

# Commentary on “Some observations on mental conditions as observed amongst the ship’s company of a battleship in war-time”



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## Original Article

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*It is always interesting to observe the psychological reaction of a large body of men when placed in exceptional circumstances, and in these times a few remarks as regards the mental conditions applying in my own ship may not be out of place.*

*Any mental state depends upon, or is the resultant of, two or three main factors: first, the type of mind, for the adage that ‘one man’s food is another’s poison’ is no less true in matters psychological than it is in physical affairs; then the conditions or influences, or stresses derived from the surroundings, the circumstances in which the mind is set to work; and, finally, the degree and direction of the change in such external influences from what they were previously to what they are at the time under observation. It is as well to consider the material and the previous environment as a preliminary to investigating the reaction under the present conditions.*

*In this connexion it is found that, in this ship’s company, by far the majority of the men are derived from the Royal Fleet Reserve. A considerable proportion are Royal Naval Reserve ratings, and a very few are actual active service men. Most of them are married, and in their shore life have held positions demanding considerable intelligence and necessitating much self-reliance. Some have had a certain amount of responsibility in civic life. It is evident, then, that this ship’s company cannot be regarded as if they were a typical naval crew, and therefore their reaction will be different from that of such men when they fall into their new conditions.*

*From the purely mental standpoint, many grades of intellectual development are to be seen, but, on the average, the type is quite high, and, compared with a similar body of men elsewhere, very satisfactory. In only one case that has come under observation has there been any question of actual mental deficiency. The material, then, consists of*

*a very good standard of seamen from the better part of the working population, who, by reason of their responsibilities, have made the habit of taking forethought and of acting in accordance with their own considered judgments.*

*Passing, then, to consider the nature of the crew influences to which they are subjected, and the reactions which have occurred it is advisable to divide the time since the beginning of the war, as regards this ship, into three periods corresponding to position and movement of the ship. First, a long period of over four months, during which the ship was lying in an exposed position on the East Coast; second, a short period amounting to two days, while the ship was at sea; and the third; another lengthy period of, so far, about six weeks, in the course of which the ship was lying in a protected harbour on the South Coast.*

*Roughly speaking, the influence of the first period was in the nature of a prolonged and monotonous stress owing to the nature of the position; the routine demanded was of an extremely irksome type, consisting of continual watches, night and day, daily repetition of the measures for defence and offence possessed by the ship, and, save for a very occasional route march, giving the men two or three hours away from the ship, nothing to break the monotony or give some little change to the environment. Recreation while off actual duty, too, presented many difficulties owing to the need for darkening the ship and the shortness of the daylight at the time of the year.*

*There was the always-present possibility of attack by submarine or by ships of superior force, at some times more apparently imminent than at others.*

*Apart from these special conditions appertaining in this ship, there were many other considerations to be taken into account in dealing with men of this type, and it will be best to follow an average man from the time of his joining the ship, in order that they may be fully appreciated.*

*The man takes up his duties, it may be assumed, with more or less eagerness and pleasure, the unpleasant facts of*

leaving his home and his ordinary life and the possibility of danger in the new sphere, being more than counterbalanced by the emotional satisfaction arising out of the gratification of his patriotic instincts. Largely influenced by this self-satisfaction he smooths over his absence from his home; the life on board ship obtains a certain glamour; and the little difficulties as to be encountered do not appear on the horizon. There is also the feeling of returning again to a life belonging to his younger days, of which he undoubtedly recalls much that is inviting. He meets a large number of entirely fresh faces, and, in the interest to be found in such circumstances, his mind is fully employed.

It was remarkable to notice how quickly the men settled down and merged their individuality into the component of the ship's company. Given a short space of time, the man has sorted out the new acquaintances into friends and otherwise; the novelty of the situation has passed off; the routine no longer demands that close attention which was necessary at first, and there is nothing further to be discussed in the ship. His mind then turns to other more remote matters; the possibilities of the duration of the war, the probabilities of the employment of the ship and the part he himself will actually play in the war. Such topics are naturally of great importance to him, and, consequently, they were discussed everywhere in the ship. Pass along another week or so and these matters have been threshed out to the bone; everyone's opinion has been given many times over. The newspapers do not help by bringing any fresh material as food for discussion, and he is completely in the dark as to any movement on the part of the ship herself.

