1945 November 12-18

Cigarette Shower

—Tribune Photo

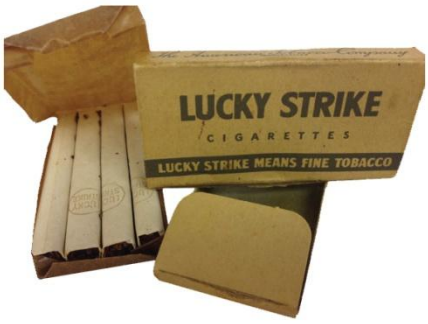
Take The Word of T5 Roy R. Schmitt, Manitowoc, Wis., left, and Rudy Silberschmidt, 231 North 14th, hospitalized veterans depend for cigarettes upon organizations like the American Legion auxiliary. The two happened into the American Legion club rooms Friday night and congratulated Miss Florence Kabat, auxiliary president, on the organization's cigarette shower for veterans at King, Mendota and Wood, Wis., hospitals. Schmitt, on leave from Mayo General hospital, Galesburg, Ill., is visiting Miss Ann Silberschmidt, 207 South 21st. Silberschmidt was a patient at Mayo before his discharge from the army a year ago this month. Both know what cigarettes mean to boys in the hospitals. The American Legion auxiliary opened its second annual cigarette shower for veterans Armistice Day and closed it at the Saturday night dance celebrating the national auxiliary's silver anniversary.

(*La Crosse Tribune*, 1945 November 18, page 8)

Baby showers. Bridal showers. Cigarette showers? Cigarette showers were apparently a thing in 1945.

But it should hardly be surprising since cigarettes were as much a staple to servicemen in World War II as C-rations. In fact, C-rations in World War II included a "mini-pack of either three or four Old Gold, Chesterfield, Lucky Strike, or Camel cigarettes, along with a fold of waterproof paper matches." This

practice continued until 1976. Soldiers smoked to relieve boredom or stress. Even the Supreme Commander of Allied Forces in Europe, General Dwight D. Eisenhower, chain-smoked four packs a day.[1]



C-ration cigarettes

(National Museum of the United States Army)

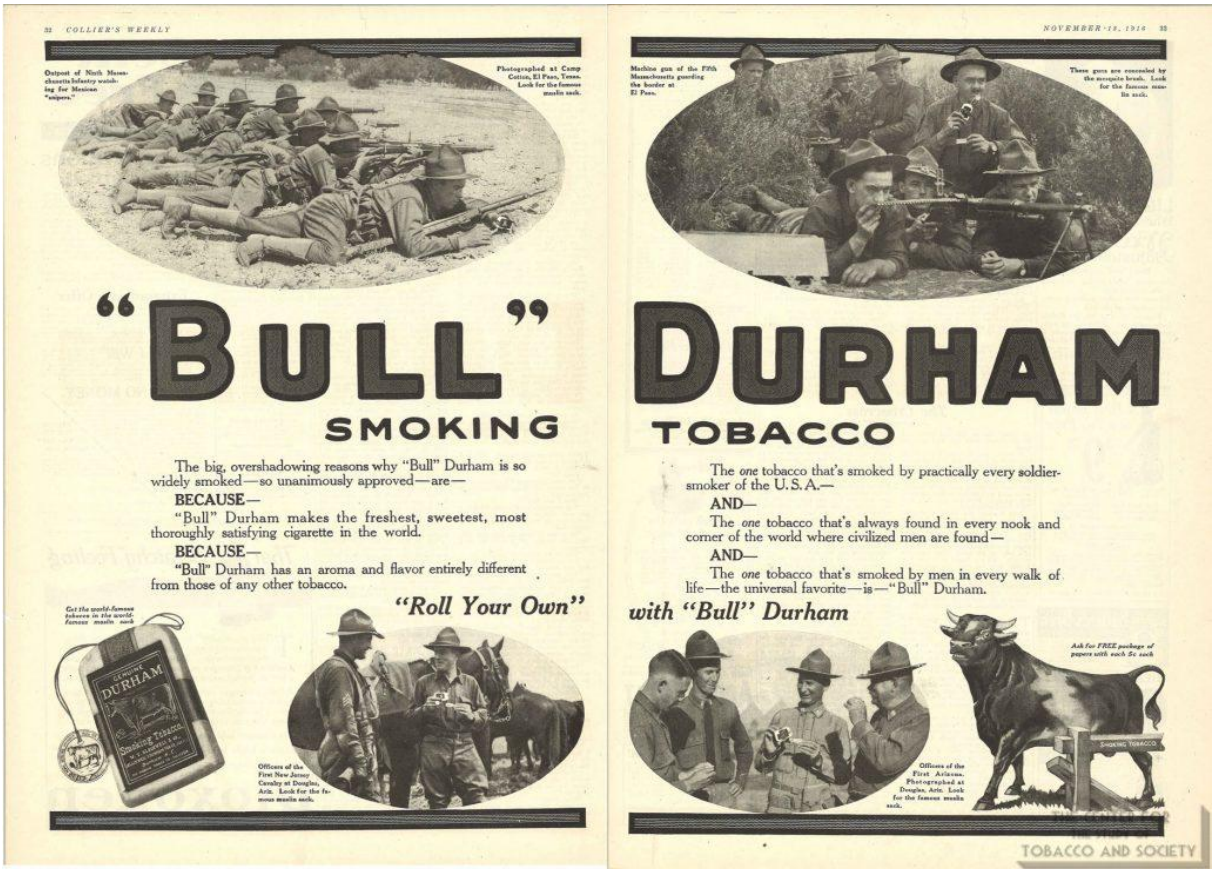
Tobacco companies were anxious to sell their cigarettes to the armed forces and provide them to the USO for care packages with the goal of building brand loyalty in a huge market.[2] It was akin to a drug dealer giving away free samples to increase his market share.

