

# **ENDURING MILITARY BOREDOM**

## **FROM 1750 TO THE PRESENT**



Bård Maeland and Paul Otto Brunstad



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Bård Mæland

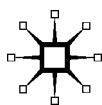
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*Wars, pogroms, and persecutions have all  
been part of the flight from boredom...  
Boredom is a vital problem for the moralist,  
since half of the sins of mankind are caused by it.*

Bertrand Russell, *The Conquest of Happiness*

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This book is dedicated to all those who volunteered for interviews and diary writing. We hope that all those who gave of their time to this project will not be too displeased with the finished book, in whose development they played such an important part.

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# 1

## Introduction: Enduring Military Boredom

### **An enduring inner enemy**

‘The greatest danger for the soldiers is boredom’, reported the German *Spiegel Online* in late October 2006 after having visited Spanish elite soldiers deployed along the Blue Line between Southern Lebanon and Israel. After the Israeli war against Hezbollah in July of the same year, the international community had requested a robust force to police the border between Northern Israel and Southern Lebanon. But there was little to do for the soldiers. ‘We are here just because we are here’, said one of the soldiers interviewed. A lack of motivating reasons, often combined with high military skills, is the perfect recipe for military boredom, the enduring inner enemy of soldiers at all times. But a seemingly boring situation can change swiftly. In late June 2007, almost a year later, three Spanish and three Colombian soldiers were killed in a bomb attack in the same area.

Some 20 years earlier, a rare study on boredom in peacekeeping operations commenced by stating that ‘although boredom is one of the major problems experienced by those engaged in peacekeeping missions, there is little consensus on the nature of the problem’ (Segal and Harris, 1985, p. 235). The study examined boredom and associated phenomena in the first American battalion to serve in the Sinai Multinational Force and Observers (MFO) during the early 1980s. The aim of this book is to contribute to increasing the vocabulary of military boredom and to create a deeper understanding – historically, empirically and theoretically – of the complex phenomenon of boredom in a military context.

That said, military boredom is hardly a recent phenomenon in the history of mankind. The second chapter of this book will take the reader on a journey through fragments of military history in order to

## 2 Enduring Military Boredom

demonstrate how boredom has been a much-felt problem at all times, and how new means of alleviating it have emerged. A standard formula says that wars consist of '5% horror and 95% boredom' (or waiting). In this sense, military boredom is *historically enduring*. But it is also enduring in terms of what it demands and requires of individual soldiers who have *to endure it*. That is the dual meaning of the title of this book.

Moreover, boredom can range from being a rather simple and superficial irritant to a grave, disease-like state of mind. Seán Desmond Healy calls the former 'simple boredom' (*ennui commune/banal*), whereas the latter is called 'hyperboredom'. The former he defines as 'feelings of tedium that are at least in principle conscious responses to specific irritants that tend to goad one into escape'. The latter is understood as 'a deep-seated agony, scarcely realised except by its effects, which is brought on by an all-inclusive, persisting perception of what is taken to be one's existential situation' (Healy, 1984, p. 28). Consequently, boredom is a relative phenomenon, which in a military context is unlikely to be experienced in the same way by people who serve in the same unit, in the same place and at the same time. This implies, of course, that how it is experienced, interpreted and endured depends on a number of factors.

It makes sense to maintain that, as a phenomenon, boredom is easily felt but difficult to describe precisely. This is partly due to the complexity of its nature, but also because its causes, symptoms and effects are rather ambivalent. With regard to the latter, the consequences, boredom can serve as a precondition for imaginative and creative processes, but it can also form a devastating force of dissolution and destruction. This ambiguity and unpredictability, therefore, call for thorough examination. To our knowledge, this has never been done with respect to military training and military life, or wars and other kinds of military operations. A vast amount of literature has appeared, however, that approaches boredom as a historical, cultural and sociological phenomenon from the viewpoint of various disciplines, in particular from a philosophical, literary, sociological, psychological or theological perspective (e.g. Blackwell, 2004; Doehleemann, 1992; Goodstein, 2005; Healy, 1984; Hübner, 1991; Kessel, 2001; Klapp, 1986; Kuhn, 1976; Raposa, 1999; Spacks, 1995; Svendsen, 2005).

In the Norwegian context, from which the empirical data for this book are taken, there is a distinctive term for boredom, namely 'barracks sickness' (*brakkesyke*). Barracks sickness is boredom in the sense of quiet desperation (Henry David Thoreau; quoted in Raposa, 1999, n180), but it also has an immense potential for mental, social and moral

disruption. No wonder that all kinds of specialists in and outside the armed forces of most countries have been called upon to cure it: welfare personnel, chaplains, soldiers' unions, commanders and parents' organisations. In our age, with troops increasingly being required to go on deployments overseas, it may very well be that the service of an average soldier has become more meaningful, exciting and rewarding. But one important concern has to be addressed by those who send young men and women to conflict areas worldwide: the 'overstretched' use of soldiers overseas, with repeated postponements of their dates of return. It should come as no surprise if such prospects reinforce a rather deep sense of boredom.

In this study, boredom is partly understood as reduced awareness. In war and peacekeeping operations, the capacity to interpret the situation adequately, in all its complexity, variation, restrictions, irregularities and trivialities, and respond to it accordingly, is not only important, but may be necessary for survival, or the lack of it. In this respect, boredom represents a deep but imminent danger to soldiers and officers alike.

In addition to this reduced awareness comes the issue of distorted or perverted awareness. If, for example, a soldier turns his or her attention from the (external) situation to mere self-obsession with his or her own problems and fatigue, that is, switches from situational awareness to ego awareness, boredom has already started to evolve into something potentially very dangerous. In such a situation, one's own problems may overshadow everything else and dull both one's vision and sensitivity. This kind of perceptual shift will also impact on the ability to distinguish between what is important and what is not. Hence, the situation may easily be wrongly judged and acted upon. This tendency of *incurvatus in se* ('curved/bent inwards towards oneself'), to use a theological notion, may replace a militarily necessary *excurvatus* attitude, that is, an attentive awareness directed towards external realities such as people, the terrain and movement, which at worst may represent lethal threats.

This distinction between inward and outward awareness is vital to any soldier, and it is also vital to the study of boredom. Hence, there is a deep military relevance hidden in the very phenomenon of boredom which needs to be fleshed out and interpreted seriously in order to enable us to develop a vocabulary that can benefit not only soldiers, but society at large. This is the case because there is no such thing as isolated boredom among poor soldiers serving in boot camps or overseas. The boredom of individual military personnel will often be decided by the esteem, or lack of it, soldiers receive from back home or from their

home country. And, as with wind, weather and other natural forces, you simply cannot ignore boredom as a potentially mental disruption to the purposes of military goals (Fussell, 1989, p. 15).

### Sources and procedures

In his book *Firing Line* (1985), Richard Holmes asserts, with reference to his study of the nature of human behaviour in battle, that 'one of the major difficulties in the study of stress is that evidence is usually inadequate. It is either anecdotal, or is the product of experiments which tend to be unrealistic or unethical' (216). Furthermore, he continues, 'personal accounts of battle help us plot men's changing sensations.' These statements cover the methodological challenges involved in our present study. Firstly, it has been necessary to use rather anecdotal material to situate boredom in a historical context. Secondly, we have chosen to listen to the voices of soldiers, cadets and officers in order to 'plot men's changing sensations' about boredom and associated feelings and states of mind, such as meaninglessness, joy, restlessness, the trivial and monotonous or the need for diversion.

One of the main ambitions of this book is to research this question on the basis of three separate case studies from the period 2005–7. One involves infantry soldiers in Afghanistan, another how naval cadets coped with crossing the North Atlantic Ocean, there and back, on a tall ship, and the last case study is about how submarine commanders with long experience have developed a capacity to endure boredom.

While different methods are used, and they vary from chapter to chapter, the overall methodology is heuristic and interpretative. In terms of both the historical and empirical material it is heuristic since it seeks to find both explicit and implicit signs of boredom, from the far past to the present day. It is interpretative in terms of how military personnel interpret their own situation with respect to boredom, as well as in terms of how the historical and empirical data can be understood in light of insights from literature, psychology, philosophy, theology and, in particular, sociology. All in all, we hope to provide a deep understanding of a highly complex and ambiguous human phenomenon.

In this, our goal has partly been to give voice to how boredom is felt, experienced and described by our informants. Secondly, it has been our aim to analyse how such feelings and mental states are interpreted and understood by the same men and women. Thirdly, it has been important to uncover strategies that are used to cope with the force of boredom. Since it is part of the nature of the phenomenon of boredom in

the military to be to a large extent ‘wordless’ and underreported, the experience of boredom among soldiers, or lack of it, should not lead to too hasty conclusions. It may be that the problem of boredom is best traced through its counterpart, namely the number and diversity of strategies employed to avoid it.

All in all, this involves a hermeneutic process in which different aspects of experienced boredom are interpreted in light of theoretical perspectives. In this, we not only hope to interpret their experiences in an insightful way. We also aim to develop theoretical concepts that can enable further research and a capacity among individual soldiers and commanders to endure and manage the inner enemy of boredom. This capacity, which may have positive strategic implications, is much needed since boredom does not always remain quiet, and the desperation it can cause seems to have rather destructive, not to mention fatal, consequences if not dealt with wisely – and robustly.

One result of such an informed strategic capacity may be to make it easier to distinguish between boredom as a prerequisite for new insights and creative understanding, and boredom as a negative force threatening the stability and security of military staff in times of war and conflict. Of course, this goal entails a pedagogical component, and it should therefore be of great relevance to all institutions involved in military training and education, but also to education in a broader sense.

## **Structures**

In Chapter 2, we trace boredom in a military context back to the mid-eighteenth century, in military training, conflicts and war. Interestingly, this coincides with the introduction of boredom as a (modern) concept in various European languages. The material that is examined in this chapter ranges from the American Civil War to Scandinavian contributions to peacekeeping missions in the late twentieth century and the ongoing operation in Iraq. The examination of boredom is based on its explicit expressions, but also implicitly, that is, on the basis of the strategies that are employed in order to cope with ‘quiet desperation’ in the trenches, in the jungle or in the desert. Historical sources from books, articles, online material and films have been used to ‘harvest’ experiences and understanding of military boredom.

In Chapter 3, theoretical perspectives are developed on the basis of insights from psychology and information sociology (Orrin E. Klapp). Since boredom has a strong connection with meaning, the study of how information is perceived and received as meaningful or not seems

to be an appropriate means of arriving at a vocabulary that can enable us to make more precise statements about what is perceived as boredom in military training and operations. This perspective is reinforced in Chapter 6 by ideas by Michael L. Raposa (1999). The aim of Chapter 3 is to add precision to our survey of military boredom in historical records (Chapter 2), as well as preparing the analytical ground for the remaining empirical studies (Chapters 4–6). These will cover case studies of soldiers in Afghanistan, of cadets crossing the Atlantic and submarine officers, and all use various qualitative methods (diaries, in-depth interviews, focus groups and observation).

In Chapter 4 soldiers in Afghanistan, mainly reconnaissance troops, were given the chance to comment on 25 statements, carefully selected to cover feelings and mental states associated with boredom. Was there something resembling boredom in Kabul or in Meymaneh? Through their daily notes, some very short, others lengthier, they expressed views about these issues that helped to describe important aspects of boredom, even when boredom itself was not strongly felt. For most soldiers, their daily tasks, especially going out of the camp on patrols, but also the opportunities they had to help Afghan people, were perceived as highly meaningful. Nevertheless, one may contend that boredom was still present among many of these troops, simply by manifesting itself in the form of its absence, which made it consciously present. This could be seen in rather elaborate strategies for diversion and the avoidance of boredom. It seems, therefore, that many of the soldiers perceived boredom as a potential which was there, lurking around them. Consequently, in order to prevent it from ‘seizing’ them, they had to ‘fill time’ with various kinds of diversion. In most cases, boredom was successfully prevented, but it was still there in their consciousness.

The greatest risk to them in their handling of ‘potential boredom’, however, was the risk of exhaustion. To be alert for long periods, to tip-toe on every patrol, to be too excited too often, was experienced as quite meaningful, but it would also lead to a deterioration of their ability to stay alert and fully attentive after a while. Hence, they needed rest, which again would provide a vitalising restlessness (boredom). But rest is not always handed out generously by commanders.

Chapter 5 explores the traces of boredom found among cadets on board an almost 100-year-old sailing ship crossing the North Atlantic Ocean, there and back, during a three-month-long voyage in demanding weather conditions. We found that the ability to endure the slowness and unpleasantness of a boring situation could give rise to new and more considered insight and understanding. But again, boredom is an

ambiguous state of mind. At best it can help a person to see new possibilities in an otherwise deadlocked situation, but there is no guarantee that this will not induce a *tromp-l'œil* effect, a misperception caused by self-pity. Actions directed by such a misperception are no longer informed by, or adjusted to, the situation *per se*, but guided by a self-centred perspective.

Chapter 6 deals with the question of how high-ranking submarine officers experience and encounter boredom themselves, and how they are able to lead and motivate their crew when the crew are confronted with the same problem. Interestingly enough, the problem of boredom appeared to be less prevalent than first expected. That does not necessarily mean that the expectations were wrong. A submarine may still be the ultimate place to experience boredom, but, despite this fact, the submariners seem to have developed countermeasures that enable both the individual crew members and the community on board to endure and handle the threat of boredom in different ways. The first striking factor is that one of these countermeasures is the focus on details and procedures. Contrary to what it would be normal to assume, that is, that a redundancy of drill and details would lead to an increased feeling of boredom and therefore be best avoided, the opposite appears to be the case in this setting. The pedagogical implication of this is a highly regulated and ritualised life on board. Furthermore, the secret of this strategy apparently lies in mastering the details automatically, whereby the mind and energy are liberated from the same, otherwise boring details. The liberated and open mind is free to adapt and interact with the ever-changing surroundings and circumstances. This mastery of detail also results in a more relaxed style of leadership.

These strategies for handling the internal challenges of boredom are certainly important, but, as we will see, still not sufficient to handle the complexity of boredom. According to the commanders, boredom also has external implications. The correct remedy for military boredom may not only involve internal strength or capability. There also appears to be a social dimension in the form of a strongly felt need for external recognition and support. If this recognition is withheld or not given in one way or another, a feeling of meaninglessness and boredom will easily spread and also attack moral integrity. To be esteemed, on the other hand, may help to establish mutual commitment and loyalty to shared values and norms.

Finally, Chapter 7 raises the important question: how can military personnel endure and cope with boredom? As clearly shown in previous chapters, even in its simpler form, boredom can endanger a military

operation. Thus, the answers to these questions have implications for military leadership and the way prudent officers and their personnel deal with this challenge. Our study has shown how entertainment in different forms has served as an attractive antidote to boredom. But can entertainment really help? The chapter takes a closer look at the entertainment strategy in light of the battle against boredom. The second part of the chapter deals with boredom from a psychological perspective, in which the concept of hardiness plays an important role. The term *hardiness* is used to describe particular characteristics that not merely make personnel able to passively resist, but also enable them to engage and interact despite boring situations. The chapter concludes with the question of how these skills and attitudes could be developed.

So, is there any enduring cure for boredom? No strategy seems to be capable of alleviating boredom once and for all. And no victory appears to be everlasting. As soon as the 'demon' of boredom is expelled or 'exorcised', it threatens to return, stronger and more unmerciful than ever. Hence, instead of focusing on how to get rid of it, the best way of dealing with boredom may be to endure it. In this, we aim to contribute to the wisdom of a British Second World War Brigadier: 'The more you can train soldiers to stand boredom and then come to life when required, the better' (quoted in Fussell, 1989, p. 78).

Finally, a few words about the writing of this book. Firstly, writing this book has been anything but boring. Secondly, the enduring pleasure of pondering such an underestimated and manifold phenomenon has been shared in the following way: Bård Mæland is chiefly responsible for Chapters 2–4 and Paul Otto Brunstad for Chapters 5–7. The Introduction has been a common effort.

# 2

## Boredom in Military History

### The invention of Russian Roulette

Smith & Wesson (revolver) was the father. Boredom was the mother. What kind of offspring you would expect from such parents? But that's how the game was born: the man gambled with death and his life was his only stake.

(Edge and Cup, undated)

The quotation is taken from an article on how Russian Roulette was invented in the trenches during the Russian–Turkish Wars in the late nineteenth century. The article claims that it resulted from a combination of acute boredom and military inactivity, often ‘aggravated by unreasonable consumption of vodka’. Boredom may of course express itself in less desperate forms. It seems, however, to have accompanied military life and military operations throughout history.

The aim of this chapter is to explore aspects and facets of military boredom through the use of selected historical records. The period from which the material is taken is modern and contemporary history, from the mid-eighteenth century to the ongoing wars in Iraq and Afghanistan. The beginning of this period coincides with the emergence of the word boredom in English and German (*Langeweile*), as well as variations of and equivalents of the word (Healy, 1984, p. 24; Svendsen, 2005, p. 24). Moreover, only a selection of events and stories has been included, hence the subtitle ‘fragments’. Mostly, a chronological approach has been employed. The main purpose, so to speak, has been to stretch out a canvas and paint a few strokes, thereby setting the scene for the empirical part of this study. As will soon be evident, some features of military boredom are fairly constant throughout

history, even though distinctive characteristics can be identified in the various wars, conflicts and periods. In our treatment of historical fragments from a rather large time span, one will see how these similarities and differences emerge. Whatever these are, it seems that General Georg von der Marwitz was right when he, in a conversation with his wife about the war at the end of 1914, quoted a predecessor of his from the German Cavalry: 'Once the war begins to be boring, it is the real war' (Kessel, 2001, p. 252).

## **Records from the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries**

### **War as deliverance from the tyranny of idleness**

The first record from modern history is both satirical and generic. It is taken from the poet, essayist, critic, journalist and lexicographer Samuel Johnson (1709–84), one of the most influential Britons of the eighteenth century. The quotation comes from a collection of essays called *Idler*, and the essay was first published on 2 September 1758 in the *Universal Chronicle*, a London weekly:

I suppose every man is shocked when he hears how frequently soldiers are wishing war. The wish is not always sincere; the greater part are content with sleep and lace, and counterfeit an ardour which they do not feel; but those who desire it most are neither prompted by malevolence nor patriotism; they neither pant for laurels, nor delight in blood; but long to be delivered from tyranny of idleness, and restored to the dignity of active beings.<sup>1</sup>

The quotation is entitled 'On Linger's listfulness' and the name is actually borrowed from a correspondent called Dick Linger. In his essay, Johnson mentions that Linger 'was in the army, but quit because of boredom; married, but found ennui soon set in'. All in all, already with our first witness to military boredom, from the point of view of both the observer and the deserter, one realises how boredom has had a long-standing history in the military.

Yet the above quotation, though written with a satirical edge, is rather telling. Firstly, it is made plain that one does not have to be evil to wish war to come. It suffices to be bored to wish for war. That soldiers wish for war to come, either because of their long training and education or their waiting for battle to commence, can be found in many sources, and it can be regarded as something of a 'boredom constant'. John Keegan, in his *The Face of Battle*, in which he describes the period

immediately before the Battle of Waterloo on 18 June 1815, mentions how an assistant surgeon found 'waiting for orders... tedious work', and 'was anxious to be put in motion, if it were only to circulate our blood' (1976, p. 138). This was not a new phenomenon. Keegan comments that, before the Battle of Agincourt in October 1415, the English army had 'also found prolonged waiting physically tiresome and emotionally frustrating'. Hence, 'the decision for battle had come eventually as a welcome release.'

Secondly, the explosive potential of boredom is disclosed in the record of Samuel Johnson. It is 'tyrannical'. Hence, everybody affected by this intolerable situation will take serious initiatives to gain relief from it. A wish for action in a state of inaction is thus one possibility and, indeed, one that matches the nature of the 'tyranny'. Thirdly, while the quotation may appear to glorify military activity, one can interpret the statement the other way around: boredom dehumanises individual soldiers in a way that only the right remedy (activity, thrills, military action, construction of meaning) can retrieve. This certainly represents a pedagogical challenge, which is primarily dealt with later in this study (Chapter 7).

### **Breaking the monotony during the American Civil War**

In this respect it is interesting to see how boredom was eased (since it could hardly be cured entirely). We will provide two examples of this from the young American Republic. The first one is taken from the frontier defence garrisons of the young Republic (1784–1828) on the expanding western frontier, which were meant to separate Native Americans from the settlers on their way westwards. The other is taken from the American Civil War.

In an article on Army culture, William H. Brown describes how the hardship suffered by soldiers at the frontier mainly consisted of two things (Brown, undated): strong application of discipline by their superiors in order to make them mentally strong enough to take part in the 'European linear tactics' applied to make them a lethal force in open terrain, and the 'extreme boredom' of frontier garrisons. The latter certainly did not help soldiers to endure the ruthless treatment from their superiors, and many deserted.<sup>2</sup>

During times of peace, in between the almost continuous warfare with the Indians in the West during the nineteenth century, army life could be 'very ritualistic and extremely lonely for officers and soldiers alike', according to Brown. This picture concurs with other literature from this period.<sup>3</sup> One can imagine that boredom and frustration could

set in among frontier soldiers at outposts along trading and water routes by the border. It is also mentioned that, despite long hours and hard work, there was some free time, which allowed for recreation. Yet, how should this time be used? It was left to the 'creative minds' of both groups to use it to alleviate the feelings of loneliness, hardship and boredom. And the means were diverse:

Army personnel resorted to activities such as gambling and drinking as a way to deal with the hard work and loneliness. Whiskey was a part of the issued rations for both officers and enlisted soldiers. The alcohol became a tool to deal with the emotional problems of garrison duty. Attempts were made to bring churches, small theater groups, and fraternal organizations like Masonic lodges to these posts. Many times it was left to officers and enlisted men or their families to create pursuits to relieve the boredom on posts. (Ibid.)

Much of the same can be found some decades later during the American Civil War. A web exhibition was posted some years ago by the National Park at Gettysburg, known as the site of the most famous battle of the Civil War. Its purpose was to present various aspects of camp life in the military camps and garrisons. Here, battling boredom was a prominent aspect, also stressed in the introduction to the exhibition:

Soldiering is 99% boredom and 1% sheer terror wrote one soldier to his wife. This was an obvious complaint when you realize that the armies in Virginia, Maryland, and Pennsylvania usually campaigned during the warmer months and camped in the winter. In addition, soldiers spent weeks and months at a time in camp between engagements, even during active campaigning. Their life consisted of tedious daily routines.<sup>4</sup>

The monotony and 'sameness' of the days consisted in particular of waiting and marches. The relationship between the two is well described in the compiled and transcribed letters of a Confederate private, Thomas Allen Davis, who, after battles and boredom, ended up taking his own life:

The monotony of outdoor living in the rain, snow, cold and heat, was usually broken only by the tedious marching back and forth from one camp to another and the tearing down and assembling of these camps each move. (Davis, 1861–3)

How, then, did they cope? The abovementioned exhibition emphasises a number of remedies for boredom. I have also added some more material from the selection of letters by Davis, and together they give a rather complex impression of how this war was marked by boredom.

Firstly, the most common pastime in camp was 'sitting around and talking', or 'grumbling about the circumstances'. This reminded them of home, and gave them a chance to reflect about what they were actually engaged in before settling down to sleep. It might also have had the effect of distancing them from their daily routines in a productive manner, even though it would most likely also cause much longing for their loved ones at home. This, in turn, could obviously also have a different effect than combating boredom: it probably reinforced the feeling of boredom, since the distance between 'me' and 'my loved ones' increased. Another means of combating boredom, which activated the bonds to the family back home in a similar fashion, was receiving and writing letters. The caption accompanying pictures of a group of soldiers in front of the post office tent reads as follows:

The arrival of mail played a large part in the soldier's life. Letters from home were critical to boost soldier morale, although there never seemed to be enough news from home or about the war. Mail was uncensored, and contained not only military information but many personal feelings and words from the heart.

There were also several ways of alleviating boredom within the perimeters of the camp that did not involve the relationship with those back home. Traditional sports such as baseball, running races, wrestling and boxing were very popular. Reading was particularly popular during winter, even though new books were hard to find. The Bible is said to have been the most popular book in the camp (Davis, 1861–3). Moreover, gambling and playing cards were popular on both sides, along with other games.<sup>5</sup> This could even unintentionally benefit those back home, because a good gambler could send money to his family during the hardship of wartime. Gambling, whether for money in the camps or for survival on the battlefield, has always been a part of military life (Ligget, 2002–3).

Smoking, chewing tobacco and social drinking became popular as well, in particular among officers, who had both privacy and greater income at their disposal. Due to a lack of availability on either of the

fronts, Confederate and Union soldiers would swap items of value in order to get what they wished.

Music is also said to have been important during the Civil War, for both individual and social reasons. Sitting around the campfire, soldiers would sing and play all kinds of instruments available to them, and even dance with each other. 'A fiddler in a mess was considered a great "find",' Davis writes in his letters.

A quite distinctive means of channelling soldiers' need for diversion and a morale boost was whittling. Everybody whittled, from generals and officers down to privates. In general, as Davis wrote about the Confederates, the soldiers 'became very inventive when it came to creating recreation to break the monotony'. One such invention, mentioned by Byron Liggett in an article on gambling in the US Military, was the 'lice race' (Liggett, 2002–3). This was a Civil War favourite. Surrounded by spectators, two owners would place their animals in the centre of a tin plate, spectators would bet on the 'runners', and the lice would eventually run for the end of the plate. A stunning reminder of this game can be found in *Jarhead*, a film about the first Gulf War, based on the eponymous book by Anthony Swofford, in which the game portrayed is identical to the lice race, except that two scorpions are substituted for the lice.

Lastly, religious activity also played an important role. The chaplains, mostly Protestants, but also Catholics, and in one instance a rabbi, would invite soldiers to attend services and other activities. This may have reminded the soldiers of their homes in a strong and solemn way.

### **Boredom among noble German officers**

One of the best records of military boredom is found in a German study by Martina Kessel (2001), which covers experiences of boredom in German society from the late eighteenth to the early twentieth century. In a chapter on 'boredom and maleness', life at the German court is explored as well as military life, both dominated by the nobility. Moving from the particular to the general, one could say that, if boredom was also widespread among the upper echelons of society (which one, *prima facie*, would hardly expect given all the time and means at their disposal), it should manifest itself in no less painful a way among ordinary people participating in military training and war. This presupposes that men from such social strata were exempted from the attacks of the 'noonday demon'. But why should that be so? The way pure amusement (Fr. *divertissement*) among noble people is treated in Pascal's *Pensées*, for example, gives a quite different picture.

It has become commonplace to maintain that, during this period of history, boredom was to a large extent a phenomenon among society's elite, before the advent of leisure time for everybody, and the pertaining problem of filling one's free time (Healy, 1984, pp. 21f; Svendsen, 2005, pp. 21–3). Life at court often meant one of two things: either days strictly filled up with duties, rituals and conventions, such as playing host to visitors (bores!), listening with patience to people with various concerns and enquiries, or empty days in need of being filled. In the latter case, if too many days were in need of being filled with increasingly more intense and exciting diversions, this would soon turn into a form of captivity rather than freedom – not entirely different from what many people in the privileged world experience nowadays on a daily basis. Thus, boredom could feed on a time regime overfilled with ceremonies and the like, as well as on the time which was underfilled, that is in need of being deliberately filled, but often with boredom as the unintended result. In both cases, time became a problem, and in such a way that life was experienced as empty and boring.

Hence, for some of these people, military manoeuvres, not to say war proper, would often serve as means of diversion, and an amplification of happiness. Several individuals are reported as having signed up for service at the front merely to get away from an otherwise boring service. There is also a gender aspect to this: the people at the court who were not directly involved in governmental work were often occupied with tasks and patterns of behaviour that otherwise in society were reserved for women (Kessel, 2001, p. 235). Hence, military service also proved attractive in terms of realising one's maleness.

One of the nobles who broke with the pattern of the court is Prince Schönburg-Waldenburg, *Flügeladjutant* to William II from 1900 to 1902. It is said that he was a dynamic personality, far from a bore, who viewed himself as 'the only lively human behind the many inanimate "masks" at the Wilhelmian court' (ibid., p. 245). Thus he must have seen soldiering as refreshing in relation to his life at the Emperor's court. Soldiers were viewed by him as 'healthy' [*frische*] by nature, as opposed to what he had seen at the court, and his occasional life as a soldier provided him with more free space and mobility. There was thus an element of both freedom and diversion connected with his military life in various positions.

However, for most people in this era, being a soldier also meant encountering boredom. This was part of the very nature of soldiering, which exposed soldiers to boredom in various ways, in particular the training for something that might not occur and the waiting for war,

irrespective of whether or not it actually broke out. At the same time, nobody could eliminate the worst-case scenario of their profession: to die in combat, especially during this period. Though fear and boredom may be said to go hand in hand for soldiers over time, fear also marks a different emotional state, something that is not boring, rather the opposite. In the meantime, there were lots of routines and drills, a 'play war', which General von Kretschmann compared with the life of an artist who was never permitted to paint (*ibid.*, p. 249).

