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PANIC IN THE MILITARY

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PANIC IN THE MILITARY

It has happened countless times in every era, with every people, and in every way--a squad, company, regiment, sometimes a whole army, turns in an instant from a disciplined and cohesive fighting unit to a fleeing and disorganized rabble of terrified individuals. The word, much feared by military commanders, is "panic," and all too often it has accomplished more in defeating an army than the actions of the enemy.

In 1918, an American infantry battalion was held in reserve a short distance from the front. It was night and the soldiers were trying to get what sleep they could in the face of shelling from enemy artillery. At 11:00 p.m., while inspecting his position, the battalion commander received a request to report to his regimental command post. Turning to his adjutant, he said, "Come on, let's beat it," and the two officers started to run toward the rear. They had gone barely 200 yards when they discovered that the entire battalion was frantically running to the rear--and they ran for six miles before being stopped.

In 1904, during the Russo-Japanese War, a Russian rifle brigade was encamped in a very secure position behind the lines. A soldier, relieving himself in a rice field, saw--or thought he saw--something. He raced back to the camp shouting that the Japanese were attacking. The panic was instantaneous and complete; rifles were fired in all directions and the entire brigade ran pell-mell toward the rear. It took several days to rally the men. There was no Japanese attack.

Peacetime maneuvers were being held in this country in the 1930s, and a battalion of the "Red" Army was suddenly ambushed by a "Blue" infantry company. The Blue soldiers, grinning broadly, cut loose with a volley of blanks. A strange thing happened. The battalion froze in its tracks for an instant and then broke. Men flung away their rifles and packs and raced to the rear in insane flight. Leaders were powerless to stop them. Equipment was scattered all over the landscape. The umpires shook their heads.

"Wherever men congregate this group madness is not far off. A word, a gesture, even a shadow, may be sufficient to transform men into stampeding cattle" (Lanham, 1937, p. 301).

→ It is the purpose of this paper to attempt to define and comprehend military panic, this "group madness," and to discuss its causes.

Panic Defined

Most of the work available in the social science literature dealing with panic is concerned with unorganized groups, e.g., civilians caught in a disaster situation such as a theater fire or on a sinking ship. There are extensive anecdotal, theoretical, and conjectural formulations on the causes and nature of such panic and the behavior of panic participants (see Schultz, 1964).

From this work, the following definition of panic has emerged: Panic is a fear-induced flight behavior which is nonrational, nonsocial, and nonadaptive to the situation at hand. Thus defined, the flight behavior characteristic of panic (a) leads to the destruction of the group as a psychological group, and (b) reduces or minimizes the escape possibilities of the group as a whole.

A further consideration in defining panic in unorganized groups, which has become evident in the study of actual large-scale disasters, is the crucial importance of the degree to which escape or flight from the danger can be successfully implemented. "Given blocked or in some way limited numbers of exits or escape routes, the potentially adaptive character of flight gives way to nonadaptive behavior in which people quickly clog or jam the few escape routes so as to render them, in effect, closed, leaving an even smaller number of such routes" (Schultz, 1964, p. 8).

Thus, the three essential components of panic in unorganized civilian groups are fear, flight, and limited access to escape routes.

When we turn to a consideration of panic in a highly organized group, such as a military unit, it becomes necessary to alter slightly the above considerations, although the panic and its causes remain the same in principle.

One major point of difference between the civilian and military group facing disaster or danger is the simple fact that the latter group is organized. The military unit exists as an integrated and cohesive unit and one which is trained specifically to cope with danger.* One would ordinarily

*There are occasionally exceptions to this in the urgency of battle where a new unit may be hastily organized of stragglers and support troops. In this case there would be less cohesiveness than with a unit that has been together for a period of time.

expect a very adaptive response to situations of fear and fright and such is usually the case. The incidence of military panic, though debilitating when it occurred, happened to only a small number of the military units involved, for example, in all of World War II. Thus, panic occurs much less frequently in organized as opposed to unorganized groups and this seems to be due, in large part, to the composition of the military unit.

