

Holiday Salute



Giving Back

The holidays are a time for family, but many service members will be away from them.

Separation from our loved ones during this special season is hard on everyone, including military personnel and the families who remain at home while they serve. Thankfully, there are several ways to give back as an expression of your thankfulness for these sacrifices.

ADOPTING A FAMILY

One particularly effective way to offer assistance to our military is by adopting a family. Spouses and children coping with the absence of a service member may experience loneliness, financial strain and personal stress. You can help make this season more enjoyable by reaching out with support. Of course, financial aid can make a huge difference. Consider purchasing prepaid gift cards for essential items such as groceries, household necessities or gas to help alleviate some of their burden. If there are children in the family who are missing a parent this holiday season, consider providing a special gift or helping out with their interests and hobbies. This could involve transportation, coaching or supplying needed materials. You can help even if you don't have money to donate: Offer your time for chores, pet care or babysitting. Be receptive to



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the specific needs of the family and try to address any gaps created by their loved one's absence.

VOLUNTEER OPPORTUNITIES

VA hospitals are frequently in need of volunteer assistance, particularly during the holiday season when more events and activities are organized. Ask

local representatives about volunteer opportunities, even if that simply involves spending quality time with patients. Additional volunteer options may be available through local VFW chapters or through human resource directors at nearby veterans' homes. Many older veterans may not have friends or family around to celebrate the holidays, and your

companionship could have a profound impact.

MAKE A DONATION

Find and support local non-profit organizations that distribute holiday gift packages or stockings to spread festive cheer, since they're typically aimed at both active-duty service members and veterans. These organizations seek

support with donations, letters, gifts, packing or stocking assembly, or delivery. If there is a lack of participation in your area for meaningful holiday initiatives like these, consider partnering with a community organization to launch your own. Before getting started, recruit plenty of volunteers to assist with the packaging and distribution process.



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Write a Letter

If you don't have a friend or family member serving, reach out to active military this holiday season.

Letters to members of the military acknowledge the sacrifices made by these individuals as they are separated from their families, while serving as a source of positivity and motivation when far away from home. Here are some helpful tips on how to reach out:

MAKING CONNECTIONS

Organizations such as A Million Thanks and Operation Gratitude can help connect letter writers with troops who are serving during this holiday season.

A Million Thanks says they alone have delivered more than 21 million letters to active, reserve and veteran military around the world since 2004. Many of these partner groups accept and distribute letters throughout the year, but they're particularly needed during the holiday season.

The challenges in dangerous, uncertain circumstances are compounded by being away from loved ones on these special days. Take a moment to express your appreciation and share some good cheer.

GETTING STARTED

Many service members appreciate the opportunity to correspond during their downtime. You'll need cards or paper, and envelopes for all your letters. You may want to gather decorating materials like stickers, markers, scissors and glue, but the organizations typically ask that no glitter or confetti be included. When writing your letter, remember to tell troops a little about yourself. Share a bit about your family, pet or hobbies to establish a personal rapport. At the same time, discussions about political matters and news of the day should be limited. Topics like sports events, favorite foods or the

last movie you saw are more likely to encourage a friendly exchange.

WHO TO WRITE

Some terms to remember: Deployed troops are on assignment. A veteran is someone who served in the past. Recruit graduates recently completed training and are about to begin a term of service. "Wounded Warriors" are those who have sustained injuries while serving. Writers are encouraged to compose letters for more than one of these categories of service, as they all play a vital role. Include your first name and address and remember to express gratitude for their service.

Decorating Patriotically

You don't have to limit your holiday ideas to familiar figures like Santa Claus, Frosty the Snowman and Rudolph.

This year, show your patriotic pride by stepping outside the conventional norms. Those with friends and family of active military personnel might be particularly interested in splashing the season's usual festive elements with red, white and blue — but anyone can get in on the fun. Place decorations in the colors of the U.S. flag on your Christmas tree, table centerpiece or holiday mantel. Inflatable Santas posing with an eagle and flags are available for sale. They'd complete any holiday yard display — and it could be reused on July 4th, too!

