

Combat Fatigue Irritability
TRANSCRIPTION

UNITED STATES NAVY
TRAINING FILM
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COMBAT FATIGUE IRRITABILITY

"The doctor says this will make you feel better.
- Yeah."

"God, how I hate these rest hours.
- Yeah, if you can sleep.
- Of course you can't sleep, sitting like this guy with your eyes open."

"I still say malaria doesn't kill you.
- Like hell it doesn't. An old uncle of mine had it in Scranton. Had it for 40 years in his bones, and out it came every 3 years, the day after Christmas.
- Yeah, too much Christmas booze, that's all.
- Ah, don't give me that."

"Your play.
- Hmm
- Oh, Jesus, you're slow.
- Shut up.
- I said it was your play.
- Okay, okay. Here, how's this?
- What a jerk.
- Dr. Bush wants to see you, Lucas.
- Oh, for Christ's sake.
- Now what'd you do?
- Okay.
- Good luck."

"Come in.
- This is Lucas, sir.
- Sit down, Lucas.
- Thank you, sir.
- Cigarette?
- No, sir.
- You know, Lucas, I've been wondering about you. During the week that you've been here, I've noticed that, unlike the other men, you don't talk in our group sessions.
- What is there to talk about, sir?
- Lots. I hear the other men getting quite a few things off their chest. You should be able to see that they feel better by so doing. What ship were you on, Lucas?
- The Montandan, sir."

- The Montandan was sunk, wasn't she?

- Yes, sir. Last May. South of Mindanao, on the high sea. Torpedo aft.

- And you were a fireman?

- Am, sir.

- Certainly.

- And it's a tough job being a fireman. Always below deck, you never see what goes on. That's why I'm fed up, nobody gets it. Nobody!

- Maybe not. And yet, there may be some of us, even among those of us who haven't been there, who do understand.

- What do you, sir, know about what it feels like to be a fireman? What does anybody know what it feels like to be a fireman, except a fireman? You got to be there to know. You got to feel that goddamn heat. On the Montandan, it was always 128 degrees below decks. 128 degrees of sweat and more sweat. No place to go or to move to. Those guys topside have it soft. They can breathe air, move around, see the enemy. Hell, we don't know whether the next minute will bring a bomb or whether there's a torpedo coming for us right now.

- What was your job in the engine room, Lucas?

- I was striking for water tender. I watched the lines feeding water to the boilers. That's why I couldn't move, I had to stay with those goddamn valves. Guys topside can take it out on the enemy, they can shoot a gun. All I could do was wish I could twist a valve, but I couldn't, because I'd wreck the boiler. Christ, the gut says you got to do something and, well, all you end up with is a burning feeling in your guts and your hands shaking. Goddamn it, look at me! This isn't me, doctor!

- How did you feel, Lucas, when you knew you were safe in the water?

- How did I feel?

- Yes.

- I was damn glad to get out of that hole! Anybody would have been!

- No, Lucas. Not everybody would have been. That's something you've got to face. Furthermore, you didn't really find relief, did you?

- I said I was glad to get out of that hole!

- Perhaps for a while. But I doubt it for long. How about it, Lucas? How about it?

- No, sir. I got the feeling I left my buddies down.

- That's it, Lucas. And that's something you've got, in a way, to feel proud of. You were in a tight, tense situation. And, quite naturally, you were afraid. You and every other man on that ship. Your buddies in the engine room, the gunners topside were all afraid. Because that's what happens to men in a battle. You were no different from any other man on that ship, only most of them accepted their fear. You fought against yours.

- If I only could have been topside! If I could only have moved around!

- It would have made no difference. You see, you let your fear get control of you. You wanted to get out of the engine room. That's why you felt relief when you were in the water. Even though you'd been blown from the engine room, as far as you were concerned, you had escaped. In your mind, you felt that you deserted your buddies, your ship. As a result, you feel guilty.

- Yes, sir.

- That's a feeling that you have to face and conquer. And the only way you can do that is to understand that the real cause of your being here is your normal fear in time of battle, a fear which you didn't learn to handle properly, that you're continuously short-tempered, even mean, that your hands shake, you have a burning sensation in the pit of your stomach. All stem from this cause. Now, in order to start getting well, you have to realize this. And in realizing it, remember that fear, and the thoughts that it makes you think at the time are

normal. Nothing to be ashamed of. Shared by all of the other men who were with you on the Montandan, as well as by the men on all the ships.”

“So, he told me I was scared. That’s not what’s wrong with me. What’s to be scared of around here?

- Gee, fella, something’s the matter. What is it?