Waiting in particular is seen as a serious threat to the soldier. Soldiers waited *for* the war to come, and then also waited *during* the war. Waiting would soon spark longing for another situation, and doubt about what one was a part of. Soldiers ask for activity and action, and they ask for meaning and purpose. These characteristics seem to accompany any military force, as was also the case in Germany during this period. For Leopold von Schlözer, known to be a passionate soldier, a move to the French border meant to him a refreshing and stimulating life as a soldier. Another, Gerhard Kügelgen, son of a famous painter and one of those who explicitly had to cope with waiting, reported very poignantly about the nature of waiting and its possible remedy. While he was stuck in Berlin in 1866, waiting to take part in the fighting, he wrote the following in a letter to his father:

We are sitting calmly, training to be patient, and are thinking over why we are actually here. To approach this issue is not without danger for Prussian officers, since one may easily go insane from it. (*Ibid.*, p. 249)

Perhaps we see in this brief report a clue to one of the most effective remedies for boredom: to develop the virtue of patience and the ability to wait. Interestingly, a British professor of English literature, after being presented with our research project on military boredom, reacted as follows:

When I did my army service long ago, the most important thing we learned was to stand still and to wait. This was regarded as the most important virtue, we were taught. More important than anything else. More important than tactics, than shooting, than ...

Nevertheless, for most German people, military service was probably perceived as involving more action and resolution than the bureaucracy and diplomacy of the courts. Of course, some may have asked

themselves whether military life was actually nothing but the same routine they experienced outside the barracks, or a lack of responsibility and exacting challenges, or free time fragmented into pieces. Others, however, were still attracted to the vision of action, more space and, consciously or not, confirmation of their masculinity.

As already mentioned, no echelon of society was exempt from the boring aspects of military life. As Prussian Crown Prince, Frederick William III (King from 1797 to 1840) participated in the campaigns from 1792 to 1794, during which he is said to have experienced waiting and boredom. Moreover, his uncle, Prince Louis Ferdinand, is recorded as having sought 'the tickle [Germ. *der Kitzel*] of being close to death in order to combat his existential emptiness and boredom', according to the German author Thomas Stamm-Kuhlmann (*ibid.*, p. 248). Thus princes went to war, even to the front, in order to fight their inner struggle against boredom and personal meaninglessness. Some even went overseas, to China or to South Africa, in order to take part in exciting events.

Back in the German peacetime environment, military personnel were invigorated by military exercises. These were recognised as 'brief vacations', as opposed to revolutions and wars ('long vacations'). Manoeuvres were seen as everything daily routines were not, and they were regarded as interesting and adventurous, or, in brief, a wonderful time. For officers (and their wives) it meant meeting lots of interesting people. For professional soldiers it brought a break from the daily routines. Not only was the military exercise a climax of the year, it also made for an attractive period in terms of how the advent of the exercise generated great expectations, as well as how the remembrance of it offered extensive material for prospective conversation and discussion.

Hence, the individual and social experience of time became important. One remarkable observation by the French philosopher and musicologist Vladimir Jankélévitch (1903–85) in his *L'Aventure, l'Ennui et le Sérieux* (1963), which Martina Kessel quotes in her book, is that military exercises *made the future contemporary*. That is a sharp observation with great relevance to our subject, since such a *contemporisation* of war and conflicts stresses the importance of manoeuvres, not only in terms of anticipating and training for future conflicts, but also in order to relieve the destructive potential of boredom. With their attractive combination of the use of skills, physical demands and anticipation of the attraction of future military action, military exercises have the potential to promote the military potential of soldiers and their personal welfare.

From this, a time structure emerges which has potential for alleviating boredom and reinforcing military commitment. Exercises will not

only develop military skills in individual soldiers; they may also create a 'horizon of expectation' and a 'horizon of past', of good memories. Hence, this time perspective may explain how exercises can fill a time span with meaningful and intense action as they involve both looking forwards with expectation and looking backwards with good memories. Thus, exercises may intensify the life of soldiers in a twofold way.

Another lesson from German military history is that the magic of manoeuvres with respect to curing boredom was highly vulnerable. Even if one were to endeavour to increase the frequency of exercises, the exceptional would soon turn into routine. And, as soon as military exercises became dull and ordinary, they lost their value as military climaxes. The same applies to war: even though, for many people, war was the realisation of their expectations, boredom knocked on the door as soon as calm, waiting and spatial confinement penetrated the camps and the trenches. So, boredom seemed to be inevitable for the military, and attempts were made to ease it. During the First World War, organised entertainment was introduced by the Germans, for example regular 'front theatres'. We shall now turn to this period.

## The Great War

### Monotony, boredom, depression: George Winterbourne

In 1929, after a decade or so of general literary silence, the bestseller *Death of a Hero* by Richard Aldington was published. Through the main character, George Winterbourne, a pre-war artist in London, the book has clear parallels to the author's own life. The effect of writing the book remained important to Aldington. From his autobiography one learns that he 'purged [his] bosom of perilous stuff that had been poisoning [him] for a decade'.<sup>6</sup>

The first part of the book takes place in London, where George is making a life as an artist in a rather bohemian environment marked by contempt for the values of Victorian society, especially its sexual hypocrisy and repression. Through his relationship with two ladies, Fanny and Elizabeth, George pursues sexual liberation and love of life, despite 'his rages and his worryings and the complications and boredom'. On the outbreak of war, he only hesitantly enlists in the army. He does not believe in the alleged causes of the war, which he does not find at all convincing. On the other hand, his political ideals mean that he wants to share the burdens of the soldiers in the ranks. And it was indeed a burden. It was a process of degeneration through which he lost not only his past and his present, but also his future – literally.

Describing his time in the army in retrospect, he mentions in one place a threefold strain, namely: his personal life, the strain of 'exasperation with Army routine', and that of battle (p. 288). This threefold perspective may be useful for exploring the role of boredom in the literary biography of this First World War soldier. We shall begin, however, with the strain of 'Army routine', then move on to battle strain, and end up with the strain on his personal life, especially how the war removed him from his women back in London.

The upcoming war was much welcomed by George. Though he was doubtful about its causes on the British side, and despite all the parading and tedious routines in his first training period, he saw the war as a relief. The war represented something real, and it offered close contact with genuine masculinity. He joined the masses in their enthusiasm over the outbreak of the war. Interestingly, despite George seeing the war as realising his masculinity, the 'pleasures' of the Great War seem to have also attracted female soldiers, as demonstrated by Joanna Bourke in her *An Intimate History of Killing* (Bourke, 2000, pp. 306f).

However, boredom would rapidly dampen his hopes and expectations. His travel to the front was marked by monotony as he was introduced to the 'curious fact' of waiting, the lack of solitude and inaction (Aldington, 1929, pp. 241, 250, and 261). Moreover, the weather and nature – the aesthetics of war (the greyness of heavy rain, the coldness of night and winter, the mud of the spring thaw, the smell of the trenches) – would also soon add to this feeling of comprehensive and intolerable boredom. After a while, George reached the first of two different 'expressionless' stages: 'He had reached the first expressionless stage of the war soldier, which is followed by the period of acute strain; and that in turn gives place to the second expressionless stage – which is pretty hopeless' (p. 238). The war would soon pull him into a process of 'interminable holocausts and immeasurable degradation of mankind' (p. 242).

In this situation, he suffered mentally, he felt that he had lost emotion, and recognised how degeneration had set in. He became indifferent to his past (the ladies!), his ambitions faded, and the repetitive mindset of 'depression, monotony, boredom' describes his situation precisely. It was a 'peculiar sort, a strained, worried, exasperated sort' (p. 251).

The notion of time is reflected in George's self-reflection. Time, experienced as quantitatively prolonged ('day' was experienced as 'month'), is likened to torture (p. 264). Previously, time had been a vehicle of joy and expectation, but once in the trenches 'the hour-goddesses who

had danced along so gaily before, and have fled from us since with such mocking swiftness, then paced by in a slow, monotonous file as if intolerably burdened' (pp. 266f). At this time, the enemy has not yet put his company under serious attack. There is only 'mild artillery fire, sniping, and machine-gunning', and he starts thinking that 'the dangers of the war had been exaggerated, while its physical discomforts and tedium had been greatly underestimated' (p. 280). Thus, boredom not only had to be dealt with; it even forced itself upon those who tried to ignore it.

In this perspective, to go to the latrine, to get an easier position in the company, to see rats for the first time, to be exposed to dangers or even to be wounded would all be seen as attractive, simply because it would give you a chance for some diversion. Letters and parcels were also popular, nurturing a sense of home and feelings of sympathy. The troublesome insight of all this, according to Winterbourne, is that men have feelings. And, since replacement by robots was not an option, determination and endurance were required. This also applied to military success itself: the side that could destroy the other side's 'man-power and moral endurance' would win (p. 267). Boredom thus reveals the human condition in all its facets: the burden of boredom, the need for diversion and the potential for degradation.

However, through this jungle of depression, monotony and boredom, he still kept his 'consuming curiosity to see what the war was really like' (p. 250). He still hoped for movement, something real, relief and alleviation from the pain he felt as he waited to get to the front line. Once on active duty, having left training in England, he felt an 'immense relief' as he would now face 'dread realities, not Regular Army pedants and bullies' (p. 242).

His wish to take part in the war was reinforced by his encounter with experienced soldiers coming back from the front. These men were men, 'strangely worn and mature, but filled with energy, a kind of slow, enduring energy' (p. 253). In comparison, the soldiers about to enter the war zone seemed both childish and feminine. The war offered an almost exclusively masculine experience, 'where no woman and no half-man had ever been, could endure to be' (ibid.). Soon he would be one of them. He was 'almost happy' and thought the war had 'saved something from a gigantic wreck', namely 'manhood and comradeship, their essential integrity as men, their essential brotherhood as men' (p. 258). This description is ambivalent, however. Yes, the war offered an attractive masculinity to people bored with civilian life back in England, but what seemed attractive was also deceptive and destructive because it

would soon ruin millions of male bodies. One could argue here that, despite the duty to go to war and the 'impiety' of demurring (p. 227), boredom, that is the desire for active service, indirectly brought degeneration to the men who were first relieved, and then destroyed them both physically and mentally.

One important expression of the latter is how soldiers understood themselves as *numbers* in the war. It soon seemed to Winterbourne 'insane to think that you had any individual importance' (p. 257). But nihilism went deeper as deterioration became physical, and 'his body became worthless' (p. 289). Hence, he asks desperately: 'To be violently cast back into nothing – for what? My God! for what? Is there nothing but despair and death? Is life vain, beauty vain, hope vain, happiness vain?' His questions resemble the tone of the biblical Ecclesiastes: 'all is vanity'. This is existential boredom, which would soon turn into physical nihilism. 'He was surprised and a little alarmed at his own listlessness and despair. He felt like a sheet of paper dropping in the jerks and waverings through grey air into an abyss' (p. 264). This is nihilistic boredom, the boredom of meaninglessness, which is central to any boredom, yet in highly different ways.

Fear soon became the other big challenge for George, not to say *the real enemy*. During the first part of George's first visit (of two) to France one could say that fear and boredom were separated as night was separated from day. Whereas the night was the time for nervous waiting ('stand-to') for the German shelling and shooting, not least in the early morning hours, boredom, monotony and physical strain marked the days. This division of emotions and states of mind is well captured in *In Parenthesis*, in David Jones's sketch of Private John Ball and how this soldier experienced the difference between daytime and night-time in the trenches of the wasteland before the battle of the Somme:

Slowly they made progress along the traverses, more easy to negotiate by light of day. Not night-bred fear, nor dark mystification nor lurking unseen snares any longer harassed them, but instead, a penetrating tedium, a boredom that leadened and oppressed, making the spirit quail and tire, took hold of them, as they went to their first fatigue. (quoted in Fussell, 1975/2000, p. 149)

This description would also have neatly fitted Winterbourne's situation. Later during this period, however, fear takes over completely. There is simply no more room for boredom, only the continuous struggle to control one's nerves through the hailstorm of bullets and shrapnel bursts.

At this stage of the war, it became 'absurd to talk about men being brave or cowards' (Aldington, 1929, p. 287), and what mattered, despite individual differences in sensibility, was conscious self-control. As the constant pressure on one's nerves kept increasing, all one's energy and determination had to be repressed. One simply became thoroughly exhausted over time as the 'real' and 'intensified' nightmare commenced (pp. 296 and 307): mud, systematic gas bombardment, incessant artillery, a steady rumble and roar, and sleep deprivation. Winterbourne was of a sensitive nature, and thus developed neurosis quickly. His war soon turned into a 'timeless confusion, a chaos of noise, fatigue, anxiety, and horror' (p. 323). Perhaps this may even amount to a kind of boredom, though of a very different kind from that of monotony and routine?

It is a man exposed to such circumstances, 'a little mad', with a 'cut in his life and personality', marked by apathy, who returns to London after seven months to join the Officer Cadet Corps, before again going back to France to end his life as an officer. As he arrives back at Victoria Station from his first tour to France, Elizabeth is there to welcome him, but she does not recognise him right away. He has changed. The next day, he is invited to see Elizabeth's friends, including her new lover. He behaves like a stranger to them. And they all seem strange to him. He feels he does not fit in any more. After the party, he returns to Elizabeth's apartment, where he lives, and, in Elizabeth's room, he finds a draft of a letter to her lover dated the same night as he returned, starting thus: 'DARLING, What a bore, as you say!' (p. 346). Also when he later talks to Fanny, he gets the impression that he is viewed as a returned war bore. Elizabeth and Fanny had symbolised civilisation, life and hope to George. But the war had created an abyss between them. The ladies see a vast degeneration in George.

'It's quite useless,' said Elizabeth; 'he's done for. He'll never be able to recover. So we may as well accept it. What was rare and beautiful in him is as much dead now as if he were lying under the ground in France.' And Fanny agreed. (p. 228)

Thus the story of George Winterbourne's boredom ends with boredom as a reaction to the sacrifice of a nation's individuals in the slaughter and horror of the trenches. Thus, war first attracts boys away from civil boredom. Once they are in the war, war bores and degenerates them. Then, if and when soldiers return from the war zones, they bore the ones who sent them to war. The loop of boredom is complete.

### Boredom, home and sentimental religion

As the last section ended with some remarks about the role of the 'home' in First World War London, it may be of interest to pursue this focus a little more. This theme becomes all the more important if, as Joanna Bourke asserts in her *Dismembering the Male: Men's Bodies, Britain and the Great War*, 'the war did *not* frame the real world for many men. For most, home remained the touchstone for all their actions' (1996, p. 23). In connection with this perspective, we shall now look at a quite different fragment of soldiers' lives during the Great War. A study on the religiosity of soldiers on the European Continent during the First World War by Eivind Berggrav, a Norwegian theologian and psychologist of religion, describes how religion and sentiments about home played a role in mitigating boredom (Berggrav, 1916). Berggrav, who is best known for his resistance as a bishop to the Nazi regime during the Second World War, travelled to the Continent during the First World War to study how soldiers coped with the war, in military hospitals and in the trenches and in order to identify some kind of religiosity.

One of his findings was *sentimental religion*.<sup>7</sup> According to Berggrav, the homely and domestic was reinforced in the face of battle. The sentimental and tender was amplified in a similar way to what can be seen among seamen, but almost disproportionately with what he calls 'the armoured soul that the soldier normally develops' (p. 26). In addition to being attached to the sense of 'home', sentimental religion was mainly experienced during calm times, during 'rest and idleness', that is during potentially boring situations.

Coming into contact with death and suffering, often accompanied by a feeling of having been given one's life as a gift once more, stirred up emotions such as gratefulness, yearning and a need to express oneself. Berggrav understands this as a mental bulwark against vanishing. This mental bulwark was intimately connected to the remembrance of one's home. This sense of home manifested itself in as different actions as naming streets in the camp after names from one's hometown, or decorating one's surroundings as mum had done. This almost essential function of the home for the soldier is also channelled through religion. Berggrav, who was an agnostic at the time, demonstrates how religion becomes a mediator between the home and the life of the soldier. During services, and the Christmas service in particular, the thoughts of the individual soldiers flew back home (pp. 34f). The social dimension of this was fundamental: the effect of the social and religious meaning of the homely was to rid the soldiers of their feelings of loneliness, establishing an invisible contemporaneity with those back

home (p. 41). If our interpretation of Berggrav is correct, then military boredom has to be understood as being intimately connected with a sense of home, community and fellowship. Other means of alleviating boredom, such as writing and receiving letters, appear to confirm this suggestion.

## **The Second World War**

### **Nurturing vigilance by making tiny matters big**

On the website of Time Capsule, one Second World War veteran called 'Ted' explains how, as a young British boy during the war, he yearned to take part in what he foolishly thought to be an adventure. So he volunteered for the Royal Navy at the age of 17, but was not called up until just after having reached the age of 18. When the call-up came, he was 'overjoyed at receiving the long awaited notice' and arrived at the Chatham Royal Naval Barracks some time after, full of enthusiasm. However,

disillusion was reached quicker than the eagerness of the anticipation of now serving as a member of His Majesty's Royal Navy. Frustration came faster than the previous thoughts of achieving glory. Boredom rescinded the hopes of excitement.<sup>8</sup>

Suffice it to say that the discrepancy between expectation and actual service immediately threatens the welfare of a soldier. This phenomenon will be stressed when we later examine the material from post-war peace-keeping operations. For Ted, the state of boredom was overwhelming:

So a boring morning was followed by a boring afternoon, that preceded a boring evening accompanied by dozens of other bored personnel.

There would also be breaks in the monotony, such as medical examinations, various tests, rare leave to go ashore one evening and visit the cinema, a visit back home, and then, finally, basic service at HMS Thingy, a land-based establishment. After that, he eventually came to HMS Lizard, another shore-based placement and a pre-war hotel. His appointment was in the Combined Operations force, where he became a mess man, a servant for the officers. He was disappointed because of his qualifications, which he thought the Navy could have used better. When he told one of the nice officers that he was bored, the officer

encouraged him and said 'something will turn up lad.' The same officer soon appointed him and two other soldiers to make up a base defence on the shorefront of the base (at Portslade-on-Sea). Ted and the others were told that their duties were 'to defend the Country against any invasion that the Germans may carry out at Portslade-on-Sea'. This was to be their base for the rest of the war, armed with a 1914–18 rifle, and five rounds of ammunition, to be shared between the three of them.

During the night they were expected to patrol the shore, 'just in case of a sneaky invasion at night'. And, since Hitler was not expected to invade during a weekend, they were given leave every weekend. Yet, the three of them kept vigil and never let boredom enter the gates of their minds:

So for almost a month, three of us vigilantly guarded our Country, alert and ready to defend its citizens against the Nazi enemy. Boredom we never accepted, as it was a righteous duty we had to perform, and in between the card games we would see who could throw a pebble into the sea. We were aware that if we should run out of bullets in conducting the defence of our Island, then we would repel the enemy with pebbles. Didn't Winston Churchill say 'We will fight them on the beaches.' It could have been possible that that beach could have been the one that Winston was referring to if there had been a Battle of Brighton, well Hove, well actually, Portslade-on-Sea.

Thus, big meaning is invested in the tiny elements surrounding an otherwise tedious service. It all depends on the capacity of the eye, imaginative force, *coup d'oeil*. Thus, not only is big meaning invested; the essential *virtue of vigilance* is also nurtured.

### **Fear, boredom, and occupation**

In his book *Firing Line*, a book on 'fundamental questions of the nature of human behaviour in battle', the British soldier and military historian Richard Holmes writes about 'The Real Enemy', which is terror. Among other things, he focuses on the terrible feeling of being shelled, and in particular how one may cope with it ('Taking the Strain'). Most interestingly, Holmes distinguishes between the bombardments of the Napoleonic era and those of the twentieth century, when the intensity and duration had increased. It seems that not only had the intensity, which he describes as a complex consisting of being 'impersonal, inhuman, and implacably hostile' (1985, p. 232) increased; the duration had as well, and consequently it affected the stress of being shelled.

Holmes mentions how inactivity during bombardments was most dangerous to the morale of the soldiers, quoting from an article by the former US psychiatrist, Dr W.B. Gault:

A soldier is expected to be aggressive. General military principles emphasise the need to strike first, act swiftly and decisively, dominate the field of battle, control the lines of fire, keep the enemy on the run, search and destroy, etc. Moreover, in war, inaction is virtually unbearable. (Ibid., p. 230)

Inaction was not merely a sign of helpless confinement; soldiers were stuck in the trenches or compounds, unable to run or fight. Inaction also involved indications of boredom. Holmes mentions here Private T.C.H. Jacobs of the 15th London Regiment, who was eager for an attack to end the unbearable stress and uncertainty of a possible bombardment. In this situation, private Jacobs used 'weary exasperation' to describe his state of mind, probably an indication of the irritation of boredom somehow intertwined with fear.

Soldiers would choose various ways of escaping from this severe situation, which was regarded as the one that caused the most intense fear of all. Some would flee in panic, some would disappear slowly from the battlefield – especially those lacking good commanders – some would deny their situation and think they were not going to be hit (until they were), some would deliberately move physically, but not necessarily far, in order to avoid fear exhausting them completely, some would work hard to occupy their minds, and, lastly, some would 'remove danger by destruction of the noxious agent or agency', that is act in aggression.<sup>9</sup>

All of these strategies are of interest to the general theme of our book, since they outline at least three approaches to what we can call internal enemies: either you flee, or you basically stay where you are and start doing something about your situation on the inner level (occupation of mind), or you start attacking what you perceive as the outward root causes of your situation. In fact, the latter two may be variations on the same theme. Both are active initiatives to cope with a difficult situation, but, whereas aggressive action against the enemy is an outwardly oriented approach to solving your situation, occupation of your mind is a more inwardly oriented strategy aimed at overcoming the external situation by concentrating on how to cope with your internal 'enemies', such as fear and boredom.

'Occupation' is a concept often used by Holmes to identify an important way of channelling one's energy and attention during a period of

continued shelling. During the bombardments of the Second World War, having enough to think about would at best keep worry, fear, and boredom away. 'Unless you've something to keep you occupied while it's going on, you're a gone goose,' wrote Charlton Ogburn Jr, an American officer and author. In many ways, officers would have an advantage here, simply by being in command, which normally required their full attention. But soldiers were also often sufficiently occupied by the officers or by their own initiatives to defeat inner enemies, such as fear or boredom. Such kinds of occupation may of course have been of little direct military value. Holmes mentions a German corporal who forgot the horror of Stalingrad by assembling clocks in his dugout. He also draws attention to the so-called 'trench art' of the First World War, in which shell cases were decorated, chalk was carved and, again, soldiers whittled wood, already mentioned as a popular activity during the American Civil War. Holmes says that such activities were 'inspired as much by the need to relieve stress as to defeat boredom'.

Again, the components of fear and boredom seem to go hand in hand, despite their obvious differences. This applies in particular to how they are coped with rather similarly in times of war. This might be the case because they are perceived as internal enemies that can be combated in similar ways. In the case of bombardments, the parallel goes even further: in a situation in which one is prevented from attacking the enemy or fleeing in panic, one has to decide how to cope with the pressure and stressors inside the trench, the cave, or behind a sandbag revetment. Inactivity in a confined battle environment thus seems to carry a serious threat of both fear and boredom.

One thing that might work against the eroding forces of boredom is military ritual. Richard Holmes defines such rituals as a 'comprehensive framework of behaviours designed to serve, *inter alia*, as a precaution against disorder and a defence against the randomness of battle' (Holmes, 1985, p. 236). One of the elements of randomness in battle is the unpredictable ratio between horror and boredom, battle and waiting. Hence, rituals may keep soldiers together as battle breaks up the troops and their units, but also give them a boost as boredom threatens to lower morale and alertness. In both cases, the function of a ritual may be to empower soldiers to cope with fear and stress, also including the irritant of boredom.

One example of this can be found in the *Pacific Ocean Diary*, a 'secret diary' by James J. Fahey (1963), a 'Seaman First Class' aboard the 607-ft cruiser USS Montpelier, taking part in the Pacific Ocean War, in particular around the Solomon Islands. The diary starts with a description

about how attractive it was to young sailors to embark on the ship with the forecast of hoping to see action (p. 7). None would like to return from the Pacific unless they had taken part in the campaign (p. 15). The life aboard this ship was also quite cheerful, allowing time during the evenings for boxing, movies, printing (there was a press onboard), smoking cigarettes, watching shows on the back of the deck. In brief, James J. Fahey describes that he got along with the crew of around 1300 men 'like one big happy family' (p. 12). Christmas day, for example, after more than one year 'with continuous action', was found to be almost as good as being with one's family back home. The notion of the Navy as a home is therefore a keyword for how Fahey coped with life aboard USS Montpelier in the South Pacific. One may even in this case see the family as a very strong ritual in itself (cf. Holmes's 'comprehensive framework of behaviours').

But not everybody managed as well as he did, and that shows us how relative the experience, or lack, of this ritual is. Some crewmen got very homesick. Interestingly, Fahey's recipe to this fellow, in addition to a call to suppress his feelings, was to emphasise the importance of what one could denote the imagination of the family ritual: 'I told him that after a few months he would recover and the Navy would seem like a second home to him and he'd never care if he saw home again. I also told him to forget about being homesick and think of something else' (p. 83). For Fahey, the first year had been the 'fastest year I can remember', simply because 'we were on the go most of the time' (p. 94). It is also interesting to see that, even though boredom is implicit in his descriptions (cf. below), the word is never mentioned in the entire diary. Another word that is used, routines, may take us to the same issue, not least in combination with descriptions of the rough climate. Despite the amount of action, diversion, and coping, and the importance of the crew serving as a family, they also felt the burden of the heat and the routines.

Although the routines may have been boring, they may also have played the role of a rather strong ritual for keeping the average day together. The crew were situated in the outpost of the war, often hungry, in a very hot and humid area of the Pacific. The routines on board the ship consisted mostly of these elements: up at 5:30 or 6:30 a.m., decks to be washed, line up for the (monotonous) chow, bombardment and gunnery practice, watches, working parties (e.g. take off the paint of the entire ship), often interrupted by Condition Red signals and manning of the stations on the deck. Yet, the routines could also become 'rugged', not least caused by sleep deprivation because they

never knew when the Japanese would attack them from the air or hit them from the shores:

I think the rugged routine that we have had for the past 7 months has something to do with the way the men have been acting lately. The men have noticed it themselves doing it. Your mind goes blank and you find yourself walking around some part of the ship, some distance from where you want to go, and then it dawns on you that you are not supposed to be there. You forget what day it is, what you had for breakfast, what you did in the morning. You find yourself in the washroom with no soap or towel. When you turn the water on, then it dawns on you. (...) These things sneak up on you before you know it. You will find yourself somewhere and ask yourself: 'What am I doing here?' Our routine for almost 7 months has not helped the situation. (...) Our recreation consists of a few hours a month in the jungle. (...) We seldom get a night's sleep. The only thing we see is, glaring ocean, thick green jungle and tropical rain storms. (pp. 41f)

The ambivalence of the ritual of routines is thus strongly ambivalent: it may reinforce order, and it may threaten to cause disorder. If the latter, it can no longer serve the role as a 'comprehensive framework of behaviours designed to serve, *inter alia*, as a precaution against disorder and a defence against the randomness of battle' (Holmes). The ambivalence goes even further: the sailors could cope with much, with the rugged routine and with bad food, but not to be given extra duty by the masters in the 'hot, steaming scullery from 6 to 8 P.M.' (p. 314). Receiving such penalties for the slightest break of the regulations, they felt like 'a pack of animals'. Eventually, at the earliest convenience when they reached a US harbour on one of their trips back, the master was beaten and locked in his cabin (ibid.).

In another memoir from the Solomon Islands, *With the Old Breed* by E.B. Sledge, a similar and yet different picture of the war in the South Pacific is painted. In a description of the 1st US Marine Corps Division from the island of Pavuvu, 'simply living' is regarded as their main problem, and contrasted with the boredom problem of those stationed at more comfortable bases in the Pacific:

Most of the griping about being 'rock happy' and bored in the Pacific came from men stationed at the big rear-echelon bases like Hawaii or New Caledonia. Among their complaints were that the ice cream wasn't good, the beer not cold enough, or the USO shows

too infrequent. But on Puvavu, simply living was difficult. (Sledge, 1981/1990, p. 31)

Simply living included work parties collecting rotten coconuts and 'pick-and-shovel details' with coral rocks to improve the drainage of the walkways under the heat of the sun. What was worse was of course to enter the 'meat grinder itself': 'The war was a nether world of horror from which escape seemed less and less likely as casualties mounted and the fighting dragged on and on. Time had no meaning; life had no meaning' (ibid., p. 121).

