



'Part of our tradition': 400+ Marines to share Thanksgiving with Coachella Valley families

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Members of Toscana Country Club celebrate American Friends of our Armed Forces' 12th annual Adopt-A-Marine for Thanksgiving in November 2018. Toscana Country Club is one of the 10 clubs participating in the event, with more than 400 Marines being hosted by families. (Photo: Shannon Wilsey)

Nearly 500 young Marines stationed at Marine Corps Air Ground Combat Center Twentynine Palms will be treated to a Thanksgiving meal at one of 10 Coachella Valley

country clubs participating in the “Adopt-A-Marine” program, now in its 12th year of operation.

Around 9 a.m. on Thanksgiving morning, the Marines will board chartered buses and depart from the base to these country clubs, where they’ll receive a hero’s welcome, and enjoy games and competitions, including pickleball and putting contests. Then, they’ll share a Thanksgiving dinner with host families. Post-meal activities include watching football games, swimming, playing board games or just hanging out and talking with the families.

Walt and Judy Van Benthuyzen, residents of Toscana County Club in Indian Wells, founded the “Adopt-A-Marine” program through their charity, American Friends of Our Armed Forces.

It all started when Walt and a friend heard that families could arrange with the base to host Marines for Thanksgiving Day. So, 13 years ago, they drove up to the base, picked up four Marines and treated them to a Thanksgiving meal.



Walt and Judy Van Benthuyzen, founders of American Friends of Our Armed Forces and organizers of the local Adopt-A-Marine Program stand with an American flag on the patio of their home in Indian Wells, Calif. on Monday, November 25, 2019. (Photo: Vickie Connor/The Desert Sun)

The next year, they formalized their relationship with the base and other country clubs expressed interest in the program, which has continued to grow since its inception.

“We have roughly 480 Marines that will be going out to the community and they’re all basically 18, 19 year-olds at their first duty station away from home,” said Capt. Shelly Ochoa, Adjutant for Air Control Training Squadron and the base coordinator for this year’s Adopt-A-Marine program. “The Marines are very excited to go out into the community and be around family and getting to be in the community and see other things besides Twentynine Palms.”

The Marines participate voluntarily in the program.

“We basically reach out to the Marines and ask them who has plans to go home and who plans to stay here,” Ochoa said. “There’s a lot of them that can’t afford tickets to go home, so they either just stay here. Or they don’t have the best family experience back home.”

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'It's become part of our tradition'

This is the fifth year The Reserve Club, a private golf club and residential community situated within a stunning expanse of desert off Portola Road in Indian Wells, is hosting Marines for Thanksgiving.

Jerry and Lynn Pharris, who split time between their home at The Reserve and their residence in Newport Beach, heard about the program from Walt. An empty nest one Thanksgiving prompted the couple to explore options for holiday entertaining.

"This was one of the few Thanksgivings that we didn't have our family here – our family, meaning we have three kids and 10 grandkids," Jerry said. "This was a Thanksgiving that they were going to 'the other side of the family.' So, Lynn and I were here by ourselves and we tried to figure out how we could do something that would be interesting – and how could we give back."



Reserve Club host families and visiting Marines from Marine Corps Air Ground Combat Center in Twentynine Palms, Calif. (Photo: Nicole Hughes)

The couple got the ball rolling and, that first year, they hosted six Marines at their home.

"Now it's a club event," Lynn said. "It's really expanded. They put in a barbecue lunch and they made it bigger and better. They put club resources behind what we're doing, so it made it really nice. And everyone looks forward to it – it's become part of our tradition and culture of the club."

Greg and Stephanie Ehlers, also members at The Reserve, threw their support behind the annual event.

"I used to drive for SOS (Soldiers Organized Services, in which volunteers provide transportation for Marines from Palm Springs International Airport to the Twentynine Palms base). My dad was in the Navy, and I've always supported the service members," said Stephanie, who is also involved in Walt's charity, American Friends of Our Armed Forces.

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Lynn Pharris

"A few years ago, we wanted to do something special so we asked if we could have a putting tournament," Stephanie continued.

Now, the Ehlers sponsor the tournament.

At the end of the putting course, a ring is drawn around the 18th hole and the Marines try to putt the ball inside the ring. If they are successful, they are

given a \$20 bill. In the end, all of the Marines "win" \$20.

"Last year we had for the first time a young man who had a hole-in-one," Stephanie said. "We gave him \$100 and he was so excited."