It is only to be expected that, under such circumstances, discussion of these topics becomes unprofitable and highly unsatisfying. To a man accustomed to foresee his own course of action, it is very difficult to maintain a state of intelligent anticipation with so little material to work upon. More than that, the effort to maintain it in the face of such difficulties, coupled with the feeling of helplessness in his own destinies, becomes an irritating factor the longer it continues.

As a result it was found that, as a subject of general interest, the war and its personal application to the individual ceased to be heard. Instead, as a defensive measure, the man adopts a condition of more or less unstable apathy to his future, unstable on account of the setting on one side of his instincts of self-preservation and self-control.

In the meantime he has been going on, day after day, repeating the same evolutions of the routine and though, as regards the efficiency of the ship, the automaticity with which these come to be performed is very desirable, from the individual's standpoint the results are not so happy.

Apart from the actual time while on duty, the man has nothing of importance in the ship left to think about. The effort too at maintaining a sufficient interest in so monotonous and trying a routine becomes a steadily, increasing stress as time goes on.

Consequently, as the man has been accustomed to think, and subject matter for thought must be found, he turns to the relatively unimportant things of daily life as a relief. Now, any event, however insignificant, under these circumstances is liable to assume an importance entirely out of all reason when it occupies so relatively large an area of the destitute mental field. The imagination in dealing with such petty matters may easily become distorted, and whether the distortion will proceed in an exalted or depressed direction depends largely on the tone of the background on which the thoughts are spread.

It will be seen from the fact of the underlying stress and the failure of satisfaction of the primary instincts and habits of the man that the emotional background is more likely to be dark than bright. The disproportion will therefore probably exist in a direction tending to produce a state of anxiety and distress of the mind. It must be remembered that this anxiety, though outwardly attributable to the insignificant event, is in reality the outward expression of the general unsatisfaction of the mind.

The extent to which the lack of proportion will proceed now becomes a pure factor of the individual, and it is in those men where a morbid tendency already exists that the distortion will occur in the highest degree. There is no question of attributes such as courage and loyalty in the matter; given a well-developed imagination and the faculty of viewing events in a critical spirit, the very fact of a man's zeal and his desire for action will help rather than retard the morbid process.

The attendance at the sick bay towards the end of the period under discussion showed quite plainly the necessity for taking these considerations into view in dealing with the various minor ailments and injuries which came under notice. Mild conditions of neurasthenia with hypochondriacal ideas were prevalent. Minor accidents all had a mental sequence of some kind. Most striking of all was the occurrence of a hitherto unsuspected case of general paralysis of the insane in an apparently healthy man, who sustained a small injury to a finger, severing a tendon. The tendon was sutured and the wound healed perfectly, but during the period of convalescence the patient attracted observation, and it was found that he presented the Argyll-Robertson pupil, the markedly increased reflexes, etc., of the general paralytic. These, of course, probably did exist to some degree beforehand, but the interesting point was the rapid advance of the disease dating from the trivial

*injury. In other cases conditions occurred which could only be described as of slight traumatic neurasthenia.*

*The second period of time, when the ship put out to sea, was productive of very striking effects. On the one hand, it came as a welcome relief from the terrible monotony of the first period, and the possibility that the ship might have been proceeding to take an active part instead of passively awaiting attack, might be relied upon to revive the patriotic emotions which had suffered from want of fuel. On the other, the risk to the individual was apparently much greater, and if the deterioration due to the first period had proceeded beyond a certain limit, then the additional acute stress might prove disastrous. Both of these suppositions were found to apply as a matter of fact. By far the majority of the men showed appreciable relief - a general rising of spirits was to be noticed. Work was carried-out with an eagerness belonging to the early days of the War, and altogether a sense of satisfaction could be felt throughout the ship.*

*In one case, however, a fatal result ensued, the man severing his carotid artery on the second morning at sea. In another, severe emotional crises arose, attributed by the man to an alteration in his home affairs of which he had just heard. In others the intensity of hypochondriacal ideas in cases under observation became much greater.*

*What the effect of a prolonged period at sea would have been is extremely difficult to forecast; probably the two sides of the question would soon balance up again, the men would soon become accustomed to the new conditions, and would, no doubt, recover their usual tone.*