- I don’t know. I don’t get it. It seems like I’m always mad and running off at the mouth. But how can being scared when the Japs are shooting at you make you such a bastard after you’ve gotten back?

- The doctors tell us when a fella gets that way, it’s because he fights being afraid instead of trying to do something about it.

- What the hell are you gonna do anything about it when your job’s just standing there twisting a little valve?

- My job’s the same sort of thing. In a battle, I’m not shooting a gun either, but I know when I got scared and thought how much I’d like to be someplace else. I used to think: “All the other guys are, too.” But they’re doing their job and I’m doing mine. And between us, we’re giving the enemy a hell of a licking. The same thing goes for you. Your job was important. You had to do it so the guys in the turrets could fire the guns. And so guys like me could take care of the wounded. You got to work your feelings off that way. Like figuring it’s a whole ship that’s fighting, and since you’re part of the crew, you’re fighting, too. At least, that’s the way I look at it.

- Yeah, I know, I used to feel that way sometimes. What I got to do made me be on edge all the time and want to smash things. And you know, what gets worse, when I came back first, that wasn’t so bad. When I saw all these guys sitting around at their desk, shining their pants, goldbricking, I thought of what me and my buddies had been through and... Well, that’s what got me started.

- Did you ever stop and think that maybe those fellas didn’t want to be sitting at desks? Maybe they were there because they were told to be?

- Don’t give me that! They like it! They like shoving us around, the yellowbellies.

I hadn’t been at that relocation center more than two hours before I got wise to them.

“Come on, come on! Clear the gangway! You’re not allowed to stand around here!

- Oh, we’re just waiting for Small Stores to open.

- I don’t care what you’re waiting for! Get going!

- For Christ’s sake, mate, what kind of a Navy is this?

- If you don’t start moving along, sailor, you’ll be finding out!

- Yeah.”

Yeah, it was just one little thing after another. Hell, “Do this, do that”.

“Hey, sailor, square that hat.

- What do you think I am, a booth?

- Square it. In case you don’t know, this is a taut ship.

- A taut ship? Looks to me as if we’ve run aground, skipper. By the way, do you know there’s a war going on? Ha!”

“I’m sorry but there’s nothing we can do until the Bureau sends us an adjusted pay account.

- You mean because I was dumb enough to get myself torpedoed, I can’t get paid?

- Oh, it won’t take long. You’ve only been here two days.

- Don't you people ever think of anything but your little pieces of paper?
- I'm sorry, but you must remember there were a thousand men on your ship. That's a big pay list to clear up. And besides, you're scattered all over the country now.
- Look, sister, I got a 30-day leave. I need spending money!
- Then you can go to the chaplain or the welfare office.
- Go to the ch...? Oh, for Christ's... thanks, sister, I'll be seeing you!"

"Well, it just doesn't make any sense. They want you to square your hat, they won't let you stand in line. Not even in line! They act as if nothing were different... Hell, we can keep our noses clean without them telling us.

- Huh-huh. The boys got to have something to do. Holding you down helps fill up the idle hours.
- Yeah. Well, thank God I got this leave coming up. And maybe after, they'll send me back to a ship where I can feel like myself again."

"Maybe I can get away from these goldbricks that have nothing to do all day but order us guys around telling us to square our hats. I'd like to see them out there! I'd like to see how square an SP's hat is with a hundred Jap planes dive-bombing him. That's the way I felt, that's the way I feel yet. If that means I'm crazy, alright, I'm crazy.

- They don't understand us back here.
- Goddamn civilians.
- If they knew what it's like being asleep in a foxhole and having a Jap land on your back, and having to fight it out with him with a knife, I don't think they'd stay home so often on Mondays.
- You're damn right they wouldn't.
- I guess you're all proving how irritable you are this morning.
- Don't think we like it.
- I'm sure you don't. One of the unfortunate things about being bad-tempered and quick to take offense is that you cut yourself off from most people. Now, there's one thing to get straight right away. All of these attitudes of yours, your hatred of the land-going Navy, civilians and so on, are all symptoms of your illness. And they're symptoms for which we must find a cause.
- It's because squaring your hat is of no importance that it gets you.
- Not at all. The reason you're annoyed by such petty matters lies in your basic condition. You know that before the war, before you experienced the tension and the fear of battle, you weren't annoyed by such things. As I told you before, your natural fears in battle were not properly handled. You didn't accept them as part of living, and a necessary part of fighting. You held them in, choked them back, until they finally overpowered you. You still have those fears, and it's from them that these irritations arise.
- Then why aren't we allowed to leave the hospital? If they'd just let us go home, get away from military life, we'd forget it. We'd snap out of it.
- Lucas, did you go on that 30-day leave you were talking about?
- Yes, sir.
- How come?
- I wasn't sick yet. At least, it hadn't caught up with me.
- How was it, Lucas?
- It was lousy.
- In what way was it lousy?
- I know what you're driving at, and that's exactly what it was like. As a matter of fact, if I hadn't gone on that leave, I probably wouldn't be here now."

