

# MENTAL AMMUNITION

*Volunteer shipments of tobacco helped raise the spirits of American soldiers fighting in World War I.*

By Daniel J. Demers

**W**ithin weeks of the beginning of World War I, British collectives sprang up soliciting fellow citizens “for tobacco and cigarettes [for their soldiers] ... as a small recognition of sacrifices, dangers and sufferings incurred to keep [the home front] untouched by the horrors of war.”

When America joined the war effort in April 1917, groups emerged that followed the British lead. Then, like now, smoking was a hot-button issue, politically, and the War Department did not issue any form of tobacco to soldiers or sailors. Thus tobacco funding became a national volunteer endeavor.

Mostly these volunteer efforts were championed by local newspapers. One such effort was that of the *Washington Times*. The *Times* began its effort in August 1917, announcing its “tobacco fund” and initial startup contribution of \$100 [\$1,900 in 2015 values]. The paper pleaded with its readers to “donate as frequently as possible.” Each reader was asked to donate a minimum of \$0.25. The newspaper announced that it had negotiated a deal with the American Tobacco Company to purchase one packet that would retail for \$0.45 for the quarter contribution. Each packet would contain one package of Tuxedo tobacco with four books of cigarette paper, three pouches of Bull Durham tobacco with

corresponding books of tobacco paper, and two packages of Lucky Strikes with 20 cigarettes each.

The following day, a front-page headline proudly declared, “Quick Response Greet *Times*’ Smoke Appeal.” Overnight, \$177 had rolled in—one \$1 contribution came from House Speaker Champ Clark, another from General Leonard Wood and the same from General Henry McCain, the army’s adjutant.

The following week, Washington, D.C.’s Chamber of Commerce endorsed the endeavor. Numerous local merchants “had enlisted their corps of employees in the campaign,” each of whom having contributed at least a quarter to the fund. The president of the D.C. Retail Merchants Association suggested that “contribution boxes be placed in all Washington business houses ... [including placement of strong boxes] on the main floors of big department stores ... to afford all patrons an opportunity of dropping change into them.”

The same article mentioned that at a local Elks Lodge some “antlered member ... had casually mentioned [the fund], and in a jiffy half a dozen or more good fellows, who were puffing on perfectos, dropped ‘two bits’ into a hat.” By the end of the week, \$809 had been paid into the fund [the equivalent of \$15,280 in 2015], enough to purchase 3,236 packets for the boys.

The demand for contribution boxes exceeded everybody's expectations, forcing the *Times* to order a second supply. Bankers and theater proprietors climbed on the patriotic bandwagon. "Within the last twenty-four hours [hundreds of boxes] had been placed ... where men, women and children may drop their money ... [sending] a message of cheer and comfort to our khaki-clad boys overseas," a *Times* mid-September edition claimed. The fund had swelled to \$1,934, enough to purchase 7,736 packets, within a month of its startup.

Two weeks later, a heart-rending story appeared about little 3-day-old Alvin L. Newmyer Jr., the youngest contributor, who sent in \$1. Alvin's letter to the editor announced, "I am only three days old ... so here is my dollar to pay for the smokes to help 'smoke out' the Kaiser." G.E. King, manager of the Southern Dancing Academy, brought in change "chipped in" by male and female dancing students. By month's end, contributions had reached \$2,740, enough for nearly 11,000 packets.

One woman contributed \$0.50 [the equivalent of \$10 today] from her weekly paycheck—"enough," she said, "to keep two soldiers happy at least part of the time." Jeweler Harry Fischer's \$10 contribution "will make happy the hearts of forty American soldiers," another article reported three days later. Yet another commentary reminded *Times* readers that "thousands of our boys are somewhere in France without their favorite smoke," with the concomitant plea, "Won't you contribute 25 cents to supply your soldier friend with a week's supply of smokes?"

Five days later, Washington Navy Yard munitions workers, "stained by the grime of hard work and earnest toil ... in the interest of American rights and American principles," donated enough to purchase another 444 packets for "the fighters." The fund had swelled to \$4,020—enough for 16,000 packets of tobacco. That amount, touted the *Times*, "represents thousands of sacrifices by Washington [D.C.] citizens who have given their share to see to it that American soldiers are provided with smokes from real American tobacco."

Elsewhere in the nation, *The New York Sun* announced a series of golf competitions between May and September 1918, the purpose of which was to ask every contestant "to pay \$10 for a tournament card ... and we are going to spend every cent of this money on cheering smokes for our soldiers in France ... let's raise \$4,000."

By mid-June 1918, the *Washington Times* bragged that its tobacco fund had sent "20,000 packages of good smoking material to our boys in France." The same year, the government joined the effort by purchasing tobacco products itself, buying the entire output of Bull Durham for distribution to the troops. General John "Black Jack" Pershing, America's Expeditionary Forces in Europe commander, issued a statement: "You ask me what we need to win this war. I answer 'tobacco, as much as bullets,'" adding, "Tobacco is as indispensable as the daily ration; we must have thousands of tons without delay."

The war ended in November 1918, but there was still a vibrant interest in supplying smokes to American soldiers still in Europe. A February 1919 dance at the local chapter of The Daughters of Isabella (the female auxiliary of the Knights of Columbus) was "held for the benefit of the soldiers' tobacco fund." A couple of days later, an item in the *Times*' sport section noted that Cuban horse fancier A.H. Diaz had purchased the unbeaten filly named Just Fancy for \$7,500, the proceeds of which "went to the tobacco fund."

By war's end, billions of smokes had been sent to the "boys over there." *The New York Sun* issued its final report one year after the armistice, showing that it had raised \$441,151 [\$8.3 million in 2015 values] for tobacco products for America's soldiers and sailors. *The Sun* patriotically bragged that its fund had provided "two hundred million smokes ... to maintain [a] constant supply of comforting cigarettes and pipe fuel for [the] men who fought overseas." The *Washington Times* issued no such final report.

After the war's end, one story emerged criticizing the Red Cross, which was charged with distributing the smokes to America's soldiers. The *New York American* disclosed that "gift cigarettes and tobacco were held in storage, while





American soldiers went without smokes ... in certain cases ... [soldiers were] forced to purchase tobacco, and even then had to be satisfied with French tobacco instead of American brands." Joe Despain, an American serving in the Canadian Army, wrote his brother Grover in Pendleton, Oregon, and said that his tobacco preference was "good old Prince Albert Tobacco." A few months later, when his tobacco supply was cut off, he lamented that "it means we have to use English tobacco, and it sure is awful stuff ... about every three puffs ... you have to stop and splutter and groan before you can start again."

What started as a patriotic clamor to help America's soldiers assuage the misery of the trenches had far-reaching and unforeseen consequences. Tobacco became an end-all for many soldiers and sailors who returned home with the tobacco habit. But why was tobacco so important to soldiers? Perhaps Despain summed up the prevalent feeling best: "All we see [are] trenches, ruined villages, some hard fighting, and part of the year it's all mud; the rest is dust. All we have to do is to fight and rest." Smoking helped in the daily drudgery, mayhem and boredom of a soldier's life. Tobacco purportedly had a calming effect on young boys who lived on the brink of death on a daily basis.

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