

Holiday
SALUTE



History at the Holiday Table

As the United States celebrates its 250th anniversary, many families are reflecting on the stories that shaped their own histories alongside the nation's.

For some households, those memories include military service — experiences that may live in old photographs, faded letters or stories told only in fragments around the dinner table.

The holiday season can offer a rare opportunity to preserve those memories before they are lost.

Experts in oral history often encourage families to focus less on formal interviews and more on meaningful conversation. A smartphone voice memo, a video recording or even handwritten notes can help preserve details that might otherwise disappear over time.



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START WITH EVERYDAY MEMORIES

One of the biggest mistakes families make is focusing only on major historical events or battlefield experiences. Often, the stories that resonate most with future generations are the personal details.

Questions such as “What did you miss most from home?” or “What did holidays look like while you were serving?” can open the door to richer conversation. Other helpful prompts include:

- Who were your closest friends during your service?
- What music did you listen to?
- What was your daily routine like?
- What do you remember most vividly?

• How did your service change you afterward?

It can also help to avoid rushing silence. Some veterans may need time to gather thoughts or decide what they are comfortable sharing.

Not every conversation needs to become an emotional centerpiece of the holiday gathering. In many cases, a quiet conversation in the kitchen or after dinner may feel more natural than placing someone on display in front of relatives.

PRESERVE MORE THAN STORIES

Photos, letters, medals, uniforms and postcards can provide valuable context for family history. The holi-

days can be a practical time to gather and organize these materials together.

Families can digitize photographs using a flatbed scanner or smartphone scanning apps that automatically crop and enhance old images. Scan letters and military documents in high resolution and label them with names, dates and locations whenever possible.

Even identifying people in old photos can be valuable. A simple recording of a veteran pointing to faces in an album and naming individuals may preserve information future generations would otherwise never know.

Storage matters as well. Back up digital copies in multiple places, such

as external hard drives and secure cloud storage.

CREATING A LIVING ARCHIVE

Preserving veterans' stories stretches beyond military history. It preserves family identity, relationships and perspective.

A recorded memory about a snowy military base, a holiday meal overseas or a friendship formed during service can become part of a family's living archive; one that future generations may someday treasure far more than anyone realizes now.

Sometimes history survives not through grand speeches, but through an ordinary voice saying, “Let me tell you what happened.”

When the Holidays Feel Different

The first holiday season after deployment can bring joy, stress and unexpected emotions for military families.

Holiday movies often portray homecomings as simple, joyful reunions: A hug at the airport, tears around the dinner table and life returning neatly to normal.

For many military families, however, the first holiday season after deployment is more complicated than that.

The transition home can bring happiness and relief, but also emotional readjustment, disrupted routines and unexpected tension as families learn how to fit together again after months apart.

Experts who work with military families say understanding that complexity can help ease pressure during the holidays.

RETURNING TO A CHANGED HOUSEHOLD

During deployment, families naturally develop new routines. A spouse may take over responsibilities once shared. Children grow older and more independent. Traditions may shift simply because daily life had to keep moving forward.

When a service member returns, everyone must adjust again.

Sometimes the returning



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family member expects things to feel exactly as they did before deployment, while loved ones have already adapted to a different rhythm. Even small issues — meal schedules, parenting styles or holiday plans — can create friction.

Mental health professionals who work with veterans often encourage families to approach the season with flexibility rather than trying to create a “perfect” holiday. That may mean scaling back expectations, leaving room for quiet moments or understanding that someone may need breaks from crowded gatherings and noise.

JOY AND STRESS CAN COEXIST

Many returning service members describe feeling grateful to be home while also struggling with restlessness or emotional distance. Large gatherings, fireworks, loud celebrations or packed travel schedules can sometimes feel overwhelming after deployment.

Families may encounter surprising emotional reactions. A returning veteran might feel disconnected from traditions they once loved or unexpectedly emotional during ordinary moments like decorating a tree or hearing a familiar holiday song.

Children may react differently as well. Younger children sometimes need time to reconnect with a parent who has been away for months, while teenagers may appear withdrawn or uncertain about changing household dynamics. Experts stress that these reactions are common and do not mean something is wrong with the family.

