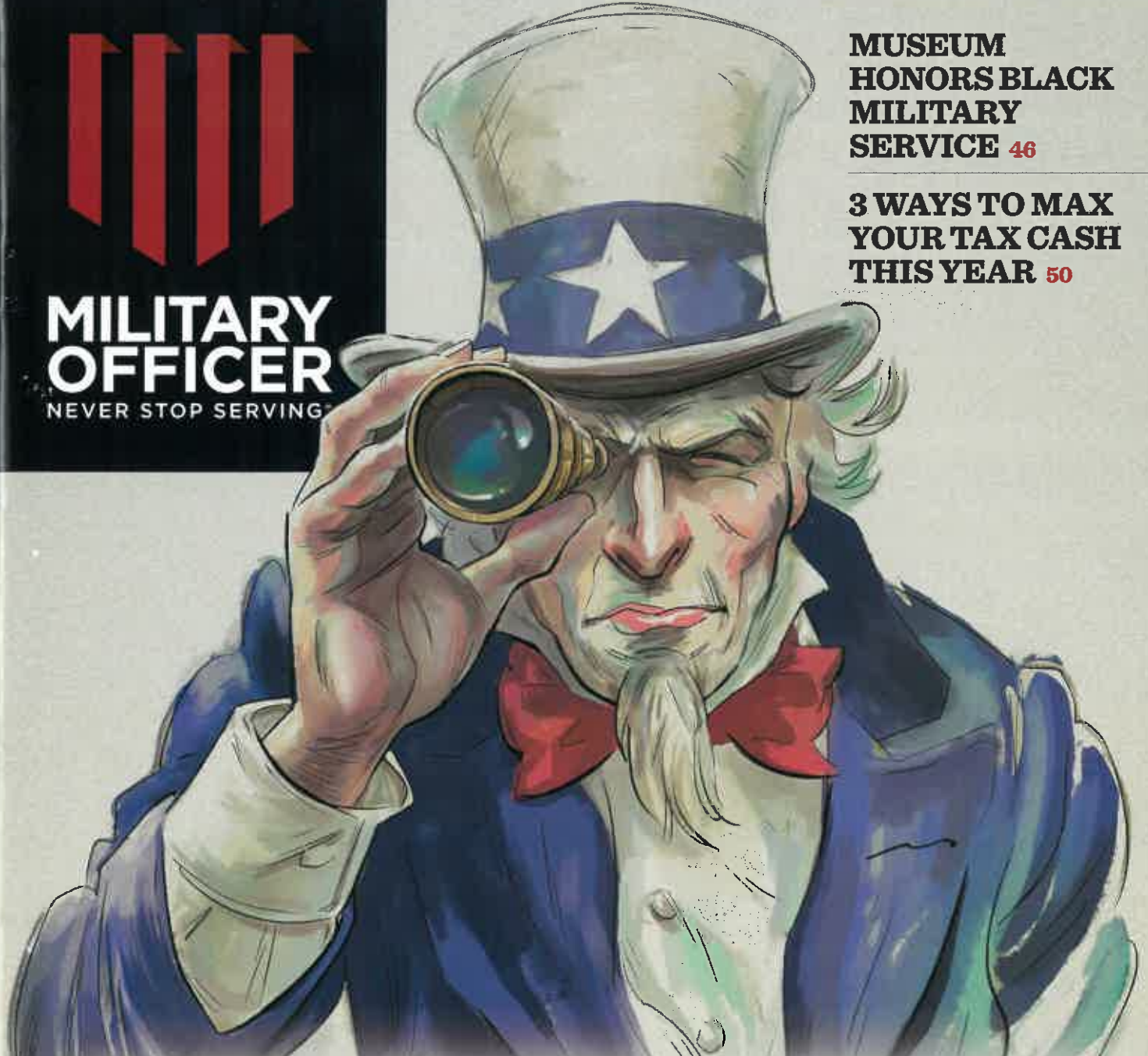




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RECRUITING WOES

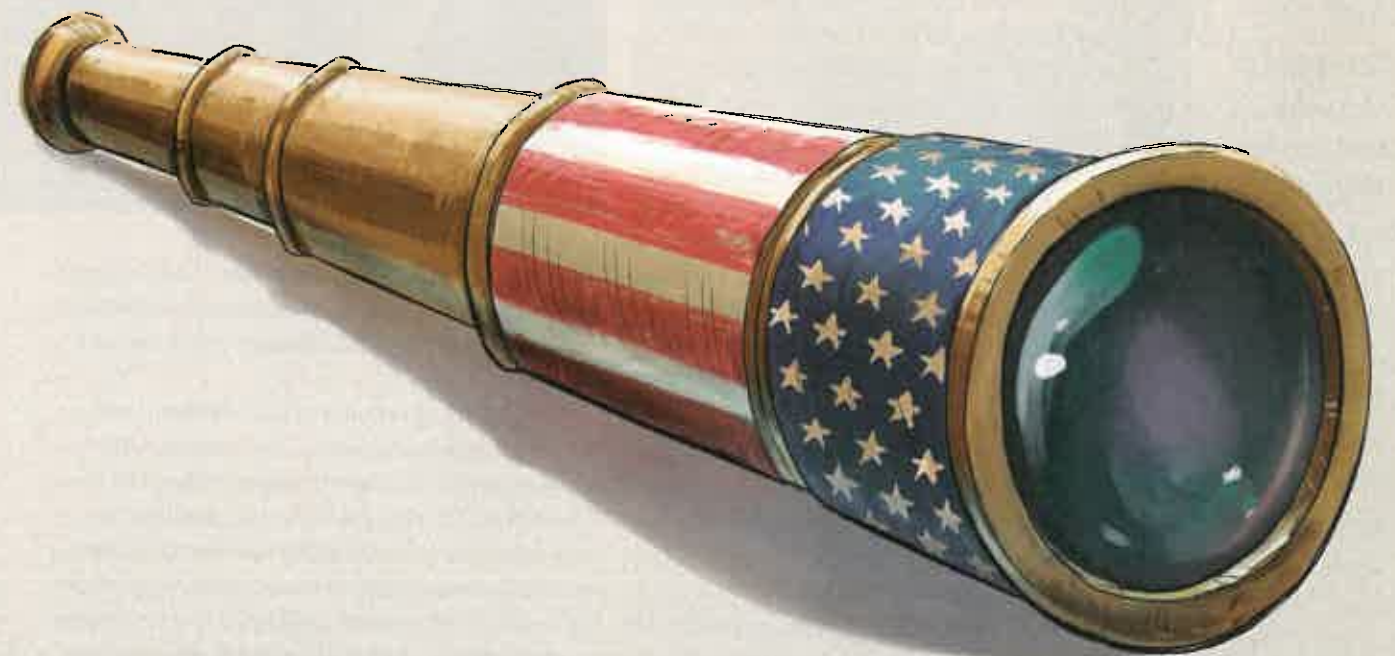
With more than 7 in 10 young Americans unfit for duty,
the services are searching for ways to fill their ranks **40**

RECRUITING WOES

★ By Senior Staff Writer Gina Harkins ★

★ Illustration by James Boyle ★

Seven out of 10 young people aren't fit to join the military, hindering the search for eligible new servicemembers.



After years of personnel drawdowns, some of the services are adding thousands more troops back to the ranks — but finding the next crop of fit and willing warfighters isn't an easy feat.

More than 70 percent of 17- to 24-year-olds are ineligible for military service, according to DoD data. Nearly a third of those young people weigh too much to qualify. Criminal records, past drug abuse, and failure to meet educational requirements are other top disqualifiers.

The 2018 National Defense Authorization Act (NDAA), which President Donald Trump signed in December 2017, authorized another 20,000 troops to be added to the ranks, on top of some already-demanding accession requirements. The Army will add 7,500 more soldiers; the Navy 4,000 sailors; the Marine Corps 1,000 leathernecks, the Air Force 4,100 airmen; and the reserve components will increase by 3,400 more troops.

The recruiting mission isn't getting any easier, either, said Maj. Gen. Jeffrey Snow, head of Army Recruiting Command, at an October event in Washington, D.C., addressing recruiting challenges. The shrinking pool of eligible prospects has led some services to alter their recruiting standards. More tattoos, past drug use, and certain medical conditions no longer bar some young people from serving.

"We developed obstacles and barriers that great young men and women who wanted to join the United States Air Force had to overcome to come in," Maj. Gen. Garrett Harencaak, commander of Air Force Recruiting Service, tells *Military Officer*.

That was fine when the Air Force was drawing down, Harencaak says. However, as the military ramps back up and the world becomes more volatile — at the same time as the economy improves and fewer young people are eligible to serve — recruiters will need to cast a wider net.