To tell the truth, it was damn nice to get home. Mother and dad were at the train, and so was Sue. She and I got engaged before I joined up, she'd been my girl in high school. Anyway, I was glad to see them. It'd been over two years.
You know, that dinner was something, just the way I thought it would be.

“Want some more coffee, Bob?

- Yeah.

- More ice cream, Bob? There's a lot left.

- Gosh, no.

- Go ahead, Bob. Puts hair on your chest. Well, you used to laugh at it.

- Here.

- Flesh. Female flesh. Mighty soft.

- Drink your coffee.

- Oh, isn't it wonderful, Dad? The children here together again. Bob and Sue.

- Just like old times. Just like it used to be.

- Well, that sure was some chow, Mom. Almost as good as Navy chow. Only, we should have had some beans.

- But you know, Bob, I was so excited having you home I was afraid I'd forget how to cook.

- You sure didn't.

- I'll say you didn't. Goodness!

- Well, Bob, would you like Mother and me to go to a movie?

- Oh, no! No, we should all be together this first evening. Bob will walk me home later.

- Well, we... we could easily go.

- Oh, Mother. We haven't much gas left, anyway.

- You'll never know how rationing has tied us down. Now, Dad only gets an A book.

- Now, you know how I've tried, Martha. It's just that Bill Thomas. Oh, he's chairman of the Rationing Board now. He's never forgotten how I quit his darn factory. Gosh, that's been fifteen years ago too.

- I guess it is sort of tough with just an A book.

- Eh, I'll say it is.

- I just can't believe you're here, Bob. Sitting there with Sue.

- Mother, that's about the tenth time you've said that. I'm sorry.

- Burt Haskins is home, got home just the other day.

- Hey, that's swell! What's he on, a furlough?

- Yes, he's just back from Germany.

- Now, what's wrong with all of you anyway? You're not the same, you're treating me as if I were a stranger.

- Oh, son.

- Maybe you're right, Bob. You are a bit of a stranger. Well, I mean, you've been lots of places and seen... Well, the sort of thing we've never seen.

- That's all it is, Bob.

- Yes, sir. We've got a lot of ground to cover before we're all caught up. And there's things that happened here for you to find out about, too. Oh, oh, we haven't been exactly standing still!

- Well, I should say not. Why, we've got one of the biggest factories in the country here. And we're not supposed to tell what they make.

- Only 50,000 people know it's tanks.

- Well, it's brought more new people to town. Things are terribly overcrowded.

- Now, let's let Bob do the talking. He can find out about these things tomorrow. After all, it's not everybody who's been to sea for 18 months.
- Was it really bad? I mean, all the time?
- No, no, of course not. Usually, it was just moving from one place to another. Noumea, Guam, Moresby, all those stinking little places.
- Tell me, Bob. When it happened, I mean, when the ship sank, were there sharks?
- Shut up! Shut up, all of you!"

Even before I was out of the house, I was ashamed of myself. I had a burning feeling in my stomach and my hands were shaking. I think I know why now, but then, I didn't.

- *Why, Lucas?*
- *It got me back by the questions of those goddamn valves and I was all wound up and scared all over again. I was too scared to know that that's what it was. I really thought that they didn't understand me anymore. Well, anyway, they should have known better than to ask me those questions.*
- *That "being scared" is certainly part of it, Lucas.*
- *Anyway, I walked the streets for a hell of a long time trying to figure it out. But I didn't. I just felt lower and lower by the minute. I couldn't get them. I couldn't get myself, so I decided to pin one on. Brother, did I.*

"Give me another.

- Here. You've had most of it. Finish it.
- Smart guy, uh?
- What's eating you, sailor?
- Not a goddamn thing.
- Is this your hometown, sailor?
- Yeah.
- Been home long?
- This afternoon.
- Oh. A fight with your girl, uh?
- No.
- Have you got a girl? Been away a long time, haven't you?
- Christ, how many more questions you got?
- Hell, it's near closing time. You're the last customer. I'd just as soon talk.
- Well, I wouldn't.
- Been lots of places, haven't you?
- Hell, yes.
- What's that first ribbon for?
- That's the continental area. It's the one that goldbricks wear.
- What have you got it on for?
- Christ, you got me. That's a good one.
- What's the middle ribbon?
- It's for Africa. This is the Pacific. The one with the stars in it. They're for getting shot at.
- Lot of them, aren't there?
- I'd say there are. Plenty of shells behind them, too. Hey, are you making fun of me?
- Hell, no.
- Stop, you and your questions, you son of a bitch!
- Go home, sailor. Make it up with somebody. Is it your family? Or is it your girl? Here's your change."

