

A Look Back at Iraq: Troops, Tobacco, and RJ Reynolds

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The road to war with Iraq sparked heated debate and controversy all over the world. Yet, once the war began, another debate festered among the troops themselves – a debate about their rights to tobacco.

Historically, tobacco has had a significant role in the military and in wartime. During World War I, tobacco companies made new customers for themselves by providing free cigarettes to troops. By World War II, cigarettes were provided to soldiers as a part of their rations. Smoking and dipping were seemingly a part of military culture, and according to the Department of Defense, 51% of those serving in the military smoked in 1980. However, access to smoking in the military has changed in more recent years. As a result of the 1998 Master Settlement Agreement, cigarettes are no longer freely distributed to soldiers (even though they can still be purchased duty-free at military exchanges, commissaries, ships, etc.) and, as of 2002, all Department of Defense facilities have been smoke-free. Yet, despite these efforts, approximately 34% of the service members smoke, compared to about 23% of all Americans.

During this Iraqi war, soldiers were able to supply themselves with cartons of cigarettes and tins of dip while they were camped in Kuwait. Troops received tobacco in the mail from home or bought tobacco themselves at the camp PX (post exchange) truck. However, once in the desert of Iraq, troops' tobacco stores quickly ran out, leading to a bit of desperation and irritability. Troops argued that tobacco helps to relieve boredom, helps them relax and also stay awake for long nights. The threat of health risks posed by tobacco has been expressed as a low priority, given the immediate danger of their environment. Finally, the lack of tobacco was repeatedly framed as a blow to morale. One marine summarized these ideas in a letter:

“We are aware it is not politically correct for companies such as Philip Morris to send cigarettes to our exhausted troops - the vengeful, ticked-off non-smokers would have a fit. Who cares? If these soldiers can put their lives at risk and sacrifice themselves for their families in a dangerous, hostile environment for months on end, then why should they suffer the added stress of not being able to enjoy a smoke after being shot at by the enemy? Soldiers' rations used to include cigarettes, not because we were oblivious to the health risk, but because we enjoyed them. If we can lay our lives down to fight for a nation that, coincidentally, was founded partially thanks to tobacco, a simple pack per day should be a no-brainer . . . For the high percentage of smokers in the military, tobacco deprivation is a morale killer. Low morale leads to poor performance, and none of us wants to face what that might lead to.”

Such narratives could be used to garner support for potential future efforts to resume military tobacco distribution. It should be noted, interestingly, that the author of the above letter introduced himself as a marine and a son of a retired Philip Morris employee.

Troops were still able to obtain tobacco in Iraq from unexpected sources including Iraqi farmers and young Iraqi boys who sold the

soldiers local Sumer cigarettes for about \$2.50- \$10 a pack. Along the way, journalists exchanged cigarettes with soldiers for stories.

In the meantime, RJ Reynolds said that it was looking for ways to ship cigarettes to US soldiers. While Philip Morris seemingly agreed that free distribution would be a violation of the MSA, RJ Reynolds expressed a different opinion.

Tommy Payne, the senior vice president for external relations, said that the MSA was no obstacle in this effort, that even though it barred free samples among the 46 states that signed the agreement, the agreement says nothing about other countries. Payne said, “Our military guys over in Iraq, we don't think it falls within that (agreement). It would be a clear stretch of the imagination to say that our military men and women who are fighting over there shouldn't be able to get a pack or two or a carton of cigarettes.” It is not known whether RJ Reynolds succeeded in its attempt.

Interestingly, the European Union filed a lawsuit against RJ Reynolds for allegedly smuggling billions of dollars worth of cigarettes into Iraq between 1990 and 1997, violating the US economic sanctions that banned any American company to do business with Iraq. Investigators believe that cigarettes arrived in Iraq from a purposely circuitous route, from Puerto Rico to Spain to Cyprus to Beirut, Lebanon, to the port of Mersin in Turkey. There are allegedly witnesses who have seen RJR people show up on the border with Iraq. A reporter addressed Tommy Payne on the subject and said: “World-famous RJR products, like Camel and

Winston, are in Baghdad in plentiful quantity. They've been there for ten years and I'd like you to tell me how they got there.” Payne answered, “Well, I don't know how they got there.” Sure you don't, Tommy.

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