

Holiday Salute



Giving to the Armed Forces

We'd all like to make this season brighter for veterans, service members and their families.

Gift-giving for military personnel and their loved ones, however, can be a real challenge. After all, there are numerous regulations regarding what service members can and cannot receive as a present.

FOR THE DEPLOYED

Their jobs often take place in rugged conditions, so focus on things that provide protection and comfort. Consider impact-resistant sunglasses with high-definition optics to protect their eyes, or a sturdy water bottle that is insulated to keep their drinks at the desired temperature. High-quality multi-tools are specifically designed for emergency preparedness and outdoor survival.

Portable power banks with durable cords help ensure all their devices stay charged. An adjustable headlamp offers various angles, brightness levels and light colors. Look for one that's water-resistant. Travel organizers are a big help. Make sure they are easy to clean and durable enough to withstand wear and tear. Noise-canceling earbuds can provide a relaxing, immersive audio experience.

FOR VETERANS

Help our nation's veterans



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commemorate their service this holiday season with a custom phone case, flask or wallet showcasing their branch of service. Purchase and decorate a display case for medals, ribbons, patches and other mementos.

Buy products like coffee from companies started by veterans and focused on supporting veterans' causes. Other stocking stuffers might

include challenge coins and a coin holder, a special koozie or tactical stockings.

FOR FAMILIES

This can be an especially difficult time of the year for families of service members. Kindle their holiday spirit with special photos, gifts or plants. Consider setting up an appointment with a local photographer or the Portraits of Love

program, which organizes photo shoots for service-member families nationwide. Create a special album with these new images as the centerpiece. The USO Wishbook located at usowishbook.uso.org provides a way for you to purchase gifts for service members to celebrate special occasions like these.

The Hug-A-Hero program focuses on young children who

are missing someone who is deployed, offering dog tags, security blankets and pet pillows. Trees for Troops provides free farm-grown Christmas trees to families of those serving in all branches of the military. Smaller gestures mean so much, too: Gift cards can be very useful – especially for the base exchange store – or you can sign families up for helpful meal delivery services.

Wreaths Across America

Each holiday season, Wreaths Across America coordinates an extraordinary display of military appreciation as wreath-laying ceremonies are held in 50 states and beyond.

This non-profit organization gathers on a designated Saturday with the assistance of numerous selfless volunteers to place these commemorative items at gravesites in hundreds of locations.

To put these efforts in perspective, the program began with 5,000 donated wreaths in 1992. Now, more than 140,000 wreaths are annually placed at Arlington National Cemetery alone. Tens of thousands of patriotic Americans take part, and more than 1,000 local fundraising groups have joined in to coordinate local wreath-laying ceremonies.

HOW IT BEGAN

The owner of Worcester Wreath Company in Harrington, Maine, initially established Wreaths Across America in the early '90s. The idea originated when Morrill Worcester had an excess of wreaths and decided to donate them as a tribute to local veterans, according to the Worcester company's



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official website. Wreaths Across America obtained official recognition in 2008.

They later made arrangements to place wreaths in one of the older sections of Arlington National Cemetery, with the assistance of Maine's U.S. Senator Olympia Snowe and local volunteers. The advent of social media helped the effort grow by leaps and bounds. Today, thousands

take part in this coordinated ceremony to show heartfelt holiday appreciation for those who made the ultimate sacrifice.

GETTING INVOLVED

The Wreaths Across America theme for 2024 is "Live With Purpose." Karen Worcester, the organization's executive director, said, "Over the course of the last year, and

then especially on the escort to Arlington last December, I listened to people who had gone through great adversity, and they'd taken that adversity and turned it around as a call to action to spend the rest of their lives making sure that every day was meaningful and that they lived with purpose."

Anyone can take part individually by placing a wreath as a tribute to veterans in

their local community. You can join or help organize larger wreath-laying ceremonies, or contribute directly to the Wreaths Across America program. They offer special wreath sponsorships at Arlington National Cemetery. The organization encourages everyone to invite friends and family to take part in honoring fallen service members, this and every year.

Reaching Out

It's easy to feel disconnected when away on service duty. Thankfully, there are several thoughtful and easy ways for those who love and miss them to bridge the gap.

NOTES FROM HOME

Deployments are often lengthy, and service members' friends, family and hometowns can undergo significant changes. Stay connected by providing them with regular news updates. Include notes about marriages, births and graduations. Clip newspaper headlines covering local news. Keep them up to date on things like new businesses, new buildings and new residential developments. These care packages can help with feelings of homesickness while they're away and perhaps help with transitioning back once they return.