Another bonus for the Marines is a trip to the club's pro shop, where they can select any item they want – it could be a shirt, a hat, a pair of pants, a sweater or sunglasses. An anonymous donor foots the bill for these gifts.

'What Thanksgiving is all about'

A busload of 40 Marines from Twentynine Palms will arrive at The Reserve Club around 11 a.m. on Thanksgiving, where they'll receive a warm and resounding welcome then enjoy a barbecue lunch at the club. After lunch, the Marines will head to the putting course, where they'll be met by host families and other club members.

After the putting contest, the Marines will go with their assigned families to enjoy an afternoon of food and friendship.

The Marines are pre-assigned to host families during the planning process. If an emergency or other situation arises where a Marine needs to be contacted, the base knows where to find them. At least two Marines are assigned to each family, though some families host as many as six.



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"We find the young Marines many times are pretty shy and having that second Marine along helps get the conversation started," Walt said.

All Marines will enjoy a Thanksgiving meal either at the hosts' home or at the clubhouse during the 3 p.m. dinner seating.

The Pharris' will host the Marines at their home, where they'll share a meal together in their large formal dining room, with seating for 12. While Lynn originally cooked the entire spread, now she orders from the club.

"Whole, big, uncarved turkey, mashed potatoes and two or three kinds of vegetables and salad and pies," Lynn said. "Just a regular traditional Thanksgiving. It's a Norman Rockwell kind of feel."

Learning more about the Marines and their lives is a priority at the Pharris household.

"What we do is, around the table, I'll make a statement, like, 'OK guys, in about five minutes, I'm going to ask you where you want to be in five years,'" Jerry said. "Where do you see yourself?" and then Lynn and I will start. Then we go around the room.

"Thanksgiving doesn't feel right now unless we have some people to share it with."

Lynn Pharris

"Sometimes they'll say, 'I don't know.' They come from a lot of broken homes. Some of the stories we hear are pretty sad. They say, 'I have no family or dad's over here, mom's over here, they don't talk.' No family life for the most part, so the Marines are their family."

"We've heard some very interesting stories from these kids," Jerry continued. "That's when you feel good about helping them out. They come into a place like The Reserve, these guys have said this gives

them hope. 'If we work hard, we can make something of ourselves.'"

The experience is likely one the Marines will not soon forget.

"I don't think a lot of them have experienced this before – or have had the generosity in the past to be able to do something like this," Ochoa said. "So I think they're all very

excited to go and experience something new – and it's probably going to be eye-opening for most of the Marines here that are very young and haven't had the ability to do something like this."

As much as the hospitality and generosity of the host families has a lasting impact on the Marines, these families are similarly touched by their special guests.

As a result of her interaction with the Marines, Lynn said she wants to share more with others at Thanksgiving.

"It's not just your own immediate family – there are people who really need to be included in a Thanksgiving celebration," Lynn said. "To feel that they're a part of it too and that they have a family atmosphere they can be in for that day and they love it. Thanksgiving doesn't feel right now unless we have some people to share it with that otherwise wouldn't be able to."



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The Marines' presence has also had an impact on her young grandchildren.

"It makes them outward bound – that it's just not all about you," Lynn said. "It makes them understand what Thanksgiving is all about and what giving is all about and helping other people."

"For the Marines, it makes them feel, not at home, but as close to home as they're going to get," Stephanie said.

Before they board the buses around 6 p.m. for the return trip to the base, the Marines receive a goody bag filled with necessities and snacks, including socks, razors, toothpaste, granola bars and other items. Host families pack up extra food and cookies so they'll have a meal for the next day.

By the time the Marines return to Twentynine Palms, they'll be at least a little bit transformed by their experience, Ochoa said.

"The Marines, usually when they get there, they get off the bus and they're pretty shy, they're not familiar with where they're going, but by the time they get back to the base, they're all smiles, they're happy, they're full," Ochoa said. "It's just a great experience. They go in one way, they come out the other way, kind of like boot camp."

Participating clubs

These Coachella Valley country clubs participate in the “Adopt-A-Marine” program through American Friends of Our Armed Forces.

The Reserve

Toscana Country Club

Desert Horizons Country Club

Hideaway Golf Club

Indian Palms County Club & Resort

Palm Valley Country Club

Rancho La Quinta Country Club

Sun City Palm Desert

The Lakes Country Club

Trilogy at The Polo Club



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