So I went home.

From then on, it was all downhill. Little things got me. One night, I was waiting for Sue to get dressed. We had a date. Her kid brothers were in the room playing.

“Jesus, Larry, watch out! Sue...”

I was only really happy when I was with those of the old gang who had come back, particularly with Burt Haskins, who'd lost an arm at Aachen. They hadn't told me that first night. Thought they'd spare my feelings.

“Well, I tell you, us guys from now on have got to stick together. You know, I was thinking, when enough of us get back, we can rent a place like that old vacant storeroom down on Market Street and have a club of our own.

- Yeah, I could start working on it right now.

- Why not?

- Sure.

- Now, I'll call Tom McGinnis tomorrow. He's good at raising money.

- You know, fellas, we've got something there. We could sit around shooting the breeze, have a bar, throw parties. It would be a place of our own.”

But it was with Sue that there was the real trouble. We just couldn't hit it off anymore. God knows we tried. It was alright when we couldn't talk.

*The glories of our blood and state
Are shadows, not substantial things;
There is no armor against Fate;
Death lays his icy hand on kings:
Scepter and Crown
Must tumble down,
And in the dust be equal made
With the poor crooked scythe and spade.”*

But later, after church, it was different.

“It's hard to think what it's like in summer. Leaves in the trees, it's hot and thunderstorms.

Remember when we used to come out here for weenie roasts and all?

- Yeah, I wonder what's happened to that old hay wagon and that old horse.

- It was wonderful riding that wagon. All of us singing and there was always the moon, wasn't there?

- Seems that way. Ah, that certainly was a long time ago.

- Not so long. Back in senior year in high school. The time that we went swimming right over there. You proposed to me in the water. It's a silly place to ask a girl to marry you.

- Well, I tried everywhere else. Gosh, you were stubborn.

- We were too young and you knew it.

- You never said that then.

- No. Maybe I just knew it without realizing it.

- I don't get you, Sue. It should have happened. Look what we've missed.

- We'll have it, darling. It won't be very much longer. We can start all over again. Come back here with the gang, have a weenie roast and go swimming.

- How's Burt Haskins going to go swimming? How do you know how many of the old gang will be around, including me?
- I'm sure you'll be here. I must be sure of that.
- Oh, stop kidding yourself, Sue. Don't you know what this is all about? Don't you know we can't go back?
- No, I don't. I know that we've got to feel the way we did about each other or our marriage won't work. You've got to get a hold of yourself, Bob! Ever since you've been home, you've been snapping at me and...
- Oh, for God's sake, Sue! You just don't understand anymore! You've changed. Go on home, Sue. I want to be by myself."

I never felt so low in my life as when I walked away from her. But there was nothing else I could do. For the next couple days, I hung around the house. I was nervous and felt half-sick. Dad got the idea it might do me good to go hunting. At first, it was fine. Dad and I used to hunt a lot. I'd always liked to hunt. I had a sweet gun. I don't know, it seemed good to be out in the woods with the old man. I felt pepped up."

- "You skirt the woods here, Bob. I'll go in and see what I can flush.
- Okay.
- Don't shoot me by mistake, now. I'm no rabbit.
- Okay.
- Yo! Yo! Yo! Hey! Yo! Hey!...
- Christ! For Christ's sake, what'd you bring me out here for? Goddamn it! Goddamn it! Goddamn it!"

So Dad took me to the doctor. He said something about my nerves and called the Red Cross. The Red Cross called the Navy.

"And that's that. Now, brother, don't want to go home. Don't want to go home until you're well.

- The thing I don't understand is why did Lucas get all hot and bothered about a rabbit? He didn't have to fire a gun in combat.
- Do you know why, Lucas?
- No, sir.
- Lucas, tell the class again about that torpedoing.
- Torpedoing?
- Yes. How did you feel when you were in the water?
- I told you over and over again! For God's sake, I felt glad! Glad I was out of that ship!
- Is that all?
- Yes, yes, yes!
- I don't think so or you wouldn't be so excited about it.
- Well, it is, goddamn it! I tell you it is! Lots of them were dying all around me.
- Easy now, Lucas. We all understand. It takes a lot out of you to face bitter, unpleasant memories. Come inside with me. I'll be back in a moment."

