

# Obesity takes heavy toll in the military

THE ASSOCIATED PRESS

WATERTOWN, Wis. — With America at war and in need of a few good men, Jon Schoenherr expected a warm reception when he walked into an Army recruiting office in this Midwestern farm community, intending to enlist.

But a sergeant gave the 17-year-old some surprising news.

"He told me I'd have to lose a little bit of weight," said Schoenherr, who dropped 50 pounds to qualify.

Besides terrorists, germ warfare and nuclear weapons, military officials increasingly worry about a different kind of threat—troops too fat to fight.

Weight issues plague all branches of the military, from elite Marines to the Air Force, often lampooned as the "chair force" because of its many sedentary jobs.

Thousands of troops are struggling to lose weight, and thousands have been booted out of the service in recent years because they couldn't.

However, one of the biggest worries concerns those not even in uniform yet: Nearly two out of 10 men and four out of 10 women of recruiting age weigh too much to be eligible, a record number for that age group.

"This is quickly becoming a national security issue for us. The pool of recruits is becoming smaller," said Col. Gaston Bathalon, an Army nutrition expert.

Unless weight rules are

relaxed, "we're going to have a harder time fielding an Army," he said.

Today's soldiers are super-sized, averaging 37 pounds heavier than their Civil War counterparts. Military officials say that's not all bad, because most of it is muscle, not fat, and the result of better nutrition. "Large and in charge" makes soldiers look

suits and risky pills to shed pounds.

Problems don't end when active duty does, either. The Veterans Affairs health system increasingly is strained by vets piling on pounds and developing weight-related diseases like diabetes.

Ironically, the big concern used to be soldiers not weighing enough. Congress passed

USARIEM, as it is known, has 170 doctors, dietitians, psychologists and other scientists who study military medical issues, from preventing heat exhaustion to coping with sleep deprivation. They view soldiers as specialized athletes whose physical condition can be a life-or-death matter. Increasingly, they deal with weight.

It starts with new recruits. Each branch of the service has its own entry rules, but by federal weight guidelines, 43 percent of women and 18 percent of men in prime recruiting ages exceed screening weights for military service, Bathalon said.

Army standards are based on body fat, using a chart for body-mass index—a ratio of weight and height—as a screening tool. If soldiers or recruits exceed chart limits, body fat calculations are done using a formula based mostly on waist size.

Marines can be as much as 10 percent over weight standards to ship to boot camp.

"The Marines say, 'Send us anybody and we'll turn them into a Marine.' They're pretty successful at it," Friedl said.

Schoenherr, the Wisconsin Army recruit, was pretty successful, too. After weighing in at 215 pounds, he did his own boot camp during his senior year in high school, going to the recruiting center for 6 a.m. workouts, then downing a boiled egg or two and orange juice before heading to class.

Lunch would be "tuna fish right out of the can" or a low-carb wrap at school, he said. After school, he'd lift weights. He's now a svelte 165 pounds and about to join a special forces unit.

"I've had some people who have lost close to 100 pounds to join," said Sgt. Chad Eske, his recruiter.

But often, making it into the military is just the start of the struggle. The military even has its own version of the "freshman 15"—after basic training, Army women gain an average of 18 pounds in their first year and often have problems with annual weigh-ins that determine whether they can stay.

A survey Bathalon and others did of 1,435 troops referred to Fort Bragg Hospital for weight loss helps show the drastic measures some try. Roughly three-

fourths did things doctors recommend—eating less, exercising more and downing more fruits and vegetables.

But many resorted to potentially harmful things. Nearly half tried using rubber suits or saunas to sweat off pounds, a third of men and half of women tried appetite suppressants, and one in five tried laxatives. 11 percent of women and 6 percent of men had tried vomiting.

Half of the troops said stress was a reason they had gained weight, and half had come for help because they'd been denied promotion.

"The Air Force is not escaping the national trends," Maj. Christine Hunter said at the obesity conference, showing a photograph of the new Baghdad Burger King, already the third busiest in the world.



PHOTO/THE STOCK MARKET

more formidable to the enemy, they note.

But at an obesity conference in Las Vegas last fall and in interviews since then, Bathalon and other military officials detailed the heavy burden that excess pounds are causing for some troops and taxpayers.

Weight problems add stress to already stressful jobs, costing many soldiers promotions and leading some to try desperate measures like rubber

the school lunch program after World War II, worried that too many high schoolers were malnourished and unfit to fight.

"This is the same deal in reverse. We've got young kids who are not going to be qualified for military service. They're either unfit or over-fat," said Col. Karl Friedl, commander of the U.S. Army Research Institute of Environmental Medicine at Natick, Mass.

