



The US Army: Beards at Risk - Towards the End of Permanent Shaving Waivers

Published on 11/07/2025

Washington, July 11, 2025 – The United States Army has declared "war" on beards. In fact, the Army is ready to introduce a new policy that could lead to the discharge of soldiers suffering from a **chronic skin condition related to shaving**, known as *pseudofolliculitis barbae (PFB)*, **a condition that disproportionately affects African American men**. According to internal documents and Pentagon sources, the new regulation would ban permanent shaving waivers and impose a formal medical plan for affected soldiers, paving **the way for administrative discharges** for those requiring prolonged exemptions.

The Medical Condition and Treatment Costs

Pseudofolliculitis barbae occurs when hair grows back under the skin after shaving, causing painful bumps, inflammation, and scarring. It affects up to 60% of African American men, according to the American Osteopathic College of Dermatology. For these soldiers, daily shaving is not just an aesthetic obligation, but a real threat to skin health.

The new military policy stipulates that soldiers with exemptions exceeding 12 months within a two-year period are eligible for discharge. Alternatively, they will be offered costly laser treatments — potentially covered by the Department of Defense — but not without risks, such as skin pigmentation changes or permanent scarring.

Accusations of Racial Discrimination

Many members of the armed forces see the new directive as a veiled measure of discrimination. "It is obviously a decision motivated by racial reasons," said a senior non-commissioned officer to *Military.com*, maintaining anonymity to avoid retaliation. "There is no tactical reason: you can have a professional appearance even with a beard."

A similar precedent was recorded in March, when the Marine Corps adopted a policy allowing discharge for those unable to resolve the skin condition — also raising controversies over the treatment of ethnic minorities in the armed forces.

Impact on Recruitment and Diversity

The issue arises at a delicate time for the Army, which struggles to recruit new soldiers after the peak enlistments of the Iraq and Afghanistan wars. Historically, African Americans represent about 14% of the US population, but up to 25% of new Army recruits.

In recent years, however, the number of white recruits has plummeted — from over 44,000 in 2018 to just over 25,000 in 2023, a 43% decline — while minority recruitments have held steady or increased. However, the policy of Secretary of Defense Pete Hegseth, appointed during the Trump administration, has led to a general review of diversity and inclusion programs, severely impacting initiatives aimed at minority communities.

Historical Precedents and Motivations for the New Crackdown

The issue of shaving-related problems has deep roots in the history of the armed forces. **In the 1970s**, Admiral Elmo Zumwalt of the **Navy was among the first to recognize the problem, authorizing sailors to wear beards and mustaches to reduce cases of PFB among African American servicemen.** It was a fundamental step in anti-discriminatory reforms within the armed forces.

Today, however, the main justification for banning beards is related to the fit of gas masks. Yet, a 2021 study published in *Military Medicine* found no conclusive evidence that well-groomed beards interfere with the fit of protective masks, noting that only a small portion of military personnel operates in chemical risk environments.

The Role of Hegseth and the Battle for “Standards”

The change comes in the wake of a review of appearance standards ordered by Hegseth, who has repeatedly criticized the relaxation of military standards in recent years. In a statement last March, he said:

"We have expelled good soldiers for a wrong tattoo. Today, instead, we allow beards, dreadlocks, buns, and blatant obesity. Every piece of the standards has been demolished for reasons of equity."

Conclusion

The crackdown on shaving waivers could disproportionately affect African American soldiers, at a time when the Army should focus on inclusion and efficiency, not aesthetics. The risk is that, in the name of a questionable idea of "discipline," the medical, historical, and social reality of uniformed personnel is lost. The final decision, more than on the soldiers' faces, will weigh on the face of the entire military institution.

News link: <https://www.military.com/daily-news/2025/07/09/army-policy-severely-limiting-shaving-waivers-goes-effect.html>