

YANK

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PSYCHOLOGY for the Fighting Man

What causes panic and mental breakdowns in the Army? Here's an interesting discussion of such problems in straight, simple language.

Panic

PANIC can occur in the best-drilled, most thoroughly seasoned troops. Some of the greatest routs in history have been cases of panic. The panicked group is much like a mob but it acts from fear, not anger. Even a well-disciplined regiment can disintegrate into a panicky mob when it meets a situation for which it has never been prepared.

Among troops which are "panic-ripe" a single cry of "Gas!" or "Run!" or "We're cut off!" may start a mad flight. The enemy, aware of this fact, plays on it whenever possible. In the first AEF, agents were planted among American troops to yell "Gas!" when the cry might start a panic. It became necessary to work out a code warning for gas, known only to trusted men. "New York" would mean gas one day, "Minneapolis" the next. The men were instructed not to cry "Gas!"

Trifling things can start panic.

In 1866, a dust cloud was enough to start the cry, "The German cavalry is charging!" among exhausted and frightened Austrian troops. The dust cloud was raised by a herd of frightened pigs.

In 1918, a runner handed a message to a battalion commander. The major read it and called to his adjutant, "Come on, let's beat it." The two started toward the rear at a dead run. The entire battalion was instantly in wild flight behind them. The message was only an order to report to headquarters.

One main cause of panic is lack of training. Troops trained only in methods of attack may, when forced into quick retreat and separated from their leaders, turn into a typical mob.

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Bad morale, rumor and poor leadership can make the ground ready for panic, impairing the confidence in command necessary to hold troops to the performance of duty. Contradictory or ambiguous orders make troops ripe for panic. So do apparent stupidity and vacillation among officers. Or prolonged waits under tension. Or frequent false alarms. Or unexplained retreats on the heels of victory. The death of a leader in whom confidence has been too much centered also makes the grieving men more ready for panic.

Once panic has begun, the best way to halt it is to capture attention and then provide positive, clear commands. If no officer is present, any self-possessed man can assume leadership and give the scared men what they need—clear confident direction. Unconcerned calm is effective if it can get full attention. One officer got attention in the first World War by standing up on a stump and laughing loudly and pointing at panic-stricken men who came running by him following others.

On these pages YANK presents selections from *Psychology for the Fighting Man*, the new Infantry Journal book prepared for soldier readers by a committee of the National Research Council with the collaboration of Science Service. Material in the book was written and edited by 60 outstanding American psychologists, medical and military authorities.