

# HEAVY DUTY

*Citing youth obesity as a threat to national security, military leaders hope to turn the tide, starting with schools.*

BY WHITNEY PIPKIN



In 2006, three years before the Pentagon published a report diagnosing American obesity as a threat to national security, Lt. Gen. Mark Hertling was already seeing the symptoms. Stationed with troops in Europe at the time, he saw the fitness shortfalls plaguing troops firsthand as he equipped some 160,000 new soldiers at the helm of Initial Military Training. While these training groups represented the cream of the recruiting crop – the soldier hopefuls not disqualified for being overweight, undereducated or having criminal records, among other leading factors – they still bore the traits of an increasingly unhealthy culture.

Even those who met the Army's height and weight requirements and passed its fitness test showed signs of previously sedentary and nutrient-poor lifestyles. Bone density and muscle development issues led to a proliferation of injuries during training; tooth decay from sugar-rich diets added to health-care costs and downtime. They were not just unprepared for battle – many weren't healthy enough to endure training.

What Hertling, now retired, and other leaders saw anecdotally was soon supported by a series of official reports. And the evidence of a generation less able to meet the physical requirements of service is piling up.

Today, one of every four young adults of prime recruiting age is disqualified from service because of excess body fat. Weight-related medical issues are now the No. 1 factor keeping young people from serving, according to surveys conducted by the military and the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC).

A cultural lack of nutrition and exercise also is evident among those who do meet the initial physical requirements to join the military. One study found that 14 percent of male Army recruits said they had not exercised or done any sports in a typical week prior to joining. Less-fit recruits are prone to the types of leg and ankle injuries that have sent more soldiers home from Iraq and Afghanistan than combat wounds.

The Army and other branches have begun cracking down on soldiers who don't make the physical-fitness cut, replacing the leniency that had accompanied a surge in soldier recruitment during two wars with a slimmer force. More than 1,600 troops were dismissed from the Army in the first 10 months of 2012 for being out of shape, compared to 116 in 2007.

But what about the next time the country needs to recruit a fit force – and quickly?

Projections show that the number of obese adults in most states will crest over 50 percent by 2030, according to an annual report by Trust for America's Health. The CDC and the military define "obese" as weighing above what is generally thought healthy for a given height. A body mass index (BMI) of 30 or higher is considered obese.

The increase in obesity among adults tracks with its steeply rising rate among today's youth, which has tripled over the past 40 years. The lack of fitness among U.S. children is a sobering symptom of its unhealthy culture and, according to one group, an indicator that the country may not be able to answer the call of duty in the future.

**A TEAM SPORT** An organization of more than 400 former U.S. military leaders is starting young, waging its battle against the bulge in schools.

Members of the Washington-based Mission: Readiness see the vending machines in school halls, bottomless French fries in cafeterias and the demise of physical education classes as a threat to national security. They see today's youth as tomorrow's recruits and can't ignore their alarming trajectory when it comes to physical health.

"The folks we're looking to enter the military in 2025 are entering school today," says Norman Seip, a retired Air Force general who has memorized

many of the statistics since joining Mission: Readiness in 2009. "If you're overweight by 10 or 15 years of age, the statistics show that there's an 80 percent chance of obesity by 25."

Seip, who is in his 60s, joined Mission: Readiness because he wants each generation to have the opportunity to "do better" than the one before. He wants the military to have the best pool of candidates to choose from and imagines that as the economy improves the competition for recruits will become steep.

As a squadron commander, he has had to discharge airmen who couldn't meet the Air Force's weight standards, and says "it's one of the hardest things to do."

Along with passing physical fitness tests, members of the armed forces have to meet height and weight requirements or body fat standards. A 2008 Department of Defense study found that nearly 5,000 servicemembers were discharged for failing to meet those standards, costing the department an estimated \$180 million to train and recruit additional forces that year.

No wonder the obesity epidemic, which the American Medical Association officially declared a disease last year – one affecting more than a third of U.S. adults – worries military leaders.

