



Thanksgiving on the Home Front

by **Karen Whiting**

"I can't see Daddy! He's the tallest man on the ship so where is he?" Rebecca cried. She stared at the ship's deck then jumped up and down.

It's all right. Daddy has a special goodbye for you that he's taking care of, so he's not standing on the deck. You've been in the engine room. That's where he went. Watch the top of the ship. See the tower that's the smokestack. Keep your eye on it!" I encouraged my daughter.

"But the engine's way down at the bottom. I climbed stairs and ladders to get there."

"That's right but Daddy is sending the surprise out of the smokestacks.

My husband, the engineering officer on a Coast Guard Cutter, had descended to the engine room for his first trip at sea since our two children had been born. Michael sat in the stroller watching while Becky peered into the sky, keeping her eyes fastened on the stack.

Suddenly we heard the ship's whistle blow. "Mommy, look! Balloons! Did Daddy send them?"

"Yes. That's his goodbye. Run and catch one as it comes to shore."

Jim had his men blow up bags of balloons and stuff them into the stack to send a farewell to our children and the rest of the crew's children.

We would not see Jim for two months. He'd be away for Thanksgiving but return a few days before Christmas *IF* the patrol stayed on schedule.

Becky cheered, "I got one, a red one." Michael tried to grab her balloon. The Captain's son walked over and handed Michael a blue balloon. We stood on the sandy Hawaiian beach and watched until the ship became a little dot on the ocean.

"Will Daddy be home soon?"

"No, dear. Not until Christmas.

"You said my birthday comes before Christmas. Daddy come for my birthday."

"Grandma and Papa will come for your birthday. Daddy will be at sea."

The questions had just begun, worse than a car trip full of the repeated pleas, "Are we there yet?" Thankfully Michael had not started talking.

We gathered that evening for a potluck with the wives and children of our men at sea. The women stationed on the ship were all single. I laughed as I overheard a teenager point to Michael and exclaim, "Why he's the man of his family now until his Dad comes home!"

Michael must have understood. The next morning he grabbed Jim's razor and cut himself trying to shave. I wiped tears from my eyes thinking of how my son wanted to be brave and help with Jim gone. Later I bought Michael a toy shaving kit that he used for the next two months.

Each week I placed a parcel in the mailbox for the children to find. It contained a book and tape recording of Jim reading the book and chatting about the pictures. He even told them when to turn the pages. We were so unsure of the mail that we decided this would be the best way to give our little ones surprises from Jim. Each night I put the children to bed and played the latest tape again. His voice settled the little ones down and comforted me, too. It seemed like he was there and I could take a break and let Jim finish the bedtime routine.

As Thanksgiving drew near the children opened a book about the Mayflower. Becky felt sure the book described the life on her Dad's ship, too. She questioned that Thanksgiving did not happen until after the ship landed. It was hard to explain that the Mayflower journey occurred long ago and that we still remembered that famous safe arrival. I suggested that we would have two Thanksgivings, one with her grandparents and one with her father. We made pinecones turkeys to decorate our home.

My parents arrived and we celebrated Becky's third birthday a few days before Thanksgiving. Judy, the Captain's wife called and invited us to her home to celebrate Thanksgiving. She planned to invite all of the officer's families. I offered to bake pies, my mother's specialty. Mom and I cooked pumpkin, lemon meringue, and apple. We did not make Jim's favorite, pecan. His grandmother who lived in Georgia had sent pecans from her trees but I wanted to save them for Jim's homecoming.

That Thursday the wives and children gathered at Judy's home. We played games and talked until dinner. Judy looked around and then announced to my father, "John you're the only man here, so will you carve the Turkey."

My Dad grinned and took the knife Judy held out and said, "This is a pleasure to be surrounded by so much beauty."



Everyone stood and watched the carving of the turkey. Most of us wiped away tears as we thought of our husbands at sea, unable to share our meal or perform this annual tradition.

Before the meal, we held hands and prayed. We thanked the Lord for our freedom and asked Him to keep the men and women aboard the USCG Mellon safe.

It was hard to eat. I did not have a big appetite as I thought of Jim. Michael and Becky enjoyed the meal and festivities. My dad told stories and jokes to lift the spirits of the women. He mentioned part of a letter I had read to him. We all began sharing news from the one mail drop the ship had a few weeks earlier.

Judy reminded us of the group care package we had sent in the care of her husband. He had been told to not open it at the noon meal on Thanksgiving Day. We chatted about the contents and how our husbands would react. We had held up a sheet, showing only our legs in a group photo to remind the men we were waiting for their return. We promised a surprise to the man who could match the legs up correctly but later learned that as soon as one man stated, "No one had better identify my wife's legs!" The comment evidently brought laughter and cheerful agreement but also ended the challenge.

My parents left the next week. To pass the days remaining until Jim's return I set up a small tree and helped Becky and Michael each make an ornament every day to decorate the evergreen boughs. I said by the time it was filled Dad would come home. I designed a new creation during the children's naptime and also chose a Bible verse to match. I used the craft time for daily devotions.

A few days later Becky invited a friend stating, "Amy's Daddy's away too, so she wants to make an ornament. Then she can surprise her daddy like I'm doing." Within a week children filled the house to make ornaments. Becky had kept her pinecone turkey from Thanksgiving to show Jim. She hung hers on a branch, saying, "Daddy missed Thanksgiving, so I put my turkey on our Christmas tree."

Jim laughed when he returned as Becky described each decoration, telling a story of what she did as she made each one. Michael danced around the tree and pointed to the ones he helped make. Becky pointed out the turkey and described how papa was the only man at Thanksgiving so he had to cut the turkey. She added, "But I was sad you were not here."

Jim picked her up and said, "Well I'm thankful I'm home now."

Becky exclaimed, "That makes it Thanksgiving again. We are having a second Thanksgiving! Mommy was right."

Thanksgivings have come and gone and many times we have invited people who live far from family to join us. But we will always recall that year and our lesson that Thanksgiving is not just one day but every day that we stop to be thankful.

Thanksgiving Tips For Reaching Out To People Separated From Family

- Send letters and care packages to active duty service personnel. Include a toy turkey or Thanksgiving decoration.
- Invite families or singles far from home to your home.
- Help at a food shelter or with a Thanksgiving food drive.
- If you live near an airport that has a USO office, find out what you can donate in food for that day or volunteer to spend time there to greet traveling military personnel.
- If you have neighbors with a mom or dad away for the holiday invite them to your home or surprise them with flowers or a special treat. Chat with them and fill their loneliness.

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Karen Whiting (<https://karenwhiting.com/>) is a mother of five and a grandmother who loves cooking for family gatherings. Her 26 books include Stories of Faith and Courage from the *Home Front: From the French and Indian Wars to the War to the Wars in Iraq and Afghanistan*, filled with true heart-warming stories. Learn more at www.KarenWhiting.com (<https://karenwhiting.com/>)

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