Yet, how to cope with all this? There is later in *With the Old Breed*, after the terrible bloodbath on the island Peleliu, a memory of a new division commander, Maj. Gen. Pedro del Valle, who introduced a set of new routines that had an immediate impact on the complex experiences of ultimate fear, strain, and boredom, and which may deepen the meaning of 'occupation' mentioned by Richard Holmes above:

[He] ordered regular close-order drills, parades, and reviews. This was better than work parties moving rotting coconuts and added a 'spit and polish' to our routine that helped morale. A regular beer ration of two cans a man each week also helped. During close-order drill we dressed in clean khakis which each man pressed under his mattress pad on his canvas bunk. As we marched back and forth on the neat coral-covered parade ground, I thought about home or some book I was reading and wasn't at all bored. (Sledge, 1981/1990, pp. 168f)

Award of Purple Hearts was also part of this ritual picture of pride and important diversion. This memory of a leader of good routines leads us to another Second World War story of a general who also managed to boost the morale of his soldiers, by his mere presence.

### **Waiting and coming: Boosted by Montgomery**

Waiting was critical during the Second World War. Paul Fussell, in his *Wartime*, a book 'about the psychological and emotional culture of Americans and Britons during the Second World War' and 'the abnormally intense frustration of desire', writes about how waiting was intensified during the war. This war was characterised by 'a great deal of nothing', where waiting 'itself and nothing else' came to mark the entire war atmosphere (Fussell, 1989, p. 75). For soldiers and civilians alike it was this comprehensive waiting for 'induction into services, waiting for D-Day, for someone to come home on furlough, for a letter,

for a promotion, for news, for a set of tires, for the train, for things to get better, for your release from POW camp, for the end of the war, for your discharge' (ibid.).

In all this, there was an inherent attention, namely attention directed towards the future. However, according to Leonard Woolf, endless waiting would soon 'convey the feeling of "negative emptiness and desolation of personal and cosmic boredom" of war'.<sup>10</sup> Interestingly, Woolf makes the observation that boredom was anticipated during the Second World War in the sense that they expected it to come, and that there was no way to escape it. Thus, past and future wars are connected through an expectation of boredom. Later in this book (Chapter 4), we shall see how this may explain initiatives to avoid boredom, where there is hardly any boredom.

Just as waiting can be hard to endure, *coming* can lead to a most appreciated boost of morale. Especially the coming of military leaders paying visits to their soldiers may have this effect. One is reminded of this in D.G. Chandler's book on Napoleon, when he writes about the French forces settled in the Camp of Boulogne in 1803–4:

The early enthusiasm gradually wore off, however, as weeks lengthened into months with still no sign of Villeneuve's fleet entering the Channel. The main camp at Boulogne near Moulin-Hubert took on a permanent and elaborate aspect. French troops were famed for their ability to make themselves comfortable, given time, and the rough shelters of the first weeks were soon transformed into well-built huts, while elaborate gardens sprang up along the tree-lined avenues. In the end, the camp of Boulogne took on all the appearances of a prosperous provincial town rather than of a military encampment, but boredom at the continued inactivity soon began to take its toll.

At this particular time and state of the camp, the Emperor [Napoleon] himself paid several visits to see his troops and rally their morale. Chandler says that the effect of the reviews was magnificent, though not always, and it climaxed on one famous occasion on 16 August 1804 when he decorated officers and men with the *Légion d'Honneur* (Chandler, 1966, p. 323).

A Second World War record of a similar effect is found in an interview with Captain John Monier Bickersteth, later Bishop of Bath and Wells, who served with the East Kent Regiment in England in 1941 (De Lee, 1986). Later in the war, he and his battery were attached to the 185th Field Regiment, Royal Artillery, which served in France, the Netherlands

and Germany from 1944 to 1945. He mentions two occasions when he had met General Montgomery. One took place in East Anglia. The men were impatient and tired of waiting when Monty made one of his addresses to them in a big park, from a hidden box. Bickersteth says that he believes Monty showed himself to practically every soldier who was going to land with him.

In this way he encouraged them, representing to them 'the sweats who came back from the desert thing', which made them feel part of something bigger and real, and which made them feel certain of the outcome of the operation. They all longed to see action and were boosted by it when it arrived. Bickersteth did not see a shot fired until 6 June 1944. He soon realised, however, that it was a 'bloody battle'. Having landed in France, General Montgomery once again visited them, stopping his car and handing out cigarettes and newspapers. Bickersteth recalls the time Montgomery spent with them, for which he was well known, as they were about to send their letters home: 'I recall the sensation. To send some letters back home. Loving kiss at the end of the letter. Extraordinary things we had to do which we had no training for.'

In that very moment, it seems that the effects of the review by the General, the magic of sending the letter and the remembrance of home created an amplified moment, quite the reverse of the boredom of waiting and the horror of combat. 'Home' is certainly one keyword in this amplified moment; 'diversion' and 'the extraordinary' are other concepts that cover this special situation. The 'soldiers loved things to be different', Bickersteth concluded, after having told how Germans were rounded up in a Dutch bungalow along the dikes near Den Bosch, which in turn 'gave them something else to write about, and yearn about other than their beer ration'. Hence, diversion and the extraordinary in the form of letters to be sent home, a visit paid by high-ranking officers, or a rounding up of German prisoners would serve as morale boosters for soldiers. Boosters of meaning and boredom busters at the same time.

## **Vigilance and acedia in Vietnam**

### **The romance of war and *la cafard* of the jungle**

The famous autobiographical book, *A Rumor of War* (1978), by Philip Caputo, one of the finest books about the Vietnam War, is also a rich mine of insights about military boredom. As one book reviewer put it, 'No one has recounted so well the combination of fear, pain, irrational euphoria, ferocity and boredom which filled the lives of combat soldiers.'<sup>11</sup>

*A Rumor of War* tells the story of a 'restless boy caught between suburban boredom and rural desolation', sick of 'security, comfort, and peace' in Westchester, Illinois, who experiences in the war of the patriotic and idealistic Kennedy period ('ask what you can do for your country') a strong attraction to the Marine Corps. Against this backdrop, he finds war to be 'the ultimate adventure; war, the ordinary man's most convenient means of escaping from the ordinary' (p. 6). Despite 'mind-numbing' classroom work and the 'bloodless make-believe of field problems' he was set at the Officers' Basic School in Quantico during his innocent time before Vietnam, he would soon test the 'romance of war' in the 'ethical as well as a geographical wilderness' of Vietnam (p. 14).

But the first thing he encounters on his way to Vietnam is the 'epidemic of island fever' his battalion is suffering from on the island of Okinawa, where they are waiting in January 1965 to be sent south to Vietnam (p. 30). They had been there since September 'waiting for something to happen'. Moreover, their boredom was 'compounded by isolation'. Furthermore, 'it was a bleak existence,' according to Caputo, and 'the idleness and tedious housekeeping chores of life in camp got on my nerves because I was eager – some would have said overeager – for a chance to prove myself' (pp. 31f). He started to despair of ever seeing action, though, once the rumours about going to Vietnam started in the camp, the atmosphere changed from boredom to expectancy (p. 33).

Soon the relief of war came. 'One-Three' was going south to protect the airfield in Da Nang, a city on the North-Eastern coast of South Vietnam. The news was broadcast as the most wonderful thing that could happen, and Caputo himself 'felt an adrenal surge, a tingling in my hands and an empty sensation in my stomach, as if I were in an elevator that was descending too fast' (p. 41). As the battalion was transported from training camp to be airlifted to Vietnam, they were quite fired up about what was to take place:

The happy warriors. They all sounded as if they were a little drunk. And they were, though it was on the excitement rather than on alcohol. Their battalion had accomplished no mean feat. Without warning or preparation, it had made itself ready for a major combat operation in less than eight hours. Now that that was done, they were free to enjoy the adventure, the sense of release from the petty rules and routines that had governed their lives until now. It was intoxicating to be racing through the darkness toward the unknown, toward a war in a far-off, exotic country. They were done with drills, inspections, and training exercises. Something important and dramatic was about to happen to them. (p. 48)

This quotation displays in an exemplary way the counterpart of compounded boredom, namely comprehensive joy and great excitement. And one sees clearly how joy, happiness, excitement, and curiosity have their opposites in the tedium, routines, confinement to camp and periods of training and waiting. The atmosphere of boredom had simply evaporated.

Once in Vietnam, it took some time before they saw action. In the meantime, they 'fought the climate, the snipers, and monotony, of which the climate was the worst' (p. 59). Descriptions of weather and boredom – as we also saw in the First World War biography of George Winterbourne and in the stories from the South Pacific War of the Second World War – are to the fore, reminding us about how Clausewitzian 'friction' always impacts on the waging of war. It is also striking to note how these frictional forces are regarded as in need of being 'fought'. Hence, military fighting must be seen a complex phenomenon. The same goes for the 'enemy'. Who is the enemy? For a soldier, military adversaries, the climate, as well as one's emotions and state of mind can all be perceived as threatening one's mission and readiness for combat.

The pairing of climate and boredom is followed up in Caputo. As to the weather, the real measurement was 'what the heat could do to a man', not what the thermometer displayed: 'It could kill him, bake his brains, or wring the sweat out of him until he dropped from exhaustion' (p. 60). Marines are sacrificed to the land and to the sun, not to the enemy (p. 106). However, there was no option other than to endure it. The same applies to boredom. Instead of action and combat, which the battalion had wished for, 'defending the airfield turned out to be a deadening routine' (p. 60). Hence the conclusion was that 'this was not war; it was forced labor,' and it 'destroyed a marine's offensive spirit' (p. 61). We will later see how, for Caputo, precisely this ratio between tedious and weary routines, on the one hand, and the so-called 'offensive spirit', on the other, explains the change of strategy in this first part of the US engagement in Vietnam.

To fill out the picture, there are also passages in *A Rumor of War* describing a balance between excitement and monotony. For one, the battalion was exposed to some danger during the night patrols that were conducted in the jungle. They were important in order to 'maintain the illusion that we really were in danger, and so to style ourselves combat infantrymen' (p. 65). As one realises from the words that are used, even at this stage war was associated with performance (cf. Bourke, 2000, p. 28). Secondly, monotony was occasionally broken by the 'usual

whoring and drinking' in the city of Da Nang (Caputo, 1978, p. 66), of which there would be much more in the months to come.

Throughout the book, Caputo displays an elaborate, but also inventive, vocabulary of boredom. One of the concepts not found in the material we have examined so far is the French term *la cafard*. According to Caputo, this concept was inherited from the French troops who had previously served in colonial Indochina. Literally, it means cockroach or beetle. In its metaphorical sense, it designates a combination of monotony, misery, hardship, and fatigue – a deep form of boredom. Caputo even calls it a 'spiritual disease', echoing, incidentally, the tradition of the Deadly Sins (*acedia/sloth*), with symptoms such as 'occasional fits of depression combined with an unconquerable fatigue that made the simplest tasks, like shaving or cleaning a rifle, seem enormous' (p. 68). Though its causes were not clear, once more weather and boredom acted together. 'Its causes were obscure, but they had something to do with unremitting heat, the lack of action, and the long days of staring at that alien landscape; a lovely landscape, yes, but after a while all that jungle green became as monotonous as the beige of the desert or the white of the Arctic' (pp. 68f).

It is in this environment of *la cafard* that a strategic change of operational pattern is adopted: from defence and protection of the airfield to so-called 'aggressive defense'. From now on, the new order of the day would be search-and-destroy patrols in the jungle, hoping to track down the invisible enemy. The idea was that of a quick war, 'cleaning up' the area within just a few months. *La cafard* was now successfully cured, and 'The old excitement, dulled by seven weeks of drudgery, pulsed through the battalion again' (p. 69). The sacrament of baptism of fire would soon take place for the battalion, and with it the satisfaction of the 'lust' for and 'unholy attraction' of war (p. 71). Within this sexualised and religious linguistic atmosphere, going into combat for the first time, Caputo 'felt happier than I ever had' (p. 81).

This happiness would not endure for long. Patrolling the jungle during the night had a 'nightmare quality', and the jungle's power to cause fear had blinding effect (p. 85). Especially those who suffered from 'constant expectancy' were liable to these fears. The best soldiers, says Caputo, were those with a weak imagination. Caputo was not among them. We see here how the effects of excitement and waiting have been turned on their heads: whereas waiting in a monotonous environment would dull the senses and drag the marines into the quagmire of *la cafard*, waiting in a dangerous, dark environment had the potential to bring nerves out of control. Caputo had encountered fear and death, which training camps could not teach him.

But boredom has not given way to terror entirely. The days of routine, waiting and lack of action return. But this time Caputo has reached an advanced stage of his spiritual disease. At this advanced stage, hatred enters: 'I recognize I am in the second stage of the *cafard*, the stage in which you feel a hatred for everything and everyone around you (...). The marines are all in the same state of mind as I, "fed-up, fucked-up, and far from home"' (p. 99).

The rest of the book mostly records how this advanced stage of *la cafard* coincides with a strategy of aggressive defence and the Marine's inculcation of a 'spirit of aggressiveness' – topped up with exhilaration about killing the enemy and burning down villages. Though one can see how Caputo is continuously struggling to retain self-respect and empathy for the enemy, degeneration becomes pervasive in the end: boredom in the camp is relieved by 'brief, sordid liberties' in nearby cities, punished by an explosion of venereal diseases. Marines expose themselves to excessive risk-taking. The focus of the entire operation is narrowed down to 'body counts' and 'kill ratio' (killed enemies vs own dead). Local people are despised, corpses maltreated and 'weeks of bottled-up tensions would be released in a few minutes of orgiastic violence' (p. xiii).

Towards the end of the book, Caputo describes how such a release could bring back a distinctive set of 'human emotions' as they became 'men again' (p. 305). After his platoon had burned down the village of Ha Ha, they felt relieved, 'a catharsis, a purging of months of fear, frustration, and tension'. The flip side of this was that they felt ashamed and tormented by guilt about what they had done. Not even the conventional set of justifications for what they had done (e.g. 'it was under enemy control'; 'it had been a VC supply dump as much as it had been a village'; 'it was a legitimate act of war' (p. 306)) helped. What was left was – again in a religious tone – a deep need to atone for what he had done (pp. 333 and 336), as well as an all-embracing disgust: 'I felt sick enough about it all, sick of war, sick of what the war was doing to us, sick of myself' (p. 306). Here, one is reminded of William Ian Miller, who in his *Anatomy of Disgust* describes boredom as disgust with one's life (Miller, 1997, pp. 30f). Paradoxically, in such a situation of self-disgust and despair, those with a future are those he meets when he arrives at the rear camp, the most obvious place for boredom:

Having slept undisturbed for eight hours, as they did every night, and breakfasted on bacon and eggs, as they did every morning except when the division served pancakes, the clerks were happy,

healthy-looking boys. They appeared slightly bored by their dull work, but were content in the knowledge that their rear-echelon jobs gave them what their contemporaries in the line companies lacked: a future. (Caputo, 1978, p. 321)

This was for Caputo the irony of his romantic dream of a 'splendid little war' and the 'compelling attractiveness of combat' (p. xv). Moreover, it seems that the abovementioned brutish consequences of his war action cannot be entirely separated from a well-developed experience of *la cafard*. Nor can deep boredom explain everything that took place. For example, boredom due to monotony and confinement is definitely different from the horror and heat of combat.

### **Australians in Vietnam: Between bonding and public boredom**

The Vietnam War was not only fought by American soldiers on the anti-communist side. One of the other countries that contributed significantly was Australia. Its immense contribution is often ignored. From 1962 until 1972, 46,582 Australian service personnel served in Vietnam, 496 were killed and 2398 wounded. The average age of the Australian soldiers was 20, slightly older than their American counterparts (19), but still much younger than the average Second World War soldier (26). We will draw on this experience in order to complete the picture of boredom in the Vietnam War. Our guide this time is the memoirs of David Pye, a combat soldier, dating back to 1971, during what he calls 'the longest war this country has known'. Even though the war was winding down at the time, what Pye experienced required a high 'payment' from him in its aftermath. Ten per cent of his battalion was injured or killed, and the memory of this caused him to suffer post-traumatic 'delayed shock' 27 years later.

Pye's memoirs are written in a modest way. He was not a Rambo or wannabee 'super soldier'. He was just a 20-year-old 'kid' who fought in 'an incredibly unpopular war, in an incredibly uncomfortable place, ... in a war no-one cared about' and 'in a war that should never have been'. First and foremost, it was a lonely and senseless war, quite different from conventional perceptions:

Contrary to the perception that many people have about wars, they're not places of excitement and glamour, but places of boredom, long periods of time alone and thinking, places of fear, of bone weary tiredness, thirst, hunger, frustration, living in rain, mud, dirt, heat, sweat and most of all, wonder at why you're there at all. There

are no cameras, glamour or heroics as the movies portray, there is only YOU, doing what YOU have to do, simply because you're there. (Pye, 1998)

The war had a deteriorating effect, particularly on the Americans who, in the Northern provinces, experienced harder fighting than the Australians, as just seen in our exposition of *A Rumor of War* by Caputo. Pye mentions two bad consequences of the warfare, which he hardly knew to exist among the Australian troops: the use of drugs, and the phenomenon of 'fragging', that is 'shooting or blowing up anyone you didn't like'. Even though this conclusion is drawn by Pye, and is based on no scientific examination, it is interesting to see how he explains the national differences in terms of what he calls 'the bonds of mateship':

I believe the Australian soldier was much more disciplined and better thought of (by our government) than the US troops. We trained together in Australia, sometimes for a year or more before going 'in country' and we went there as a complete unit. Whereas the US seemed to send a whole bunch of conscripts to Vietnam, then split them up and send them wherever a replacement was needed. They were all individuals and strangers to each other and the bonds of mateship that we had were uncommon amongst the US soldiers. We almost always operated in large groups of usually a company size and no smaller than a platoon, the US seemed to send out small patrols without much support.

If this is correct, the bonds of mateship may thus have acted as a bulwark against the erosion caused by fear, loneliness and boredom, that is the complex of stressors. However, we can see something similar in Caputo's writing about a group of marines with a presumably high degree of cohesion, which actually backs this suggestion about the importance of 'mateship' or 'bonding'. According to Caputo, bonding shows the importance of company and fellowship, and it was 'as profound as any between lovers' (Caputo, 1978, p. xv). Moreover, and here comes the connection to our issue, 'It is, unlike marriage, a bond that cannot be broken by a word, by boredom or divorce, or by anything other than death. Sometimes even that is not strong enough.' In this, it had a humanitarian effect. Caputo tells about two friends of his who died as they tried to retrieve the corpses of fellow soldiers from the battlefield. Despite the demonic and monstrous character of war, this was 'the one decent thing' that would be found among war mates.

Warfare for Pye was warfare in the jungle, without front lines, without a clear picture of the enemy, and involving exhausting marches through dense jungle (for a good depiction of the phenomenology of marching, see O'Brien, 1973/1995, pp. 34f). This meant that every soldier had to be extremely alert in order to react rapidly enough if the enemy attacked. In a 'war of boredom', this turned out to be a very serious challenge:

The end result of this was that most of us simply followed the person in front through the jungle while whoever was forward scout would quietly lead the way with safety catch off and eyes and ears wide open. For us this was a war of boredom, we just walked, stopped..., walked, stopped...walked, stopped, and after doing this for a few weeks, I got so bored and pissed off because NOTHING ever happened, that I used to hook my rifle through the webbing straps to take the weight of it (so did most of the others). If we had gotten into a contact it would have taken several seconds just to get the rifle untangled. (Pye, 1998)

This description is most illuminating in terms of the *effect* of our subject: if boredom causes you to ignore the importance of vigilance, and you start caring less about your own and others' safety, boredom soon starts to become not only your inner enemy, but also a serious threat to you. We have already observed this excessive risk-taking in Caputo's account. Another very good Vietnam memoir is Tim O'Brien's *If I Die in a Combat Zone* (1973/1995). Brien's depiction especially of how boredom produced carelessness among US soldiers in Vietnam is worthwhile reading, like this explanation for an episode of 'incoming' (grenades):

As it turned out, the first fight had not been a fire fight. The blond soldier and a few others had been bored. Bored all day. Bored that night. So they'd synchronized watches, set a time, agreed to toss hand grenades outside our little perimeter at 2200 sharp, and when 2200 came, they did it, staging the battle. They shouted and squealed and fired their weapons and threw hand grenades and had a good time, making noise, scaring hell out of everyone. Something to talk about in the morning. (Ibid., p. 33f)

It is appropriate here to turn our attention to the etymology of *acedia*, one of the words that in medieval times were used to characterise what we since the eighteenth century have called boredom.<sup>12</sup> *Acedia* is a Latin

word (Greek *akedia*) that consists of a prefix 'a-' that has the function of negating what comes after, and of 'kedia', which simply means 'care'. Consequently, *acedia* literally means 'non-care', or 'care-lessness'. This is the reason for applying the root meaning of this word to the episode above.

When you become weary of your time as a soldier, boredom may cause you to become un-alert and care-less in a comparable way. Hence, boredom becomes a very serious threat to the combat morale and combat readiness of a unit and has to be resisted. We also see how physical weariness and mental tiredness (boredom) work together in the same direction and with the same result, namely *military acedia*, or simply *military apathy*, literally 'without passion'.

In Pye's memoirs, we also seem to find an additional *acedia* – lack of care – which is by no means less serious than the aforementioned type. If the enduring boredom of the jungle was hard to bear, the lack of care from society was even harder in the end. In Pye's memoirs:

The most difficult part to accept about the Vietnam war wasn't the war itself, but the fact that no-one in Australia cared. Being a soldier and fighting in a war has a huge impact on anyone's life and would have to be the most important thing that anyone could experience. But if we are then told that it was all a waste of time, that we shouldn't have been there and that no-one really cares anyway, then how much importance can we place on everything else that happens in life. All of us build up our self esteem by doing things and then feeling that we have 'done good.' We feel good about ourselves because we are complimented or noticed by our peers for doing these things. But if we do what we believe is a good thing and in turn we are ridiculed and chastised, then we lose our self esteem and unfortunately, quite often turn against society.... They condemned and ridiculed us, we were simply the sacrificial pawns used by our government and abused by our fellow countrymen.

This is an extremely important aspect of the comprehensive complex of military boredom, and we choose to denote it *public boredom*. This term was already used to characterise the reception of George Winterbourne from the trenches in France during the Great War. It is easily overlooked, and neglected, but what happened in Vietnam is that US and Australian soldiers experienced a lack of care, a state of carelessness and apathy, where they had expected a pat on the back and a 'welcome home'. We see here how the boredom that Pye experienced in the war

zone was heavily reinforced by the lack of support, care and interest from society back home. It is simply an unending spiral of deprivation of meaning. Again the boredom loop closes. This perspective presupposes a kind of war boredom on the part of society at home, which in turn impacts directly and negatively on the sense of meaning among the grunts. If this is so important to a soldier's self-esteem, it is easier to understand why so many Vietnam veterans have taken their lives: a deep boredom which is ultimately disgust with one's own life. Or why sex and violence became blurred in the raping ('requisition') of girls who could 'break up the boredom and keep up morale'.<sup>13</sup> In this, we definitely have an advanced stage of *la cafard* as with Caputo, and, if not a second stage, we may even have a third stage amounting to the ultimate self-destruction.

### From alcohol to drugs

Pye did mention the role of drugs among US soldiers. Let us examine it within a broader framework. 'The soldier, especially the conscript, suffers so deeply from contempt and damage to his selfhood, from absurdity and boredom and chickenshit, that some anodyne is necessary,' says Paul Fussell in his book on the Second World War (Fussell, 1989, p. 96). Richard Holmes in *Firing Line* also mentions the use of alcohol and drugs in the military. Armies have almost always provided access to alcohol and to a lesser extent also to drugs. Holmes mentions four functions of the use of alcohol and drugs in armies. Firstly, this kind of stimulation may be used to help 'over-wrought men' to sleep. Especially rum has been seen as effective in this respect in Western armies. Secondly, in times of both war and peace, armies seem to have used alcohol in order to cope with an otherwise unbearable situation. Whereas, in war, this mainly had two functions – to fortify the fighting spirit or to soothe the soldiers after battle – in peacetime one may assume that a situation of boredom would also provide an impetus to indulge in alcohol. The example from the American Civil War is explicit on this matter. Thirdly, alcohol and drugs were very often involved in violations of the law in armies. For example, one-third of crimes committed by soldiers in the Soviet military were carried out in a state of drunkenness, according to Holmes. Fourthly, and lastly, drinking had a social function in that it contributed to cohesion and small-group bonding processes. The social value of this was also of great military value, of course. It could take the form of an initiation for individual soldiers or officers who were admitted into the group, or a kind of party before one was to take part in combat on the battlefield.

Vietnam marks a watershed in this respect, however. Before Vietnam, alcohol had been the most important means of mitigating the pain of boredom. During the Vietnam War, however, drinking was overtaken by drugs. Half of the American soldiers had smoked marijuana in 1971, 28.5 per cent had taken heroin or opium, and almost a third (30.8 per cent) had experimented with psychedelic drugs. Whereas the common function of drugs and alcohol in the military was to act as 'well-established devices for assisting the soldier to escape from the wartime environment or to mask the ugly face of battle', drugs literally eliminated the self-understanding of soldiers as soldiers, with the most tragic consequences. Moreover, even though drugs may have served similar purposes to alcohol, one can ask whether not only fear and traumas, but also the all-pervasive feeling of meaninglessness, contributed to the need for stronger palliatives. Given what we know about the relationship between boredom, lack of meaning and the use of drugs in other situations, this seems to be a fairly safe assumption.

## Peacekeeping operations

### The President for whom boredom never existed

*[Mr. President,] Were you ever bored?*

Oh, my, no. We didn't know the meaning of the word, and I'll tell you another thing. I can't remember being bored, not once in my whole life. How in the world can you be bored if you have things to think about, which I must say I always have?

*Mr. President, do you think those were better times, when you were a boy?*

Oh, I don't know about that. Comparisons like that. They're so easy to make, but I'm not sure they're ever right. ... The only thing I'm sure of: People weren't so nervous then. All these things people have now that are supposed to entertain them and all. They just seem to end up making everybody nervous.<sup>14</sup>

This conversation is taken from a biography of Harry S. Truman, the popular US president from the important post-war period who was forced to withdraw from his re-election campaign in 1952 due to the quagmire in Korea and low ratings. We have included this passage to show how perceptions of life can alter from one period to another, and from person to person. Our suggestion, before presenting records of boredom

from peacekeeping operations from recent decades, is that boredom is a rather well-known phenomenon to most military personnel who have served overseas in various missions of this kind. One study that seeks to examine the relationship between various stressors and performance in peacekeeping operations was conducted by Jennifer Kavanagh at RAND ([www.rand.org](http://www.rand.org)). She concludes thus: 'Firstly, boredom is especially connected to peacekeeping operations, but also to combat situations; secondly, boredom may be especially dangerous to the successful completion of peacekeeping missions, along with lack of clear definition of responsibilities or lack of relevant training, and, thirdly, some stress may maintain vigilance and reduce boredom' (Kavanagh, 2005, pp. xi, xii, 7, 8, and 21).

So, President Truman may here be an exception to what other citizens of Western states relate about returning from peacekeeping deployments. The bigger issue, which is raised by Truman's last remark, is the question of whether men and women serving in contemporary missions are of a quality (e.g. socially, mentally and morally) that makes them unfit for this kind of operation. Attempts to answer this question have been made in later studies on peacekeeping operations after the end of the Cold War. One such study by the Italian sociologist Fabricio Battistelli suggests that, on the one hand, it may be quite easy to attract young, so-called 'post-modern soldiers' to experience the adventure of missions overseas. Yet, on the other hand, such soldiers, driven by a desire for experience, sensation, meaning and instant gratification, may not have the same endurance as one would expect of soldiers in former times (Battistelli, 1997, pp. 468–70).

### **Sinai: Lack of control and time**

In a study of the experiences of the first US Army Combat Battalion assigned to the Sinai Multinational Force and Observers (MFO) during the early 1980s, boredom proved to be an issue among the soldiers soon after their deployment (Segal and Harris, 1985). It is shown in the study how boredom could be part of a web of connected issues, such as underutilisation, cultural deprivation, lack of privacy and isolation. In general, boredom became a metaphor for the soldiers, expressing their perceived lack of control of time and space. Segal and Harris also add two general observations that they think might help to explain this understanding of boredom in a peacekeeping context. Firstly, peacekeeping is a form of low-intensity conflict, which, due to lack of experience, not least genuine military experience, may cause boredom, among other stressors, to become a potential stressor during the deployment.

Secondly, the unit rotation system is regarded as rather frequent, which may cause a loss of psychosocial history, which in turn may lead to stress among the soldiers due to unfulfilled expectations. Simply put, the leaders of the battalion did not really know what the mission was going to be like for their troops. Hence, troops were not well prepared for coping with what they experienced as boredom, perceived as a loss of control over time and space.