America's weight gain has been linked to everything from socioeconomic status and cheap food to sedentary day jobs and family history. Experts agree that fast food and an aversion to exercise have helped increase waistlines and that better habits are key to reversing the trend. But there's little they can do to instill sweeping cultural changes in a country where what we eat is a very personal decision.

While the military has made changes to its dietary offerings on bases, and others are working to do the same in schools, the rest is largely up to individuals.

"It will be a team sport," says Seip, noting that the work of Mission: Readiness is one small component. "There's a place for government, parents, kids, schools, the medical community, and (the) food and beverage industry. They have to decide what's in the best interest for that generation of kids that need healthy choices."

**'SILVER BUCKSHOT'** For a problem rooted in culture that appears to get worse with each generation, Seip and his colleagues are determined to address it at the source.

Dennis Benchoff, a retired Army general and former chief of staff at Army Recruiting Command,

quotes the old proverb, “An ounce of prevention is worth a pound of cure.” The preventive health measures he is working on as a member of Mission: Readiness are multipronged.

Children consume up to half their daily calories while at school, leading nutrition experts and the Institute of Medicine to declare schools a focal point of efforts to combat childhood obesity.

The nonpartisan group released its first “Too Fat to Fight” report in 2010, showing the small pool of eligible military recruits on a path to even slimmer margins as childhood obesity rates balloon.

# MORE THAN FINE

*Officer's efforts to help an airman lose weight led him to get – and stay – in shape.*

Jay Stratton didn't lose weight to join the military. He did it to help someone else stay in.

A major in the Air Force Reserves, Stratton was supervising commander for a reserve squadron when the Air Force added a new rule to slim its force: a maximum waist measurement.

Stratton, 42, said he barely came in below the new 39-inch limit (measured around the belly button) at the time. Meanwhile, an airman in his squadron was “nowhere near being fine” and needed help to lose the weight.

“I said, ‘Look, I’m going to help you lose weight so you can stay in,’” Stratton says. “He had 15 years of service, and if he didn’t pass they’d boot him out.”

After a decade of commuting in and out of the Washington area for his day job, Stratton had put on a few pounds, too. He’d been reading books about nutrition and fitness since the late 1990s but hadn’t applied what he’d learned.

He did now.

“I started educating him on how he should eat and exercise – everything I knew. I said, ‘I’ll live this with you, lead by example,’” Stratton remembers.

So he did. In October 2009, Stratton began religiously applying his mantra about fitness – eating the right foods, and exercising with focus and intensity.

He started writing down what he had learned over the years to share with others in the military. He saw the airman he was trying to help only two days each month, so it was difficult to keep him motivated.

Over the course of six months, Stratton’s body changed dramatically. He dropped 10 inches from his waist and shed 85 pounds, ending up at 155 pounds (and adding some muscle so he’d avoid being underweight for his height).

That same year, its fleet of retired generals and admirals expressed support for the Healthy, Hunger-Free Kids Act championed by first lady Michelle Obama. The legislation passed and, as a result, the vast majority of schools in the country have updated their nutrition standards for school meals, helping to reduce the caloric and sugar intake of many students.

Benchoff said the group isn’t trying to turn schools into military recruitment camps. It is trying to ensure children have the opportunity to serve if they so choose.



*Maj. Jay Stratton shoulder throws a Marine during martial arts training at Camp Leatherneck in Afghanistan's Helmand province. In 2009, the Air Force added a maximum waist requirement, motivating the officer to take personal fitness more seriously. DAVIDS*

Stratton had seen firsthand the changes that could happen – despite the long commute and family dinners with two kids and a wife at home – if he put his mind to it. Unfortunately, the airman he had been trying to encourage was not as successful.

“I could tell him everything, and he would say ‘OK, OK.’ Then, at the end of the day, every month I was having a radical change and he wasn’t changing at all,” Stratton says.

Stratton continued to work with him in attempts to get the weight off, but nothing worked. After two years of trying, the airman was released from the Air Force Reserve for failing to meet the physical requirements.