FAMILIAR TASTES

Along with updates about their hometown, consider purchasing preferred non-perishable delicacies that are only available locally. That might include treats like beef jerky, jams and jellies or hot sauce. Only send products with a long shelf life, since overseas mail can take a significant amount of time. Ensure that all



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containers are securely sealed when shipping these items.

PICTURE PERFECT

Include photos when you can. Deployed service members often can't take part in the holiday traditions that make this season so special. So, bring along a camera to capture all the festivities on film – including holiday lighting displays,

parades and parties. Pay close attention to children and older relatives, since their joy at this time of year can be contagious. Add special messages to the back of the images, along with names and dates.

BOOT CAMP BASICS

If your family member is still in boot camp, remember that most service branches won't

allow care packages for recruits. Wait until they finish basic training before sending any packages. In the meantime, ordinary mail is always allowed. Letters typically take around two weeks to be delivered.

PACKAGING EVERYTHING

For others who serve, combine your notes, newspaper

clippings, photos and tastes of home with other small necessities to complete your special holiday care package. That might include extra socks and lip balm, or games like playing cards, crosswords or puzzle books. Don't forget to send things like paper, envelopes and pens – since they are likely to be unable to respond if you don't.



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Holidays in a Time of War

During times of war, fighting has sometimes continued through the holidays.

In fact, one particular Dec. 25 saw a turning point in America's fight for independence. On one other notable occasion, however, fighting memorably stopped. Here's a look back:

DEC. 25, 1776

Gen. George Washington was facing harsh conditions of snow, sleet and bitter cold on this date in 1776 as he led 2,400 Continental soldiers along the icy Delaware River. They'd already faced numerous challenges on the

path to eventual victory in the American Revolution. Washington now had a daring plan, despite plunging temperatures and deteriorating weather conditions. Maintaining the utmost secrecy, Washington's strategy involved a nighttime river crossing followed by a 10-mile march to Trenton, New Jersey.

This covert maneuver was meant to surprise an enemy garrison with a dawn attack. Washington and his troops would achieve a significant military triumph for the Continental Army, and in time it began to hold an even greater significance: History shows that this battle marked a turning point for the colonies after months of demoralizing defeats. From the

perilous river crossing to the strategic triumph at Trenton, Washington's leadership restored faith in the American cause.

DEC. 25, 1914

An unforgettable pause happened on this date during the pitched battles of World War I. The 1914 Christmas Truce between the British and German lines near Ypres, Belgium, began at dawn. German soldiers emerged from their trenches and approached the Allied lines, greeting them with "Merry Christmas" in their native language. During the truce, carols were sung and food and gifts were exchanged. Servicemen even organized soccer games during this brief

respite from hostilities.

While the lower ranks celebrated the holidays in the trenches, some high command officials from both sides were reportedly furious. Others saw it as an opportunity to provide rest for their troops, while gathering intelligence on the enemy's position. Fighting eventually resumed, but the legend of the truce lives on. Today, it's celebrated by groups like the Veterans for Peace, with local chapters worldwide organizing celebrations. The English Premier League, Europe's largest soccer organization, regularly brings together under-12 teams from England, Belgium, France and Germany for the Christmas Truce Tournament.

Giving Back to Our Heroes

You can make a difference in the lives of service members and their families — and it doesn't matter if you have a direct connection to the armed forces or not.

There are several important ways everyone can express gratitude for their service, including volunteering, charitable donations and holiday-themed outreach programs. During a time when family means so much, don't forget those who keep everyone safe.

ADOPTING A FAMILY

Families who are left to celebrate the holidays without their service member might be experiencing even more stress and loneliness. There may be new financial burdens, and that is even more painful during the gift-giving time of year. So, consider brightening the season by “adopting” these families. That might involve lending a helping hand with household chores, yard work, babysitting or caring for their pet. Help alleviate their financial burdens by purchasing prepaid gift cards for everyday necessities like groceries, gas or household essentials.

If the family has young children who will miss a parent during the holidays, consider buying a special present just



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for them. You could offer to support the child's personal interests or hobbies. Their remaining parent might need assistance with tasks such as carpooling. Offer to purchase related materials or serve as an assistant coach. Helping to fill these temporary voids can also provide a sense of relief for brave members of the armed forces, while also

easing the pain of separation for everyone.