'A RED FLAG FOR THE COUNTRY'

Retired admirals, generals, and other military leaders with the nonprofit Mission: Readiness have been sounding the alarm about the declining health of America's youth for nearly a decade. The group, which cohosted the event on recruiting



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challenges along with the Heritage Foundation, a conservative think tank, has pressed Congress to make school lunches healthier to help combat the obesity epidemic.

This isn't the first time military leaders have been concerned with Americans' nutrition. When troops showed up undernourished at the start of World War II during the Great Depression, the then-head of the Selective Service also urged lawmakers to pass a school lunch program to improve the health of the nation's children, according to the report "Retreat Is Not An Option: Healthier school meals protect our children and our country."

Rep. Don Bacon, a retired Air Force one-star and member of the House subcommittee on mili-

tary personnel, called the number of young people ineligible to serve appalling. It's a "red flag for the country," he added, which could face a serious shortage of troops if forced into a major conflict.

"What happens if we had a national emergency and had to go beyond that initial great group of men and women who volunteer?" Bacon asked. "You can't find folks who can carry that 50-pound rucksack in 120-degree heat. I'm concerned about our reserve strength."

The country's approach to fitness is moving in the wrong direction, Bacon added. That's not something that just affects the civilian population, but the active duty force, too, he said,

recalling outrunning 18-year-old airmen as an officer in his 50s.

"[When I was their age,] I never would've let that old guy beat me," Bacon said. "But it's changed — I've seen in 30 years that culture change."

The military services also are fighting their own battles with obesity. Nearly a fifth of soldiers were classified as obese in 2015, according to the Army's 2016 Health of the Force report. The Air Force was next in line with the highest number of overweight troops, *Military Times* reported in 2016, with the Navy and Marine Corps following.

Aside from physical barriers, Snow said at least half of the country's youth also know little

Finding potential new servicemembers has increased in difficulty in recent years, and recruiters have a tough road ahead of them. (clockwise from top left) A staff sergeant passes out business cards to potential Air Force recruits; a poolee withers under the gaze of a Marine Corps drill instructor; Navy recruiters interact with students at Our Lady of the Lake University, San Antonio; Air Force trainees swear in to the service; an Army recruiter engages with high school students; a poolee chats with a recruiter at a high school.

A soldier shows off his sleeve tattoo (right). In light of recruiting challenges, the Air Force recently made its tattoo policies less restrictive and more on par with the other services, such as the Army's.

about the military. Many can't even name the various services, he said.

"What they think they know comes from the movies and the news," Snow added.

RETHINKING REQUIREMENTS

The Air Force is going through a massive recruiting push after falling to an end strength of 311,000 airmen in 2015. The service is expected to top 325,000 airmen in 2018 as it rebuilds after being stretched too thin.

"We were too small for what we need to do," Harencak says, as airmen continue the fight against the Islamic State group, deploy to Afghanistan, and reassure allies around the world, including those in the Asia-Pacific region and Europe.

The Air Force recruited more than 33,000 new airmen in FY 2017, bringing its end strength to about 322,500.

The Army is undergoing a similar experience after its years-long drawdown was halted in 2016. After dropping from a wartime high of 565,000 active duty soldiers to 450,000, the Army was allowed to ramp back up to 476,000 soldiers, per the 2017 NDAA. Because of budget delays months into FY 2017, the Army had only nine months to find 68,500 prospective soldiers — 6,000 more than originally planned.

Those kinds of recruiting demands prompted leaders such as Harencak to review accession standards.

"We had a new environment, and we had to change with the times," he says. "If we are going to get these new numbers and continue to grow our Air Force like we so desperately need to do ... we needed to be more agile and flexible."

The Air Force had restrictive tattoo and marijuana policies that weren't consistent with the other services. It was time, Harencak says, to update those policies — along with some medical restrictions.

"There were over 200 ways you could be medically disqualified from joining the Air Force," he



says. "We had to update some of those policies. ... There's data out there now showing we can take a little bit more risk on the medical side of bringing great people in and giving people the opportunities they deserve."

Now someone interested in joining the Air Force who has a condition such as attention deficit disorder or asthma gets a closer look, instead of being disqualified automatically. Recruits with more than a quarter of their

arms, legs, chest, or back tattooed are also now eligible, as are some people who've used marijuana in the past.

The Army also issues waivers for some past marijuana use. That's necessary, Snow said, since several states now allow the drug to be used and sold legally. He stressed the Army hasn't lowered its recruiting standards.

