragedy!



Chaplain Garst was a Naval Lieutenant, not much older than myself. He must have read surprise and anxiety in my eyes, so he stated his purpose quickly. "You have been issued a 'Top Priority' through the Red Cross for an immediate emergency trip home! I have prepared transportation clearance and ten day leave papers. Go to Shore Transportation on the main deck for travel orders."

"Is someone dead?" I asked.

His answer was "Sorry, I don't know. Might be a good idea to pick up your gear and hurry over to transportation."

My mind began to whirl. At first I thought, it isn't me, maybe a mistake. Then, wonder took over, wonder who is sick - must be bad - someone must be dead - my wife or her mother or father. I hadn't been home in two years. War was using us up in '43 and '44. Couldn't get any leave time. My wife was staying with her mother and father for the duration. Still had my last letter in my locker. There had been no mention of sickness. A strange kind of fear began to take over my mind. It pushed everything else out but, a quiet, solid determination to get home quickly by any method, at any cost.

A flight to the Norfolk Air Station was leaving in one hour. There were public ground phones at this base but the thought to call home never entered my mind. The determination to get there had replaced common sense. The Norfolk Air Station was the closest Naval Station to Norton, Virginia. We reached there early next morning but I still had to cross the State of Virginia to the coal field in the far southwestern corner. I took a street car for fifteen cents from the Norfolk Air Station to the downtown Norfolk train station.

It cost \$17.00 for a ticket on the N&W Powhatan Arrow to Bluefield, West Virginia. Bluefield was the closest train stop to Norton. The train left at 10:00 A.M. on that Christmas Eve morning for the long trip west.



By this time I was exhausted, so I slept most of the way across. It took longer to cross Virginia by train than to fly from Opa Locka to Norfolk. With every click of the rails my mind would return to - what was wrong - who is it - who is it? - all in time with the rail rhythms.

Got off the train in Bluefield, West Virginia at 9:00 P.M. on Christmas Eve. This began a series of events that I would have believed impossible only the day before. The town had closed down at 9:00 P.M. with the exception of the train station. Cold blasts of December air would freeze you if you stood outside. This was especially true for me in a light uniform. I walked outside once and saw some trees with no leaves - I wondered why no foliage, why no leaves - in a moment it struck me - it's winter here and cold. On the outside I found a cab with no driver. He was inside the station, looking out, so I asked him to take me to the bus station. He quietly informed me no buses leave tonight - not until 7:00 A.M. - that is, if the snow holds off. All this began to crush down on me - no way out until morning - then ninety miles down a two-lane road to Norton, Virginia. The only people in this railroad station on Christmas Eve were Norfolk and Western railroad employees. You can tell railroad men by the distinctive cap they wear. I must have looked like a lone, deserted serviceman standing there. Perhaps it was the expression on my face? One of the railroad men moved over to me and asked, "Everything ok Fella?"

I said quickly "Yeah - just can't get out of here til morning."

"Where you going?" he asked.

"Norton, Virginia," I replied. "Got to get home - think somebody is dead. I have a 'Top Priority' leave."

"Top Priority leave, huh," he continued. I showed him that magic piece of paper. "You have to get to Norton, huh? - What's your name boy?" he asked all in one breath.

"Atkins," I answered the one name.

"Thought I might know your people. I live in Norton," he said. "You ever ride a freight train?" he continued.

Hope flashed again for me. "Not yet," I replied.

"I am a brakeman on a coal train going to Norton tonight. You want a ride?"

Without thought, or hesitation, I answered immediately, "Yes."

"Ok, when I leave here in a few minutes you follow me. Stay behind but when I stop at a switch you stop at the same spot and wait there. Step back from the tracks behind the tool shed. The very next train coming by on this track will be mine. It will be moving slow. I will be hanging on a ladder on the tender just behind the engine. You grab the ladder beside me, swing on and climb to the top of the cab. There is a little shack on top with a door. Go inside and sit. Don't come out! I will join you in a little while."