MAKING SPACE FOR RECONNECTION

Rather than focusing entirely on elaborate celebrations, many military families find meaning in smaller traditions that encourage reconnection. Cooking together, looking

through photographs, taking a quiet drive to see holiday lights or watching a favorite movie can create opportunities for conversation without pressure.

Allow returning service members some say in how the holidays unfold. After months of highly structured schedules overseas, simple choices about meals, activities or downtime may matter more than relatives realize.

The first holiday after homecoming is rarely about recreating the past exactly as it was. More often, it is about building a new sense of home together — one careful tradition, awkward conversation and shared moment at a time.

Joy and Grief at the Holidays

Holiday advertisements often portray the season as a time of uncomplicated joy filled with family gatherings, treasured traditions and happy memories.

For many people, those moments are real. But holidays can also bring grief, stress, loneliness, conflict and deeply mixed emotions, especially for military families and veterans.

Mental health professionals note that celebrations often carry different meanings depending on a person's experiences, family history and current circumstances. Two people can attend the same gathering and experience it in very different ways.

JOY AND SORROW CAN COEXIST

For families who have lost loved ones, the holidays may highlight empty chairs at the dinner table and traditions that can never be quite the same. Military families may celebrate while missing relatives who are deployed or serving far from home.

Some people navigate complicated family relationships, while others face financial pressures that make the season stressful rather than festive. For those who have



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moved far from home or immigrated to the United States, the holidays may bring both gratitude and longing.

Even positive life changes can create mixed emotions. A first holiday after a marriage, a new baby, retirement or a move may bring excitement alongside nostalgia for traditions left behind.

Experts say these reactions are normal. Holidays often

encourage reflection, and reflection rarely produces just one emotion at a time.

MAKING ROOM FOR DIFFERENT EXPERIENCES

Mental health professionals often encourage families to approach holiday gatherings with openness and compassion. Someone returning from military service may experi-

ence conflicting feelings — excitement at being home again and some bittersweet feelings at observing how life has changed and new traditions formed in their absences.

Sometimes it is enough to just understand that someone may choose a quieter celebration or recognize that a relative who seems withdrawn may be carrying grief. It can

mean allowing family members to honor traditions differently than they have in the past.

For many military families, some of the most meaningful holiday moments come through storytelling. Older relatives share memories, younger generations describe new experiences and families reflect on both challenges and accomplishments from the year.

These conversations can strengthen connections and help people better understand one another.

CELEBRATING WHAT MATTERS MOST

The holidays have always been about more than decorations, gifts or meals. At their best, they offer opportunities to connect with loved ones, express gratitude and reflect on the values that matter most.

The season does not require constant happiness to be meaningful. Joy can exist alongside grief. Gratitude can coexist with uncertainty. Hope can emerge even during difficult years. Gatherings can be designed where people are free to bring their whole selves to the table and know they will be welcomed there.

The holidays, like family history, are rarely one emotion played at full volume. More often, they resemble a chorus: joy alongside grief, gratitude beside longing, hope threaded through memory.

War, Hardship and Change

Holiday meals often tell stories that history books leave out.

Long before elaborate charcuterie boards and online recipe videos, Americans celebrated the holidays with whatever ingredients they could grow, preserve, ration or afford.

Wartime shortages, frontier life and economic hardship shaped what people ate and how families gathered and found comfort together.

Historic holiday menus offer a glimpse into the daily realities of ordinary Americans across generations.

HOLIDAY MEALS IN DIFFICULT TIMES

During the Revolutionary War, holiday meals for soldiers were often sparse. Continental Army troops sometimes relied on salted meat, hard bread and whatever supplies could be scavenged or delivered. Letters from the era describe celebrations that centered more on companionship and survival than abundance.

On the frontier in the 1800s, many families built holiday meals around local game, preserved vegetables, cornbread and pies made from dried or stored fruit. Ingredients varied dramatically by region and season.

