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Merry & Bright

Nonprofit Organizations Help Military Families Enjoy Happier Holidays

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“Happy holidays” are not always a guarantee for military families. Frequent moves may leave military households far away from family and friends; lengthy deployments may separate wives from husbands and parents from children; and financial pressures may leave some service members unable to splurge on their children or each other.

Fortunately, there are a number of well-established nonprofit organizations working tirelessly all year to ensure that military families and veterans can enjoy the seasonal festivities. Some specialize in toys for children; others provide gift cards and care packages for all members of the family; and some focus on a specific type of giveaway, such as a Christmas tree. Here are some of the leading groups helping to provide holiday cheer to military families both at home and abroad.

California-based MilVet Presents Holidays For Heroes Toy Drive

“We noticed that many of the families who had a deployed parent missed out on holiday events due to childcare or financial issues,” notes Raven Hilden, founder and chief executive of MilVet, which has run a “Holidays for Heroes” toy drive since 2018. “We wanted to provide a way for children to receive gifts from their wish list and a way for families to meet others in the community to create lasting friendships and resource support.”

MilVet supports deployed troops, veterans, and their families. “Some of our programs include our monthly military care packages filled with special requests and letters from the community and youth groups, emergency veteran assistance/resources, and family support such as our Holidays for



Heroes event,” says Hilden, who is married to a USMC veteran. Last year, the program served more than 250 children.

“The Holidays for Heroes program provides gifts for families with special circumstances including those with a deployed parent, those in single parent households and families facing financial difficulties,” Hilden explains. “We are able to reach our goal with community participation in the form of toy donations, monetary donations, and fun activities to make it possible. This year we will hold the event at Perris Skydive and Santa will be skydiving for the families!”

MilVet begins taking referrals for families in need in November; families can begin placing children’s first names, ages, gender and wish list on the website www.milvet.org/santa, for the community to shop for them. “We invite the community to help shop from the children’s wish lists,” Hilden says. “We then invite the children and their family to attend a free holiday event with food, hot cocoa, snow, professional pictures with Santa, crafts by the local library, live music, giveaways, a petting zoo, and costume characters. We also provide resources for the family and an afternoon to

meet other military families for ongoing support. The children then pick up their gifts at the end of the event to take home.”

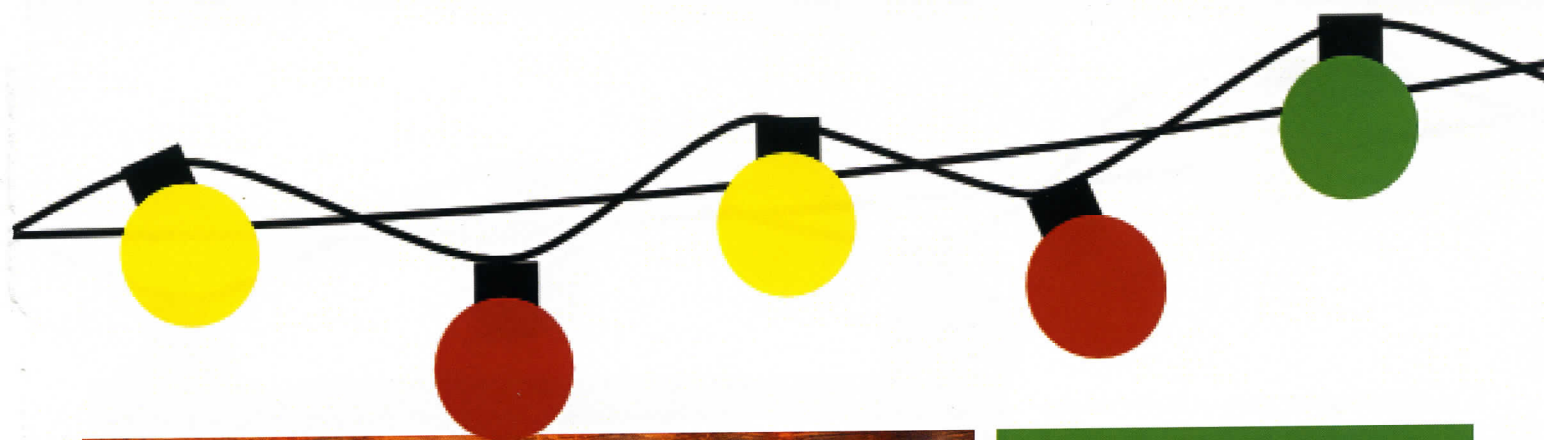
“The Holidays for Heroes event provides a fun and safe place for military families to have a complete holiday experience that they might not otherwise have,” she adds. “The event brings the community together to provide gifts and unforgettable experiences for military families with lasting memories of joy.”

Full Circle Home Helps Deployed Troops Connect with Families

Two military moms joined forces in 2007, and today, volunteer-run Full Circle Home has become a vital link between deployed service members and their families at home.

“To date, we’ve helped over 32,500 service members send their love and gifts to their hero at home; we will send out 1,400 more this Christmas,” reveals Vickie Durfee, executive director and founder. “These gifts are from service members deployed across the world to the men and women who are their source of support across the country, and sometimes, also deployed.

“Any deployed service member can sign



More Groups Helping Out

Operation HomeFront:

<https://operationhomefront.org/>
(Profiled in April 15, 2023 FAMILY)

Wreaths Across America:

<https://www.wreathsasscrossamerica.org/>
(Profiled in Nov. 15, 2022 FAMILY)

Operation Help a Hero:

<https://www.operationhelpahero.org/>

Armed Services YMCA:

<https://asymca.org/>

USO: <https://www.uso.org/>

Military Friends: <https://militaryfriends.org/>

up to send a box of gifts and their love note to their hero at home, their source of support," she continues. "These are gift sets FROM the service member TO their loved one - they are not a care package from an organization. Full Circle Home is merely the conduit to make this happen. All gift sets are underwritten by businesses and individuals across the country so there is no cost to the service members."