Another point of difference between military and civilian panic is to be found in the environmental situation in which the behavior may occur. The military unit in flight may not be as restricted in its access to escape routes as a civilian group in a theater. Of course, such flight can usually go in only one direction, but beyond that the escape routes may not be very restricted (except in special circumstances where, for example, all fleeing troops have to cross one narrow bridge).

The factor of limited access to escape routes may thus play less of a central role in inducing panic in the military. However, from the standpoint of survival of the unit in flight, as well as neighboring units, the panic flight of troops can also be just as nonadaptive as that of any civilian group.

If panicking troops had stayed together as a cohesive unit, they could probably conduct a strategic withdrawal and remain intact, thus maximizing the chances of survival of the individual members. By running to the rear and throwing away their weapons, for example, the men have ceased to function as a unit and this lapse can result in the loss of the entire battle. This is behavior that reduces the survival possibilities of the group as a whole.

Most of the literature on military panic is of an anecdotal nature, drawing on the observations of actual participants or observers of a panic, or a psychiatric evaluation of the behavior. Most of the available articles on the topic have been written by military officers.

One such analysis of panic by an army psychiatrist offers a definition of panic which is not incompatible with that offered above: "Panic, the pathologic counterpart of normal fear, involves temporary major disorganization of thinking and control by fear. Consciousness is usually clouded. The soldier's actions are usually wholly unadaptive and often compromise his safety. The most common expression of true panic on the battlefield is the panic run, in which, usually during a shelling, the soldier deserts cover and

dashes about impulsively, exposing himself to flying shell fragments" (Ranson, 1949, p. 10).

Another psychiatric analysis was conducted by White (1956, pp. 207-208), using observations by Mira (1943): "As danger mounts, control becomes increasingly difficult. The person's mind begins to be occupied incessantly with the danger. He can no longer inhibit the bodily signs of anxiety; perspiration, tremor, restlessness, fast-beating heart, quickened breathing force themselves upon him. Thought and judgment deteriorate, actions are erratic and poorly controlled, new acts are started before old ones are completed. As he finds it impossible to pull himself together, the person experiences an extremely unpleasant sensation of losing his mental balance. Danger seems to be everywhere. When panic begins to reign, the conscious state resembles a nightmare, 'consisting of a peculiar, irregular stream of delirious, distorted mental images, most of which are forgotten when the subject returns to normal.' Scarcely aware of what he is doing, the panic-stricken person may rush wildly about, laughing, shouting, crying in rapid succession."

Causes of Military Panic

Fear has been mentioned as the major necessary, though not sufficient, cause of panic. Of course, fear in varying degrees is ever-present in a situation of combat, or the anticipation of combat, but not all units in battle panic.

There are a variety of factors which can serve to transform the fear and terror of combat into the "group madness" of panic. Further, the fear and terror can serve to compound or magnify the impact of these various causal factors. The stressful conditions of combat contain all the necessary and sufficient forces which can lead to panic. As S. L. A. Marshall commented, "The seeds of panic are always present in troops so long as they are in the midst of physical danger" (1947, p. 149).

The causes of panic can be divided into two general categories: predispositional and precipitating variables.

Predispositional Variables. There are a number of factors, loosely subsumed under the label of stress, which serve to weaken men physically and psychologically, rendering them susceptible to the more traumatic panic-precipitating

variables discussed below. While these background conditions are not direct causal factors of panic, they provide the highly fertile soil in which the precipitating seeds of panic can quickly take root.

In their extensive studies of World War II combat, Stouffer et al. (1949) listed the following types of stress which, if experienced for too long a period of time, severely weaken the resistance of the individual soldier:

(a) prolonged front line duty with its ever-present threats to life and limb;

(b) extreme physical discomforts including extremes of temperature; inadequate food, water, clothing, and shelter; lack of sleep; insects; filth; fatigue; and so on;

(c) anxiety engendered from the death or wounding of close friends and the constant exposure to the wounded and dying;

(d) deprivation of the usual sources of affection and security (e.g., family) and normal outlets for social and sexual expression.

