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Army

EDITORIAL

Editor Kathleen Curt
kcurthoys@militarytimes
Senior Reporter Kyle
kremper@militarytimes
Ground Combat Rej
tsouth@militarytimes

Military Times Exec

Andrew Tilghman
atilghman@militarytimes
Managing Editor Ho
haltman@militarytimes
Deputy Editor and C
Leo Shane III
lshane@militarytimes
Pentagon Bureau CI
mmyers@militarytimes
News Editor Steve W
sweigand@militarytimes
Associate Editor, Mil
jsimkins@militarytimes
Navy Reporter Mark
mfaram@militarytimes
Marine Corps Report
ssnow@militarytimes
Air Force Reporter Si
slosey@militarytimes
Senior Reporter Geo
geoffz@militarytimes
Editor, Military Com
kjowers@militarytimes
Editor, Rebootcamp
galtman@militarytimes
Associate Editor, Reb
ngross@militarytimes
Early Bird Brief Edit
kremper@militarytimes

DIGITAL OPERATION

Senior Editor, Digital
Christian Lowe
clowe@militarytimes.c

VIDEO & PHOTO

Video and Photo Edit
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Multimedia Journalist
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mgreenberg@militarytimes
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THE SMOKING AGE HIKE IS GOOD FOR THE MILITARY

By Army Col. James Tyson Currie (ret.)

The Defense Department has stated that 175,000 currently serving service members will die of tobacco use. To put that number into context, that's more soldiers, sailors, airmen and Marines than were killed in combat in the American Revolution, the War of 1812, the war with Mexico, the war with Spain, WWI, Korea, Vietnam, Iraq and Afghanistan combined.

The sad part of this is that 38 percent of current military smokers began smoking after they joined the military — which almost all of the enlisted personnel did before they turned 21 years old. If the legal tobacco use age were raised to 21, almost all of those who enlist in the military would not be able to smoke legally for their first few years. According to the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, 95 percent of smokers start by age 21. Raising the legal age of tobacco use to 21

would cause a significant reduction in its use.

Why does the Defense Department care about tobacco use among service members? After all, most of these premature deaths will occur after these folks have left the military. They then become the VA's problem as veterans suffer from emphysema and lung cancer and all the other ailments that smoking causes.

For one thing, smoking-related illnesses cost the Pentagon some \$1.6 billion per year in direct outlays.

Second, smoking is a readiness issue. Smokers are not as fit and capable as non-smokers. They spend more time in the hospital when they are wounded or injured, meaning they are away from their units longer.

But we know it's not simple. There is a military culture which encourages tobacco use. "Willie and Joe" from World War II exemplify it. The war-weary GI gazes with the thousand-yard stare, cigarette dangling from his lips. Today's GI is likely to

dip or chew or smoke, all of which can lead to really bad health results.

I remember when boxes of C-rations came with three-packs of cigarettes in them, together with matches. This was the tobacco companies' way of hooking more military folks on tobacco use. They actually started doing this during WWI at a time when men smoked cigars, and cigarettes were not regarded as manly. It was all nefarious, as we know from the tobacco company documents that have been released over the years. Members of the military services were a particular target for these companies.

Raising the legal age for tobacco use to 21 would save countless lives and billions of dollars. It's a step worth taking.

Retired Army Col. James Tyson Currie is executive director of the Commissioned Officers Association of the U.S. Public Health Service, one of the seven uniformed services of the federal government.