For Stratton, fitness had taken on new importance. He kept the weight off through another deployment to Afghanistan – his eighth. Staying fit has been harder since he returned to the desk job, but he’s committed.

Stratton is now working on a book he hopes will help other military members stay in shape.

“Even if a young child doesn’t want to serve, being fit, mentally alert and staying out of trouble gives them a wealth of opportunities they wouldn’t have,” he says. “We want to improve the overall condition of young Americans so that, if they’re interested, they can serve.”

Mission: Readiness wants to see schools have access to healthful foods and cafeteria workers have the training and equipment to prepare them.

Last summer, the group took on another foe of healthy eating in America’s schools: snacks. The group is still pressing for the USDA to update standards for snack foods and beverages sold in school vending machines, stores and a la carte lines. Members said it didn’t make sense to tighten health measures on school lunches without addressing the junk food many kids buy while on school grounds.

To get the message across, the group of military leaders uses illustrations that are in their wheelhouse, continuing to tie the issues back to national security. For example, they say the amount of junk food kids consume in schools each year – the equivalent of 2 billion candy bars – would weigh more than the aircraft carrier USS *Midway*.

“When you see retired generals and admirals talk about kids in a lunchroom, we’re able to frame it as America’s problem, as a national security issue,” Seip says. “We don’t have a silver bullet. This is silver buckshot, I like to say, aimed in the right direction.”

The group of leaders is also aiming to encourage physical education in schools and among youths as part of a holistic approach.

Benchoff first noticed the effect of America’s lack of fitness on national security in 1980, when he was assigned to Army Recruiting Command. The Army had fallen 17,000 soldiers short of recruiting goals the previous year – the equivalent of an armored division – following the end of the draft.

Benchoff was charged with researching how to prevent future shortfalls. He learned that half the high school graduates the Army was targeting were not qualified to serve due to medical, physical, mental or moral reasons. The primary factor, even then, was recruits being overweight or dealing with hypertension. Many couldn’t pass the physical fitness exams.

After Benchoff retired and was approached by Mission: Readiness, he found that the number of recruits now disqualified from service for those same factors is 75 percent. He didn’t have to imagine the problem the military would have if a larger force is suddenly needed.

**HISTORY** This is not the first time the United States has squared off against fitness and nutrition issues, declaring obesity a threat to national security. Nor is it the first time the solution has targeted young people, says Dr. Chip East, director of guidance at the U.S. Military Academy in West Point, N.Y., and author of a historical review of physical readiness training in the Army.

President Dwight Eisenhower launched the Presidential Council on Youth Fitness in 1948 with military readiness in mind (the council has had several names since then and became the President’s Council on Fitness, Sports and Nutrition in 2010). A study in the late 1940s revealed European children to be far more fit than U.S. youth, more than half of whom failed a basic test of leg lifts, situps and toe touches. An Army general during World War II, Eisenhower was keenly aware that half the men who showed up for the draft had been deemed physically unfit (though the problem was more muscular deficiency than obesity at the time, hence the need for Captain America-type transformations).

A handful of initiatives to address troop fitness ramped up during the war, including a Victory Corps program that encouraged high school students to take on physical fitness regiments and other vocational training related to the war effort.

Concerned that poor nutrition was leaving troops and future recruits unprepared, President Harry Truman signed the National School Lunch Act in 1946 to provide additional funding for states to serve school meals that met federal nutrition standards.

“It is hereby declared to be the policy of Congress, as a measure of national security, to safeguard the health and well-being of the nation’s children and to encourage the domestic consumption of nutritious agricultural commodities and other food,” the legislation stated.

While our idea of what constitutes “nutritious agricultural commodities” may have changed since then, the basics of the obesity conundrum are this: Americans need to eat less and move more. But if personal health isn’t enough to inspire life changes, will obesity’s threat to national security do the trick?

“This happened fairly quickly,” Seip says. “It will probably take longer to reduce the trend. But we think it’s doable.” 🍌

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