Strauss (1944) believed that there were three basic kinds of predispositional variables:

(a) those that physically weaken men, such as poor food, fatigue, illness, and intoxication;*

(b) those that reduce one's level of mental ability, such as prolonged uncertainty, confusion, and doubt;

(c) those that produce high states of tension and heighten the imagination.

Still another list of predispositional variables was noted by Garner (1945), an Army psychiatrist in World War II. He discussed the forces capable of weakening resistance, such as hunger, cold, heat, rain, illness, and fatigue, but also considered variables of a more psychological nature. For example, Garner suggested that anything which reduced the

*In today's military, perhaps the use of drugs should be considered as well as alcoholic intoxicants.

soldier's morale, such as loss of confidence in his leaders, could also predispose troops to panic.

The final factor mentioned by Garner refers to "anything which tends to minimize group feeling and prevents good group identification" (1945, p. 351). He included such individual factors as mental deficiencies, illiteracy, and psychoneuroses, which may retard or prevent group attachment.

The security afforded by a sense of strong attachment to a group--a high level of group cohesiveness--is also discussed by Schultz (1964) as a factor, the lack of which may predispose a unit to the group madness of panic.

The cohesive military unit functions as a primary group to its members for whom it provides intimate, warm, accepting, and secure relationships. Cut off from his usual sources of affection, security, and status, the soldier turns more and more to his military primary group for the satisfaction of his basic emotional needs.

When this sense of group identity and belonging is disrupted (by too many casualties in a unit, large numbers of new replacements, etc.), or when it is not allowed to even develop, then the members are less able to resist the stresses of battle and are more predisposed to behave as individuals (i.e., nonsocially) and be more concerned with self-survival than with the survival of the group as a whole. It seems that the lower the level of cohesiveness of a group, the more readily the group can be precipitated into panic behavior.

Another predispositional variable is the powerful force of rumor. Meerloo (1950) described how rumor created panic among German troops in Holland toward the end of World War II. Rumors spread throughout Holland among the Dutch concerning the rapid advance of the Allies into their country. Actually, only a few advance units had crossed the border from Belgium at the time. The rumors among the people so strongly influenced the German troops that they started a panicky retreat to the German frontier. (Their flight was stopped by German troops at their own border.)

Caldwell, Ranson, and Sachs (1951) noted that Genghis Khan made very effective use of rumor to induce panic in his enemies. Rumor can very effectively contribute to feelings of tension and insecurity among troops, as exemplified by a

battle between Italian troops and Abyssinians in 1896. An Italian unit of 15,000 troops was advancing through a narrow defile when they were suddenly ambushed by a relatively small number of native troops. The trained Italian troops immediately fled in the terror and disorganization of panic.

"A number of factors contributed to this panic, but the most important appears to have been the rumors about the cruelty and violence of the natives. All sorts of wild tales were told and retold . . . about how the natives castrated and tortured their prisoners. These stories made a deep impression on the men, and at the first contact with the natives there was an upsurge of fear which the officers and less suggestible soldiers were unable to check" (Young, 1944, p. 340).

A U. S. Army officer, Lanham (1937), discussed the factors of defeat and loss of confidence which can weaken the resistance of troops. Defeat, particularly a prolonged series of retreats and lost battles, "sows the seed of distrust . . . it implants the idea that the enemy may be physically superior to [the private soldier] and mentally superior to his leaders" (p. 307).

The lack of confidence and faith in one's fellow soldiers and leaders can result from continued defeats and is also likely to be found in untrained and untested troops. Instead of functioning as a unit, each individual acts and thinks only for himself. "In such cases each individual sees his own questionable reactions in his neighbor. Suspicion, fear, jealousy, and cowardice, grow in these dark places of the mind" (Lanham, 1937, p. 307).