It is interesting to see how the US Army has attempted to take boredom seriously. One sign of this is how the issue has been included in two of its Field Manuals. In Field Manual 3-05.70, entitled *Survival*, a manual on how to survive as a soldier in various environments with regard to food, diseases, various kinds of climates etc., boredom is treated together with loneliness as an example of natural reactions in a chapter on the psychology of survival. Dealt with after fear, anxiety, anger and frustration, and depression, it is said about loneliness and boredom that:

**Loneliness and Boredom.** 2-22. Man is a social animal. Human beings enjoy the company of others. Very few people want to be alone all the time! There is a distinct chance of isolation in a survival setting. Isolation is not bad. Loneliness and boredom can bring to the surface qualities you thought only others had. The extent of your imagination and creativity may surprise you. When required to do so, you may discover some hidden talents and abilities. Most of all, you may tap into a reservoir of inner strength and fortitude you never knew you had. Conversely, loneliness and boredom can be another source of depression. If you are surviving alone, or with others, you must find ways to keep your mind productively occupied. Additionally, you must develop a degree of self-sufficiency. You must have faith in your capability to 'go it alone.'

This seems to express a highly adequate understanding not just of the state of mind that boredom represents, but also of the resources to cope with it. We saw in the Second World War records how keeping the mind *occupied* can play an important role in enduring boredom. It is also interesting to see how the creative faculty is emphasised, as well as making it an individual challenge and responsibility to cope with boredom. The manual also highlights what could be called *the principle of limitation*, as well as the importance of creativity in such situations if one is to cope well with loneliness and boredom. However, the manual is quite general on this point.

If we narrow the focus, what would the situation be if peacekeeping missions were made the exclusive focus? Another Field Manual (Department of the Army, 1992) concerns low-intensity conflicts in general and peacekeeping operations in particular (chapter 4). Here, boredom is dealt with twice. Firstly, boredom is mentioned as something that can arise in the deployment of a peacekeeping force 'when the force is well established, the opposing sides are quiet, and troops are watching a buffer zone in a quiet area' (4-31.a.6). This would certainly apply to the Sinai operation. The second time boredom is addressed is under 'Morale, Discipline, and Administration'. To have a vigilant eye on the effect of boredom is emphasised in this part of the document (4-41.e):

A peacekeeping mission is meant to be visible to all concerned. Due to this fact, locals and other contingents scrutinize the force. The force must, therefore, reflect vigilance, readiness, and competence in its duties. Personnel in isolated OPs and checkpoints can become bored with the daily routine. However, innovative leadership can take steps to enhance interest. Rotation of units between OPs and checkpoints, as well as out of sector, can help avoid boredom.

The flavour of these documents is quite different. Whereas the latter is geared towards the importance of leadership in preventing boredom (innovative leadership and the decision to carry out a rotation), the former, general document concentrates instead on the ability of the individual soldier to realise his or her potential for mastering the feeling and state of mind of boredom. It can be argued that both aspects are of equal importance. Leadership cannot free the individual from taking responsibility for a potentially boring life as a soldier, but leaders carry a responsibility to address boredom on a social and systemic level. Some leaders may feed boredom unduly. Also, the issue of discipline and morale seems to unite the individual and the leadership perspective. This is even clearer in the case of irregular forces. According to John Mueller at Ohio University, such forces are marked by the following characteristics: 'Irregular forces are ill-disciplined, opportunistic, easily bored, and often cowardly' (Mueller, 2000, p. 39). So, without discipline, there is a higher risk of boredom and everything that goes with it.

#### **Croatia: Boredom or unit cohesion?**

One study that relates explicitly to the aforementioned Sinai study (MFO) was carried out by Paul T. Bartone and Amy B. Adler (1999).

This study focuses on the connection between cohesion and soldiers' morale, performance and stress resilience. The empirical material in the study is from a US Army medical task force that was put together to serve six months in a United Nations peacekeeping operation in the former Yugoslavia (Croatia) in 1993. Survey data were taken from three phases of the mission (pre-deployment, mid-deployment and late-deployment). One finding was that unit cohesion formed an inverted U pattern. That is to say, it started out low, reached a peak around mid-deployment and decreased again as the mission approached the end of its six months' duration. The study shows, and this is another significant finding, that boredom correlates negatively with unit cohesion at mid and late-deployment. Another way of putting it is that boredom is low when unit cohesion is high, and that boredom increases as cohesion decreases.

There could of course be a parallel here to the story of the hen and the egg: does boredom produce unit dissolution? Or is it the other way around, that unit cohesion prevents boredom, acts as a buffer against it, and hence prevents it from impacting upon unit morale? This is not answered by the study, but the empirical findings provide clues. One of them is that boredom is low where unit cohesion is high. This may suggest that cohesion can prevent boredom from realising its more destructive potential, yet without curing or eradicating it. Moreover, all kinds of components related to the level of cohesion are of importance as a bulwark against the arrows of boredom (i.e. confidence in leaders, high skills in the group, mutual respect, effective flow of information; see Bartone and Adler, 1999).

Since the causal direction between cohesion and boredom cannot be established in the study by Bartone and Adler, they suggest that cohesion and boredom are correlated with a third variable, the lack of meaningful work. The study shows how those groups that were most engaged in professionally meaningful and relevant work were the ones with the highest level of cohesion and the lowest level of boredom, and *vice versa*. This concurs well with the notion of 'underutilisation' as a precursor of boredom in the Sinai study by Harris and Segal. Moreover, and interestingly, volunteers for this mission scored higher on experience of unit cohesion than non-volunteers at the point of late-deployment. Bartone and Adler find it likely that these people find their duties more interesting and rewarding than their non-volunteer peers, and hence become more resistant to deterioration caused by boredom and mission alienation over time.

In connection with the importance of meaning, and as a suggestion for future research, Bartone and Adler draw attention to the personality variable of *resilience* or *hardiness*.<sup>15</sup> These personality traits are characteristic of people who create and attach positive meaning and importance to their work activities. Such people are also less vulnerable to the negative effects of work and life stress, including boredom. Perhaps these personal qualities should be emphasised as important *virtues* in the mastery of boredom in peacekeeping missions, and probably elsewhere as well?

### **Bosnia: Boredom of training-mission mismatch**

Swedes, too, get bored. A study of Swedish peacekeepers in UNPROFOR (Bosnia) in the period 1993–5 was conducted by Eva Johansson and Gerry Larsson a decade ago (Johansson and Larsson, 1998). The study is based on grounded theory, and its strength lies in using open-ended questions in in-depth interviews in order to describe moods, feelings and opinions among the group concerned. Boredom is a topic, though only indirectly. One feature of the findings of the study is that many soldiers found that the preparation for the mission did not match the current situation in Bosnia. Since training was often experienced as being too focused on ‘worst case scenarios’, many felt that they did not get realistic help to cope with what they were actually going to encounter. So, the worst-case training was at the expense of specific training for various kinds of jobs, and everyday routines were not much considered at all. This may have a parallel in the abovementioned loss of control of time and space in the Sinai operation.

This leads one of the interviewees, simultaneously voicing the essence of many others’ responses, to conclude as follows: ‘Don’t go in expecting that there is a war going on all over Bosnia. Prepare for a lot of waiting.’ Even though this study was conducted in Bosnia during a period which was rather rough in other respects (the slaughter in Srebrenica, for example, took place within this time frame), boredom seems to have been perceived as being a challenge that was relevant to military training and in relation to the expectations that were created by the leaders.

### **Kosovo: Shame, lethargy and the need for a meaningful narrative**

The discrepancy between pre-deployment training and military experience is also a topic in two Norwegian studies of Norwegian soldiers who participated in the NATO-led stabilisation force in Kosovo (KFOR) after

the Kosovo War in 1999. The first of these studies, concentrating on the second infantry battalion deployed in Kosovo (2000–1), concludes sharply that soldiers became frustrated by the lack of accord between training and service (Laberg *et al.*, 2002). There was a lack of meaning due to this training–mission discrepancy. The only thing that is not mentioned in the quotation below, which is an excerpt from the conclusion of the report, is ‘boredom’.

The biggest problem, though, was that the strain the troops were exposed to was different to what was expected. There was a lack of ‘sharp missions,’ which was what they had expected and accordingly trained for. Kosovo had just been at war (...). When this didn’t happen, and most of the service concentrated on static missions such as securing churches, traffic policing and street patrols where nothing happened, a feeling of lack of meaning and a lack of challenges (...) spread among the soldiers. (...) Mad driving patterns from the local people, lost dogs and endless discussions with local leaders in order to settle apparently trivial problems (e.g. who was going to get a job at the newly refurbished petrol station). All these were more important tasks than violence and armed clashes.

However, these brushstrokes do not fill the entire canvas. This study also mentions a number of things in the daily lives of the troops that contributed to meaningful service in Kosovo:

(...) a great effort was put into reconstruction of infrastructure (...). It was undoubtedly meaningful to witness and contribute to the reconstruction of roads, railways, schools and shops, and this feeling was amplified as soldiers participated in equipping farmers with seeds, farming machines and other necessary material. (...) In particular, it was a joy to see how children and youth were given possibilities for leisure activities, such as playgrounds, football fields, basketball courts, scouting and even participation in Norway Cup [an international football tournament for children and youth that takes place in Oslo once a year]. (...) But this civil-military activity was understood by many soldiers at best as merely supporting the ‘real’ operations, and at worst as a waste of time for an army battalion. (...) The consequence is that you get troops who feel that they are useless, and who easily slip into a state where morale and cohesion drop.

Another study of the same battalion was conducted some years later by Tone Helene Røkenes (2004). She found the same discrepancy

between expectations and training, on the one hand, and the kind of mission the troops were asked to carry out in Kosovo, on the other. In her study, boredom is an explicit issue in her description of the morale of the soldiers. She also demonstrates that this state of mind can result in rather dysfunctional behaviour. Also a third study, of a Danish battalion, by the Danish sociologist Claus Kold confirms this picture of Scandinavian soldiers sent on missions they had not forecast adequately, and with which they struggled to cope without ending up in a dysfunctional state (Kold, 2006).

This has also been suggested by one of the authors of this book, in a study of 15 young Norwegian officers serving in Kosovo from 2000 to 2002, the period between the two studies mentioned above (Mæland, 2004). Some of these officers tell about a humiliating service, for example with regard to how local people did not care about rules and order. So, the feeling of 'contributing to world peace and international order' was completely absent. It was also shameful to describe the nature of the service to friends and family back home. They thought what they were doing was very important and dangerous:

I got an email from some friends with whom I hadn't had any contact during recent years. I told them where I was, and then got the following reaction: 'Whoa! You must be mad to have volunteered for such a mission, right in the middle of the firing line!' I must admit everything was so calm and quiet, that it was pretty embarrassing to tell them what I really did there. (Mæland, 2004, p. 45)

As inaction and a sense of uselessness and shame increased, Mæland found that boredom could contribute to isolation from the local population, which also included the use of rather rough, quasi-racist language about two of the ethnic groups in the area, Albanians and Romas (but not so much about the Serbs). Let us look more closely at two of these dysfunctions.

The first one relates to a dulling of the senses. As calmness, quietness and routine came to mark the operation, the soldiers were marked by lethargy. According to one of the officers (called Bjørn) who was interviewed, the 'boys' had joined up because of a desire for adventure and action. Since there was no action until March 2004, when the situation in Kosovo exploded, the mind of each soldier came to be marked by lethargy. Bjørn maintains that this mechanism was reinforced by the young age of the troops, especially the young team leaders, who quickly became victims of the routine. Also Terje, another officer, mentions the

problem of the mismatch between the desires of the soldiers and the reality on the ground in Kosovo:

Many of the boys who join up have a deep desire to shoot and be shot at. It is part of the excitement that motivates them. But they hardly talk about it. They certainly find it boring to go out on the 100th patrol, without anything to report, except someone who lacks a driver's licence. And I do understand them. But they do not say, 'we want more action!' (...). That is not a topic. It seems that they channel some of their frustration by playing PC-games and the like (Terje starts laughing). (Ibid., p. 91)

Terje's laughter may have to do with the latent tension between boredom and the desire for action. His platoon has not developed a Rambo culture, but there is a desire for action nonetheless. Perhaps 'quiet despair' describes it? But this 'inner pressure' seems to be relieved through the safety valve of the PC games they play on their laptops. It may well be that this tension between boredom and action may decrease as one becomes familiar with real service in Kosovo. But the problem of routine and the impact of lethargy do not appear to be solved merely through PC games. It is our suggestion that the main problem remained: how could KFOR service become meaningful? All kinds of military service have the potential to become boring and full of laziness and 'lethargies' (John Donne).<sup>16</sup> But all kinds of military service also have a potential for meaning. It seems that soldiers in Kosovo were caught between the meaningful (civil-military cooperation) and the meaningless (inaction, no distinct need for military personnel).

One way of putting this is to say that soldiers who did not see the point of going out on an endless numbers of patrols without witnessing anything serious had a desire for a meaningful 'story' about their service. If meaning was not produced for them, they had to invent meaning themselves, as it were (cf. Victor Frankl and 'the will for meaning'). One such attempt was broadcast in the Norwegian (and Serb!) media some years ago. Norwegian soldiers produced a video about shooting dogs, many of them wild dogs. This was a task Norwegian snipers were asked to carry out in order to prevent rabies and also to prevent the number of wild dogs from growing too high in the area of operation. However, this task probably became the most action-filled task Norwegian soldiers carried out during this period. As the pictures were manipulated to increase the sense of action and excitement, and the beat of rock music was added, the result was like a proof of action and warlike experience during an

otherwise deadly boring time in Kosovo. In all its artificiality it came to provide the necessary purposeful narrative these young Norwegian men<sup>17</sup> needed in their quiet desperation.

The problem for military and political leaders in Norway was that this video was portrayed as 'disgusting behaviour' (in particular towards the dogs!), and hence threatened to damage the picture of innocent, peace-loving Norwegian soldiers. Even though this is a misunderstanding and far from the mark, it still shows how boredom may have strategic consequences for a nation's international reputation ('How could such barbaric soldiers bring peace to a war-torn area?'). American soldiers have also produced similar videos, and the main point in analyses of them has been that such videos are caused by boredom and a need for meaning.<sup>18</sup>

We will now turn to some very different material, to the two Gulf Wars. The dysfunctions of boredom are no less important, however.

### The first Gulf War and the story of a jarhead

Roger Waters of Pink Floyd once sang in response to the 'Americanised spectacle' of the Gulf War that 'this species has amused itself to death.' This might have seemed to be the case for the people who decided to go to war, but this is quite far from what it looked like on the ground, in the desert.

One of the books that best describes the boredom of modern warfare is *Jarhead* (Swofford, 2003), written by and about Anthony Swofford, a 19-year-old 'jarhead' (a member of the US Marines, referring to their 'high-and-tight' haircuts). Swofford served as a scout-sniper in a Surveillance and Target Acquisition Platoon (STA) from August 2000 until April 2001. In 2005, the book was made into a film directed by Sam Mendes. In the following, we will refer to both.

The film is slow and bleak for a war movie, but it is still intense in its attempt to portray the machismo of the culture of the marines and the basic instincts of men in (and without) uniform. It also addresses the psychological and moral costs of taking part in the operation, although dysfunction is also viewed as a means of survival in the book. Here is but one example of dehumanisation, a passage taken from Swofford's book, describing the effect of watching films from the Vietnam War (in which his father took part, and survived), as the jarheads were preparing for a mission overseas:

Filmic images of death and carnage are pornography for the military man; with film you are stroking his cock, tickling his balls with the

pink feather of history, getting him ready for his real First Fuck... As a young man raised on the films of the Vietnam War, I want ammunition and alcohol and dope, I want to screw some whores and kill some Iraqi motherfuckers. (Swofford, 2003, p. 7)

One sympathetic way of reading such a desperate and potentially destructive statement is to see it as forming a horizon of high expectations for what Iraq could bring. However, the First Fuck never came. Strong desires, high readiness, but no satisfaction. Hence boredom (cloaked in fear), irreverence (the profanities in the book are quite intelligent), black humour, meditation and wit follow.

In its description of the antiseptic war in Iraq, with hardly any action involved, boredom is *Jarhead's* overarching theme. It is described through a wide range of disparate elements such as inaction, walking in a landscape of 'dead repetition', daydreaming of hamburgers and pizzas back home, endless waiting, physical waste, routines, shelling by friendly or enemy fire, fear, sand and dust, no battles and, finally, petrol rain that falls from the sky as a result of burning oil wells. In the words of the New York Times reviewer, Michiko Kakutani, the film is 'like something out of a Hieronymus Bosch painting of hell'.<sup>19</sup>

Let us look at a sequence from the film depicting the unending spiral of degeneration, but also some of the black humour lurking behind the unheroic and tragic picture that is painted. The scene is taken from the Saudi desert exactly '62 days, 19 hours, 15 minutes' after deployment, and we listen to Swofford's listing of 'suggested techniques to use in the avoidance of boredom and loneliness' as he is lying in his bed:

Masturbation; rereading of letters from unfaithful wives and girlfriends; cleaning your rifle; further masturbation; rewiring walkman; arguing about religion and meaning of life; discussing in detail every woman the marine has ever fucked; debating differences, such as Cuban versus Mexican (i.e. cigars), Harleys versus Hondas; left versus right handed masturbation; further cleaning of rifle; studying a Filipino mail order bride catalogue; further masturbation; planning of Marine's first meal on return home; imagining what the marine's girlfriend and her friend Jodie are doing in the hay, or in the alley, or in a hotel bed.

The force of boredom seems to be quite manifest. Boredom may also dim the senses, and put one's own and others' lives at risk. This happens during the Christmas party in the camp. Swofford is on watch, everybody

gets drunk and Swofford is dancing around naked. Another soldier falls asleep in another tent as sausages are frying in a pan over a gas burner. Suddenly his tent is on fire. The result the next day: Swofford is ordered to attend to the burning of 'shitters' (portable toilets, 'fuelled' with a good dose of diesel), and is demoted from corporal to private. Far from what he was there for and as far from an honourable service as one could get. After the service with the shitters, he even attempts to kill the soldier who fell asleep 'by accident', because that would end 'this *fucking* waiting'.

But Swofford lacks the courage and will to sink even deeper into the quagmire. In the book, but left out of the film, the lowest he gets is when he is sitting with his weapon in his mouth considering whether to pull the trigger. Life as a Marine in the desert is experienced as entirely pointless. And he is convinced that Kristina, his woman back home, is having sex with another man. However, it is not just Kristina. 'It's the desert.' Swofford's skills as a sniper have not been utilised, the waiting is so hard to endure, and the desperation stirs up his soul. He does not know whether he is driven by cowardice, fatigue, boredom or curiosity. But again he 'lacks' the courage to carry it out (at least, that is how he sees it). It is at this point he states that: 'My despair is less despair than boredom and loneliness' (Swofford, 2003, p. 73).

As he recovers from his 'sickness', he decides to return to the thing he knows best: being a jarhead. His loneliness is also somehow compensated for by his strong friendship with Allen Troy. One day, a request from the Colonel for 'his best snipers' is conveyed to Swofford and Troy. They are the 'chosen ones' and are asked to 'take out' some Iraqi soldiers from the Republican Guard, who have not yet surrendered. They have dug in around a control tower at the airfield of a city (Al Jabar) not far away. The recon reports have discovered two high-ranking Iraqi officers in the control tower. And all airplanes are occupied for the rest of the day. Taking out these officers would open the door for the whole battalion. But no Rambo mission – clearance has to be given before the officers are taken out. They accept the order immediately, and start smiling.

Swofford and Troy prepare for the mission and enter a building from which their sniper rifles are capable of hitting the Iraqis. But there is nobody in the tower yet, and the sun is about to go down. They wait nervously for some minutes. Suddenly the Iraqis arrive in the control room at the top of the tower. Swofford gets one of them in the fore sight of his rifle; Troy calls the ops for clearance, which is given. Wind speed and range are measured, the rifle is loaded, permission is given to

fire, Swofford puts his finger on the trigger, starts to pull it slowly ... But then, suddenly a US Army officer storms through the door of their position and shouts, 'What frequency are you on? We've got air (support)!' Swofford argues that they have been given permission by the colonel to shoot. The officer denies it. Troy even begs on his knees to make the shot just before the planes arrive with their loads, while Swofford starts targeting the Iraqis once more. They soon all start fighting, as Swofford cries in despair: 'You don't know what we've been through here.'

Combat fighters then fly over low, drop their loads, and the tower is blown to pieces. Closely following the dynamic of the film, the existential meaning of military life, and life in general, is blown to pieces for Swofford and Troy at the same moment. They have been refused permission to climb the last yard of the mountain peak. Or more correctly, they have been denied permission to get out of their quagmire. They never got their First Fuck, nor the *medulla oblongata* shot, the epic shot. This is military boredom at the very bottom of human existence. This is existential boredom.

## The War on Terror

Everyone who has searched the internet for new titles on the war in Iraq, or who has browsed bookshops at international airports, knows that a string of biographies, as well as other books, has emerged from recent US-led forays into Iraq. Boredom is covered in many of them. In this section, we will present fragments taken from a limited selection of these books, as well as from various stories found online.

### Bored with not being deployed

We have already mentioned how boredom can be all-pervasive within the military, in particular how underutilisation and the lack of meaningful tasks cause boredom. We have also discussed how the stress of waiting for the war was relieved by the outbreak of the war. It appears that both aspects accompanied the outbreak of the second Gulf War in 2003, the war of the coalition forces against Iraq.

'The level of frustration is growing,' said a news report on the morale of National Guard soldiers awaiting deployment to Iraq back in the USA in March 2003, as fellow soldiers were rolling through the Iraqi desert.<sup>20</sup> In fact, they were interviewed at the checkout in a Wal-Mart, with a trolley full of batteries, disposable cameras, music CDs and a 19-inch colour TV for their barracks. The reason given: 'We needed something to keep us from being bored.' Even with all these items, 'the place isn't home, even with the refrigerators, video game systems, microwaves and

teddy bears the soldiers have brought from home or purchased in surrounding towns,' the same journalist reported from Fort Coy, a military base outside Chicago that was almost filled to overflowing with 8200 soldiers about to be sent to Iraq. They would prefer to join the campaign, 'to go and get it over with,' according to Melyssa Cruz, a 25-year-old member of the 708th Medical Company.

Also British soldiers stuck at home in those days envied their colleagues in Iraq. In a quiet corner of the north-east of England, a group of 30 soldiers, fire-fighters from the Royal Air Force and crews and MPs from the Royal Navy were 'doing their best to battle boredom', it was reported, as 30,000 troops were shipped to the Gulf.<sup>21</sup> To ease their boredom, each of them was given a grant of £5 to buy themselves board games to fill their spare time. The local police even presented them with free passes to a leisure centre in the vicinity. It may sound like a rather depressing story, but it is quite realistic, as acknowledged by one of the interviewees, Sgt. Jones: 'The hardest part really is keeping guys from getting bored. In the Army you want to be on the go all the time.'

Interestingly, even at 'the other end of the scale' soldiers seem to have been afraid of not being used in the combat. This record is taken from Afghanistan, from British Royal Marines who, a year earlier (2002), were preparing for their next battle with al-Qaeda. At the time the report was made, they had returned from one 'event', and were 'waiting, refitting, recuperating'. During the preceding week, they had attempted to clear out al-Qaeda troops from a valley at 12,000 feet (Burke, 2002). In the meantime, the marines were supplemented by 130 additional men, making a total of 650 marines, who, according to their commander, were 'psyched'. One of these additional marines, Second Lieutenant Mike Carty, was interviewed after he had arrived in Kabul. According to him, 'it was a huge relief to really arrive,' since they were never sure they would be used, and because they were desperate

to close with the enemy and kill them. We do the whites-of-the-eyes-stuff. The guys are champing at the bit to get out and engage the enemy. It'll be a big disappointment if we go home without any contact. It's an amazing opportunity for me.

Much of this (quiet) desperation may be fully understandable, and Carty admits later in the interview that

we were very depressed when it looked like the Marines weren't going to get anything. There was a bit of a morale problem. Now the blokes are just excited about taking the opportunity we have got.

We include this quotation to underline how motivated the soldiers were who entered the war against al-Qaeda and Iraq in 2002 and 2003. The morale would soon change for many of the soldiers. War may be hell, and it is not always preferable to a dull day in Darlington.

### **It's the boredom beat: Monotony vs alertness**

After a while, once the campaign against Baghdad had concluded during the first spring, the operation turned very difficult, what Richard Holmes calls

a postmodern conflict comprising extreme violence and near-normality, formally structured military operations and sheer terrorism, diplomatic negotiations and Mafia-style powerbroking, all intertwined like the skeins of a rope. (Holmes, 2006, p. 135)

One of the places where military life was next-to-normal was at the American base in Kuwait. Journalist Matt Misterek of *The News Tribune* reported on 6 May 2005 about life among the American soldiers in the camp at the Ali Al Salem Air Base 39 miles from the Iraqi border (Misterek, 2005). He described the highly monotonous work soldiers from McChord Air Force Base in the USA were doing in Kuwait to help their friends inside Iraq. 'In Kuwait, it's the boredom beat,' was the title of the report. However, the description of their daily routines reveals an important aspect of military boredom: the need for alertness during times of monotony and lethargy.

Their main task was to escort and observe how foreign workers (people from non-Iraqi countries) performed their work at the base, be it construction work or driving 'a fleet of sewage tankers to a pit and dump[ing] another load of waste from portable toilets' from the coalition forces. The ultimate reason for this close escort and observation duty was the sheer lack of trust – the military threat to the coalition forces was often highest within the perimeters of the camps. On 21 December the year before (2004), one may recall how a mess hall in Mosul was blown up, apparently by a suicide bomber disguised as a foreign worker. Two hundred and twenty-two soldiers lost their lives. Hence, the intimate relationship between careful observation and the absence of such fatal incidents: 'As long as we do our jobs right, another Mosul won't happen,' says Campbell, a 24-year-old soldier. Awareness and alertness may thus help to prevent the dulling of the senses that will often result from monotony in a difficult climate:

Force protection has its own monotonous mix of vehicle searches, pat-downs and hours spent in the sun watching workers [i.e. foreign

workers] do menial tasks. Spotty verbal communication makes it necessary to closely monitor workers' gestures and body language.<sup>22</sup>

The importance of alertness, also under the pressure of monotony, is of course all the more threatening inside Iraq. In a documentary made by FRONTLINE for the American PBS (Public Broadcasting Service), Corporal Benjamin Morgan, a member of a Dog company, is interviewed. He is asked what a typical day in Iraq looks like. 'Numbness' is the keyword he uses: 'You kind of get numb to it, day after day, same patrols, same cleaning.'<sup>23</sup> Interestingly, one of the things that has helped him is the good feeling he gets from helping local people gain control over their situation. But Iraq is dangerous. As Richard Holmes says in *Dusty Warriors: Modern Soldiers at War* from 2006, violence in Iraq has become binary: 'full on or full off, often with little warning that the switch has flicked' (Holmes, 2006, p. xxv).

Morgan had already lost two of his friends. Hence, it was extremely important for him both to keep up his level of concentration and not to expose himself to unnecessary danger. Difficult enough, especially over a long period. It seems that Corporal Morgan indirectly assumes that there is a connection between boredom and the level of casualties. To ignore boredom and the fight against it may be fatal.

### **Tedious mortars and godsend among British soldiers in Al Amarah**

Richard Holmes, himself a Colonel in the Princess of Wales' Royal Regiment, writes in *Dusty Warriors* about soldiers from his own regiment who were posted in Iraq from April to October 2004.<sup>24</sup> In a chapter called 'Taking the Strain' he describes everyday life in two camps around the city of Al Amarah in the Maysan province, the CIMIC house and the camp at Abu Naji. During this period, according to Holmes, the British army experienced the longest period of sustained fighting since the Korean War. The period prior to and after the fighting in August that year was also marked by what we referred to above as the binary pattern of violence in Iraq: 'full on or full off'. For a force that was originally equipped for peacekeeping operations, this entailed a clear change of pattern and a need for equipment that could better withstand the rockets and mortars launched at them.

But it also involved certain personal requirements. Both the CIMIC house and the Abu Naji Camp were regularly mortared and bombarded with rockets. This required alertness and vigilance against everything that could dull the soldier's senses. According to Holmes, 'the guard

commander had an unenviable job. He had to keep his men on their toes during long, boring and painfully hot hours' (Holmes, 2006, p. 142). The situation required full awareness in a situation in which both fear and boredom could easily cripple the necessary capacity to withstand and endure the attacks from the enemy. Private Jackson, a clerk in the admin office at Abu Naji, had been bombarded with rockets and mortars every night over the past two months, and is quoted in Holmes's book:

As strange as it may seem you actually become used to the sound of the rockets and although the fear still remains inside you, you carry on as though it never happened... The mortars were just blips in your normal working day. Every time it becomes more and more tedious. 'Not again,' everyone would say. 'When will they ever give up?' Then it'd be forgotten about, with everyone laughing and joking again...

I believe that 1 PWRR's admin office has some very strong characters who have helped the less experienced through some very hard times. (p. 148)

This quotation shows how fear and boredom are intertwined. It also describes how awareness and alertness are highly important in a situation in which anything can happen, but where you can hardly see the enemy. In this respect, it is interesting to read how certain personal qualities can help people in a unit to take the strain ('strong characters').