NEW IDEAS

You can decorate the tree with ribbons, bows and ornaments that reflect the colors of the nation. There are patriotic variations of traditional holiday decorations, including angels, stuffed animals and soldiers. Special flag-like tree skirts can complete the look. Look for red, white and blue color schemes, stars and stripes patterns, or even solid-colored items to curate your personalized design. Related patriotic figurines can also serve as an elegant



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centerpiece for your Christmas decorations.

Consider adding flags representing various branches of the military, along with the Stars and Stripes, to a fresh or faux strand of garland. This arrangement can be elegantly displayed on your mantle, front porch or staircase rail. One of the benefits of

decorating patriotically for the holidays is that the season's end doesn't require storing away your decor in the attic. They can serve a dual purpose for other significant holidays like Memorial Day.

OUTDOOR DISPLAYS

Just remember the Flag Code rules when flying Old

Glory outside. The code was established in 1923 to ensure the banner is treated with respect.

When displaying the U.S. flag outdoors, it should only be flown from sunrise to sunset on flag poles and buildings. Flags raised after dark must be illuminated with high-quality lighting for visibility. When

displaying the flag on a staff or stationary pole, it should be raised to its peak, unless otherwise specified for half-staff. If the flag is being displayed against your home or another structure, it should be hung flat, with the blue field of stars oriented toward the north or east, depending on the orientation of the street.

Dealing with Loss

The holidays can be particularly challenging when you're mourning the absence of a loved one who served.

If you're dealing with the loss of someone in the military, there are resources available to help navigate these difficult days. It can be particularly challenging if this is the first holiday without a loved one. At the same time, just as every individual loss is unique, so is the way their loved ones grieve. Your process will be shaped by individual coping mechanisms, your life experiences and personality profile.

KEY STEPS

The Department of Veterans Affairs has identified key steps in dealing with grief that can help people grasp the process and hopefully more easily manage it. First, accept the reality of your loss. This involves confronting the truth of death and recognizing its permanence. Following this, allow yourself to mourn.

While temporary relief may be found in distracting yourself from the pain, failing to address these feelings will slow the healing process.

Everything will unfold on a gradual basis, so begin adjusting to a new reality where your loved one is no longer present. Seek support during this time. Don't hesitate to reach out for



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assistance when needed. Be patient with yourself as you navigate the journey of redefining your identity apart from your loved one. Talk to friends, family, a counselor or one of the numerous support groups specifically designed for those grieving military losses. You'll find a space for shared experiences and healing. The

military community surrounding you may provide counseling and other valuable services.

HONORING THEIR MEMORY

Establishing a strong support network lets you navigate the healing journey. Honor the memory of your loved ones.

This could involve attending bereavement camps designed for adults and children, or accessing online support resources like webinars and educational materials. You may construct a place of honor in your home, or decorate the tree with commemorative ornaments. Some commit to seeking more

public recognition of service and bravery. Sometimes spending time with others who've lost loved ones or other veterans is a great way to honor the memory of the one you lost. The way you commemorate a loved one ultimately rests in your hands. Follow a path that is the most healing and meaningful.

Sharing Meals

Active-duty service members won't have the chance to enjoy generous home-cooked meals with loved ones.

Big holiday gatherings of friends and family with a huge spread of food are something many take for granted. It's hard to make those special memories when you've been deployed. That's why various organizations provide a taste of home while service members are away. Here's how you can help:

REACHING OUT

Groups like Operation Homefront, Veterans Inc., Support Our Troops, Homefront Heroes and Soldiers' Angels provide needed food to faithful service members. Veteran's Inc. is primarily focused on the homeless but has set up a pantry to help combat veteran food insecurity. Homefront Heroes also offers food and snacks as part of a suite of aid programs for dependents of active-duty military, reserve and the guard during their deployment.

Operation Homefront's Holiday Meals for Military was founded by happenstance when a businessman lined up behind a soldier, his wife and their infant child at a grocery store checkout as they struggled to pay for everything they'd gathered for Thanksgiving dinner. Ken Ruff paid off



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the difference and then decided to redirect funds from all the gift baskets his company normally sent to clients to 500 military families instead. The idea eventually grew to tens of thousands of families per year.

INSIDE THE NUMBERS

Last year, Support Our

Troops transported 690,000 pounds of holiday meals to deployed servicemembers. Officials said that included 6,210 whole turkeys, 98,091 pounds of ham, 176,791 pounds of beef, and 49,055 pounds of shrimp. That represented an increase of 26% over 2023 because of increased deployments.