Durfee's son joined the U.S. Marine Corps right out of high school, and her father was a fighter pilot in World War II. "When my son was deployed, he asked me to send something to his then girlfriend, now wife, for Christmas," she recalls. "I packaged up 12 Days of Christmas gifts, with a note from my son. It included things that she would use every day and be reminded of the way it felt when she opened it, and the love she felt from my son. What I found out was that this effort was as much a gift to my son as to his girlfriend. He was so happy that he could do something special for her from around the world - I could hear the smile in his voice. The gift set was empowering not only for her, but for him as well.

"The prior year, when my son was returning from his deployment, I met an Army mom whose son was also returning," she adds. "I never expected to see her again, but the following year, Lisa Miller found out about what I was doing. She shared our info with her son's unit and has been a 'battle buddy' for me ever since. Together, we strategize what the gift set will look like, reach out to units, schedule wrapping events and more. We also take gift sets to Walter Reed National Military Medical Center so the warriors can honor those at their bedside, as well as those who have supported them through the long journey of recovering and healing."

Full Circle Home (<http://www.fullcircle-home.org/>) works with businesses and organizations to prepare the gifts and underwrite some of the 24,000 gifts they wrap in a year. "My ultimate goal would be to have every deploying service member have the opportunity to send something special to their hero at home - Christmas, Mother's Day or Father's Day," Durfee asserts. "While FCH can't bring them home, we can bring them home in spirit. Sometimes the press of the pen in writing the note is a physical reminder, a touch that

is a connection. Connections are of vital importance when you don't know what the next day, the next hour will bring. Feeling connected can help you get through a challenge."

Soldiers' Angels Provides Comfort & Support Through Adopt-A-Family program

Toys are certainly one big part of holiday joy...but gathering together for a family meal are some of the most cherished memories. One nonprofit - Soldiers' Angels - is helping make those memories by providing military families with a gift for each child and a grocery gift card to help them purchase their holiday dinner and trimmings.

"Let's face it: the economy isn't great and times are tough for many military-connected families," points out Air Force veteran Amy Palmer, president and CEO. "We don't want anyone waking up Christmas morning without anything under the tree - particularly those who have volunteered to protect and defend our nation. Adopt-A-Family is just one way we ensure that our military-connected families are shown the love and appreciation they deserve.

"The goal of our Adopt-A-Family program

is to show America's gratitude for the services and sacrifices made not just by the military service member or veteran, but by the family as a whole," explains Palmer. "We understand that military and veteran families usually live on a very tight budget, so putting together a Christmas or other winter holiday celebration can be a real challenge for some of them. The Soldiers' Angels Adopt-A-Family program provides holiday support to eligible Military and veteran families while at the same time giving businesses, organizations, and individuals the opportunity to give back to those who could use a helping hand over the holidays."

Soldiers' Angels (<https://soldiersangels.org/>) has served more than 6 million service members, veterans, and their families since being founded in 2003 by General George Patton. "Last holiday season, 1,758 families, including more than 4,500 children, were supported through the Adopt-A-Family program with presents and gift cards provided by individuals and businesses that adopted registered families," Palmer notes. "We hope to reach our goal of supporting 2,500 families this year."

Christmas Spirit Foundation Provides Trees for Troops

Nothing quite beats the look and smell of a fresh-cut Christmas tree, and the Christmas Spirit Foundation is bringing that holiday tradition to thousands of service members and their families every year.

Founded in 2005 as a nonprofit branch of the National Christmas Tree Association, the Christmas Spirit Foundation's Trees For Troops program (<https://www.treesfortroops.org/>) has provided 293,392 free Christmas trees. "We hope to provide more than 16,000 free, fresh Christmas trees in 2023," says Rick Dungey, executive director. "Thousands of trees are donated by American farm families and the public, and FedEx Freight picks up and delivers these trees to bases all around the U.S. Trees for Troops counts on donations from the public to make this program succeed year after year along with the generosity of sponsors, donors and the work of many volunteers.



"Imagine a smiling group of U.S. troops gathered around a Christmas Tree that was grown on an American farm and shipped to arrive fresh and green somewhere on the other side of the world, just in time for Christmas," Dungey continues. "Or, imagine a spouse and children sharing joyous memories of Christmas through the gift of free, real Christmas Tree while their family member is away serving our country. Trees for Troops® makes this vision a reality!"

Marine Corps Reserve Continues Successful Toys For Tots Program

Military families and disadvantaged children alike benefit from one of the oldest and most-established holiday gift-giving programs in the U.S., the Marine Corps Reserve Toys For Tots program.

Toys For Tots (<https://www.toysfortots.org/>) distributed 24.4 million toys, books, and games to 9.9 million children in need in 2022 alone. "Our mission is to provide hope and joy through the gift of toys, books, and other gifts," notes Kelley Hardison, deputy vice president of marketing and development. "Since 1947, we've distributed 652 million toys to 291 million deserving children, and last year



alone, we assisted nearly 10 million children living in poverty.

"Toys For Tots provides happiness and hope to children in need," she continues. "The toys, books, and other gifts collected and distributed by Marines and volunteers during the Christmas season offer these children recognition, confidence, and a positive memory for a lifetime. Toys for Tots is not just a Christmastime charity and is now considered to be a year-round force for good." 