



It is cold, muddy, and the cities are in ruins. It is France, November 1918, and over a million Americans are about to miss Thanksgiving, being far away from home.

The First World War has ended, Germany having signed an armistice only a few weeks before. The rebuilding, however, has just begun. It will be a long time before the Americans – doughboys, as they are popularly known – sail back across the Atlantic. Many are wounded and most are sick; either homesick or from disease.

Back in the states, people are rationing food. The government asks them to cut back on sugar (none on fruits or in desserts, less on cereals and in coffee) and refrain from eating turkey and cranberry sauce. Thanksgiving dinner will be as “home grown as possible,” with each family expected to grow their own food.

*“Everybody is expected to remember that other nations are subsisting on tight belt rations,”* declares one newspaper.<sup>1</sup> Since our Allies know only scorched fields and devastated economies, their ability to feed themselves – much less our troops – is limited. *“Only by moderation in use of food on our part can this condition be bettered.”*

After all, everyone knows someone “over there.”

In the trenches and the hospitals, the doughboys write letters to their loved ones. They are anxious for news, stories, and written kisses, anything to feel closer to home. Anything to make home closer to them.

Then, the flyers arrive.

Five-hundred-thousand soldiers receive a copy of Abraham Lincoln’s legendary proclamation: that all Americans, including those sojourning in foreign lands, should give thanks “with one heart and one voice” for their blessings. Lincoln’s words strike a chord. Auxiliary organizations set up Thanksgiving Day celebrations for the benefits of the troops. The Y.M.C.A. arranges football games between rival units. Those soldiers who were professional actors, comedians, and singers before the war stage plays and dances. Technicians erect movie screens; carpenters lay down dance floors. And all the turkey, cranberries, cider and pumpkin pie willingly forfeited back home arrives via the Red Cross. The sick and the wounded, the bent and broken – each gets a Thanksgiving feast.

Perhaps it is not quite like mother would have made it. But it is close.

Then, an announcement comes down the lines. All over France, families are inviting American soldiers into their houses. This family can host three men. This family can host five. And on and on and on. What little they have to share – and for most, it is little indeed – is shared gladly. Commanders publish official lists of those soldiers who most desire a meal around an actual table, in an actual dining room. In response, local French communities take the lists and send out personalized invitations.

All so these strangers can feel closer to home.

In France, there is no such holiday as Thanksgiving. This year, the French celebrate it anyway. And on both sides of the Atlantic, people unite with one heart and one voice, just as Lincoln wanted.

*That was Thanksgiving, over 100 years ago.*

Isn't it astounding to see how, even after such a long and horrible conflict, people still found so much to be thankful for? Even more astounding is how people *relished* the opportunity to give thanks. They saved and skimped and shared. They opened their doors to strangers.

They worked just to make Thanksgiving *possible*.

Now, over a century later, we think about all we have to be thankful for. It's an enormous list. Unlike those doughboys, we are not wounded, hungry, or homesick. Unlike their families, we do not have to ration food or go without. And unlike the French, we do not see a ruined, smoking skyline whenever we step outside our doors.

Yes, we have so much to be thankful for.

We are thankful for this country. We are thankful for all people in our lives who have ever shown us kindness. We are thankful for the convenience of this modern world we live in.

And we are thankful for a chance to express our gratitude every Thanksgiving.

This year, let us do as President Lincoln asked and give thanks with one heart and one voice. Let us remember how far we've come since that day in 1918.

Let's have a wonderful Thanksgiving.

Sincerely,



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**Sources:**

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