Sigmund Freud, one of the few psychological theorists to address himself to the topic of military panic, discussed the strong relationship which ideally develops between troops and their leaders. Panic arises when this libidinal relationship disintegrates to the point where the leader is no longer obeyed and each soldier is concerned only with his own welfare with no consideration for his fellow troops.

As to the cause of this group-leader disintegration, Freud cautioned that it was not danger alone since troops always face danger in combat. "Dread in an individual is provoked either by the greatness of a danger or by the cessation of emotional ties. . . . In just the same way panic arises either owing to an increase of the common danger or

owing to the disappearance of the emotional ties which hold the group together" (Freud, 1922, p. 48).

There are, then, a number of factors--both individual and group, both psychological and physiological--that can predispose a military unit to the nonsocial, nonadaptive, and nonrational behavior of panic. It is noted that these factors are not capable, by themselves, of directly producing a panic reaction, but they can so weaken the resistance of troops as to render them highly vulnerable to the actual panic-precipitating conditions.

Precipitating Variables. The factors capable of precipitating the panic reaction share the following characteristics: They represent a sudden traumatic shock or surprise, either real or imagined.

The importance of strong sensory stimulation or sensory overload has been discussed by several writers as a panic-precipitating variable. Research on the concept of level of arousal or activation has suggested that each individual has a threshold of optimal level of stimulation in which he functions most effectively (see Bindra, 1959; Cannon, 1929; Duffy, 1951; Freeman, 1948; Lindsley, 1951; Schultz, 1965).

These writers have posited the existence of an arousal continuum ranging from deep sleep (at the low stimulation level) to the high excitation found in panic (the high stimulation level). Any extreme change in the level of stimulation from the individual's optimal level--either too much or too little stimulation--results in reduced efficiency of behavior.

At the level of excessive stimulation, the person can no longer cope with the situation and his behavior disintegrates. The soldier is, of course, trained to adapt to high levels of stimulation and high levels of noise and visual complexity are standard conditions of the battlefield. However, when some combination of the panic-predisposing variables are operative, the soldier's optimal level of arousal may fall to a low level so that he is less able to tolerate the excessive stimulation that may have been "normal" or at least tolerable to him before.

The result can be panic. Caldwell, Ranson, and Sachs (1951) discussed the importance of high levels of stimulation, and the resulting high levels of activation, in completely

debilitating even well-trained troops. "In the Gallic War, Julius Ceasar's enemies recognized the value of auditory stimulus in creating panic and confusion among Ceasar's legions by yelling and knocking their weapons together to produce loud and fearful noises" (p. 551).

Various tribes of Indians in this country produced terror among white settlers and soldiers in the same way. The Japanese used the same tactic in World War II as did the North Koreans and Chinese Communists during the Korean War.

Another traumatic precipitating variable involves the exposure to a new weapon or threat for which there is no prepared method of coping. For example, the Germans in World War I introduced two new terrifying weapons which caught the Allied troops completely by surprise--gas and the flame-thrower. The troops exposed to these new weapons had no means of fighting them or protecting themselves from them. Panic flight was the result, as one eyewitness describes in the case of the first gas attack at Ypres: "eagerly we scanned the country with our field-glasses, hoping to glean some knowledge of the progress of the battle. Then we saw that which almost caused our hearts to stop beating--figures running wildly and in confusion over the fields.

"'The French have broken,' we exclaimed. We hardly believed our words. It seemed so impossible, so inconceivable. For a while we almost thought that the whole French Army was in retreat. Gunlimbers passed at the gallop, fugitive Zouaves and Tureos clinging to them. In a few minutes the road in front of the asylum was choked with fugitives--soldiers and panic-stricken peasantry from the farms and villages round. The story they told we could not believe; we put it down to their terror-stricken imaginings--a greenish-gray cloud had swept down upon them, turning yellow as it traveled over the country, blasting everything it touched, shriveling up the vegetation. No human courage could face such a peril.

"'We can fight, but the good God would not have us stay and be poisoned like rats in a sewer.'