"We're a microcosm of society," Snow said. "As long as it's not a pattern of misconduct, I think they should be afforded the opportunity to serve."

The services also are looking for new ways to recruit people for their most in-demand, yet toughest-to-fill positions in vital areas such as cybersecurity. The Army was the first service to announce in December it would begin testing a new direct-commission program for five civilians willing to join its cyber command.

The people selected for the program will spend six weeks in a direct-commission course before becoming second lieutenants and heading off to a 12-week cyber basic officer leader course, *Stars and Stripes* reported. The other services are expected to follow suit.

Adding tens of thousands of new troops to the ranks doesn't come without cost. The services have had to pour money into new recruiting commercials and other advertising materials. The Air Force and Army also are adding recruiting billets or increasing bonuses to entice servicemembers to take on the high-demand duty.

The Air Force Recruiting Service is looking for ways to make recruiting a more attractive duty,

too. They're looking for ways to leverage technology to make Air Force recruiters' lives easier so they're not buried in paperwork and filing, Harencak says. Recruiters don't have time to spend doing that kind of thing — they need to be out connecting with people in their communities.

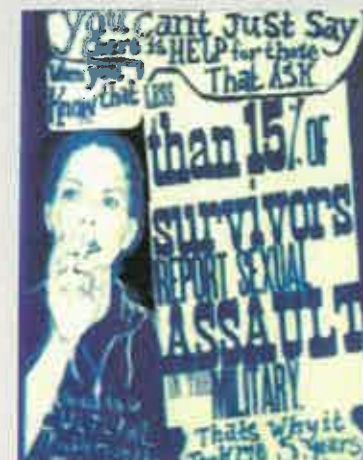
"We just need to stop doing stupid stuff," he says.

ANTI-RECRUITING EFFORTS

Despite the demand for more troops amid global uncertainty, recruiters across the country face challenges to their mission.

Federal laws require schools to give military recruiters equal access to students if they're being presented with other occupational or educational options from other groups. Not all schools are following the rules, though, Harencak says. Often administrators don't understand the requirements.

Recruiters also face some antimilitary activists in their communities who distribute brochures discouraging young people from talking to recruiters. Some pamphlets warn that recruiters are nothing but salespeople trying to make a quota, or that recruits will be used to carry out the Pen-




tagon's agenda, that they'll be at higher risk of sexual trauma, or that they'll develop post-traumatic stress.

To counter these efforts, veterans should get out and share their stories and talk about how the military improved their lives, Harencak says.

They should ask if recruiters are getting access to their local high schools, he adds, and stop and chat with recruiters when they see them around town.

"When MOAA folks see [recruiters] out there, encourage them, thank them, help them out, and send them leads," he says.

Snow agreed. Filling the ranks with the best and brightest requires help from community leaders. When recruiting requirements are high, finding top-notch talent isn't always easy. However, with the right changes, he said, recruiters can make sure they're connecting with the right people.

"We need your help," Snow said. 

Gina Harkins is MOAA's senior staff writer. Her last article for Military Officer was "Physical Readiness: Then and Now," January 2018.

Recruiters have had to contend with antimilitary activists' efforts preventing them from reaching high school students more effectively, such as this brochure (left).

Giving Credit Where It's Due

One MOAA Life Member is doing his part to ensure young people enlisting in the military immediately after high school are recognized — an endeavor crucial to morale and recruiting efforts.

As an educator, former 1st Lt. Dr. Kenneth Hartman, ARNG, noticed the acclaim college-bound kids were getting and realized students who had decided to enlist were getting no such accolades. To fill this void, he founded Our Community Salutes (OCS), a 501(c)(3) nonprofit that organizes


ceremonies to honor these young enlistees as well as their families.

Today, OCS ceremonies are conducted in 25 states. Supported by local businesses and organizations, the ceremonies draw retired officers and NCOs, active duty servicemembers, enlistees' families, and even prominent community leaders such as mayors.

"Parents understand for the first time the [community] their kids are joining, so they get behind them. This means these young

men and women go off to basic training motivated," Hartman says.

OCS also endeavors to strengthen the relationship between recruiters and high school guidance counselors, which improves recruiters' access to students. Recruiters can nominate helpful guidance counselors for OCS' Colin Powell Award.

Ultimately, this helps recruiters find "the best and the most talented to serve in our all-volunteer service," Hartman explains. 

— By Senior Editor Laural Hobbes