## Author loses 'Groove' after divorcing inspiring husband

THE ASSOCIATED PRESS

SAN FRANCISCO — Author Terry McMillan has filed for divorce from the man who inspired the 1996 novel "How Stella Got Her Groove Back," which chronicled the romantic adventures of a 40-something woman who falls for a guy half her age.

In papers filed in Contra Costa County Superior Court, McMillan, 53, says she decided to end her 6 1/2-year marriage to Jonathan Plummer, 30, after learning he is gay.

The revelation led her to conclude Plummer married only to get his U.S. citizenship, she said. McMillan met Plummer at a Jamaican resort a decade ago.

"It was devastating to discover that a relationship I had publicized to the world as life-affirming and built on mutual love was actually based on deceit," she said in court papers. "I was humiliated."

In response, Plummer maintained McMillan treated him with "homophobic" scorn bordering on harassment since he came out to her as gay just before Christmas.

McMillan is seeking to have the marriage annulled; Plummer has asked the court to set aside a prenuptial agreement that would prevent him from getting spousal support.

McMillan filed for divorce in January, but news of the split didn't surface until this week, when it was first reported in a San Francisco Chronicle gossip column. Earlier this month, a judge ordered McMillan to pay Plummer \$2,000 a month in spousal support and \$25,000 in attorney's fees until the case comes back to court in October.

McMillan's latest novel, "The Interruption of Everything," is scheduled to hit store shelves next month. It plots the mid-life adventures of a married mother of three who is questioning her comfortable suburban life.

McMillan said she did not plan to let a divorce "detract from the many blessings in her life," according to a statement released through her publicist.

Plummer's attorney could not immediately be reached for comment.

## Confederate flag continues to stir emotions years after removal

THE ASSOCIATED PRESS

COLUMBIA — An organizer of the march against the Confederate flag that brought nearly 50,000 people to the Statehouse five years ago regrets her group didn't fight harder to remove the flag completely from the capitol grounds.

Five years ago Friday, two Citadel cadets lowered the Confederate flag from atop the Statehouse dome. At the same time, a similar flag was raised atop a pole by a Confederate monument in front of the Statehouse.

The flag remains there today, and the governor who helped broker the compromise to move the banner said it will likely stay there for the foreseeable future.

"Those who wanted it off the dome and off the grounds entirely, they had to see that that was not a solution that was going to happen," said former Gov. Jim Hodges, who personally supported a compromise to put the flag in a less prominent place on Statehouse grounds.

While lawmakers and public officials mostly accepted the compromise, many that

fought to get the Confederate flag off the Statehouse dome don't want to see it anywhere on the grounds.

The peak of the fight came in January 2000, when 46,000 people rallied in Columbia, covering the Statehouse lawn on Martin Luther King Jr. Day. It was just months after the NAACP announced an economic boycott of South Carolina.

"The march was so incredibly successful. Overnight, the public conversation went from 'Can we bring it down?' to 'Where is it going?' It changed the question," said Julia Sibley Jones with the South Carolina Christian Action Council, a march organizer.

But Jones said those fighting the flag didn't speak with one voice on where it should go.

"The question got reformulated by the Legislature, who, in my opinion, came up with a bad compromise, not a resolution," she said.

The boycott of the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People will continue until the Confederate flag is completely

removed from the Statehouse, said James Gallman the retired president of the state civil rights group.

"I think most people who see where it is located now cannot understand why we would fly on our grounds this symbol," Gallman said.

But the boycott has lost its steam. The political will to remove the flag completely wasn't there in 2000 and still isn't there, legislative leaders say.

Flag supporters are split too.

Ron Wilson, the national vice commander of the pro-flag Sons of Confederate Veterans in 2000, said moving the flag didn't end the NAACP boycott. "From that standpoint, it didn't resolve anything," he said.

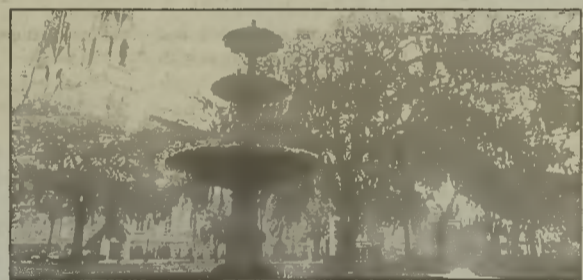
Michael Givens, South Carolina commander of the Sons of Confederate Veterans, said the compromise satisfied him, but he wished lawmakers had allowed South Carolinians to vote on the issue.

"We lost, OK?" Givens said. "We wanted the flag to stay where it was. We lost. But we never squawked about it."

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