"Then there staggered into our midst French soldiers, blinded, coughing, chests heaving, faces an ugly purple color--lips speechless with agony, and behind them, in the gas-choked trenches, we learned they had left hundreds of dead and dying comrades. The impossible was only too true.

"The immediate result was a four-mile breach in our line, and through this gap the Germans were pouring in their thousands" (Literary Digest, 1915, p. 483).

The French troops who panicked were described as worn and exhausted by a long period in the front lines where presumably the predispositional variables had been able to take their toll by sapping the men's resistance. The battle was saved by a Canadian division, well-trained, experienced, and fresh from a rest camp behind the lines. They too were exposed to the new weapon of gas, but did not panic; a good example of the importance of the predispositional variables in rendering troops more susceptible to such traumatic experiences.

The Allies quickly instituted training programs and distributed gas masks, and panic due to a gas attack was thereafter extremely rare.

Practically every writer on the topic of panic in any kind of group, military or civilian, lists some form of behavioral contagion as a direct causal factor (see Brousseau, 1920; Caldwell, Ranson, & Sachs, 1951; Coste, 1929; Eltlinge, 1917; Maxwell, 1923; Munson, 1921; Percin, 1914; Quarantelli, 1954; Strauss, 1944).

In his work as U. S. Army historian during World War II, S. L. A. Marshall investigated seven incidents of panic, two in the Pacific and five in Europe, and found they all had the same origin. In all cases, the panic began when a few men made sudden and unexplained flights to the rear which, through suggestion, mimicry, or behavioral contagion, prompted the others to join them in what turned out to be disorganized routs.

"They ran as a body because something had happened which made them suddenly and desperately fearful. . . . I think it can be laid down as a rule that nothing is more likely to collapse a line of infantry in combat than the sight of a few of its number in full and unexplained flight to the rear" (Marshall, 1947, p. 145).

In France, in 1944, a sergeant was suddenly hit and immediately ran for the first aid station without telling his men what had happened. His own men immediately ran after him and other units, seeing the flight of troops, also ran. "Someone said: 'The order is to withdraw.' Others picked up the word and cried it along the line: 'Withdraw! Withdraw!'

It happened just as simply as that" (Marshall, 1947, p. 146).

In another incident in the Pacific, an artillery observer received permission to go back to the company command post because his radio set was out of order. Because the line was being shelled, the observer and his party ran. The infantry, seeing these men rush past them, also got up and ran.

A final example of the debilitating effects of behavioral contagion comes from World War I: "As the regiment was trotting back in marching column on the road, the regimental commander sent an aide to the head of the column to bring it to a walk. As this officer was galloping along the column from the direction of the enemy, his pace was regarded as a sign of the seriousness of the situation. When the officers tried to gain the heads of their troops by galloping, the troopers followed suit and soon the entire regiment was galloping away from the enemy, and overran a Prussian battery. Only after miles and some casualties was it possible to bring the regiment to a halt" (Altrock, 1930, p. 116).

Marshall suggested that when a soldier sees other men flee to the rear, it, in effect, releases him from duty, and any personal sense of failure or shame is obviated by his knowledge that his own behavior will not be very conspicuous.

The Ending of Panic

Once a full-fledged panic rout on a large scale has begun, there seems to be little chance of stopping it until the troops have literally run themselves to the point of exhaustion. According to Lanham (1937), there are very few instances in military history where panics have been stopped, even by the most respected and feared of commanders, until it had run its full course.

The only time to stop this group madness is before it begins and that would seem to indicate the importance of proper attention to the physical and psychological conditions of troops to prevent the emergence of any of the predispositional variables.

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Panic behavior occurring in combat in past wars is defined, reviewed and discussed. The causal factors of panic are considered at two levels: predispositional and precipitating variables. The predispositional variables are those which serve to weaken men physically and psychologically, rendering them susceptible to the traumatic precipitating variables which actually initiate the panic behavior.		

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