Civil War soldiers occasionally received special holiday rations, including coffee, sugar or canned treats when supplies allowed. Families



BRITT FULLER/WIKIMEDIA COMMONS

back home adapted meals around shortages and disrupted agriculture, especially in the South as the war dragged on.

During the Great Depression, holiday menus often emphasized creativity and thrift. Homemade breads, soups, casseroles and inexpen-

sive desserts became staples. Many families stretched ingredients while still trying to preserve a sense of celebration for children.

World War II brought rationing that changed American kitchens in lasting ways. Sugar, butter, meat and canned goods were tightly

controlled. Home cooks relied on ration books, substituted ingredients and victory recipes promoted by newspapers and government campaigns.

Carrot pudding sometimes replaced traditional desserts because carrots were easier to obtain than sugar. Meatless dishes became more common,

and leftovers were carefully repurposed.

MORE THAN FOOD

Historians note that holiday meals were never only about nutrition. The act of gathering around a table often carried emotional meaning during periods of uncertainty.

Military camps improvised celebrations whenever possible. Immigrant families blended old-world recipes with local ingredients. Communities organized shared meals during economic crises so neighbors would not celebrate alone.

Many familiar American holiday foods emerged from those adaptations. Regional traditions developed as families carried recipes across generations and geography. Some dishes disappeared entirely. Others evolved into modern comfort foods still served today.

CONNECTING ACROSS GENERATIONS

Food historians often encourage families to explore older recipes as a way of understanding everyday life in different eras. Cookbooks, handwritten recipe cards and family stories can reveal how previous generations navigated hardship, migration, war and celebration.

Across 250 years of American history, holiday tables have reflected far more than prosperity. They have reflected resilience, adaptation and the enduring human instinct to gather together, even in uncertain times.

Songs that Connect, Comfort and Sustain

Long before smartphones and video calls made it possible to instantly reach loved ones overseas, music often filled the emotional distance created by war.

From Civil War campfires to crackling World War II radio broadcasts to modern playlists shared between continents, songs have helped service members and families hold on to memory, hope and connection during the holiday season.

This year, consider creating a holiday soundtrack that honors military service throughout our country's history, music that served as both comfort and commentary during periods of conflict.

MUSIC AS CONNECTION

During the Civil War, soldiers on both sides often sang around campfires during the holidays. Popular songs such as "Home, Sweet Home" carried particular emotional weight among troops separated from families for months or years at a time.

In some cases, opposing armies could hear one another singing across battle lines.

During World War II, holiday music took on a new role through radio. Families gathered around broadcasts featuring performers such as Bing Crosby, whose recording of "White Christmas" became

deeply associated with homesick troops overseas. The song's longing for familiar traditions resonated during a time of rationing, uncertainty and separation.

Military bands became important symbols of morale and ceremony. Holiday concerts on bases and in military hospitals helped create moments of normalcy amid difficult conditions.

Even today, deployed service members often build playlists that remind them of home, family gatherings or specific holiday traditions. Streaming services and digital sharing have changed the technology, but not necessarily the purpose.

SONGS OF FAITH, PROTEST AND COMFORT

Wartime music has never reflected only one emotion.

Alongside patriotic marches and hymns have been songs expressing grief, exhaustion, longing and protest.

Religious music has historically played a major role during wartime holidays. Christmas hymns, Hanukkah songs and other spiritual traditions often provided familiarity and emo-

tional grounding far from home.

At the same time, some eras produced music questioning the human cost of war. During the Vietnam War, protest songs became intertwined with holiday broadcasts and family gatherings back home, reflecting a nation wrestling publicly with division and loss.

