

Julian Reiss

His Operation Toylift brought Santa and Airplanes Together.

World War II had been over for several years when Julian Reiss decided to build the North Pole. With the help of an ex-Navy Seabee and another friend who had worked for Metro-Goldwyn-Mayer and The Walt Disney Company, the threesome broke ground on a piece of land near Lake Placid, New York. Their plan was to create Santa's home and a workshop for elves, open to the public year-round. The group's business plans hoped to one day have as many as 300 people a day visiting. Three years after they opened in 1949, 14,000 people came through the gates in a single day. Julian Reiss was nothing less than humbled by the success of the North Pole and Santa's Workshop, and wanted to share his good fortune.

In those days, there were tens of thousands of children in orphanages across the United States. As a man who lived Christmas 365 days a year, why couldn't he — better yet, Santa Claus — visit those kids and bring them gifts and help make



their holidays meaningful? Reiss was a man who typically thought on a large scale, so his interest lay far beyond local neighborhoods. He wanted to touch as many children as he could, even beyond his home state of New York. He had a Stinson, and he had a Santa suit. Like any idea whose time had come, the rest of the pieces quickly came together to form Operation Toylift, the first time Santa logged gift deliveries in a general-aviation aircraft.

That December saw the same scene unfold again and again at airports across New York state. A tiny red Stinson taildragger would land and taxi to the ramp where hundreds of orphaned

or underprivileged children waited to meet Santa Claus. Wrapped Christmas presents and cards and lollipops were handed out to one and all. There were squeals of joy, lots of excited chatter and even a few tears, especially when Santa had to fire up the Stinson and keep to his busy holiday schedule. Julian Reiss would be the first to tell you he got the greatest gift of all.

To say that the program was successful would be a woeful understatement. Newspapers around the country (and even a few around the world) had given Julian Reiss and his Santa scheme a mountain of publicity. Donations of cash and gifts had begun rolling in, from private citizens and corporations alike. Suddenly, he found himself with a wonderful, but perplexing new problem. A growing mountain of toys far exceeded what would fit into a sleigh, much less a single-engine airplane.

Reiss and his staff at the North Pole issued a tongue-in-cheek press release showing a distraught Santa standing in front of a mass of boxes, illustrating the problem and asking for suggestions. Three days later, the phone rang. It was Esso (Standard Oil), wondering if

Santa would like to borrow their new Curtiss-Wright C-46, a comparatively huge, state-of-the-art airliner and corporate aircraft. It was the best gift any Santa could hope for.

In fact, the size of the big C-46 allowed Reiss the opportunity to dramatically enhance his "road show." Not only could the airplane's cavernous cabin hold previously unimaginable quantities of toys, but there was also room to bring along some elves and even live reindeer from Alaska! Equally important, the big Esso plane's range and speed virtually tripled the area where Santa could work.

Julian Reiss died from cancer only a handful of years after Operation Toylift began. In his memory, the project continued, and by 1957, his efforts had expanded to include 36 major airports in 14 states, the District of Columbia and two provinces in Canada. Today, the Reiss family and the staff of the North Pole continue the seasonal outreach, though aircraft no longer play a part. Occasionally, a visitor to the North Pole will ask for Julian Reiss. "I was an orphan, and I wanted to tell him what a difference he made in my life."

Over the years, more than 100,000 kids got Christmas, thanks to one good man and an airplane.