*However, there was no opportunity to judge of this. The second period was of very short duration and the third period of lying in a protected harbour commenced. Here there is a very different picture: the men are not continually subjected to the stress of imminent danger, the exercises and manoeuvres which they carry out are purely exercises and do not demand the strain of attention as they did formerly, and, of most importance, they can now have a little - very little, though, under the circumstances - time on shore, away from the ship and its discipline.*

*In nearly every way this is beneficial; physically the cramping effect of life on board ship becomes relieved, and, more important still, the cramping mental effect also passes away in the intercourse with new people. They meet new faces, can form new associations for themselves, and this expansion of the mind is of very great value.*

*Briefly to review the whole period, it is seen that the psychological conditions consisted of a prolonged and monotonous stress, followed by a sudden, increased stress and then by a quiescence as regards the present, the only*

*worry existing in the future.*

*It may be said that so far the men have come through exceedingly well, mental troubles of a really serious nature having occurred in less than 1 per cent of the ship's company, while the mild neurasthenic conditions amounted to under 3 per cent or 4 per cent.*

*The conclusions to be drawn can only be that such lengthy periods as the first four months under the conditions which prevailed in the first part of the War are highly undesirable and should be prevented if military exigencies will permit. All the attention possible should be paid to the need of change in the mental environment while the men are under the influence of such continued stress, especially as adequate recreation could not be obtained owing to the military precautions necessary in such a situation.*

*That the results were not more regrettable can only be due to the standard of the men and their moral, and of that nothing too good can be said.*

#### **Commentary**

Beaton's account of mental conditions encountered on a battleship 100 years ago during the First World War echoes through the century since then. He clearly recognises from the outset that there are personal vulnerabilities that may make a sailor more susceptible to mental health problems, but also that the environment and events powerfully dictate the emergence of this vulnerability. Lastly, he recognises that change and, more importantly, the direction of change predicts presentation with mental health problems.

The most prevalent condition he described is "neurasthenia" with hypochondriacal ideas. The term neurasthenia was first used in the 19th century and thought to refer to a mechanical weakness of nerves. However, it first formally entered the psychiatric nomenclature in 1869 when Beard used it to describe a condition that relates to fatigue, anxiety, headache, neuralgia and depressed mood (1). As was the prevailing condition in psychiatry before the development of formal diagnostic manuals, the term was soon used with great elasticity and encompassed a great number of neurotic conditions not yet thought to amount to "insanity", although it may be prodromal to it (2). However, regardless of the wide use of the term, it denoted a neurotic condition with prevalent mood disturbance and a multitude of minor physical symptoms. This may still apply in the modern United Kingdom (UK) Armed Forces. Fear *et al.*, in their study of 9990 UK service personnel after the campaigns in Iraq and Afghanistan, found that 19.7% presented with symptoms of probable mental health disorder (3). There are also reports of an increase in the reporting of multiple physical symptoms post-deployment (4). Since neurasthenia encompasses both these psychological and

physical domains, Beaton's observations may well have been ahead of their time. It would be of great interest in a future littoral campaign to measure these effects in a more maritime setting than the land-based conflicts on which the most influential studies to date were based.

It is interesting to note that Beaton observed the period where they were laid up for four months in an exposed position on the East Coast to be the most psychologically adverse for the crew. He put this down to the prolonged exposure to subjective threat coupled with unrelenting routine and monotony. Once again, he may well have been ahead of his time. We now know that prolonged deployment does have an adverse effect on mental health (5). This is thought to represent a dose effect of prolonged exposure to subjective threat to self, increased exposure to traumatic events and prolonged separation from emotional support networks. Beaton's observation that mental health improved in the two days they went to sea after the four-month period of being laid up in a vulnerable position, in spite of the increased threat and one death from an accident,

is also now known to be a feature of deployment. The mental health of deployed personnel whilst on operations is actually very robust as proven by the Operational Mental Health Needs Evaluation (OMHNE) conducted during the campaign in Iraq, where there was no difference found in comparison with the non-deployed military population (6). Lastly, one patient did present with an emotional crisis during the two days at sea, which the patient attributed to an alteration to his situation at home that he had just learned about. We know now that mental health in the deployed environment can be affected significantly by events at home (7).

Beaton's observations in this small sample were borne out by time and scientific scrutiny. The issue of maritime deployment and its effects on mental health does require further study in future campaigns, and the advances made in researching this vital area in land-based theatres can be adapted to do so. It is, however, likely that Beaton got it right by and large.

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