Smoke 'em if you got 'em: A history of the failure of the United States Armed Forces to curb cigarette smoking among servicemen and women

World War I ended 100 years ago. From 1914 to 1918, the great empires of Europe clashed in a global conflict that involved more than 70 million soldiers and cost over 16 million lives. Tobacco also went to war, packed in every doughboy's knapsack. Through patriotic advertising and stepped-up production, cigarettes would supplant cigars and chewing tobacco as young men's favorite vice. The slogan of Bull Durham Smoking Tobacco, "The Makin's of a Nation," did not exaggerate the enormous contribution of tobacco to morale in the military. When asked what America needed to win the war, General John Pershing, the commander of the American Expeditionary Forces on the Western Front, replied, "Tobacco as much as bullets." Across the nation, tobacco funds were established by community groups, businesses, and relief organizations (such as the American Red Cross, The Salvation Army, and the Young Men's Christian Association [YMCA]) to send tobacco products to soldiers overseas. These tobacco funds made smoking synonymous with the war effort, introduced a new generation to cigarettes, and undermined the crusading anti-smoking efforts of groups such as the Women's Christian Temperance Union and the Non-Smokers Protective League by ennobling tobacco.. World War I took the lives of nearly 10 million soldiers and 15 million civilians. Twenty million combatants were wounded. Although the physical wounds would heal, for many the emotional trauma would never end. And in less than 20 years, many of the men who had been given cigarettes by the American Red Cross and other charities and had become inveterate smokers began dying of a heretofore rare disease: lung cancer. In 1936 New Orleans thoracic surgeon Alton Ochsner observed that virtually all of the increasing numbers of patients with lung cancer that he was seeing had taken up cigarette smoking as soldiers in World War I. Although Ochsner raised the alarm in medical journal articles in the 1930s and 1940s, cigarettes remained a staple of military life long after World War I. Beginning in World War II, they were included in soldiers' rations and became crucial assets to win over and barter with local civilian populations. Nor did the military object to cigarette makers Philip Morris and R.J. Reynolds shipping a steady supply of cigarettes to the troops in Vietnam—and as recently as Desert Storm. Few Veterans Administration hospitals banned smoking until the 1990s, and Congress did not end the sale of cigarettes in V.A. hospitals until 1991. Only when reports in the 1980s suggested that combat readiness was diminished by smoking did the military begin to address the problem. It would take more than five decades for government health agencies to acknowledge the pandemic of smoking-related diseases, and nearly a century for the military to tackle the problem head-on. This illustrated presentation explores the reasons for the military's failure to heed the lessons of World War I by not addressing the high prevalence of smoking among enlisted men and women—and the low cost of cigarettes in canteens and Veterans Administration hospitals--until relatively recently.

Learning Objective #1: Participants will identify financial, patriotic, and medical factors that led to a dramatic increase in cigarette smoking during World War I.
Learning Objective #2: Participants will cite three reasons why Dr. Alton Ochsner's alarm in the 1930s that cigarette smoking caused lung cancer went largely unheeded.
Learning Objective #3: Participants will cite three reasons for the military's failure to address cigarette smoking among service men and women throughout the 20th century.