Even soldiers in the midst of combat can be seen in contemporary photographs smoking a cigarette.

Angelo Klonis, U.S. Army, on Saipan; photo by W. Eugene Smith[3]

(Warhistoryonline.com)

The association of smoking with the military goes back to at least World War I. Advertisements touted it as an almost patriotic duty to provide the soldiers in the trenches with cigarettes.[4]

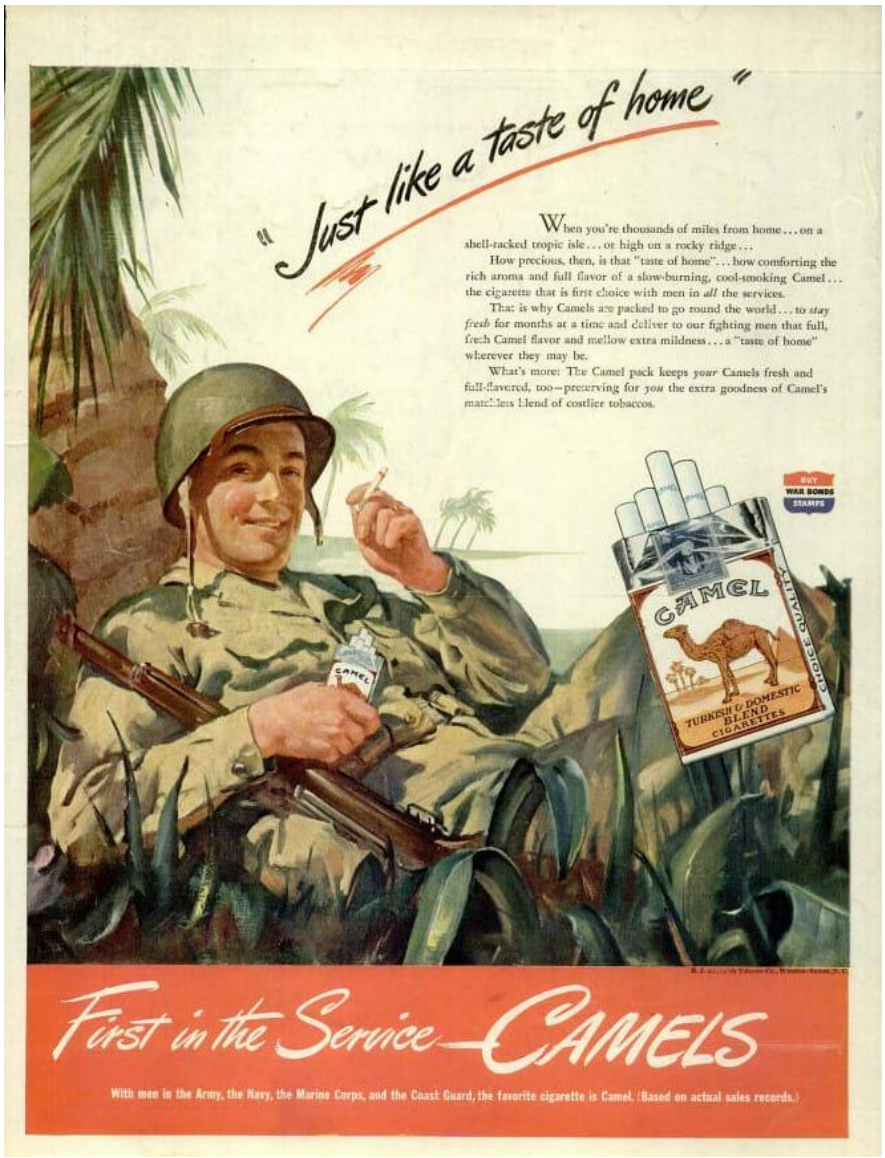


Collier's magazine advertisement, 1916

(University of Alabama, Center for the Study of Tobacco and Society)

Cigarettes served several purposes in World War II. They were so prized that offering one to another soldier, even enemy prisoners of war, was a gesture of sacrifice and friendship. A cigarette to a prisoner was often a lubricant intended to loosen the tongue during the interrogation that was to follow. Smoking was something to do while on a rest break--- "Smoke'em if you got'em!" Wounded soldiers benefited from the sedative effects on pain. Cigarettes were units of exchange in everything from poker games to barter transactions. They were a commodity on the black market. Offering a cigarette and a light to a woman was a universal opening gambit that required no translation.

In the 1940s, about 40% of American adults smoked.[5] The "smoke-filled bar" was not just a literary setting; it was the reality in every town in the United States. Cigarette ads in magazines and newspapers created a false representation of smoking as adult, glamorous, and sophisticated. Hollywood added to the sham with a plethora of movies in which smoking was ubiquitous. Smoke was the vaporous aura given off by the mysterious and the sexy. (Years later, many of the stars of these movies would die due to their smoking addiction.) A young person's first cigarette was as much a rite of passage as losing their baby teeth, graduating from the eighth grade, and their first kiss.



Cigarettes as a reminder of home, 1944