This crazy sailor jumped for the ladder, crawled up to the top and began one of the strangest Christmas



Eves I ever spent. The locomotive worked the freight yard picking up empty coal cars. I could see from the glass in the door and sides of the shack. Inside it was cramped and cold, but out of the wind so you didn't suffer too much. Good thing I was in top physical condition at that time. When you are in a state of high excitement and fear you don't notice cold too much. It seemed forever backing up and getting enough cars to make a train, but finally the brakeman joined me in the small cab. Two people can barely squeeze side by side - but it did help to keep warm. He had on a heavy overcoat and he had a lunch thermos of coffee. Only had one cup but I sipped coffee with him.

The brakeman was talking and in the middle of his story the cab got pitch dark. Sparks flew by the windows like Roman candles. It became unbearably hot. Shocked - startled - I thought, wreck - train wreck! My companion didn't seem to notice and kept on talking. In about 3 minutes, out we popped into lighter night. "Tunnel," he said. There were three more of those tunnels on the 90 mile ride. The engine was a coal burning steam locomotive. As it passed through those tunnels, the steam would collect overhead and scald you! Now I knew why it would be almost impossible to ride a freight outside. The sparks would fly down around you hot enough to burn through your skin.



At times you could see a passing mountain peak on the skyline. We moved through valleys beside mountain streams, half frozen with the ice flashing like white clouds on the dark ground. Through small towns where there were coal tipples, the train would stop, back up and the brakeman would get out and uncouple two or more cars. The tracks would go right through the center of these small towns, right down their main streets. Some streets were decorated with Christmas lights. In lighted homes I could see Christmas trees and the warmth of family Christmas Eve. Most homes burned coal and chimneys would have tall cylinders of blue smoke rising. My feet were frozen and my tail was sore but my eyes and spirit were sharing Christmas with these people.

It was 7:30 A.M. The dawn light was just breaking between the mountains. Somehow, I got down from the ladder - mostly arms hanging on - my legs wouldn't straighten out. Had to hit the ground and roll in the gravel away from the train. In a short while my legs came alive and I could stand up.



It was now Christmas morning 1944. Had to walk six blocks up the street to the house. Dirty and half-frozen, the thoughts still commanded my mind to wonder what I would find at home. The lights were on as I walked up the front steps to the porch. I knocked and my wife opened the door. What a relief - it wasn't her. She smiled with open arms saying "Merry Christmas - didn't know if it would work!"



"Who is sick?" I asked.

"No one," she replied. "My friend up the street is head of the local Red Cross. We got her to get you that 'Top Priority' leave."

The world seemed to collapse around me. A mixture of relief, joy, Christmas, fatigue, all flooded through

me. Standing on that porch, in the flood of all these emotions, a question forced its way into my consciousness. Why did you have to do it this way? What should have been joy flowed into a mental well of unforgiveness. I hid the thought. It was never voiced. Yet after all these years the dark thoughts from that memory will briefly color every Christmas Eve!

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### **Epilogue written by Robert Wayne Atkins, P.E.**

Later when you got ready to leave Norton, your father-in-law offered to give you some money but you refused. You didn't want anyone to know how poor you really were. You had almost no money so you hitch-hiked a ride on the back of a motorcycle to Bluefield. The train ticket you had purchased earlier was a round-trip train ticket so you rode the train 350 miles back to the Norfolk Air Station. Unfortunately, your 'Top Priority' Red Cross Emergency Leave Pass was only valid one-way. It didn't provide any method for your return to your Naval Base in Florida. You were now on your own.



You used the last of your money to buy another train ticket at Norfolk, Virginia to take you as far as your money would pay for. When you reached the station where you were supposed to get off the train, you mingled with the other servicemen in such a way that you were able to strategically avoid the "Ticket Conductor" for a couple of more stops. But then you were caught and you had to get off the train at Columbia, South Carolina. You had traveled 470 miles from Norfolk but you were still 650 miles away from your Naval Base in Florida. You had absolutely NO money (or food). Your only option was to start walking and you hitched a ride whenever you could. One of your rides was on the back of another motorcycle which was being driven by a black man. Eventually, you got back to your Naval Base. But you were physically and mentally exhausted. What your wife had intended as a "Christmas Present" had turned into one of the hardest ordeals of your life, and it became a memory which you would NEVER forget. More than sixty-years have come and gone since then but each Christmas Eve you relive those heartwrenching events once again, even though each year you hope and pray that this will be the year when the memory does NOT return.