"Come over here and lie down, Lucas. To say all that takes guts. As difficult as it was to do, so much easier will it be from now on. You can't dislodge deep-seated, sensitive feelings without hurting. You'll feel better shortly. Here, take this. It will help you relax. Now, just rest for a bit. We'll talk about it later, when you feel easier. You'll feel much better when you wake up. I'll be back."

“Now, let’s get some things straight. It took a lot out of Lucas to tell that story. He’s a better man for doing it. Every one of you must go through a similar realization of what lies behind symptoms, regardless of what they are: irritability, bad dreams, vomiting. No matter where you fought, on land, in the air, or on a ship or a sub, you have to face those memories. Get them out on the open, exactly as Lucas has done. Now, let’s consider the whole problem. But first, Clements, you’ve seen now why Lucas got so hot and bothered about a rabbit, of all things?

- Well, maybe.

- The moment he raised his gun, the rabbit seemed to disappear, and he saw his mates again, drowning, dying in the water all around him.

- Sure, it’s just like that feeling that I got when I watched my buddy die.

- That’s it. One of the simple basic facts: it’s quite clear, from what we know of Lucas, that he was a happy man before this whole business started. The sort of fella who might run a successful garage or a store. Liked, well-thought of in his hometown. He wasn’t irritable, bad-tempered, with a chip on his shoulder, quite the contrary. He was easy to meet, easy to know, a good guy. Then what?”

“For eighteen months, he’s at sea. There’s nothing unusual about that. Thousands of men have done as much, or more. But Lucas is tied down to valves. He’s never completely a part of the crew. He doesn’t feel that he and the gunners and the ship’s cook and the boys in CIC are all one. No, he feels that he’s just a little apart. Just a little special. Wanting to... Well, what? Wanting to hurl himself at a Jap, who he’ll surely kill. Wanting to shoot down a plane. Wanting to do anything except stay where he is and do his job in keeping the ship going and fighting. Because he can’t do what he thinks he wants to do or what he thinks he ought to do, he gets all tied up in knots. At the same time, he’s scared, scared just as you and every other man is scared when your lives are at stake.

But Lucas wants his own kind of personal release for that fear. He doesn’t realize that the torpedo men and the gunners, the bridge and he, himself, all have to work together to bring down that Jap plane, to blow up that Jap DD. It isn’t a one-man job. And one man can’t get rid of his fear at the expense of others, especially when they’re all on the same boat. This wanting to do something that isn’t his job, it’s his manner of running away. Only, he can’t. The ship and his conscience both have him tied down to those valves. Then fate steps in and gives him what he wants. As a result, he’s happy, safe in the water, blown out of his problem. And then, he sees the crew, his buddies burning, drowning, dying. And he feels that his safety is somehow part of their misery, their death.

He feels that because, deep down, he did want to escape, he’s therefore, in a way, responsible for their predicament.

Now, you have the facts. But what can Lucas do about them? What’s done is done. You can’t erase that. What he should do is to accept these feelings. Understand them and discipline them. But he doesn’t. Instead, he becomes touchy, fed up, confused and mean. Look what happened to him. When he first returned, he didn’t seem different. Calm on the surface. Nobody could tell that something was gnawing at him, fighting inside.

But as the days went on, so did his fighting. He got worse and worse. Then, when he got home on leave, he lashed out at those he loves, because they reminded him of his feeling of guilt, of unworthiness, by asking him simple, natural questions about his experiences. He fought against it and left the girl he loved, and I’m sure you all realize that he still loves her, because he felt that she no longer understood him.

Well, how could she? She only knew him by what he said and did. Why, he didn’t even understand himself. What you’ve just witnessed has changed him, started him towards a real understanding. He can now realize that all that disconnected, fed up feeling, which showed

itself as a fighting bad temper, comes from something underneath, from a feeling of guilt, feeling of unworthiness, feeling which he twisted about so that it looked as though everyone else were in the wrong. Everyone but Lucas himself. That's why we have these group discussions. They help you and Lucas see yourself as others see you, and to see problems like yours that other men have. Furthermore, you and Lucas can now put your new knowledge to use in a variety of constructive ways.

Occupational therapy will provide Lucas with a profitable physical outlet for his feelings. It will teach him that he can work while solving his problems, and do a better job of both. And physical training will help keep him in shape in the meanwhile.

What goes for Lucas goes for you. Your irritation is only a symptom. Symptoms of feelings which you've buried, tried to deny, like insomnia or being depressed or sulky or believing that you're no good. Bad temper is a sign of something. Something deeper. Something which has to be faced, and understood and worked out. When you can do with your problems what Lucas has done with his, you will be free of all your symptoms."

THE END

BUREAU OF AERONAUTICS

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