(WW II Dog Tags)

In November 1945, Ruby Silberschmidt and the good ladies of the La Crosse American Legion Auxiliary were just doing what seemed normal at the time. Many soldiers smoked and collecting cigarettes for them provided something that they wanted.

Smoking reached its peak in 1954 when 45% of Americans smoked.[6] Many of those adult smokers were probably veterans of the armed forces.

Decades later, research on the effects of smoking led to health warnings. Increased attention to health and Congressional investigations led to more prohibitions and restrictions. The Marlboro Man (all five of them) died from smoking-related diseases. The attitude toward smoking was flipped on its head, and now smoking is more of an anomaly than a standard.

For the last three years, the smoking rate for American adults has held at a steady 14%.[7]

And cigarette showers are a thing of the distant past.

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Sources & Notes:

[1] "Reflections: Smoke'em if you got'em," *National Museum of the United States Army*, accessed 2020 November 21, https://armyhistory.org/reflections-smoke-em-if-you-got-em/.
[2] *National Museum of the United States Army*.
[3] Mary Virginia Swanson, "Angelo Klonis: The Real-Life Story of an Army Soldier Turned American Icon," *The Digital Journalist*, 2005 October, http://digitaljournalist.org/issue0510/swanson.html.
[4] "The Makin's of a Nation: Tobacco & World War I," *University of Alabama, Center for the Study of Tobacco and Society*, accessed 2020 November 21, https://csts.ua.edu/wwi/tobacco-advertising-wwi/.
[5] Niall McCarthy, "Poll: U.S. Smoking Rate Falls To Historic Low [Infographic]," *Forbes.com*, 2018 July 26, https://www.forbes.com/sites/niallmccarthy/2018/07/26/poll-u-s-smoking-rate-falls-to-historic-low-infographic/?sh=388b32383351.
[6] McCarthy.
[7] "Smoking," *La Crosse Tribune*, La Crosse, Wisconsin, 2020 November 20, page A3.