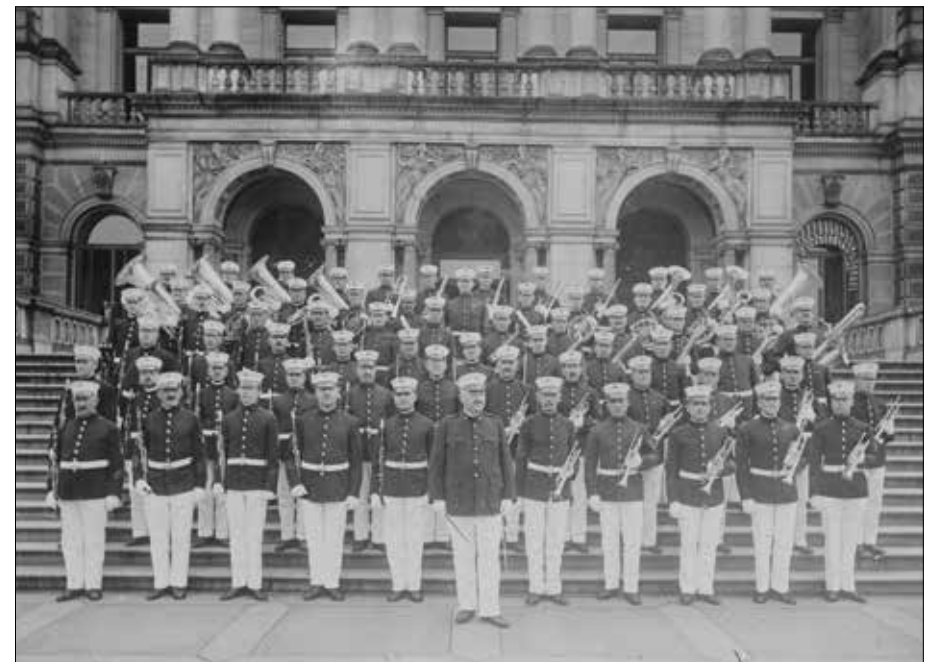
Music historians note that even songs not explicitly about war often become attached to wartime memories because of when and where people heard them.

Some contemporary songs include Tony Jackson's "A Soldier's Christmas Eve," John McCutcheon's "Christmas in the Trenches" and Charlie Daniels' "Watching Over the Soldiers at Christmas."

PRESERVING MUSICAL MEMORIES

Families interested in preserving military history may want to ask veterans about the soundtrack of those experiences.

Questions such as "What songs do you associate with that time?" or "What music reminded you of home?" can



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CPL. KAYLA HALLORAN/WIKIMEDIA COMMONS

unlock vivid personal memories.

Old records, concert programs, military band photographs and handwritten lyrics tucked into letters can also become meaningful family

keepsakes.

Sometimes a single song can carry an entire season inside it — a frozen camp, a crowded dance hall, a radio glowing softly in a darkened room thousands of miles from home.

Immigrant Veterans

For generations of immigrants, military service in the United States has represented both sacrifice and belonging, a way to defend a country while still carrying memories, languages and traditions from somewhere else.

Historians note that immigrants have served in every major American conflict, from the Revolutionary War to modern deployments overseas. Along the way, holiday traditions often became part of how military families navigated identity, connection and home.

For many service members, celebrations during the holidays reflected a blending of cultures rather than a replacement of one by another. In many ways, the story of immigrant service members mirrors the broader American story itself: People carrying pieces of one home while helping build another.

BUILDING TRADITIONS FAR FROM HOME

Immigrant soldiers throughout American history frequently found themselves balancing multiple identities during the holiday season.

During the Civil War, Irish and German immigrants made up significant portions of Union Army regiments. Many brought familiar songs, foods and religious traditions into military camps. Christmas celebrations sometimes blended old-world customs with distinctly American military life.

In the 20th century, military service became an important pathway to citizenship and economic stability for many immigrant families. Service



U.S. AIR FORCE CAPT. MELISSA MILNER/WIKIMEDIA COMMONS

Army Spc. Meirong Wang, a human resources specialist for the 4th Brigade Special Troops Battalion, assigned to Task Force Mountain Warrior, hands out mail during her day-to-day duties on her forward operating base in Afghanistan's Nangarhar Province. Wang is a native of China's Fujian province.

members from Italy, Mexico, the Philippines, Korea, Vietnam and countless other countries carried family recipes, languages and religious traditions into military communities across the country.

Holiday gatherings on bases often became cultural crossroads. A single celebration might include tamales, lumpia, pierogi, panettone or traditional American dishes side by side on the same table.