In this sequence, we learn what factors were seen as the most important morale boosters among the British soldiers. In many ways, it is the same old story, although with some modifications. Firstly, the so-called Expeditionary Force Institute, a container-shop with cold drinks, chocolate bars and Pringles on its shelves, was regarded as 'basic but a godsend', 'morale in a container' (p. 159). The soldiers enjoyed walking around inside the shop, not because they did not know what it had to offer, which was very limited, but because 'it was associated with doing something "normal".'

Contact with home was also a real morale booster, according to Holmes (p. 160). Even though all this sounds like the same old story told yet again, in Iraq a new element had been added to the notion of 'home', namely the internet. In Abu Naji, there were not only telephones in Portakabins, but also a cabin with eight computers. Thus, the internet with its Messenger and Hotmail services was also a 'godsend' to many. It seems, however, that while the internet could not match the much older boost of receiving letters and parcels from home, it does make

'our day brighter and reminds us that someone is thinking of us'. Most importantly, it established a connection with one's home, yet in a *more portable and immediate* way than in previous times. The most important aspect of this, however, was the contact with somebody in itself. The squadron even organised some female pen-pals for the soldiers. On one occasion, a soldier received hundreds of letters after a general plea for pen-pals had been published on the back page of a magazine.

### **The demon of boredom and the deterioration of a drifting unit**

One rare biography from Iraq is Kayla Williams's *Love My Rifle More Than You: Young and Female in the US Army* (2005). Kayla Williams, herself trained in Arabic, served as a specialist in the intelligence branch, but often helped other units with translation in connection with their interaction with local people. The book is fresh and often irreverent in style, fiercely honest, yet verging on the narcissistic. It addresses the stress of combat, bad weather, irregular supplies, the brutality of military life, flirtation, the military ineptitude of those around her and the long hours of mind-numbing boredom between the horrific interruptions (e.g. witnessing death close up). Or as the jacket of the book puts it: 'This raw and honest memoir exorcises the demons of Williams's deployment.' One of the demons was boredom. We doubt, however, that it was thoroughly exorcised. Let us take a look at one of the stories in the book.

As mentioned, Mrs Williams used to help other units with translation. One of these units was based in the Sinjar Mountains near the Syrian border, quite isolated up in the mountains; these were her best six weeks during the war (cf. the chapter called 'Mountain Time'). However, it was also a time marked by pressing boredom. The physical surroundings were beautiful, but there was nothing much to do off shift, the situation provided too much time to think, and the time was hard to fill. Having described the shift and patrol pattern, she writes:

Basically, though, there is nothing to do. We are so desperate to find things to fill the time, we make up games kids in the grade school would consider beneath them. Case in point: The FISTers [the rest (male soldiers) of the unit] throw rocks at one another and at me. For fun. They aim at my breasts. It's a game. They chuck stones at one another groins. That's a big game. A major activity. The objective? Get a stone into those small aforementioned rips in a guy's pair of pants. Believe me, it is not easy. With practice, however, it *can* be done. (Williams, 2005, p. 169)

In a comment on this event during a radio interview with NPR in 2005, which accompanied the launch of her book, this event is clearly interpreted as a manifestation of boredom and is compared with the Vietnam War:

Part of the boredom, eventually, evolved into 'Hey, show us your boobs!' It was almost a daily question. When there is an action going on ... it is when people have too much time on their hands, and are sitting with nothing to do for days that these issues really become apparent. And, I believe that there has always been a problem in the military when people have too much time and have nothing to do. It sounds as if in Vietnam, there was a drug problem, and that may have been partly related to downtime, when there was no action going on.<sup>25</sup>

In an interview with *The Sunday Telegraph* on 28 August 2005, she refers to the same event and mentions the social paradox of her fellow soldiers including her by throwing rocks at her:

The guys would have been throwing stones at each other's genitals even if I wasn't there. It might sound strange but by throwing them at my boobs, they were including me.<sup>26</sup>

However strange this may sound, a series of events followed, all of which may count as signs of the deteriorating effect of boredom, paired with distinctively adolescent behaviour (extensive night-time partying) and harassment-like behaviour by drunken soldiers. The worst episode, however, occurred when a stone-throwing game turned into firing live rounds that almost hit a visiting platoon sergeant, caused by an escalating cycle on the pattern of 'You-wouldn't dare – yes I would!' (Williams, 2005, pp. 169f).

In this, we see a tendency many soldiers may have experienced: the satisfaction of living quite isolated from the rest of a bigger unit, but at the same time the crushing boredom of confinement and monotonous work, especially if nothing happens, as was the case here. Groups in such situations may soon develop habits and patterns that are dysfunctional. In the above case this is illustrated by the invention of hazardous games, drinking causing lack of awareness, and the harassment of women. Boundaries become blurred – between the sexes, between oneself and potential enemies, between soberness and drunkenness. So, in the example of Williams and her unit, we see no exorcism of the demon

of boredom, but ignorance instead about how the demon attacks and should be counterattacked, or endured.

This brings us to probably the best known connection between boredom and the military in military history.

### **The existential boredom of Abu Ghraib**

That boredom should be regarded as anything but a trivial matter became rather evident in the aftermath of the Abu Ghraib scandal and similar scandals in Afghanistan. One record of this was published on the basis of a classified report by the US Army, which revealed widespread abuse of detainees in 'detention centres' in Afghanistan. Even though the investigation report concentrates on two deaths as early as 2002, the abuse carried out by young and poorly trained soldiers is said to have gone well beyond that. It is of interest to our topic that the author of a newspaper article establishes a connection between torture, abuse and boredom. In an article entitled 'American torturers driven by boredom', the journalist Tim Goldern suggests that the distinction between boredom and evil has been blurred:

In some instances, it [i.e. the harsh treatment] was directed or carried out by interrogators to extract information. In others, it was punishment meted out by military police guards. Sometimes the torment seems to have been driven by little more than boredom or cruelty, or both.<sup>27</sup>

Paul T. Bartone, a military psychology researcher at the National Defense University, also makes boredom part of the explanation when he tries to draw conclusions from the so-called Taguba report from 2004 (Bartone, 2004). Bartone distinguishes between important situational or contextual factors and individual factors. To the former belong: ambiguity or uncertainty in the chain of command (especially between the military police and the intelligence branch); *laissez-faire* leadership (absent leaders); lack of training (in particular with respect to procedures and techniques for handling prisoners, and legal standards); lack of discipline (with regard to the wearing of uniforms and behaviour); psychological stressors associated with Operation Iraqi Freedom not recognised or appreciated by the leaders.

The latter category – the psychological stressors – is what interests us most here (though the interrelation between the contextual and individual factors should not be ignored). These stressors could be imposed directly on the individual soldiers, or they could result from their leaders'

failure to recognise and address these stressors. Bartone makes use of his previous contributions to research into military contexts of a similar nature in which the following stressors were identified: ambiguity, isolation, powerlessness, boredom, danger (*ibid.*, p. 101). Hence, he suggests that all of these factors are 'salient ones' for US soldiers who served in Iraq at that time. He even adds a sixth psychological factor which is applicable to their situation: deployment load, by which is meant 'workload or operations-tempo stress, reflecting long hours, frequent and longer deployment cycles, and inadequate staffing that can result from limited resources and/or failure to replace individual losses over the course of deployment' (*ibid.*).

Within the larger picture, boredom is only mentioned in passing. It is said that 'boredom can extend to deep questions about the importance or significance of one's activities' (*ibid.*). This can apply to those who abused prisoners in a perverse atmosphere, as well as to all those who did *not* take part in those disgusting atrocities. In their search for meaning in a seemingly senseless mission, this latter group had to add the acts and the reputation of their fellow soldiers to their already existing burden. This is not merely a light boredom, generated by inaction and uninteresting things to do. This is existential boredom, which affects whether or not soldiers are capable of interpreting their service as meaningful (*ibid.*, pp. 107f). As we have seen, and will see, this fits with philosophical distinctions between superficial and situational boredom, on the one hand, and more deeply felt and existentially threatening boredom, on the other.

### **Individual and public meaning, and the lack of it**

Meaning was also found to be a problem in research conducted by a team led by the Norwegian psychiatrist Lars Weisæth. It carried out research on how Norwegian army engineers in Iraq coped mentally during their mission in the British sector. What they found to be the most significant stressor, especially in terms of the difference from previous research on similar operations, was the fact that soldiers missed the moral support of the Norwegian public, combined with insulting media coverage (Weisæth, 2004). This recalls how Australian soldiers in Vietnam struggled to find meaning as they felt a lack of domestic support.

As in many countries, the debate about the legitimacy of the war was heated, and the Norwegian government was unwilling to be included in the group of coalition forces. This caused ambiguity with respect to the mission. On the one hand, Norwegian soldiers were told by the government that they were part of a 'humanitarian contribution', but

when they entered Iraq they soon realised they had become a target just like other nations. The Norwegian public, including some of the major newspapers, ridiculed the notion of a 'humanitarian contribution'. When they arrived, the group was only accompanied by soft-skinned, light vehicles. All in all, the ambiguity of the government, the public criticism of their contribution and the lack of adequate equipment made them feel at best puzzled about what they were doing in Iraq. This is a situation in which boredom can find much to feed on, although it was not identified in this report. What probably prevented them from experiencing this state of mind, however, was their deep sense of contributing substantially to the reconstruction of the country and the immediate welfare of the local population. Here, one can again observe an intimate relationship between a partly meaningful experience and the ability to cope with an otherwise highly ambiguous context.

'I learned from writing back and forth with those serving in Iraq and Afghanistan that a major problem is boredom.'<sup>28</sup> This quotation is taken from an apology by one of the persons behind the so-called CARE packages, on the telling website *thewaruponboredom.com*. Another initiative is called 'The War on Troop Boredom'.<sup>29</sup> So, patriotic civilians are conducting a sort of parallel war from the States as boredom is perceived as attacking their sons and daughters overseas. The care for the soldiers is expressed thus by one person who collected 150 kilos of books and magazines:

This is entertainment for the troops....They can get bored during their time off. This is my contribution to the war effort without being over there and being shot at.<sup>30</sup>

These parcels – on a commercial website called Military Boredom Buster Gift Basket<sup>31</sup> – are filled with paperbacks, magazines, CDs, DVDs, a pair of field tweezers, a few band-aids, sweets, moist towelettes, hotel soap, shampoo, an American flag and a pocket knife. In fact, with respect to the latter item, the pocket knife, it is emphasised that it is only a pocket knife, not a huge combat or bowie knife, which people often think those serving overseas want. The reason is quite simply an understanding of boredom as being the major problem, not the lack of combat equipment. They want reading material, not big knives.

In all their naive enthusiasm, these boredom packages serve a double purpose. They send items that are valued by the troops, but, probably more important, the packages make strongly visible the domestic support for what they are doing. The initiatives of US citizens make

clear how people back home see boredom as a burden on their daughters and sons. Web blogs also clearly identify boredom as a major threat to the forces. For example, Operation Enduring Freedom, the operation in Afghanistan waged in response to the 9/11 attacks on the Pentagon and the Twin Towers in 2001, was soon renamed Operation Enduring Boredom (Fiero, 2003; Hayes, 2005).

This leads us back to Bartone and the Abu Ghraib scandal. In addition to the structural and strategic components of such a deteriorated situation, Bartone also stresses the individual factors, related, for example, to personality traits. The reason for this is that 'not all individuals respond alike to the same contextual factors.' In the case of Abu Ghraib, for example, the majority of units and individuals, leaders and soldiers alike, *did not succumb* to the factors and stressors mentioned above. Why? Bartone maintains that personality factors also have to be considered in order to get a better grasp of how individual vulnerability, resilience and performance are influenced by stressful situations. One of the personality factors he mentions is *hardiness*. This was also mentioned in a previous study by Bartone about a US peacekeeping unit. What he means by hardiness is 'a personality style or trait that includes a strong sense of commitment in life, belief in one's own ability to exercise control, and a perspective on change as challenging and fun'.

Understood in this way, hardiness has been shown to have positive effects on short and long-term healthy mental adjustment to major stressors, also including stressors found in war and warlike situations. Finally, leaders who score high on hardiness may also contribute to soundness in units and group cohesion, which, needless to say, would have made a difference in the case of Abu Ghraib. For the purpose of our study, we shall use this concept of hardiness as denoting *what enables a person to find meaning in her or his military service*. This may include *what makes soldiers endure stressors they experience in their situation*, thus contributing to establishing a mental and personal bulwark against many kinds of stressors, including boredom. However, according to Bartone, developing and reinforcing these tendencies is a very complicated matter, because it has to be seen as 'a more fundamental psychological process, one that training programs alone are not likely to influence much'. We could perhaps add: a more fundamental *human* process as well.

## **Conclusion: Military boredom as a human phenomenon**

In this chapter, the long-standing and pervasive history of boredom in various military contexts has been presented, from the mid-eighteenth

century up to the current War on Terror in Iraq and Afghanistan. The famous French saying, *plus ça change, plus c'est la même chose*, may in an ambiguous way describe the phenomenon of boredom throughout military history. In its metaphorical sense it simply means that history repeats itself. Boredom is a historical constant, even though the means to ease it may vary, from whittling to fragging. Moreover, it has most often proved to be a serious constant, not a superficial factor that can be ignored. Indeed, it has a highly oppressive potential, as the Vietnam War and the war in Iraq have shown us in particular.

On the other hand, literally, and with much relevance to the range of means employed to alleviate the 'gravity' of boredom, it means that 'the more things change, the more they remain the same.' In other words, there is no easy escape from boredom. It can be eased by a variety of means, but can hardly be eradicated. Hence, it has to be coped with, endured or mastered in an intelligent manner. This requires insight into the phenomenon, as well as the will to make it an important theme, both individually and as a military leader. It also seems that particular virtues, such as patience, vigilance, resilience and hardiness, can play a significant role in withstanding the impact of boredom.

Both the depth perspective (the seriousness of boredom) and the learning perspective (how to cope with it) will be examined in the rest of the book. As an intermediate station on our way ahead, the next chapter (Chapter 3) will provide some analytical tools for the empirical part of Chapters 4–6.

# 3

## Navigating against the Wind of Entropy

What is boredom? Is it monotony? Inaction? Or a deep-seated spiritual disease? Based on the previous chapter and its many records of boredom from a range of wars and operations, we will now introduce some theoretical perspectives that may help us to see more precisely what kind of boredom was presented. This will also prepare the ground for and strengthen the analysis and interpretation of the remaining case studies in the book: from Afghanistan, an Atlantic voyage and among submarine officers.

### Levels of boredom: Martin Doehlemann

Firstly, let us see what kinds of boredom there are, and how one can distinguish between various aspects of boredom. In a book called *Boredom: The Interpretation of a Widespread Phenomenon* (1992), the German sociologist Martin Doehlemann distinguishes between four types of boredom in an attempt to differentiate between both various kinds of boredom and the degree of seriousness associated with the phenomenon. Together, these four types constitute a very useful typology.

Firstly, Doehlemann suggests talking about *situative* or *situational boredom*. This is a type of boredom that one encounters only occasionally, and in a particular context. Naturally, such situational or contextual boredom will also disappear as soon as one moves outside the situation or occasion that produced it. One military example: if a soldier on an exercise is suddenly told by his team leader to wait an extra hour for his lunch ration because of logistical problems, this may produce temporary boredom of this kind. As soon as the lunch arrives, however, the boredom of the last hour is quickly forgotten. In general, most of the waiting experienced by soldiers in the last chapter is of this kind, but if

it becomes the rule rather than the exception one should probably talk about a more comprehensive boredom.

As a curious example of situational boredom, we can mention how people around Hitler experienced his dinner table as being dominated by his 'interminable nightly monologues on strategy, history, eugenics' (Fussell, 1989, p. 77). Paul Fussell asserts that this was one of the most tedious places during the entire war. Generals and field marshals applauded him, but his chief architect and closest 'friend' (if he had any), Albert Speer, found in these gatherings a 'sense of stifling boredom'.<sup>1</sup> Nevertheless, as soon as one left the tedium of Hitler's table, one also left the sphere of boredom.

Doehlemann calls the next type *unendurable* or *intolerable boredom*. This is boredom that pervades the whole day or place or a particular kind of service. A phrase such as 'It's just so booooring to serve in this platoon' does not merely imply that there are tasks or situations that are boring; the entire service is boring. In this kind of state of mind, one cannot easily escape boredom. It is stifling, and it is enduring. This is part of barracks life, not to mention being deployed overseas for months and years at a time. Whereas situational boredom consists of individual boring moments, this kind of boredom endures for long periods, or during comprehensive situations and duties, such as serving in the military, serving in a peacekeeping operation, serving as a combat engineer and so forth. One has simply had enough of Iraq, of peacekeeping or of building bridges. One is desperately in need of relief and diversion.

Here, we could recall Lord Moran's description of the First World War. Moran, at that time Captain Charles Wilson, later Sir Winston Churchill's doctor, spent two and a half years in the trenches as a doctor, from 1914 till the winter of 1917. In 1914, he says, 'I cannot remember thinking that life was monotonous. It was novel, eventful; though nothing ever happened' (Moran, [1945]2007, p. 153). By his third winter on the Continent, however, this had changed. This winter 'seemed interminable; the awful sameness of the days fastened on to the mind, till I prayed that something, that anything might happen; but nothing did happen, until at last I had given up anticipating anything' (ibid.). Boredom of this kind comes close to depression and resignation. It also comes close to the next type, especially when Moran goes on to describe his situation: 'Monotony was a fatigue, a sickness of mind' (ibid.).

This third type is what Doehlemann calls *existential boredom*. The nature of this highly problematic type of boredom largely has to do with a person's inner well-being, and it cannot be reduced to blaming external factors. The problem is intimately linked to a fundamental

feeling of emptiness and lack of meaning. Doehlemann calls existential boredom the 'little brother of death' (1992, p. 20). It seems to go hand in hand with a kind of inner death and spiritual weariness. In the historical chapter, we observed this kind of boredom on several occasions, for example in the case of the despair of George Winterbourne in Richard Aldington's Great War novel *Death of a Hero*, and Philip Caputo who, from his Vietnam perspective, described *la cafard* as a 'spiritual disease'. If bored thus, why live? That is the pressing question for anyone in the grip of existential boredom. In such a situation, the dictum of 'better dead than bored' may describe the state of affairs well.

In *Jarhead*, where existential boredom is the main theme of the story, even when a (situational) climax occurs when the two snipers (Swafford and Troy) are prevented from using their skills in the one moment that could have endowed their otherwise bored lives in Iraq with meaning, this only serves to underline the impression of pervasive, existential boredom. Much literature that has dealt with boredom in modern times has focused on this kind of boredom in particular, often referred to as *ennui moderne* (or *hyperboredom*) in contrast to the surface/superficial kind of *ennui commun/banal* (Goodstein, 2005; Healy, 1984, p. 28).

The fourth category is *creative boredom*. With this type, we are dealing with a quite different aspect of boredom, namely its creative potential. Teachers and parents often tell their pupils and children that 'it is good to be bored.' The reason given is that 'it may help you to concentrate on things and tasks that are otherwise ignored or overlooked.' In reality, deeper truths can only be reached if one takes the trouble to scratch beneath the surface of what diversion and entertainment has to offer. Moreover, innovation normally requires some kind of boredom from which to break out (Hübner, 1991, p. 34), although our age often displays an intensified and often purposeless drive for innovation (Thiele, 1997). A soldier who never has time for himself, for loneliness or for rest can hardly develop wisdom. Moreover, a soldier who never applies the principle of *limitation* (Kierkegaard<sup>2</sup>) will never experience the big room of imagination and creativity that has the potential to change an otherwise monotonous situation into something both meaningful and refreshing. However, imagination is a quite ambivalent faculty. The problem with a too well developed imagination is that it may create an oversensitive mind that fills with dread when shelling and bombardment set in. When fear, the dominant emotion in war (Bourke, 2006, p. 99), threatens to overpower one's mind, a less developed imagination would be of great help. 'A man needs many things in war, but a strong imagination is not one of them', maintains Philip Caputo (1978, p. 85). A slow mind may

be useful to control fear, but for the overall demands of war, to see what is really going on and to judge one's situation adequately, imagination is extremely useful (Moran, [1945]2007, p. 14).

It is part of the phenomenon of boredom that it does not fit unambiguously into just one category. A couple of examples from the Second World War may illustrate this. In his book *Wartime*, Paul Fussell calls the following items 'general boredom': 'overcrowding and lack of privacy, tedious institutional cookery, deprivation of personality' (Fussell, 1989, p. 80). One can discuss the seriousness of the first two items, but at least the latter one (deprivation of personality) should be understood as essentially different from the middle one (tedious cookery). Moreover, it remains to be discussed from case to case whether overcrowded camps or tents or barracks should be described as situational or unbearable.

The other example is taken from the experiences of prisoners of war. Paul Fussell maintains that 'fantastic defenses' were required to endure the experience (*ibid.*, p. 77). The following episode from the life of an American POW in a German *Stalag* clearly illustrates the meaning of 'fantastic'.

[He] counted the barbs in one section of the barbed wire fence and then estimated the total number of barbs around the encampment. When he announced this number, his fellow kriegies not only didn't consider him mad, they formed teams to check him out with a barb-by-barb count.<sup>3</sup>

This case is also ambivalent. Is this creative boredom a 'fantastic' effort to cope with an innate enduring enemy? Or is this some kind of existential, even nihilistic boredom that is captured in a bleak description of a seemingly mad life within the barbed wire? Nevertheless, Doehlemann has provided us with categories that may sharpen the analysis of similar records of antidotes to boredom – and boredom itself.

### **Boredom and navigation: Orrin E. Klapp**

In addition to Doehlemann's fourfold typology, we will also turn to a more refined model, which not only aims to define and describe aspects of and a given state of boredom, but also provides a dynamic perspective for interpreting movements between the presence and absence of boredom.

In his book *Overload and Boredom*, another sociologist, Orrin E. Klapp, has attempted to explore 'the impact of information on the quality of

life, especially the significance of boredom indicating dysfunctions of overloads of information' (Klapp, 1986, p. 1). *Information* is here understood as the meaning or lack of meaning that you attach to any given event or object. From the historical chapter, the reader should be well acquainted with the dysfunctional behaviour resulting from boredom, whether it takes the form of prostitution, heavy drinking, excessive risk-taking or suicide. However, from his information perspective, Klapp sees two possible dysfunctions of boredom, which represent a lack of quality of life, namely *bad redundancy* (simply put: too much of the same) and *noise*. Whereas the former (bad redundancy) covers flat and insipid information, an 'emotional flatland' marked by tedium, monotony, rigidity, banality etc., the other (noise) is characterised by too much information, often marked by ambiguity, irrelevance, trivia, overload – and speed. According to Klapp, these two dysfunctions of boredom are opposite states of what he calls 'the slow horse of meaning' (ibid., p. 111), that is, the production of meaning of life. Meaning and quality of life can only emerge from a slow formation of 'thought, pondering, wondering – even dreaming – all time-consuming things that only humans do' (ibid., p. 112).

One fundamental presupposition in *Overload and Boredom* is that not all information progress is good progress (ibid., p. 4). To put this in ordinary language: not everything that takes place, and therefore conveys some kind of meaning to you, necessarily makes you happy or gives you a sense of a meaningful life. Hence, Klapp's concept of information overload, which can be categorised as either boring variety or boring redundancy:

Boredom can come from either redundancy or variety when it does not tell enough of interest. The deficiency is not a sheer lack of information but hearing too much of what we are not interested in. That is, boredom as we experience it today is more likely to be from an *overload* than an *underload*. (Ibid., pp. 2f)

Thus, boredom can occur along one and the same axis, either on the *redundancy* side or on the *variety* side. However, what makes it boring is the force of another, vertical axis, or force, one ranging from complete *meaning* to, at the other extreme, ultimate *entropy*. The concept of 'entropy' is understood by Klapp as pertaining to a degradation of information, a 'loss of human potential' exemplified by 'low morale, thrill seeking,<sup>4</sup> gambling, drug abuse, vandalism, and crime' (ibid., p. 3). Although Klapp's backdrop is quite different from ours, we clearly see

how entropy can characterise part of the historical material in Chapter 2, ranging from superficial ‘tedium’ and ‘monotony’ to the ‘spiritual disease’ of *la cafard* in Caputo’s memoirs. Along this axis, the lack of meaning increases the further ‘down’ the axis you get. Again, this is a valuable tool for the analysis of how seriously boredom should be regarded.

A picture emerges that consists of a grid made up of two axes, one (vertical) between *meaning* and *entropy*, and one (horizontal) between *redundancy* and *variety*, as shown below in Figure 1. Within this grid, a complex picture of various kinds of boredom and lack of boredom can be identified. The grid also enables us to envisage how the movement between boredom and lack of boredom, and the return to boredom again, can take place; and perhaps also how it can be addressed wisely. Hence, the strength of Klapp’s navigation model lies not merely in its interpretation of how boredom arises, but also in its inherent theory about coping with it.

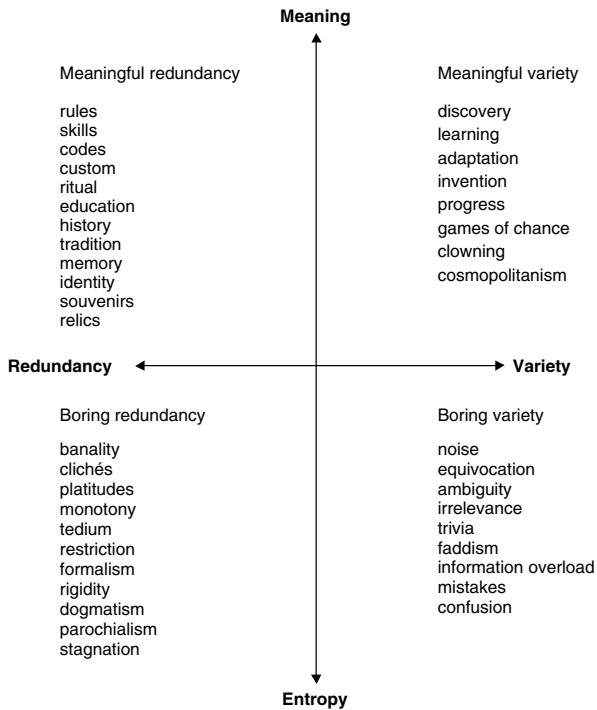


Figure 1 Klapp’s metaphorical sector model for information searches

Source: Klapp, 1986, p. 119.

Klapp's model is called a *metaphorical* model. The metaphor, the picture, is that of sailing against a wind blowing from the north, a wind blowing from meaning towards entropy. Klapp maintains that one has to tack against the wind in order to avoid the consequences of entropy (i.e. drifting away) and thus move windward, towards what is meaningful. Sailing is thus the movement of the slow horse of meaning. Moreover, since it is impossible to go due north, if we continue with the sailing metaphor, we have to continuously tack between east and west. Change and diversion, therefore, are necessary in order to avoid sailing too far into redundancy or variety, which would take you either into dangerous waters or ashore. The ideal is to maintain a steady course against the wind, continuously avoiding both boring redundancy and boring variety, achieving a good balance between redundancy and sufficient variety, leading to the exploration of more meaning. It is taken as a premise that remaining in the same 'good sector' of the grid will automatically keep you moving towards the bad sector on the same side. That is, too much tradition and safety will push you 'down' towards boring redundancy, whereas too much adventure and discovery will overstimulate you.

That said, to keep the metaphor grounded in reality, one of the reasons something is experienced as boring is that there is *no escape* from a situation which is either monotonous or ambiguous. Hence, any talk about moving and changing will be irrelevant. In an article about the psychology of boredom, Waldemar Rognes has presented a theoretical statement about what is needed for boredom to arise. According to him, a person will be bored or experience boredom during a period – short or long – if all three of the following criteria are met at the same time: (1) one finds oneself in a situation where one is unable to pursue any already existing goals that are more or less personally meaningful or important; (2) one is unable to create and pursue any new personally meaningful or important goal; and (3) one is unable to escape from this situation (Rognes, 2001). So in a situation where (1) one is well trained, is waiting for something to happen, but nothing does, (2) and one may also have exhausted all available options for diversion, and (3) is stuck in Vietnam or on Diego Garcia, one will surely experience boredom.

Those familiar with Mihaly Csikszentmihalyi's book *Flow* (Csikszentmihalyi, 1992/2002) will see how the metaphor of sailing resembles his metaphor of *flow*. According to Csikszentmihalyi, flow is what makes us happy, so-called 'optimal experience', and it presupposes a finely tuned course between boredom and anxiety. Moreover, flow can only take place when challenges are well tuned to our skills

and experience, in the sense that challenges should be slightly more demanding than merely requiring the use of skills and knowledge one already has. If not, challenges will cease to be challenges and one will sooner or later sink into a state of boredom. On the other hand, tasks that are too demanding may incapacitate through the crippling impact of anxiety. Whereas the former option (too few challenges) comes close to Klapp's 'drifting away' (boring redundancy), the latter (incapacitated by anxiety) can be compared with sailing due north (noise).