VOLUNTEERING OPPORTUNITIES

Local Veterans Administration hospitals are always in need of volunteer assistance, especially during the holiday season when so many special activities are planned. Reach out to inquire about

opportunities to help, even if it's just spending quality time with the patients. Other volunteering opportunities may be available through the local VFW. You can contact human resource directors at veterans' homes in your area.

Seek out non-affiliated local non-profit organizations whose work includes veterans' outreach. You can focus on

the VFW, VA hospital or veterans' home when they distribute gifts or fill stockings to spread holiday cheer. Then stick around for an extended visit. Some older veterans may not have friends or family to spend time with during the holiday season. Just being present could make a significant difference in their lives.

Grieving During the Holidays

Those grieving for a lost service member may struggle even more during the holiday season.

UNDERSTANDING THE LOSS

There are four levels of acceptance during the grieving process, as outlined by the Department of Veterans Affairs. First, work to accept the reality of the loss, moving past denial and acknowledging that death is sadly permanent. It's important to mourn the loss and not become distracted from the pain. Healing can't occur without facing our grief. Adjusting to this new reality without your loved one will take time. Seeking support from others is crucial while moving into this next unknown phase of life.

GETTING SUPPORT

There are numerous support groups available for those mourning loss. That includes counseling services, online resources like webinars and bereavement camps. Many are specifically designed to help service members and their families during the grieving process.

FIND A PATH FORWARD

It's important to set realistic expectations, beginning with the reminder that the holidays can be difficult. Accept helpful offers from others to



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cook, decorate or shop. Their company will be especially welcome during the holidays — and memories are sometimes a source of comfort. It might be tempting, but avoid the temptation to “cancel” the holiday.

Allow yourself to feel your authentic emotions. That means sadness, but also joy and anger. No one path is the

right one for getting through these tough times. Consider giving a donation in memory of your lost loved one. Remember that physical exercise can be an antidote for depression.

Create a new ritual if honoring older traditions are too painful. Discuss these decisions openly with friends and family.

HONORING THEIR MEMORY

Make time for personal moments of solitude and remembrance, but don't isolate yourself. Building a strong support network is essential in your healing journey.

Get together often to honor your loved one's memory. It can be one of the most

meaningful ways to cope with grief. Look over treasured photo albums and share memories.

Add commemorative ornaments to your tree at home — or create special Christmas gifts for the families of other fallen soldiers. Finding new ways to honor these brave men and women can help with closure and healing.

Vacations with a Purpose

With time off for the holidays, there's time to schedule that much-needed vacation. Why not create a travel itinerary based on honoring patriotic members of the armed sources?

These monuments and memorials are their own source of inspiration.

ARLINGTON NATIONAL CEMETERY Arlington, Va.

This well-known military cemetery of our nation is situated on land that was once owned by Confederate Gen. Robert E. Lee. Arlington serves as the final resting place for hundreds of thousands of military veterans and their dependents. Visitors are urged to pay their respects at the solemn Tomb of the Unknown Soldier, a white marble sarcophagus established in 1921 to honor unidentified service members who died in action.

NATIONAL WORLD WAR II MUSEUM New Orleans, La.

The National World War II Museum previously known as the National D-Day Museum before being officially recognized as the nation's World



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War II memorial by Congress in 2004.

The museum was established in New Orleans to acknowledge the city's significant contribution to the victory in Europe, as the local Higgins Industries designed and constructed amphibious boats used to transport troops.

NATIONAL WORLD WAR I MUSEUM Kansas City, Mo.

The Liberty Memorial was unveiled in 1926, then

officially designated by Congress as the nation's World War I memorial in 2004. The museum showcases exhibits that recount the events of the Great War and its aftermath.

NATIONAL MEMORIAL ARCH Valley Forge, Pa.

During the harsh winter of 1777-78, the fledgling Continental Army lost more than 2,500 soldiers due to disease, exposure, and starvation at their encampment in Valley

Forge. The National Memorial Arch stands as a tribute to their service and sacrifice.

NATIONAL MEDAL OF HONOR CENTER Chattanooga, Tenn.

The National Medal of Honor Heritage Center opened in 2020 as a lasting tribute to the recipients of the Medals of Honor. Their legacy is honored along with sacrifices made by recipients from the Civil War through the War on Terror.

USS ARIZONA MEMORIAL Pearl Harbor, Hawaii

This memorial commemorates the nearly 2,000 crewmen who lost their lives during the December 1941 attack on Pearl Harbor, which led America into World War II. Designated as a national shrine in 1962, the memorial pays tribute to what President Franklin D. Roosevelt described as "a date which will live in infamy."