Soldier's Angels has provided food assistance for some 436,000 service members and veterans since 2015.

HOW YOU CAN HELP

Prices of food and other essential goods have soared by an average of 28% over the past five years, and reports say 25% of active-duty enlisted

military families experience food insecurity. Donate to worthy causes like the ones mentioned above. There are also other planned giving opportunities where you can donate during your lifetime or as part of estate planning. Consider including a contribution in your will or living trust, or as a bequest.

Holiday Traditions

Serving in the military includes a range of responsibilities that go well beyond combat.

Among the most unusual — and heartwarming — things U.S. military personnel handle are unique holiday traditions. Lots of servicemembers have dedicated themselves to spreading joy across the nation during this festive season.

TRACKING SANTA

One of the best-known holiday initiatives is the NORAD Tracks Santa program. Every Christmas Eve, millions of children eagerly follow Santa's journey using the North American Aerospace Defense Command's specially created Santa Tracker. Established in 1955, NORAD's primary function is to monitor North American airspace, making the command particularly suited for this mission. They're already defending North America 24 hours a day, 365 days a year by tracking airplanes, space and satellite launches, missile tests and any other flight patterns over the continent. NORAD employs 47 radar installations in Alaska and Canada that quickly and accurately detect Santa's departure from the North Pole, then U.S. Air Force and Canadian Air Force fighter jets are deployed to escort him safely through North American airspace.



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TOYS FOR TOTS

The Toys for Tots initiative traces its origins to a pivotal moment when Marine Corps Reserve Maj. Bill Hendricks launched a toy collection drive in 1947. He was inspired by his wife Diane, who crafted dolls for him to deliver to children in need. This grassroots effort evolved into the national Toys

for Tots program, which today mobilizes tens of thousands of Marines, Marine Corps League members, veterans and volunteers each year. The program has successfully collected and distributed an average of 18 million new, unwrapped toys annually, reaching approximately 7 million children during the Christmas season.

JUMPING FOR TOYS

In 2019, the 82nd Airborne Division created the All American Presents From Paratroopers event, which offered paratroopers in North Carolina a chance to jump for special foreign jump wings in exchange for donating a toy. This event was established to continue the tradition of the

local Randy Oler Toy Drop, with benefits going to the Fort Bragg USO, Armed Services YMCA and the Fayetteville Urban Ministry, among others. Then-Staff Sgt. Older established the original drop in 1998 as a training event and airborne operation at Pope Army Airfield in North Carolina.

Saying Thanks

When you gather for the big holiday meal, don't forget gratitude for those who keep us safe.

Too often, we take for granted all that's being done at home and abroad to protect our citizens and country. At any given moment, thousands of brave people are working tirelessly on our behalf. In this season of thankfulness, take a moment to show gratitude for their sacrifice.

INTERNET MESSAGING

Do you know someone who's serving the United States right now? Sending an encouraging message has never been easier, given the various digital platforms available such as email, video uploads and social media. Reach out during the holiday season, when being away from loved ones can be hard.

The easiest way to reach out is by email. While this form of communication may lack the personal touch of an old-fashioned handwritten note, it serves as the quickest way to personally communicate with someone you know — and you don't have to find an envelope and stamp and get the letter to a postal worker. Personalize your message. Include updates about life at home, such as news concerning friends and family or local happenings.

For video communication,



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service members can use conferencing platforms like Zoom for Government or Google Meet, which allow for real-time interactions with family and friends. Connectivity can be inconsistent, especially in overseas installations, but the effort to have face-to-face holiday greetings will be deeply welcomed.

REACHING OUT TO OTHERS

Ask whether there is anything you can do to ease their service experience. They may appreciate it if you'd check in with friends and family back home. Offer to help with errands or chores. Ask your service member whether there are others who might

benefit from an encouraging message, and collect their email addresses. These thoughtful reminders of home serve as welcome distractions, particularly during the holiday season.

If you don't have a friend or family member deployed during the holidays, military pen-pal services such as

Operation Gratitude can link you with service personnel who would appreciate an encouraging note. Always start these messages with an encouraging general salutation, such as "Dear Hero," to express gratitude for their service. Include a return address if you'd like to continue the conversation.