Interestingly, Csikszentmihalyi sees *psychic entropy* as the opposite of flow. By this term he means an inner disorder of one's consciousness. This disorder may disorganise the self and impair its effectiveness, even to the point where one is 'no longer able to invest attention and pursue its goals' (ibid., p. 37). As we see, this comes close to the aforementioned phenomenon of dysfunction. This disorder can have various names, such as pain, fear, rage, anxiety or jealousy, according to Csikszentmihalyi, but the effect is similar. It seems most pertinent to include boredom in this list as well, not least in a military context, where the entropic impact on the self of a private or officer may be quite severe. Heavy boredom affects a soldier's ability to function, as does the more dominant emotion of fear.

### A military adaptation of Klapp's model

Based on Klapp's model, it should now be possible to refine some of the concepts and explanations frequently used in the historical chapter. One such concept is *lack of meaning*. It became almost a general conclusion and explanation throughout the historical chapter that boredom as a phenomenon displays, and is driven by, a lack of meaning. Given the variety–redundancy axis of Klapp's model, a cluster of boredom elements can be established under the category 'boring redundancy' (or 'banality'). This category can consist of such disparate elements as monotony, routine, spatial confinement, inaction and waiting. Moreover, this category can resemble concepts such as laziness, dullness and lethargy from the general history of boredom. In particular, much of the peacekeeping material can be understood as standstill and boring redundancy. Lack of meaning in this respect means either too much of the same thing, which also has little meaning *per se*, or too little action, adventure and excitement.

A second category in Klapp is *boring variety*, or simply *noise*. This category is characterised by too much meaningless information. The fragments of boredom from military history include such things as combat

environments full of enemy threats (e.g. snipers in the jungle, or bombardments in trenches), which one is able neither to handle nor to combat. But it can also include an operational 'theatre' in which there is enough to do, but where tasks and duties do not really yield much meaning and rewards, or at least not as much as expected. Much of the Kosovo material, in particular the mismatch between training and mission, as well as much of the 'war on terror' material seems to fall into this category. A lack of meaning, or too much information that does not involve meaningful communication, qualifies as boring variety in Klapp's model, or as *military noise*.

If we move to the not-so-boring sectors of the diagram, we can differentiate between *meaningful (good) variety* and *meaningful (good) redundancy*. As to the former, adventure can serve as typical military motivation, which is often satisfied during the first phase of an operation, or in particular kinds of operations, or in a particular part of the complex of a unit's various tasks and positions. Excitement, new experiences and new operational environments have always attracted inquisitive soldiers. Adventure and excitement, however, can soon turn into boring redundancy or boring variety, simply because novelty by definition cannot remain novel over time. Boring redundancy often arises some time after deployment. Boring variety sets in during operations where the aim of the mission is hard to detect, or when, as we have seen in the great wars of the twentieth century, horror takes over and fear makes war an intense nightmare, at least along the front lines. In order to distinguish between boredom and fear, we should perhaps not talk about boredom at all in the latter case.

*Creative soldiers* who invent ways of coping with boredom also belong to the category of meaningful variety. They are persons who have the ability to discover additional potential within the confinements of space and time to which they are subject. Hence, it may be expedient to view creativity either as a force that helps people already in a situation of 'meaningful variety' to *remain* there, or as an impetus that can *take* people from either boring redundancy or boring variety to good variety.

In our overall analysis of military adaptation in terms of Klapp's model, another movement is also theoretically possible, namely to take soldiers and officers from good redundancy to good variety. If so, this can be seen as successfully tacking the wind of entropy, succeeding almost completely in avoiding the forces of boredom, but still managing to switch between calm waters and rather choppy waters. We will call this *creative diversion*.

The last category is *good or meaningful redundancy*. By this is meant good and meaningful repetition that is not boring. We see the role of

*the home* as being a prime example of this category. The home is (most often) the good place to which one repetitiously (redundantly!) returns in order to relax, to nurture one's identity and experience continuity with the past, or to gain 'social resonance' (Klapp, 1986, pp. 71ff). In his *Anatomy of Courage*, Lord Moran reflects upon this in his chapter on monotony in the Great War: 'When we did think, we lived in the past, for it was clearly unwise to live in the present. We could only cheat our present distress by a flight into other times, away from all dreary tribulations in the passing hour' (Moran, [1945]2007, p. 152).

Home, as a comprehensive metaphor for our material, comprises elements as disparate as writing and receiving letters, sentimental religion, public support for a mission, the boredom-breaking parcels, simply thinking about dear ones back home around the campfire and loneliness in the barracks. The bonds between military comrades can also be seen as facilitating the kind of important interpersonal relationships that help the individual soldier to feel relaxed, confident and at home, as we explored in the previous chapter. There is nothing entropic – meaningless or empty – in remaining with and returning to one's military comrades; quite the contrary. Comradeship or bonding prevents you from being lonely and ensures that somebody cares for you in the midst of potential destruction. Life is worth living – and giving – when you are part of a 'band of brothers'.

To illuminate the explanatory strength of Klapp's model, let us look at the function of exercises in military training, as mentioned in the section on boredom among German nobles in the previous chapter. We noted how the French philosopher and musicologist Vladimir Jankélévitch talked about military exercises as making the future contemporary. Using Klapp's model, we are able to explain why this is important with regard to boredom. The reason why exercises can make the future contemporary is that good variety is achieved at the expense of (especially) boring redundancy. This applies in particular to soldiers who have nothing exciting to do inside the camp, and to soldiers who have contracted some version of the boredom 'disease'. Exercises can bring out the best in such soldiers, in addition to their primary military purpose of preparing for future conflict, which, from the perspective of information sociology, should be regarded as most 'meaningful information'.

## Enduring boredom

In the previous chapter, we identified virtues that appeared to be especially relevant to soldiers' coping with monotony and inaction. These

are primarily the faculties of patience (the ability to wait), vigilance, resilience and 'hardiness', that is, 'finding meaning in what you are doing, being able to construe your experience and activities as significant and useful'.<sup>5</sup> If we combine the perspective of virtues with Klapp's model, we can liken them to tacking the wind in an effective and prudent manner. We also believe that creativity and imagination should be counted among these human faculties, understood as the ability to see the unseen in the limited and potentially boring, thus enabling waiting to be endured. Despite its ambiguity, which we noticed earlier in this chapter, imagination may in fact be quite crucial to military morale and the moral success of a military mission in exacting environments. This is the case because seeing the unseen is crucial to forming meaning when the situation seems dark and pointless to others. Imagination is the ability to explore new possibilities and meanings – to provide confidence in a hopeless environment.

We noted in the previous chapter how the operation in Afghanistan was re-coined *Operation Enduring Boredom*. This has a double meaning, of course, not necessarily apparent to the soldiers who invented it. Boredom is not only something that endures in Afghanistan as in practically all operations. To endure may also imply the capacity of the soldier to endure the boredom he/she may feel in this war. If so, attention is shifted to the individual soldier, the unit or the commander and their attitudes and virtues with regard to how they approach a mission that is felt to be boring. It goes without saying that, in this case, the semantic coincidence is significant. *Endurance* and *perseverance* must be regarded as two of the most important virtues to nurture if one is to reach a sufficient level of coping with this kind of operational stress. In the future, military leaders should consider exercises that integrate this kind of knowledge into the conduct of exercises and how they are reflected upon after 'end of exercise'.

### **Knocked down by fear – the broken mast**

Klapp's metaphor is that of sailing against the wind, tacking from one side to the other over time. This picture is certainly attractive, but, to continue with the metaphor, the mast might break, the sails get ripped or the daggerboard be crushed. What then? This is a rather pessimistic scenario, but military people normally train and plan for exactly such situations. Humans are vulnerable and breakable, and most of us can potentially become very seasick. Stuck in the jungle of Vietnam or in the chaos of the insurgency in Iraq, navigation is not easy and, in the

end, there may be no ship left to navigate. In such situations, one would talk about an intense nightmare of fear, not boredom. In our historical survey, the *Great War* book by Richard Aldington, in particular, unambiguously describes how all energy is used in order to control and repress one's nerves as the foundations of one's life are shaken to the core. Or, in the words of Lord Moran: 'The capital of courage – understood as "will-power" – is spent' (Moran, [1945]2007, p. xxii). From this perspective, we must acknowledge the limits of the perspective of this chapter.

## **Conclusion**

In this chapter, we have introduced theoretical perspectives on boredom from sociology that may be useful for understanding more precisely what kind of boredom phenomena we surveyed in the preceding chapter. Furthermore, based on Doehlemann's typology and Klapp's metaphorical model, we may also be in a better situation to interpret the cases studied in the remaining chapters. In particular, our adaptation of Klapp's model to a military context may prove rewarding in our exploration of how army soldiers, cadets and submarine officers cope with boredom in infantry life in Afghanistan, on board a tall ship crossing the Atlantic, or in a steel tank at the bottom of the sea. Lastly, the application of this model to this particular empirical material will also help the other way around, namely to specify and comprehend the military adaptation of the model, and thus its wider use.

# 4

## Bored in Afghanistan?

### **Withstanding stones and intruders**

In the afternoon of 6 February 2006, a warning came that some people were going to demonstrate outside the 'occupied' Old Bank in the city of Meymaneh in Northern Afghanistan close to the border with Turkmenistan, where Norwegian soldiers were based. It was organised as a protest against the publication of the so-called 'Muhammad cartoons' in a Danish newspaper and in a Norwegian Christian weekly. Since demonstrations of this kind were not rare, the soldiers were neither afraid nor upset, regarding it as a rather routine task. The next morning, the anticipated controlled and moderate demonstration turned into a most violent one. In fact, Norwegian soldiers experienced a war-like situation, quite rare for soldiers mostly experienced in peace-keeping operations.

On this morning in Meymaneh, during five hours of combat, Norwegian soldiers had to fight for their lives. And it has been admitted that rounds fired by ISAF soldiers inside the camp killed Afghan civilians. Deadly force was used, and it seems to have been in accordance with the Rules of Engagement, which read: 'When there is danger to your life, or the camp is attacked: fire! If need be, with deadly force.' No one has objected to the way Norwegian soldiers handled the situation. On the contrary, Norwegian military and political officials, as well as foreign military leaders in ISAF, praised the Norwegians for being resolute, calm and restrained. And the camp, which until the summer of 2007 used to be located in the city centre of Meymaneh, has now moved out of the city in order to increase the security of the soldiers.

Why tell the story of this incident at the beginning of this chapter? The reason is threefold. Firstly, the event tells us that the situation in a

military area of operation can shift suddenly. There was no unambiguous warning about how fatal the situation could become. Our material stems from a few months preceding the attacks. Secondly, the story shows how a lack of awareness can have fatal consequences. If vigilance is that serious, which we have stressed elsewhere in this book, it is of great interest to explore the level of alertness and awareness among soldiers during the period prior to a combat situation like this one. Thirdly, despite the fact that the material we are about to disclose is rather trivial and contains no really surprising findings, it is our contention that it is very important material, because the situation it describes could have been the situation immediately prior to any attack on a military position anywhere in the world.

### **Diaries containing statements about boredom**

The material is homogeneous in the sense that it consists of 15 semi-structured diaries, written mostly by privates, some NCOs and two officers. For the sake of simplicity, we will refer to all of them as 'soldiers'. Two months before the soldiers went to Afghanistan, we worked out a list of 25 statements that the soldiers should reflect upon after a month in Afghanistan. The statements reflected issues such as: attention vs drowsiness; friendship and fellowship vs solitude and loneliness; meaningfulness vs lack of meaning (and morality); variation, excitement and action vs monotony; coping strategies and means of keeping in touch with 'those back home' (letters, emails etc.); unrest, restlessness; boredom as being 'too much'; possible destructive emotions, etc.

These statements were chosen in order to approach the phenomenon of boredom from a wide range of angles. In the set of statements, we tried to focus on opinions about boredom, but we also encouraged the soldiers to flesh out some of the emotions and attitudes that we suspect may be significant in adequately understanding boredom, both in general and in an operational setting in particular. One of the soldiers even admits that he has used the diary to express some of his frustrations over his mates.

The soldiers were then asked to reflect on each of these topics in the form of (moderately) provocative statements. Ideally, they were to reflect on one issue each day during a four-week period, starting one month after arrival (until which time the diaries were packed in a sealed envelope). But some soldiers covered several issues a day, often because they had been out of camp for a few days and forgotten the diary.

Their texts vary, however, in both length and form. Some soldiers write at length about the issues they were asked to ponder, whereas

others do not seem to be interested in writing very much. This method was probably quite demanding for some of the soldiers, as it is no longer common to write by hand. If we had used another method, which was not available to us for this group, we could have compensated for this to some extent.

However, taken together, it is our contention that the diaries describe boredom and 'adjacent features' in a way that makes for an interesting picture. The material also invites discussion about some important aspects of boredom that seem to be of perennial concern in literature and philosophy.

### **The soldiers and their tasks**

Who were the people who volunteered for the diary project? Most of them came from the same unit in Norway, namely the Intelligence Battalion. Of the 15 diary writers, five had joined the Military Observation Team (MOT) located in Meymaneh. The MOT soldiers were part of the Provincial Reconstruction Team (PRT), which was established to support the development of the region in close cooperation with the UN and various NGOs. The rest of the group of diary writers was deployed in Kabul and was engaged in the performance of various tasks. Many of them were attached to the ISR squadron (Intelligence, Surveillance and Reconnaissance) serving in various positions, in particular in Long Range Reconnaissance teams. The ISR squadron was part of the multinational Battle Group 3, which was Norwegian-led from July 2004 until January 2006.

The overall material seems to express a general confidence in and happiness about the deployment to Afghanistan. When explicitly asked to give reasons for why they wished to embark on such a service, they highlighted the following motivational 'clusters': excitement/challenge (7); adventure/experience (6); earn some good money (6); to do something together with the military team (6); to see another culture (5). This fits neatly with the 'post-modern soldier' as described by military sociologists such as Fabrizio Battistelli (1997) and Charles Moskos (2000). They were also asked whether their expectations had been met so far into their deployment. The reaction was almost unanimous: eight replied that 'all expectations' had been met, whereas six said 'largely met', one 'partly met', and none 'not met'. This reinforces the general picture of a group of soldiers that was very confident overall. However, this does not mean that boredom was absent as an issue, whether in the form of an actual challenge to their confidence or a potential threat not yet encountered.

Before embarking on our discourse on boredom, a few words about the daily tasks and routines of the soldiers. One of the soldiers, a deputy leader of an MOT team, describes the 'mission rhythm' of his team thus: 'Our job mainly consists of travelling around in rural areas to collect information about the conditions in our district. When we are out (as we often are), we sleep on a folding bed under the open sky'. Such missions often last for 4–5 days, interrupted only by short periods in camp (2–3 days), where 6 persons share a room (slightly more space in Kabul than in Meymaneh). There are of course two components to this: life *out of* camp, that is, on missions, and life *in* camp, where typical duties include the maintenance of vehicles and equipment, preparations for the next mission and other duties. I will return to life outside camp later in this chapter. It suffices here to say that life out of camp is regarded as more attractive and adventurous than the confined and more routine life inside camp. In general, out-of-camp missions consist of three elements: observing the situation in the province in order to gather information with relevance to the security issues, cooking food and, lastly, sleeping.

In camp soldiers are careful to do physical exercises, often twice a day, keeping up their combat skills on the shooting range, doing medical training, all in order to keep up their level of training and preparedness – and confidence. One remark from a soldier is rather typical, as it sums up lengthier descriptions from other soldiers as well: 'I had a nice day today, with two exercise [physical] sessions, the shooting range and a lot of fun ...'

Moreover, the soldiers report little stress in their day-to-day duties. They have a lot of flexibility in terms of how they execute their tasks, though they often work long hours. Their life in camp is comfortable, with good food and air-conditioned rooms. However, the camp is spatially confined, with only a four-square-metre room at their disposal, containing a bed, a chest containing all their gear and a fridge. Life is also confined in the sense that they are separated from friends, girlfriends and relatives. According to one of the soldiers, this puts one in a 'vacuum-like situation'. So, how does boredom manifest itself in this situation?

## **Boredom defined**

How can we define boredom more precisely within the context of the ISAF operation in Afghanistan? Is it a state of mind connected to too much waiting for something to happen that might never actually

happen? Does it relate to carrying out pointless tasks, or to being confined within a camp? Or is it more a state of mind wholly independent of the deployment to Afghanistan? Or perhaps there are hardly any signs of boredom in this operation at all?

Only one soldier in the selection attempts a proper, generic definition of boredom. It is a difficult notion to define, he asserts, but in general 'there are three ways of being bored'. These are:

1. One is doing absolutely nothing, just sitting around moping.
2. One is doing the same thing over a long period of time, so that it becomes routine.
3. One is doing things that do not involve enough of a challenge.

We shall see how this threefold definition of boredom to a large extent applies to the diaries of the Norwegian soldiers as this chapter progresses. Before examining our material, however, let us just briefly flesh out what is implied by the definition.

The first part of the definition applies to the lack of activity typically found in waiting for something to happen. This is the classical representation of *acedia*: a sad woman (cf. *tristitia*) sitting still, her head resting on her hand (cf. the Lat. *torpet iners*). Waiting has also been one of the main characteristics of military boredom, applying in particular to large armies, which are only rarely capable of engaging the mass of soldiers. But it is not merely a structural aspect of the military; it also relates intimately to the nature of conflict, well captured in the above-mentioned saying about war, namely '95 per cent waiting, punctuated only by 5 per cent sheer fright/terror'. To say the least, in operations that 'fall short' of war, so-called Operations Other Than War (OOTW), for example peacekeeping missions or life on a military base, this ratio may be even greater. But it need not be so. I think some of our material describes a situation in which waiting and lack of activity are not particularly prominent, though they are still present. In any case, this part of the soldier's definition relates to what Orrin E. Klapp (see Chapter 3) called redundancy, that is, lack of variation.

The second part also has to do with this lack of variation, namely 'too much of the same', or monotony. In this context, something *is* actually happening (not nothing, as in the case of waiting). The problem, however, is that what happens is of a repetitive nature, which dulls the senses and detracts from the meaning of life. This state is of course dangerous both in times of peace and times of war. When a group of soldiers, originally trained for action and often confined to a minor

'corner' of an operation, tend to repeat their work schedule from day to day, this may cause lowered awareness and attention with regard to identifying and adequately interpreting potential threats in their surroundings. We have already mentioned this.

The third element, if tasks are not challenging enough, is an issue that relates to perceptions of sense and meaning, but also to skills and preparedness. Mihaly Csikszentmihalyi talks about a state of *flow* (see Chapter 3), when the ratio between your skills and what you are challenged to do, in job situations and otherwise, is such that your skills are sufficient, and the challenges are a bit more demanding than what you have accomplished so far. In the language of Chapter 3, based on Orrin E. Klapp's theories on boredom and information overload, lack of challenges can be seen as either *bad redundancy* (monotony), desiring more adventure and meaningful action, or *bad variety* (noise), desiring less action or more meaningful action. Both possibilities, however, are characterised by lack of meaning.

Hence, we see how the basic characteristics of Klapp's information sociology approach described in the preceding chapter are echoed in the popular definition of boredom by the aforementioned soldier. It remains to be seen whether we will see these definitions reflected in the other diaries.

### **'It is good for human beings to be bored'**

The above 'quotation' is not actually a real quotation. Even though the gnomic style may look a bit like a quotation from a famous philosopher or novelist, it was just one of the statements included in the list for use in connection with the soldiers' diaries. Moreover, it may look like a common saying, reminding people of childhood or school. One of the soldiers treats it in this way, saying that 'this is a well known statement.' Another soldier smells the deception and commences his answer thus: 'Hmmm... This really sounds like something from a professor.'

The reactions can be divided into two camps. The minority camp could be defined by the reaction of one of the soldiers, imitating the same gnomic style: 'People who are bored are not capable of seeing the possibilities', or in the more resolute fashion of another soldier: 'Bullshit! If so, one shouldn't send them to Afghanistan...' The understanding of boredom is that it does not need to occur, given that one takes the initiative to fill one's spare time or free time before boredom sets in. This opinion is pithily expressed by yet another soldier: 'I rarely get bored. I have the ability to fill "available time" with meaningful activities, or to

consciously refrain from doing anything, which is indeed meaningful in itself.'

People in this camp tend to see boredom as something negative and threatening. The 'simple' (cf. his self-description below) and tautological opinion of another soldier is that it is not good for people to be bored:

Time passes slowly, and things get boring. I feel that something should be happening the whole time. Otherwise, I don't have much to say on this matter. I'm afraid the question is too complex for me to answer. I'm just a simple grunt ...

Another soldier, who himself belongs more to the other camp (cf. below), maintains that one should distinguish between having too little to do, which is destructive, and the need to relax, which is wholly legitimate and necessary:

Well, what should I say? It is my personal opinion that if you have too little to do, you end up sitting around thinking too much. These thoughts can easily turn into a long sequence of destructive thoughts. It is important to see the difference between being bored and having too little to do. Breaks are important so that it is possible to relax. In such situations some [military] 'leaders' think you have too little to do and feel obliged to give you something to do.

This over-filling of time, however, seems to be a problem for many of the soldiers (more on this later in this chapter). It is as if many of them hunger after less filled time. Some of them have been working every single day for the last month or more, and have been looking forward to a day off the next Sunday (as they wrote in reaction to this statement). But the officer may have activities scheduled for this Sunday as well. Desperation draws nearer, and they long for some boredom, says a soldier.

The other camp is characterised by an affinity for affirming the 'quote', even though they may find it problematic to have too much time for leisure or reflection. They find boredom necessary for reflection, providing room for afterthought and imagination. Another soldier eloquently describes this room:

In principle, being bored is a real drag. At the same time, you are challenged to do something about it. I've been on a lot of skiing expeditions in my life and it can be pretty boring to look into the

white 'nothingness'. After a week you have really finished pondering things you normally don't get time to think over. My way of solving this problem is to use my imagination. I put myself in a fictive story and form my future myself, using myself as both the main character and the hero of the story. Other times I plan new trips or projects I wish to start on when I get back home. ...So, based on the fact that I'm both more effective and more constructive when I'm bored, I agree with the statement [that it is good for people to be bored].

We see how boredom not only creates room for reflection and imagination, but also a narrative room, which is important if you want to 'write' a comprehensive, coherent meaning into the story of your life. However, this soldier's experience from skiing expeditions does not necessarily apply to his service in Afghanistan: 'To sit here and feel bored rarely provides me with constructive energy. I think the context of boredom is decisive for how you spend your time.'

Another soldier, who also belongs to the camp that sees boredom as constructive, also uses words such as 'imagination'. Moreover, he also puts boredom into a particular context, namely that of deprivation. He sees boredom as a kind of deprivation, which is hardly the experience of most people he knows. He maintains that these people need only to 'act', not to 'think'. The consequence is that they hardly appreciate anything. 'If you are bored... for a period, I think you would appreciate normal things in another way. That's my experience at least. But one should keep this in mind as days become normal again.' This view is implicit in the reaction of a third soldier:

People benefit, if not from boredom, then at least from having some time alone with no other demands than just being able to think. Some people would find this boring, whereas I find it perfectly fine. When you are far away from Norway and the things you are familiar with, you learn to understand yourself, in particular the way you learn about what is really important to you. And that can't be bad for anybody.

One could say that, for this soldier, boredom has the function of deepening his understanding of himself, as well as providing a clearer understanding of which values count the most to him. A fourth soldier emphasises the constructive side of boredom. Despite the fact that he says that 'nobody enjoys being bored', he still sees the positive potential inherent in boredom. Hence, he embraces the opinion that one

probably benefits from being bored: 'You get time to think and reflect about various issues and things, perhaps something you would like to do when you get home.' In his case, this obviously also applies to his situation as a soldier in Afghanistan. Time is something one 'gets', time is a *gift*, not an enemy. However, as a 'borderline' representative, that is, with an affinity for both the constructive and the destructive elements attached to the state of boredom, he also uses rather strong negative language about boredom: 'I hate being bored.' It seems that boredom is a rather ambiguous state of mind, being both a friend and a foe.

One way of keeping the constructive and destructive aspects of boredom together is to understand boredom as *a threshold phenomenon*. If understood thus, boredom is something that occurs at a certain point and at a certain level. This fits well with Klapp's theoretical perspective, and partly also Csikszentmihalyi's, which was discussed in the previous chapter. A soldier, who is among those who use the word 'imagination' in connection with boredom, clearly depicts it as a threshold phenomenon:

As a child, I always heard that it was healthy to be a little bit bored; good for the imagination. Yet, to be very bored is not good. You can become restless and do stupid things that are not very sensible in a conflict zone.

Consequently, one should keep an eye on this threshold. It is our suggestion that the threshold perspective is indirectly reflected in the responses of the soldiers to the various statements to which we asked them to respond.

It is a bad thing in itself to be bored a lot, and it is particularly bad in a conflict zone. Soldiers may start doing things that are counterproductive to their mission. This astutely sums up the whole problem of military boredom. This is not just a human phenomenon observed in the armed forces. It is also specifically related to the success of the mission to which one is attached; if boredom succeeds, the mission will fail. Examples of this from military history have already been mentioned in Chapter 2. We now turn to an aspect of the self-descriptions of the soldiers in Afghanistan, which may convey aspects of boredom as well.

### **Filling time, willing to fill time**

The relation between 'filling', 'boredom' and 'coping' is an issue in one of the statements: 'It is important to fill the days with positive things in order to help pass the days. When I am bored, I usually ...' This opens

up one of two options. Firstly, one can argue against the validity of the statement, by denying that one has ever (or normally) been bored during service in Afghanistan. Time is not perceived as a problem, *in casu*: there is not too much of it. Or, secondly, even though one does not find oneself to have been bored, one may still be in a position to respond to the first 'challenge' in the statement, namely that of identifying which kind of activity one usually engages in order to 'fill days' or 'help the time fly'. Soldiers choose differently in relation to these options. Only one (of the two officers) categorically denied that he was ever bored. The other soldiers were divided between those who immediately listed a whole number of things they would do when bored (nine soldiers), and those who said they were rarely bored (five soldiers). None, however, reported boredom as some kind of deep desperation.

In the diary of one of the soldiers, the means of coping with boredom are compiled into a list: 'writing letters to friends and family; reading newspapers on the internet; maintenance of my equipment; having a fag and a cup of coffee with somebody else; reading various documents; writing in this diary'. Other means mentioned by other soldiers are: reading a book; playing card games; watching a film; physical exercise; relaxing in the bar; resting for an hour; sunbathing; calling somebody in my home country; writing an email; playing PlayStation or PC games. It seems that the means of diversion are many, and that they are highly available to the soldiers. They do not suffer under an entertainment famine here in the Afghan mountains. On the contrary, they have literally brought more devices, films and games than a normal boy's room in Norway would contain. Many, if not all, soldiers have a personal laptop. Moreover, internet is available to many, although not to everybody. And, according to one of the soldiers, 'if there's a movie you'd like to watch, you bet somebody in camp has it.'

Viewed in the light of the history of military boredom (cf. Chapter 2), we see that some of these activities are 'classical', such as resting, playing cards, writing letters or reading a book. Others, however, belong exclusively to a rather late stage of the history of communications, such as calling somebody at home (requires satellite phones!), as well as everything connected with the internet and laptop computers. In a web-blog by an American soldier ('Fahrenheit 4/23') serving in Iraq at that time, but with experience from Afghanistan as well, the various means of easing boredom are described as follows:

Different people seek relief from it [i.e., the 'mind-numbing, soul-crushing boredom'] in their own way. Some try to sleep as much

as possible. (One of my comrades from our Afghanistan tour who's also here in Iraq with me recalled how he tried to sleep up to twelve hours every day that he could get away with it over there. He figured it would render a yearlong deployment into a perceivable six months). Others become gym-rats, or buy every last movie theater-pirated HVD (Haji Video Disc) of just released Hollywood blockbusters they can get their hands on. If the web access at your respective camp is decent, you'll find many young, single Joes whose mission in life becomes to add as many good-looking women to their MySpace profiles as humanly possible.<sup>1</sup>

Compared with this 'social' life on the web, he describes himself as a dinosaur and a 'throwback to the Industrial Revolution when literate types of all stripes enjoyed nothing more than to sit down with a peculiar little object called a "book"'.

As previously noted, expressions of boredom are heavily dependent on the available media. However, no activity here is exclusively 'Afghan' or 'military'. It seems that one of the soldiers is right in listing similar things to those listed above, and then concluding by saying: 'Anything I would have done if I had been at home'. Hence, the problem of boredom is not a military one as such. This does not alter the fact that boredom in a military context is both formed and informed by much of the military activity and its social life.