For some families, those blended meals eventually became traditions passed down for generations.

SERVICE AND BELONGING

Historians note holidays can carry special emotional significance for immigrant military families because they often center questions of identity and belonging.

A deployed service member might

celebrate an American holiday overseas while also missing customs tied to another homeland. Children growing up in military households may inherit traditions from several cultures at once.

For some immigrant veterans, military service strengthened feelings of connection to the United States. Others describe a more layered experience — one in which patriotism and cultural heritage existed together rather than in competition.

That complexity has shaped American holiday traditions in subtle ways over time. Foods once considered regional or immigrant specialties have become common at holiday tables across the country. Music, decorations and religious observances have evolved as military families moved between communities and shared traditions.

The Immigrant Learning Center points out that many popular holiday traditions were brought here by refugees and immigrants.

Pecan pie was created by French immigrant chefs in New Orleans. German immigrants brought the concept of a Christmas tree and gift exchange to the U.S. Christmas cards were popularized by a Prussian immigrant and artist. The song “White Christmas” was written by a Jewish, Russian immigrant. The first mall Santa was created and popularized by a Scottish American.

New Year's celebrations have deep roots in experiences created by immigrants to the U.S. A German immigrant, Adolph Ochs, came up with the idea for the Times Square ball drop on New Year's Eve. “Auld Lang Syne” was written by Scottish poet Robert Burns and popularized here by a Canadian-born immigrant, Guy Lombardo.

Invisible Labor of Military Spouses

Holiday traditions are often built on invisible work.

Someone remembers which ornament belonged to which grandparent. Someone shops, wraps, cooks, schedules, comforts overtired children and keeps family rituals intact even when life feels uncertain.

In military families, that labor frequently falls to spouses who continue managing households through deployments, relocations and long separations.

Military family advocates say the holiday season offers an opportunity to recognize the often unseen responsibilities military spouses carry year-round.



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CREATING CONTINUITY DURING CONSTANT CHANGE

Military life is built around uncertainty. Families may move every few years, live far from relatives or spend holidays separated by deployment schedules and training assignments.

For military spouses, maintaining traditions often becomes a way of creating emotional stability for children and family members. That can mean recreating familiar meals in temporary housing thousands of miles from extended family. It can mean decorating a small apartment to make it feel like home or finding ways to include a deployed parent

through video calls, recorded bedtime stories or gifts opened over a screen.

Many military spouses also become experts at adapting celebrations when plans suddenly change. A holiday dinner may move because of duty schedules. Travel plans may collapse unexpectedly. Some families celebrate major holidays weeks early or late simply to spend time together around deployment.

Over time, flexibility itself can become a family tradition.

PARENTING THROUGH DEPLOYMENT

The holidays can place additional emotional pressure on military spouses who are par-

enting alone during deployments. Children may struggle with missing a parent during school concerts, religious celebrations or family gatherings. Spouses often become the emotional bridge between the deployed service member and the household back home, helping maintain connection across time zones and long distances.

At the same time, many military spouses continue balancing careers, finances, school schedules and household responsibilities largely on their own. Family support organizations note that this labor is frequently overlooked because it happens quietly and consistently rather than

dramatically.

Even joyful moments can carry emotional complexity. A spouse may work hard to create a magical holiday experience for children while privately managing loneliness, worry or exhaustion.

REDEFINING WHAT 'HOME' MEANS

For many military families, the idea of home becomes less tied to geography and more connected to relationships and rituals. A favorite recipe, a holiday movie watched every year or a handmade ornament carried from base to base can become emotional anchors amid constant transition.

Military spouses often serve

as the keepers of those traditions, preserving continuity even as surroundings change. Experts say recognizing that work matters. Small gestures — offering childcare, including military families in community events or simply acknowledging the challenges of separation during the holidays — can help reduce feelings of isolation.

The public face of military service is often uniforms, ceremonies and homecoming photos. But behind many holiday celebrations is another kind of service entirely: the steady, mostly unseen work of building warmth, stability and belonging wherever a family happens to land next.