As mentioned, our general impression is that soldiers find their work very interesting. This leads to the direct consequence that there is not much available time to fill. Yet, what remains to be filled can easily be filled, according to many of the soldiers. It seems, therefore, that they have a fairly developed awareness, not to mention strategic thinking about how to fill time. The language used here is moderate. They do not talk about the need to 'kill time', but to *fill time*. Whereas time is perceived as an imminent threat in the former case, it is 'merely' seen as a sort of 'emptiness' in the latter. Michael L. Raposa calls this emptiness – paradoxically – 'plenty of nothing' (Raposa, 1999, p. 42). Moreover, this filling of time can be seen as either a passive matter – something happens almost all the time in the camp – or as an active one – one should find something interesting and meaningful to do.

In connection with the active understanding of 'time to fill', *will* is explicitly mentioned by a soldier: 'The problem of whether or not one is affected by boredom is not about time. Instead, it is about one's ability to fill spare time with sound activity.' It is thus understood as a matter of planning and management. As with the wild horses that were the

first to be 'managed' (Lat. *managere*) in history, time also has to be kept tight by the manager (the soldier) in order to avoid uncontrolled behaviour. The same soldier says that he spends his free time well, even better than at home. Time is under control. This has to do with the fact that, in Afghanistan, he is not as 'distracted' by various 'thieves of time', for example by television, as he would have been back home. He was also recommended by ex-ISAF soldiers to consider how to manage his free time, of which he was told there could be a great deal. So, he chose to take books, films, and a laptop with him.

A statement like 'I could probably have been bored if I wanted to' by another soldier (1), seems to indicate the same as indicated by the soldier above, namely that boredom is *partly voluntary*. To put it differently, there is no necessary relation between free time and boredom: 'The time available isn't necessarily decisive as to whether or not you are bored', the same soldier continues. This is obvious enough. Some people regard Sundays as boring, whereas others live for Sundays. Some regard travelling by train as deadly boring, others are stimulated by everything they can see from a train window, and yet others enjoy the quietness of travelling by train compared with the noise of airports. It seems that time can be empty or filled; there can be too little activity, or too much. Days vary as people vary. Again: boredom is a relative state of mind.

It may be overlooked, but this seems to be an important feature of how soldiers in Afghanistan cope with boredom, aptly put by one of the soldiers: 'Do something!' Activity, not passivity, is perceived as an individual responsibility – with social consequences – to avoid boredom. This can be seen as a matter of both *transformation* and *innovation*, that is, activity deliberately chosen to ease boredom may either take the path of *changing* your situation for the better, or *inventing* something new and interesting that may create happiness and entertainment. Another soldier makes this an explicit theme:

If every day is not filled with positive things, they are at least normally filled. Together with the team, you also have to make something enjoyable out of what is boring. Some days are more boring than others, and some more interesting than others. But when, occasionally, there is hardly anything interesting happening, or what I am doing is extremely boring, I try to find something fun to do. If we are doing something together, we try to talk together, especially about something positive or funny. We may invent a 'game' as we are doing those other things. If I am alone, I try to make something

more out of what I am doing. I try to do it another way, to make it more enjoyable, or to make myself more concentrated. Otherwise, I try to think positively. Everything goes more smoothly then. It happens, of course, on duty, hating intensely, that you just feel sorry for yourself, but this only causes time to pass much more slowly.

For this soldier, the experience of boredom is already there. It is the actual boring state of affairs he is coping with in order to avoid its devastating potential. In this situation he chooses constructive strategies similar to those mentioned above: *changing* the situation for the better; *inventing* something fun and positive and *maximising* the meaning in the situation by varying how repetitive tasks are carried out. At the same time, he is aware of the dark side of these sound approaches, which means that he has probably experienced them – intense hatred of the situation, and feeling sorry for himself. Boredom has a disruptive potential, and it is often composed of hatred of the place and a narcissistic concern for one's miserable situation.

We see, however, that other soldiers assert that they never feel bored, and yet they engage just as much in similar activities to those listed above. How should this be interpreted? In these cases, the understanding seems to be that potentially 'boring time' is filled in order to avoid boredom, and to 'get time moving'. Hence, whether one is bored or only sees the threat of boredom lurking beyond the horizon, one opts for similar, compensatory activities. If this is so, Bertrand Russell may have a point in *The Conquest of Happiness*, where the fear of boredom causes a lot of activity, often of a rather frantic and destructive type: 'Wars, pogroms and persecutions have all been part of the flight from boredom (...). Boredom is a vital problem for the moralist, since half of the sins of mankind are caused by the fear of it' (Russell, [1930]1996, p. 47).

One example of this is how soldiers desire some excitement, but not too much, well aware of what too much action could cause.

### **Excitement, please, but not too much of it!**

One statement to which we asked the soldiers to respond was the following: 'The days are filled with lots of excitement and action.' On our part, this statement was included in order to see whether the daily life of the peacekeepers was dominated by high-intensity activities that were time-consuming and demanded attention. This would measure the upper part of the intensity scale, whereas waiting and pointless

duties would cover the lower part. It must also be added that one of us had experience of peacekeeping operations (Lebanon and Kosovo). Hence we had some clues about how this kind of service would often consist of rather repetitive work and little activity in the area of operation, and thus contain an imminent potential for boredom (cf. what was said about peacekeeping operations in Chapter 2).

None of us, however, had experience of Afghanistan, and we were open to the possibility that the mission over there could come up with a different picture (military personnel tend to think that there is more action in all other operations than the one in which they themselves are deployed). So, what did we find? It seems that most of the soldiers were hesitant about using the word 'action' about their time in Afghanistan. Yet they were not at all reluctant to use 'exciting' and 'intriguing' about their service. So, what was the difference? Was it a matter of a fine distinction or something else? The voice of this soldier may give us a clue:

Action is probably not the right word to use, but I do find it exciting to be outside [the camp], even though it is less [exciting?] after a while. I often wander around hoping that something special will happen. Not that I would like to be shot at. But I would sometimes have liked a more active attitude from the PRT-leaders. It seems that they are more obsessed with their own careers than with accomplishing our mission.

This statement assumes two facts to be true. Firstly, the area of operation is normally rather calm and quiet. 'Your pulse rarely leaps', one of the soldiers said of the situation in Kabul. Another soldier, also in Kabul, asserts that, based on his own experience, there is hardly any potential for an action movie so far during his deployment. The MOT team leader in Meymaneh says that the closest thing to action or excitement is playing poker and soccer.

But these soldiers seem to be in need of some kind of action. How, then, is this achieved? One of the soldiers writes in his diary that he channels his desire for action into war games on his laptop. Others mention the importance of shooting exercises on the shooting range, where, according to one soldier, it is 'full power all day long'. The same goes for training for so-called worst-case scenarios. So, it seems that, *inside* the camp, action and excitement are hardly connected to the operation at all. However, it seems that the soldiers build up a finely balanced rhythm of physical exercise, military exercises, meals, education,

rest and so on. *Outside* the camp, however, the situation is normally calm and quiet. One may occasionally hear some shooting in the area outside the camp, but no one has ever experienced a direct threat.

Nevertheless, the situation is not entirely predictable. 'Anything can happen at any time', according to another soldier. And this fact causes the potential for excitement, and the inherent danger of it, to add some 'spice' to the daily routine. A shot may be fired from nowhere. The masses may riot, which reminds us about the very start of this chapter: the well planned attack by massed Afghans in March 2006. 'Not everybody likes us here', states yet another soldier, which causes him and his fellow soldiers to 'keep our eyes and ears open as we drive around'. Again, their awareness seems to be quite adequate, if interpreted *ex eventu*. Moreover, on patrol soldiers may detect people carrying weapons. Then they become excited, the level of adrenaline rises, and the blood pumps much faster around their bodies.

It seems that some excitement is attractive to many of the soldiers. One of the soldiers writes that, had there been no excitement during the operation, he would not have been there. To add a twist to the words of Michael Raposa: excitement is 'plenty of much', and has the capacity to fill time, time that otherwise would have been in need of filling. Hence, excitement may help time to pass more quickly for the soldiers, and it may also heighten their level of alertness. Another soldier confirms this interpretation:

There is some excitement, but fortunately hardly any action. Our days are mostly filled with meetings and routines. The excitement is a product of our expectations and unpredictable incidents. This adds spice [to our situation] and helps us to stay alert, and thus contributes to the security we are there to provide.

In this, the attraction of excitement coincides with the overall purpose of the operation. Excitement is intimately connected with the (ultimate) meaning of a military deployment (and also with life in camp), simply because it implies hope. To have expectations in an unpredictable environment, as the soldier mentioned, requires some kind of hope. Hence, excitement does not only prevent soldiers from falling prey to boredom; it also generates in them the attention and awareness necessary to meet security requirements. On the other hand, nobody really wishes they were part of the mess in Iraq. So, the attraction to excitement is certainly not a wish for danger and life-threatening action, just some required seasoning of the daily routines and meetings.

Nevertheless, danger is not entirely absent. One of the reconnaissance soldiers (24) points to an inherent danger in the very nature of the kind of tasks he and his fellow soldiers carry out. In this he identifies the lack of action, but emphasises the presence of a nervous excitement:

The operational pattern of my unit is of a dangerous nature. Things often stay calm for a long period of time and incidents are reported to the unit headquarters. Normally, there is no action involved in this, but a lot of excitement. What is going to happen next? Have we been discovered? Has the enemy the capacity and the will to impact on our presence?

### **Exhaustion, rest, and restlessness**

Based on how the Norwegian soldiers in ISAF respond to the statement about days filled with action and excitement, we do not only gain insight into the difference between action and excitement, which of course has direct relevance to the understanding of military boredom. The material also has another aspect, which also stands at the gateway to boredom, namely *exhaustion*. Whereas a desire to 'fill' time primarily belongs to Klapp's redundancy boredom type (see Chapter 2), exhaustion belongs to the noise category of too much information and variation. It may well be that it is here we find the biggest potential for boredom in such operations: having too great a workload, combined with being forced to stay within the camp perimeters, with no chance of leaving the camp, or returning back home.

It should be mentioned that we had not expected to find symptoms of exhaustion in the diaries. But here is what we found among three of the Kabul soldiers:

One: 'It is mentally exhausting to be here, and therefore important to relax. An optimal situation would have been to do like the Finnish soldiers; 6 weeks on and two off.'

Another: 'What is needed most is a bit of the opposite [i.e. the opposite of excitement, action, fun, laughter]. Sleep, relaxation, calming down for a day or two.'

The third: 'The fact that we have not had a day off makes us all weary.'

Exhaustion appears to be a recurrent theme, and it is not merely caused by having too much to do. Exhaustion also takes the form of

having been too long on the alert. According to another soldier, this has its price:

It is mentally exhausting to think about it [i.e., the possible dangers, being on the alert] the whole time. I think it is important to get home after max. 6–8 weeks since your body gets worn out by always staying one hundred per cent alert.

The same feeling is seconded by yet another soldier, who comments on a statement in the diary about ‘unrest and restlessness’:

I know the feeling of unrest and restlessness from here. It is mostly connected with things being unpredictable as well as the number of passive threats, such as suicide bombers, IEDs and mines. These are things that we cannot control at all. Mines and UXOs you can guard yourself against, at least to some extent, but when it comes to IEDs and suicide bombers we have hardly any counter-measures available. But in a way, I have thought that if it happens, it happens. You would go mad if you were afraid the whole time. However, you have to keep it in mind and be attentive. That’s the best weapon against it, keeping your eyes open.

Awareness, which is crucial in this kind of operation, can eventually constitute an ‘overload’ (Klapp) on the soldier. One of the soldiers places the entire issue in the context of mental disorder. He does not say that soldiers have suffered from PTSD while serving in Afghanistan. Instead he provides a perspective about the costs of exhaustion over time:

I do not think humans are meant to be in combat zones over too prolonged periods of time. Three months maximum....I recognise that I am startled more easily than before, and pay constant attention to minor things the local people are up to, which I wouldn’t have done in Norway. It is of course my wish to return alive to Norway....I feel that some of the more experienced veterans in the unit have become a bit more ‘Mad Max’ than others....I recall my grandpa telling me about the German soldiers who had fought on the Eastern Front. They became nervous wrecks and were soon transferred to other places. It is the same state of mind you can experience among some soldiers here, only here it is in a very light version or at an early stage.

It is telling to see how distinctively PTSD symptoms, such as alcoholism, misuse of pills and drugs, sexaholism, and guilt, are placed alongside boredom when Jonathan Shay describes post-combat wilderness (Shay, 2002, pp. 42ff). The notion of being 'overfilled' can cover both the exhaustion that is caused by having had too much to do over a prolonged period, and having been too attentive and on the alert. The result may be the same: human flexibility does not flex back to its original position. It has been broken and cannot quickly be put back together again. Humans are wasted.

In combination with leaders, at least according to some of the soldiers, who do not make rest and breaks part of the weekly programme, one suspects that we here stand at the gateway to the kingdom of boredom. Without difference and variation, an oppressive monotony and devastating burnout knock on the door. Moreover, it seems that the more exhausted soldiers are when these states of mind attack, the more liable they are to have serious consequences. However, this is only an unwarranted hypothesis at this stage of the material. Seen in the light of other parts of the material, however, one can ask how far the ISAF soldiers are from the corrosive aspects of boredom, despite their seemingly high degree of confidence and happiness. Our suggestion would be that they are within reach of these dark sides of boredom, but not necessarily very close to them either.

On the other hand, the constructive side of the need for rest, as well as the positive aspect of boredom that can be seen following a period of rest, is a valuable state of restlessness. To rest is seen by several soldiers as providing opportunities for variation, a break in the sequence of missions and tasks, and a way of preparing for a new period of duty, for the next week. Rest fits neatly into Klapp's model as 'good and meaningful redundancy'. If the point of departure is 'noise', pure relaxation would suffice to soothe the pain of being overloaded with impressions, excitement, action or a period on full alert. But not only that, it would also produce a need for other variation as soon as the overload has been relieved. This 'other variation' can be described as the need for something to happen, a meaningful restlessness. Or, in Klapp's words, a skilled *navigation* between redundancy and variation, to avoid the 'entropy' of either slow monotony or fast overload. In his own words, one soldier writes about this very issue:

Having been here a month without a day off, I wish I could have a day which I could spend exactly as I wish. Or better: doing nothing. Just stay in bed, eat, and perhaps do some gym. So that I get really

restless and ready for another week with lots of work. In the meantime, I was told what I actually assumed would come. The day off next Sunday is not going to happen. I suspect that my team leader was involved in that decision. The hell with it!

The last sentence of this statement may indicate a kind of despair. Since the need for recreation is strongly felt, it does not take much to irritate the soldier. This inherent tension is reinforced later in his diary when he is asked to comment on whether it is healthy to be bored:

I think so. Personally I have days where I have nothing to do. I become restless, and my body hurts. This makes me look forward to the upcoming week...During the vacation preceding my deployment to Afghanistan I was hunting [his favourite hobby!] till I got fed up with it. After that, it is good to take a day when you just stay indoors and get so restless it almost drives you mad. The day after, I would be so motivated for hunting that it was really easy. [The same goes for Afghanistan:] If you have been lying still at an observation post for a long time, the notion of boredom takes on a new meaning. It is depressing to think about the fact that cows in open byres have more space than you have.

Was just told that our mission is postponed for 24 hours, which gives us some more time. The team leader then came up with a great idea – we do not start work until 12 a.m. tomorrow. Brilliant!

This soldier is the same one who, earlier in this chapter, presented a threefold definition of boredom: (1) doing absolutely nothing; just sitting around moping, (2) doing the same thing over a long period of time, or (3) doing things that are not challenging enough. As a comment on the second and third categories, one soldier asks rhetorically in his diary: 'But is this the same as being bored?' He explains the issue by writing about what happens when he is hunting:

To hunt, that is: being posted [to watch for animals], mostly belongs to category 1 ['just sitting around moping']. But the excitement that comes if an animal appears makes waiting really worthwhile. My opinion is that you have to be bored in order to enjoy life. How would you know the difference otherwise?

Thus, the condition of resting, waiting and restlessness, is a necessary precondition for attention, joy and awareness. And it seems that

the secret contained in all this is simply difference and variation. Or, again, in Klapp's words: navigation. If everything remains the same, the colours, the commitment, the engagement, the abundance and the joy will soon disappear. In the vocabulary of the previous chapter, this is the case because the force of entropy is always at work, working against any attempts to achieve or preserve meaning in life – including military life.

### Should have been somewhere else?

One issue that we were curious about when we planned the statements for the diaries was the issue of whether the soldiers found the place problematic. This is one of the perennial issues in the history of boredom, namely the stress caused by the place. Firstly, the problem of place can be the limitation it represents. In the case of Afghanistan, with four square metres of living space, most of us would soon start regretting and wishing we were somewhere else. Secondly, another problem has to do with what M. Doehlemann calls *unendurable boredom*. This boredom is neither situational (e.g. standing in a queue in front of the bank, which will soon pass) nor existential. 'Unendurable boredom' permeates my current situation, my job, my city etc., and is thus experienced as threatening and burdensome. It was therefore important to hear the soldiers' opinions about this issue to see whether they were really bored and, if so, whether their boredom was deep-seated or not. So, what we did was to insert the following statement in the diaries to get their reaction to it: 'The service is filled with stimulating challenges and I never think that I should be somewhere or be doing something else.'

It is the latter part of this statement that will concern us most in the following. So, what did the soldiers say? It seems that the reactions of the soldiers to this statement can be summarised as follows: it is only *sometimes* that they think about doing something else or being somewhere else. It is our impression that this can hardly be interpreted as a desperate or deep-seated need. In general, they find their service quite meaningful, as described above. Yet, this general impression contains some nuances, and there are also some potential problems inherent in how they express themselves.

One of the challenging issues that is mentioned in the diaries is the relative deprivation that comes from having moved from their families and familiar activities in Norway, such as going to cafés, watching movies and meeting friends. As soon as they start thinking about such attractive things that are part of the lifestyle of young men in Norway,

they easily start to long for this other place, which in this case represents both their home and their roots. Hence, in this, they are not restlessly wishing to get away from their place, but are more looking forward to returning to their original place and home. In this sense, this is not so much about a need for diversion as it is a sign of longing for the people they are temporarily deprived of. This feeling may be stronger among fathers with families than among soldiers who have not yet established a permanent relationship with somebody and who therefore have no strong bonds to small children or a wife.

Within the theoretical framework of Chapter 3, we can see this as a yearning for 'good redundancy'. Yet, with good navigation, even if it may take months to come to a safe and good haven, one is still navigating correctly. So, in a short-term perspective, we can stress the element of boredom in this longing. However, in a medium-term perspective, it is just part of the navigation back and forth between good variation (Afghanistan) and good redundancy (home; loved ones). The fact that one may experience a 'dip' in the navigation course between the good extremes should be both acknowledged and regarded as natural all the time the forces of entropy continuously work against what is regarded as meaningful. If we think further along these lines, we can envisage two ways of reinforcing boredom. One would be to always stay home when your unit is deployed (no variation; lack of meaningful service). The other would be to deploy repeatedly at the cost of your relations with the people closest to you (cutting the ties to tradition, identity, stability and recreation). We do not claim that this would necessarily result in deep-seated or existential boredom, but it may increase the chances of this happening.

The soldiers also seem to have an understanding that what they are doing in ISAF is a job. Here is one soldier: It is 'a job, not a vocation, and I do not think that I should have been somewhere else or be doing something else'. This 'job'-oriented approach to military service abroad seems to deviate from former times when being a soldier was a duty, a vocation or even a calling, and hence of permanent nature. Among postmodern soldiers, the mood has changed (cf. above; Battistelli, 1997 and Moskos, 2000). Soldiers see themselves as temporary employees, as expressed in the words of one soldier: 'My life is not international military service. For me, this is merely a tiny assignment of limited duration, which is rewarding and interesting for brief periods at a time.' Military service is viewed in terms of categories such as 'interesting', 'exotic', 'originality', 'fun', 'action', etc. The advantage these soldiers have compared with soldiers who are reluctant to go on missions overseas is that they

are flexible and happy to join an international deployment (Battistelli, 1997). The other side of the coin is that these soldiers are often not that patient and steadfast over time. For the selection of soldiers in this part of the study, however, namely people who have been deployed in Afghanistan for only three months (and the diaries were filled in after only one month!), one is hardly surprised by their ability to cope with it. They even have a chance to travel to Norway for a brief period during this deployment. For US soldiers in Iraq who have had numerous postponements of the end of their deployment, and often without the option of leave out of the area or a visit to the US, the potential for hatred of place and desperate boredom is much higher.

Another reason for the lack of a wish to leave the place is the way they find the service interesting and meaningful. One of the soldiers puts it this way:

When I'm on the job, I'm on the job, and then I think about the job. It is very important to me to focus on my tasks. I am nonetheless responsible for my team. And it is so interesting what we are doing, that I rarely think about anything else.

This soldier is both committed and 'completely' happy about his assignment. By 'completely' I simply wish to describe a state of mind that seems to be connected to the feeling of having a job that is wholly interesting, providing new challenges every day. Days are filled up 'completely' with interesting and challenging activity. And this 'filled up entirely' is nothing but the literal (Latin) meaning of the word *completely*. And, as the sharp reader may notice, it is literally the opposite of Michael Raposa's notion of 'plenty of nothing'. One soldier thus writes in his diary:

I agree with the statement. Not a single day is like the previous one. Every day there is something new that needs to be solved and carried out. Or we go out on mission, which almost always generates excitement and fun. I am very satisfied with the job I have done down here. Would have enjoyed being here longer than planned.

Completion goes hand in hand with *satisfaction*. Traditionally, completion and satisfaction are strong words in the theological vocabulary of salvation, redemption and consummation. Completion and satisfaction are descriptions of perfection and abundance. Again, this is the complete opposite of boredom understood as emptiness, lack of meaning

or lack of good time and space. The testimonies of the soldiers are not about a need to be filled; they are testimonies of fulfilment. No wonder they do not wish to change job or place! If this is correct, the picture of Norwegian soldiers in Afghanistan is strikingly different from that described by many of the American soldiers serving in Iraq.<sup>2</sup>

As mentioned, this may be slightly different if children and a wife are missing you back home. How to combine the satisfaction of the temporary job as an expeditionary soldier with longing for your family? One soldier puts it like this:

When it comes to my work here, the statement is correct, but I would rather have been home with my son, my wife and my dog. It never gets so interesting anywhere that I would have rather been there than at home with my 8 month-old son. However, leaving the family out of consideration [for a while], the job is very good. It has the kind of attractive challenges that surpass the frustrations of never reaching a goal [i.e. the slow development of Afghan society].

The solution seems to be to divide life into two parts: one *temporary* part out of the country, and one *permanent* one at home. While the latter is suspended for a while, it is still the more worthwhile of the two. However, the pain of being absent from dear ones seems to be partly compensated by what one can gain from the experience of serving in another context. This is a mechanism that applies to other soldiers as well:

This [the statement] is only partly true in my case, unfortunately. Normally we are so heavily loaded with work that I only focus on the 'moment'. But my thoughts often also travel back home. In particular to my girlfriend! It's usually fine, but sometimes I wish I was living with her in a flat instead of this. But, as I mentioned, we do lots of exciting and fun things together down here. In addition to all that, I also get a chance to experience a whole lot.

There are two soldiers who are not entirely happy about being in Afghanistan. This is not for personal reasons but for a purely work-related reason. One soldier is restless because he has the impression that he is cut off from the development of his unit back home, thus lagging behind. Others simply do not see the kind of job they are doing in Afghanistan as relevant to their particular competence, which is in intelligence. One of the soldiers, stationed in Kabul, says directly that

'it is misuse of our capacity to send us on a security guard mission.' This kind of comment was never heard from the MOT people in Meymaneh, who seem to be doing exactly what they have been trained for. Another soldier, also serving in Kabul, says that: 'I often think that I should have been somewhere else and doing something else. It is my opinion that there are areas where Norwegian forces are deployed where the nature of my unit could have been used more effectively.' However, this should not be read as a fundamental criticism of their deployment. Given that the service is as it is, it still provides lots of interesting challenges. His point is simply to draw attention to the inadequate use of specialist soldiers, modestly put as follows: '...it wouldn't have been wrong to have been somewhere else, doing something else.'

However, this kind of criticism should not be overlooked in a discussion of military boredom. We think it is of fundamental importance that there is a fine balance between a soldier's assignments on the one hand and his competence and motivation on the other. If an imbalance arises between the two, the perception of meaningfulness will shrink and the need to change place will increase correspondingly. The greater the imbalance, the greater the potential for restlessness and, in the end, despair. One hardly needs to point to Iraq to sustain this argument.

One of the important factors that enforce the feeling of meaningful service, and hence a lack of a need to change environments and work, is the social component of *comradeship*. The importance of this to coping with military life was highlighted in the historical material in Chapter 2.<sup>3</sup> One of the soldiers simply substitutes the phrase 'stimulating challenges' from the diary statement ('The service is filled with stimulating challenges and I never think that I should have been somewhere else or doing something else') with 'good fellowship and friendship with my workmates'. This means that he establishes a connection between fellowship and confidence in the place. The same soldier also offers a deep self-reflection about confidence in the place: 'I often think that I could have been other places and done other things, but I always end up asking myself if it would have been better.'

## The meaning and problem of place

As one may soon realise, this kind of insight comes very close to describing the problem of place in the philosophy of boredom. For example, it comes close to being an anti-type of the aesthetic individual we find in Søren Kierkegaard's writings. In his book *Either-Or*, for example, the bored person moves around from place to place, and away from his

original place, never finding anything but himself dug deeper and deeper into the 'demonic pantheism' (everything filled with emptiness!) of boredom. The soldiers' reactions to the statement about the potentially problematic place represent almost the opposite. They stay where they are, and see the value of both their assignments and deployment and, not least, the value of friendships and personal bonds that have been established during preparation and deployment.

Kierkegaard writes about a prisoner who focuses on a spider moving around in the corner of his cell, which makes him joyful. It is only a genius, according to Kierkegaard, who is able to find joy in life, and the secret is twofold: we have to accept the *principle of limitation* and to *use the moment* provided to receive joy in our limited and confined situation. The soldiers above may have grasped part of the truth of this in their desire for an 'expedient' attitude to help them cope with life and work in a confined environment.

Interestingly, another finding of our study is that many of the soldiers feel *less* restless than they would have felt back home. 'I used to be restless at home', one soldier maintains. Another says: 'At least not more [restless] than at home, rather less.' We interpreted this as their having an opportunity to gain control over their time and life situation. This is not the entire picture, however. The material also contains a soldier who occasionally gets very fed up with his fellow soldiers: 'I get tired of the same place and the same people.' Nevertheless, it is remarkable to see how most of the soldiers settle in well during this deployment.

Another philosopher's writing about boredom, however, may modify the picture of the Norwegian soldiers somewhat. In his *Thoughts* (Fr. *Pensées*), Pascal writes about the fundamental problem of human beings, namely remaining alone in one's chamber. Instead, restless human beings seek all kind of amusements and 'diversions' (Fr. *divertissement*) in order to ease the pain of restlessness, which of course does not ease the pain for more than a second or two. Even though restlessness among the Norwegian soldiers does not seem to be very prominent, they still seem, as discussed above, to have a certain need to fill some kind of experienced emptiness, although not a desperate one. The variety and number of diversions mentioned earlier in this chapter seem to imply that there is a certain problem with sitting still and being alone in one's chamber. To put it differently, silence is not much mentioned in the diaries. Days are filled with meaningful activities, and the downtime is also filled with DVDs, war games, other games, the internet and so forth. Consequently, there is ambivalence in the material. On the one hand, the soldiers are confident and satisfied and

think they are doing a meaningful job. On the other hand, their time is filled. There is plenty of everything. They also mention how important the *will* to fill their time is to them. This ambivalence should be examined further.

## Managing inner pressure

One way of testing this is to assume, as we did, that some kind of irritation and 'quiet despair' (H. Thoreau) may arise if time and place become unbearable. Hence the following statement in their diaries: 'When days become monotonous, a pressure from within starts building up. Then I feel like I should be ...'

This statement assumes two things: that the soldiers have had this experience of inner pressure, and that they have done something to cope with it. One way of approaching the statement is to ignore this *inner* pressure and concentrate on things that are understood as *external* pressures, such as days that seem monotonous or identical. Among the soldiers, some deny the correctness of the fact that such pressure has evolved within them. Some of them deny it completely (one soldier and the officer who denied he was ever bored), whereas the other 12 describe some kind of pressure relating to various 'stressors'. Yet the descriptions hardly reveal anything deep-seated. Words such as 'irritation', 'frustration' and 'explosion' are only mentioned by four of them, mainly in connection with relations within the team, but also relating to the lack of 'a comprehensive vision' and concern from Norwegian political and military superiors.<sup>4</sup>

What kind of pressure, then, is felt by the soldiers? And how do they cope with it? Here is the testimony of one of the soldiers:

This pressure comes perhaps after too many days without operational tasks. I think most of the team become restless and more easily irritated. I have noticed that. And, when a new task is set, a more relaxed atmosphere instantly follows.

This is testimony about what happens when there is too little to do. In Klapp's terminology, this is monotony or 'bad redundancy'. For this soldier, the only thing to do while waiting for assignments from superiors is simply to do some physical exercise or play PC games. Another soldier, who also admits to some inner pressure, has a similar approach: 'You have to release the pressure somehow. I usually train hard in order to get exhausted. And, sometimes I wish I could take a holiday ...'

It is a general impression that days spent in the camp contain the greatest potential for getting bored. And getting out of the camp appears to be the primary remedy, soothing the itching feeling of monotony, or simply boredom. However, even life in camp does not seem to oppress anybody very heavily. They can easily cope with that too, although they prefer to exit the perimeter of the camp. Moreover, days are normally different, and there is good variety in their daily routines and tasks. Coupled with Klapp's theory of variety vs redundancy, this description of variation may explain why even the confined life in camp does not constitute a big problem for the soldiers in terms of coping.

We mentioned that also life on missions, outside the camp, can create some kind of irritation and pressure. Here is a note about this by one of the soldiers:

When we are on a particular mission, the days often become monotonous and identical. We do the same things every single day. This can be boring, especially if you start thinking about how cold, dull and prolonged this is.

But what to do about it? The remedy that this soldier has chosen for this kind of situation is partly concentration, partly a positive attitude: '...it is very important to focus on the specific assignment you are given, and to think positively.' This may help the days pass more easily, he explains. It seems that monotony results in a perception of *slow time*. This can be remedied by implementing some slight changes, which, in turn, may make the days different and, consequently, help time pass faster. Again, the keyword is variation. The problem can be solved for most soldiers, he maintains, but not for everybody: '...for some it seems that it is not that easy. Hence, they become more easily upset, and then they start irritating the rest of us.... I hate grumpy and bad-tempered people.' Taken together, all these quotations from this soldier make clear how the destructive spiral of monotony and boredom works. It can start rather invisibly, but will soon affect large parts of the social unit. Boredom infects and moves a group downward in a counterproductive spiral. This reminds us about Kayla Williams and the isolated group of US soldiers she served with in the Sinjar Mountains near the Syrian border in Iraq (see Chapter 2).

It seems that the experience of such an inner pressure requires a great deal of self-control in order to cope. During long 'un-sexy' missions, one of the soldiers forces himself to concentrate on details, order and

behaviour. I think one can understand this as a kind of self-control. Another mentions the same thing, yet in a quite different context:

I have the capacity to endure monotonous work. I also see myself as highly adaptable. I regard all kinds of jobs as a possibility to gain new experience... When I feel an inner pressure, it is when we are sitting in the office, waiting to finish the day. Often, only one or two of us are working. If we leave the office, our team leader will get angry. In those situations, I am often tempted to explode in his face. But the reason I don't do it is that we know it wouldn't help ... Nobody dares to raise this issue since you would get hell in return.

Even though this quote does not make a necessary connection between monotony and so-called inner pressure, I suspect that there is a connection between the capacity of this soldier to cope with monotony and his self-restraint in taming his rage towards his team leader. This example is important, because it shows a soldier who has obviously developed the old virtue of temperance to a high level. This is a necessary ability in coping with strong feelings of various kinds that may develop inside a peace-keeper exposed to either monotonous work, confined spaces or close and forced relations with superiors – or all of these at the same time.

### **Meaning, morality and the coherence of flow**

We have already seen how the soldiers report a high degree of confidence and meaning in their assignments and general tasks. In Klapp's diagram about how humans can relate to information, the degree of *meaning* (or the lack of it) is the factor that determines whether something is experienced as boring or not. To give just one example, one may have a great deal to do or very little to do, but, as long as this is experienced as meaningful, one is not bored. Consequently, both a busy businessman and a retired businessman with almost nothing to do may be equally happy, provided that their days and their contents are perceived as equally meaningful.

One statement in the 'questionnaire' that may help us to ponder the issue of meaning is one that challenges the perception of morality among the soldiers. In exploring their reaction, we do not aim to comprehend the entire issue of meaning and meaningfulness. Since this will add to the picture we have gained so far of boredom (and the lack thereof) among the soldiers, we will take this as a point of departure for a final discussion about boredom among the soldiers.

When asked to comment on the following statement: 'I feel that it is morally justified for me to contribute to this operation', 14 of 15 soldiers say 'yes' in one form or another.<sup>5</sup> The remaining one, who is here in Afghanistan primarily because it is one of the duties that he is expected to carry out having chosen a military profession, still finds it morally right to serve in Afghanistan. This is, however, a 'challenge' that he has to justify to himself each and every day. What this challenge consists of is tellingly described in his diary:

One day I meet an Afghan man who must be at least 200 years old. The aged man puts his hand on his heart, starts crying, smiling, laughing and talking without pause. I just know how much he values our attempts to establish stability in his country. The next day another Afghan man blows himself up right in the middle of an ISAF-column and kills one of the soldiers attempting to establish stability in his country.

Hence, morality 'on the ground' may be a rather ambivalent issue. This ambivalence is also emphasised by another soldier, when asked about whether he finds his service rewarding and meaningful: 'Morally right? Who is to say what is right? We in the West, or those who live here?' There then follows an extended reflection on the pros and cons of the operation, the prospects for success and things that work against progress. He identifies unjustifiable reasons for intervening in Afghanistan, but also sees how this may help improve the conditions of the local people. His conclusion is rather cynical:

Whether I find it justified or not to participate in this operation will not be clear to me before I become an old man. At that time Afghanistan will have had time to ripen, based on the conditions they now have. Whether that will be progress or not depends on the international forces and the local government, which must grow and become strong.

Even though soldiers may develop arguments like this, it seems that the moral justification is taken for granted in this operation. In Iraq, it is not taken for granted among soldiers, and hence it becomes a big problem. However, when moral justification is at hand, then the need for meaning switches to issues and conditions that are not necessarily perceived as meaningful, things that deserve to be called minor issues, such as whether or not three days in camp are too much.

I shall not repeat these issues here. Instead, I will adopt a theoretical perspective on meaning, again taken from the book *Flow* by Mihaly Csikszentmihalyi (1992/2002). As I mentioned in Chapter 3, Csikszentmihalyi calls what makes us happy 'flow', what he calls 'optimal experience'. Flow can be seen as a finely tuned course between boredom and anxiety, and can only take place when challenges are well matched to our skills and experience in the sense that challenges should be slightly more demanding than merely requiring and using one's existing skills and knowledge. If not, challenges will cease to be challenges and will sooner or later develop into a state of boredom. On the other hand, however, too demanding tasks may incapacitate through the laming impact of anxiety.

Our diaries seem to express a high degree of flow. Almost none of the soldiers would have preferred to be doing something else, or be somewhere else, and most of them seem to enjoy the assignments and the fellowship of comrades. But it still seems to be a vulnerable flow, prone to a certain kind of boredom.

Dissatisfaction is mentioned in *Flow*, and it can be seen as the opposite of a good and meaningful life. According to Csikszentmihalyi, *dissatisfaction* can consist of one of the following three elements (*ibid.*, pp. 160f): (a) lack of variety and challenge, (b) conflicts, (c) burnout. Viewed in light of these options, our material shows that (a) service in Afghanistan displays a rather high degree of variation and challenges, (b) hardly any conflicts are mentioned, and (c) burnout may be a problem, based on our discussion about exhaustion above. Hence, the level of satisfaction is rather high, and, if there is a potential threat to it, it mainly has to do with exhaustion and too few breaks.

Similarly, Csikszentmihalyi writes in this book (chapter 10, 'The Making of Meaning', in particular pp. 216f) about what can constitute meaning, namely three elements: (a) purpose, that is, ultimate goal; (b) resolution, intention; and (c) harmony, that is, cohesion and order among otherwise fragmented and unconnected events or elements. Based on the latter criterion of cohesion, Csikszentmihalyi talks about 'integration of one's actions into a unified flow of experience' (*ibid.*, p. 216) or an 'inner strength' (*ibid.*, p. 217). In short, his approach is this simple: 'the meaning of life is meaning' (*ibid.*). How does this formula for how to achieve meaning in life apply in the case of Norwegian soldiers in Afghanistan?

Firstly, based on our statement about the perceived morality of the ISAF operation, the *ultimate purpose* of their deployment seems to have been fulfilled. Even the micro-goals of their service appear to have a

point and to make sense. In our analysis, there is only one soldier, who is the driver for an officer, who does not see the point of what he is doing. Others may express similar feelings in passing, but this is not a prominent feature of their diaries.

Secondly, resolution has already been identified in what was said about their *will to fill* their time. These soldiers do not sit still and wait for orders. This is of course part of the Norwegian leadership philosophy, which is very decentralised and puts a large responsibility for judgements and decisions on the shoulders not only of officers on all levels, but also of privates. We noted, however, that the will to fill time contains an inherent danger of overfilling. Paradoxically, this can be understood as having to do with what they complained about in their officers, namely that there was too little time left for breaks and rest. But it can also be understood as a contribution to rest and recreation, that is by sunbathing, by watching movies, by surfing on the internet, they get a necessary break (di-version!) from their conventional modes of operating. The test seems to be whether the means that are used to fill the downtime are meaningful in themselves, as in this quote from one of the officers:

I do not usually get bored. I have the ability to fill 'spare time' with meaningful activities, or deliberately abstain from doing anything, which is also meaningful. To be able to relax is an important skill.

Third, the criterion of *harmony* or *cohesion* draws attention to the totality of the soldiers' morale. In the Norwegian case, the overall picture does seem to be marked by a high degree of meaning. If one examines this in more detail, however, one has to examine not only the totality but also how individual elements relate and are connected to each other. This criterion of differentiation and integration (ibid., pp. 221 and 240) is an important criterion for Csikszentmihalyi, because, if flow and meaning only occur partly or in a fragmented manner, 'one is still vulnerable to the vagaries of chaos.' In our case, as mentioned several times, there is still an inherent tension in the diaries of the soldiers, namely between a meaningful service and a seemingly successful 'filling of time' on the one hand, and too little rest and a suspicion of a too frantic will to fill time. In one place, Csikszentmihalyi quotes C.K. Brightbill: 'The future will belong not only to the educated man, but to the man who is educated to use his leisure wisely' (ibid., p. 163). Yet, since most of the soldiers filled in their diaries in the middle month of a period of three months, it is hardly surprising that the diaries do

not display more desperate, deep-seated boredom. It is also difficult to predict how things would have been after another month or two. What is evident, however, is that soldiers who have seen how they can contribute a little to improving the situation of Afghan people who struggle daily with the most basic needs have added a perspective of meaning to their service which runs contrary to the entropy of boredom. Here is one testimony from a soldier, having just described the poor situation of children in his area:

It is good comfort to know that I can contribute to putting the country back on its feet after an eternity of wars. Today, three team members and myself filled diesel and washed our vehicle. We talked to the interpreter and some kids we had given some colour pencils. The kids told us that one or two days ago, a man had been killed 200 metres away. All the kids had watched how he had been stabbed. They didn't even blink as they told us this, which I found terribly disturbing. No news for them that people had been killed. Completely sick, if you ask me. These are people who need peace!

More important, however, is to see how the soldiers perceive boredom as a potential, a kind of threshold, which is there, lurking around them, and in order to prevent it from 'seizing' them, they have to 'fill time' with various kinds of diversion.

# 5

## Voyage Boredom

### Introduction

Previous chapters have focused on the relationship between boredom and war in different contexts. We have revisited the American prairie during the Civil War, the European trenches and battlefields in the First and Second World Wars, the jungles of Korea and Vietnam, and, more recently, operations in the deserts of Sinai and Iraq and the isolated mountain areas of Northern Afghanistan. This chapter will focus on the issue of boredom in a maritime environment: the desert of water with its inherent danger of boredom. The focus is on 89 young cadets on board an old sailing ship crossing the North Atlantic Ocean during the stormy autumn of 2005. What kind of boredom do we find among these young officer cadets and how do they cope with and endure the boredom they encounter on this demanding, three-month-long sea voyage?

A key challenge in leadership development among officer cadets is finding the right balance between theory, mentoring and practical training in a realistic context outside the classroom. The Royal Norwegian Naval Academy in Bergen therefore carries out practical and theoretical leadership training, as a part of the Bachelor programme in military studies, on board the *Statsraad Lehmkuhl*. It is a 90-year-old bark, originally designed as a training ship for the German Navy at the start of the First World War under the name *Grossherzog Friedrich August*. The ship has 22 sails, three masts and a solid, old-fashioned rigging system. A three-month cruise in the North Sea and the Atlantic Ocean in the stormy season makes a challenging start to the cadet's leadership training.

*Statsraad Lehmkuhl* does not carry advanced computer technology, electric engines or hydraulic systems. The sailing ship requires human

cooperation at its best, in order to overcome and work with the rough weather at sea. The ship and the elements give prompt feedback on poor leadership and cooperation in the form of damage, injuries or delays to voyages. The rough and often unpredictable weather induces a sound respect for the forces of nature, and provides a dynamic context of uncertainty and complexity that is closer to a combat environment than the most planned and controlled military exercises. To be in this dynamic maritime environment for a prolonged period of time also provides an opportunity to encounter the inner logic of boredom.

The sea voyage as a formative element has been known since antiquity. Training aboard ships has played an important role in maritime and military history. There are a vast number of narratives about sea voyages that portray vessels and their crews in storms, calm and solitude, and the disintegration of the will amidst boring and tedious daily routines. *The Odyssey* and stories of voyages of discovery from Columbus to Cook, Lord Nelson and the Spanish Armada, Norway's Thor Heyerdahl, and Melville's *Moby Dick* or Hemingway's *The Old Man and the Sea* are all important parts of naval history, not to forget the new blooming of interest in literature and films on this subject, boosted by Patrick O'Brian's book *Master and Commander*, on which the film with the same name is in part based. They all describe the situation of landlessness and surroundings marked by vicissitudes and uncertainties, which induce existential reflection. These are decisive and formative moments in the sea traveller's life. The appealing and often romantic nature of such sea voyage narratives, especially present in the film about the *Titanic*, often conceals a more realistic, problematic and complex aspect of seafaring. The far less romantic side of seafaring is the disintegration of will in the face of boring and tedious daily routines after weeks or months at sea in bad weather.

The Royal Norwegian Naval Academy has named the Atlantic cruise after the Portuguese explorer and adventurer *Magellan*, symbolising a long maritime literary history and tradition.

Our study and analysis of boredom among the cadets, and their points of view, feelings and perspectives on this state of mind, are based on in-depth interviews and participant observation. The interviews on the cadets' experience of boredom, carried out during the 2005 Atlantic cruise, were conducted after four weeks, at a position north-east of the Bermuda Islands. Ten cadets were interviewed about their encounter with boredom during the voyage and how they managed to endure or overcome this feeling. The transatlantic voyage really raised the question of boredom from the outset, because the start of the cruise was rather

more demanding and less romantic than first expected. The North Sea, one of the harshest maritime zones on earth, hit most of us literally in the stomach, and immediately washed away any wishful conception. Leaving the coastline of Norway, bound for Norfolk, Virginia via the Orkney Islands, Ireland and the Azores and from the USA back to Norway passing Greenland and England, we plunged immediately into a rough storm that lasted for almost two weeks. The French philosopher Albert Camus's reflection on travelling gives an appropriate description of the feelings on board during these weeks.

What gives value to travel is fear. It is the fact that, at a certain moment, when we are so far from our own country ... we are seized by a vague fear, and the instinctive desire to go back to the protection of old habits. This is the most obvious benefit of travel. At that moment we are feverish but also porous, so that the slightest touch makes us quiver to the depths of our being ... This is why we should not say that we travel for pleasure. There is no pleasure in travelling and I look upon it as an occasion for spiritual testing. (Camus in heed 1991:1)

Close to 70 per cent of the cadets became seasick. During weeks of storms and heavy seas, it is hard to maintain the necessary vigilance and readiness to interact with the surroundings, and to have the necessary motivation to learn to operate the complex rigging system with all its heavy sails and hundreds of ropes, blocks and knots. There is no pleasure in travelling under such circumstances, to quote Camus, just an occasion for spiritual testing. One becomes frustrated and bored by the threatening weather and routine work under such conditions. The bad weather caused both mental and physical fatigue, a tiredness preventing many of the cadets from mastering the situation. In this respect, *Statsraad Lehmkuhl* proved to be the perfect laboratory for training and testing the cadets' inner strength and ability to cooperate, in conditions far removed from the more stable and predictable classroom.

In addressing boredom within the confines of the ship and the desert-like ocean, much emphasis was placed on how the cadets described their feelings of boredom, and how they managed to make sense of highly regulated, monotonous, and at times tedious situations on board. As the previous description of military boredom has shown, boredom is intimately connected to the inability of the external surroundings to offer satisfactory meaning, but also to the individual's ability to interpret information or the situation as meaningful and interesting. Different

aspects of this loss of meaning will be further scrutinised. In addition, we will also examine how the cadets reacted when normal opportunities for diversion and amusement were absent. As they had been brought up in a youth culture marked by an omnipresent entertainment industry and normally driven by a demand for novelty and innovation, speed and progress, it was interesting to see how a sea journey impacted on their feelings and thinking. The slow time aboard certainly represented a new challenge. Most of the cadets were in their early twenties and were well equipped at home with all kinds of entertainment devices.

The social challenges during cruises on the *Statsraad Lehmkuhl* are demanding and certainly ample in terms of encounters with different forms of boredom. This was apparent from earlier voyages. Three months working and living together around the clock, sleeping in rows of hammocks with only 20 centimetres of 'private' space and just a small locker for one's own belongings, can be arduous. The cadets had no access to private computers, music, mobile phones or related gadgets that might alleviate boredom, homesickness and conflicts. From cruises in the Mediterranean, as well as a voyage from the Canary Islands via the West coast of Africa to Brazil, we had learned that entertainment smoothed the existing tensions and frustrations, but also prevented maximum learning.

As to the organisation of the ship, the cadets were divided into three watch groups, called quarters; each quarter served a shift of four hours, day and night: Blue from 8 to 12, Red from 12 to 4 and White from 4 to 8. Every shift consisted of bridge, lookout and fire watch, helm, buoy and galley watch. These shifts were preceded by an 8-hour break for sleeping, eating, coaching and educational activities. The cadets were served three meals a day. In addition, there were two coffee breaks during the day, the 10 o'clock break in the morning and 3 o'clock coffee in the afternoon. During their spare time the cadets were allowed to use the library, as well as a treadmill and an exercise bike. Shanty singing, an old tradition dating back to the time when it was necessary to ease the manual work on board by singing songs with a catchy rhythm, was also an important and popular pastime for the cadets, both on and off watch.

To find possible traces of boredom among the cadets during the voyage, it is important to map the cadets' experiences of the same phenomenon before they embarked on the vessel. Was boredom a prevailing feeling during childhood and adolescence, or earlier in their military careers? To what extent is there a connection between their previous experience and their encounter, if any, with boredom on board the

ship, and to what degree is it triggered by this particular context? The question is important in order to classify the incidence of boredom into the different categories developed earlier in this study. Another interesting perspective, which can be established by tracing earlier experiences of boredom, is to examine whether they have already developed strategies for coping with this phenomenon.

### **Cadets and boredom – an unexpected story**

The interviews gave the cadets an opportunity to tell their own stories, stories that turned out to be different from what was expected. It was assumed that young people today are haunted by boredom (Goodstein, 2005, p. 1). The findings did not confirm this assumption. Instead, we found an absence of boredom during childhood and adolescence for the majority of the cadets. Asked to recall situations of boredom, they could hardly remember any. A common response was that the pursuit of activities prevented them from being bored. They seem to have no time for boredom. As one of them expressed it:

I have moved around a lot and lived in many different cities, but I have always been lucky. (...) It is easy for me to make friends, and my friends and I were never bored together. My life has always been meaningful, with a lot of friends and other people I could visit. Life for me has never been boring. (...) In fact I have never had time to be bored, too much to do all the time.

With friends and lots of activities all the time, there was no time to experience boredom. Time seems to be saturated with enough meaning, leaving no room for tedious waiting. Another cadet reports a corresponding experience:

I never felt that my childhood was boring. I played football, and was also involved in playing music. (...) In this respect I had an active childhood with almost no time to be bored. Later on, I have spent a lot of time working with computers, which has also been interesting. So I have always filled my days with different kinds of activities.

The pace or rhythm of life has apparently provided enough diversion to avoid the feeling of dullness. Spare time has been so packed that it seems to have eliminated any kind of boredom. Asking another cadet

if the phenomenon of boredom was a negative element during his childhood, I got an almost identical answer:

No, not at all, my challenge was more finding some days off. I have done things like theatre, swimming, cross-country skiing, football and handball; well, I have done quite a lot of things.

The problem has been finding a day off, a day of no activity. His days were never empty and pointless. Another cadet hesitates for a long time when I ask him if he could recall being bored during his childhood and youth:

[Lengthy pause] No...No, I cannot remember periods of boredom. You know, sporting activities helped me quite a lot. I did martial arts, and I...I learned to utilise all the negative feelings in a positive way, even to win a match. (...) Thanks to the sport I managed to interpret or utilise all the negative feelings in a way that helped me.

Martial arts have been an important part of his youth. Martial arts are traditions of training for combat that come from the Far East and in which combat skills, self-defence, mental discipline and character development are all integrated parts of the training and exercise. The ability to endure and give a positive interpretation of, and assign meaning to, unpleasant situations seems to be a valuable ability developed through his sporting activity. He comments on this ability later in the interview.

*Do you perceive the skills obtained through martial arts as being an advantage during your time in the Navy?*

Yes. Physical fitness is one thing, but not the most important. The most important is that this sport helped me develop my will and also to perceive my feelings of anxiety and fear in a way that made it possible for me to take advantage of them [the negative feelings] in other situations. (...) I have learned a lot about losing, and about accepting losing, or winning and still not regarding myself as best, which is very important. Drill is a key element in this concept, even though some of the exercises can be experienced as rather pointless. But my coach knows more than me and he always says that I have to do it. And then, suddenly after two years, I realised that it was meaningful to do it.

The cadet tells a story about grit and the ability to overcome his own negative feelings and his weak will. This ability has been developed through his involvement in this formative discipline in which he, in order to succeed at it, needed to behave in a strictly controlled and regulated way and to obey particular rules or standards. High confidence in his trainer helped him to endure the drill and the demanding exercises and rules. By doing so, he learned that instant gratification cannot be taken for granted. In one situation he had to wait for two years before the drill paid off. In anticipation of an understanding of the drill, he needed to have an overarching perspective, faith and trust in a meaning not yet discovered. This lack of an evident meaning in individual activities or exercises developed his staying power by giving meaning to an otherwise wearisome activity. He developed the ability to stay alert for a long period without immediate rewards. To endure negative feelings and also use them in creative processes seems to be a core element in building his character during these formative years.

One important lesson learned from the interviews so far is that the experience of boredom during the cadets' upbringing is far less prevalent than first expected. In this respect, the cadets seem to be a rather homogeneous group of motivated young people with the enthusiasm and inner motivation required to make the best of different situations. Dull or tiresome situations that might otherwise be considered as boring *per se* were for most of them regarded as situations with a potential for doing something new or exciting. This might also be the reason why they have succeeded in getting through the demanding process of selection that the Royal Naval Academy put them through before they were accepted. Hence, the interviews show that none of the cadets has suffered from what we could call a deeper or existential form of boredom (see Doehlemann and Klapp in Chapter 3). What we have described is an occasional or situational boredom, often related to temporary external circumstances, actions, objects or activities. The interesting question is how these young cadets are able to handle situations in which they have to subordinate themselves to rules, regulations, routines and restrictions on board ship. Why do they not end up with boring redundancy, to use the language of Orrin E. Klapp (cf. Chapter 3)? Why do they seem to live a good and meaningful life? Is it something about their navigational skills that is particularly successful? Moreover, does the lack of experience of boredom during their childhood and adolescence make it easier to handle boredom on board? Or is it the case that the absence of boredom experienced during these important formative years has weakened their ability to cope with and give meaning

to tedious times? The cadets' own stories tell us more about situations on board that cause boredom, and also about the kinds of strategies they develop to handle these conditions.

### **Boredom as being 'bogged down in the mud'**

A cadet, whom we can call David, whose childhood was filled with games and various kinds of play, with almost no room for boredom, has already encountered boring situations on board. When I ask him to think about the boredom he has encountered during the voyage, he compares it with a feeling of being *bogged down in the mud*. I ask him to elucidate this 'mud' experience a bit more, and he starts by using vivid metaphors to describe the condition.

Work for the sake of work leads to nothing. Reef, haul, furl, take in and set sails, combined with an unconscious response to biological needs; eating, sleeping, working, and once more sleeping, working, eating. If you forget your own responsibility and slide into passivity, you will become bogged down in the mud. The routines will never 'be broken by themselves'; you have to act in order to create meaning in it.

First of all, *to be bogged down in the mud* implies the lack of a higher meaning, a purpose. The work that has to be done leads nowhere. Biological needs are satisfied, but that is not enough in the long run. The mental and cognitive aspects of life also need to be stimulated. The problem seems to be these unchanging routines, which cannot be broken by themselves, and which easily lead to a state of passivity, reducing the individual to a brick in a wall. This disagreeable feeling was reinforced by the fact that the cadets on each watch started by addressing each other by numbers, not names.

An everyday situation marked by routines reduces you to just a number in a line. 'Hi you, you are hammock number 56, you take watch so and so and so...' It is just recently that we have started to use names when we fall into line on the main deck. At the beginning we only shouted each others' numbers. That was completely absurd. (...) In that situation you just fill a role, you are not in touch with yourself, you are not a part of it, you are only there to hold the tiller and follow a course... To say that you are losing your identity is perhaps an exaggeration, but you cannot be yourself, as it were. It is terribly difficult to find a way out of it, to be frank...

The feeling of just being a random brick in a wall may cause a feeling of *de-individuation*. The ship, with its demanding routines of work, is in a way 'animated' with its own will, one that the cadets are obliged to obey. David seems to feel that his identity evaporates under these conditions. To be reduced to a number and no longer be recognised as a person results in estrangement, which seems to be an important part of this mud-experience that he tries to describe. He loses touch with himself because he just fills a role. In addition to this inner powerlessness, the external world also tends to lose its significance. The broader horizon and meaning behind each individual task vanishes, and the broader perspective crumbles. There are no higher goals, beyond that of arriving at the destination harbour. The here-and-now situation loses its interest value, and the daily tasks are soon drained of meaning.

David, who normally has the upper hand in most situations in his life, is attentively looking for things that could prevent him from sliding down the slippery slope and lift both him and the watch group or the quarter *out of the mud*. He says: 'The routines will never be broken by themselves; you have to act in order to create meaning in it.' One important response to this situation is to start using names instead of just calling each other by the numbers of their hammocks. This name-giving process appears to re-establish the feeling of being a person with a separate identity. You are no longer anonymous, which literally means to be 'without a name', but are regarded as a distinctive person to be addressed and identified by your name.

In addition to this name-giving process, there is another innovation that breaks the tiresome chain of routine. During a rather boring period at the beginning of the cruise, the chief petty officer commanded all the cadets on a quarter to climb the front mast. 'What the hell are we going to do up in the mast; there is no wind and therefore no reason to set the sails?' Climbing grudgingly, to their great surprise, they were ordered to start singing the national anthem. The voices rose and soon they all sang the anthem in full voice. Something strange happened at that moment; the singing resulted in a kind of liberation from the muddy, boring situation that had encompassed them. And, as David so vividly explained it, 'the people who climbed up were not the same as those who climbed down again.' A profound mental change had occurred. The climbing and singing had changed the situation. They had literally crawled out of the mud by climbing up the mast. David explains this change in them by using an old Latin proverb, *agere contra*, which means to do the opposite of what one intuitively wants to do. Instead of complaining and cursing the conditions, the chief petty

officer had chosen to do something unexpected and with a portion of humour. David says that he has realised the importance of the imaginative faculty and the ability to be playful, and also the importance of taking advantage of small variations in an otherwise constricted situation. When you are really bored, even small changes in patterns may provide a certain alleviation, but it depends on one's ability to see and recognise them:

To see the possibilities means to see the potential of even a small alteration. Because this feeling of alteration gives you a feeling of something happening, and time progresses as if you are moving, not from one point to another but as if life itself is moving...as a result of this small alteration (...) It is not the distance between A and B that counts, but what is going on during the time it takes to get from A to B.

David continues to emphasise the capacity to forget or ignore those external places, which are the situation at home (A) or the destination (B), and focus instead on the here-and-now situation. In order to attain the main goal, it is necessary to become absorbed in the situation here and now, and be an active part of the voyage. The separation, marked by the departure, has to be maintained as a reality. Homesickness makes it more difficult to cooperate with the surroundings and to perceive the actual situation as interesting and meaningful. We will return to this issue later on, not least when we turn to the life of submariners (Chapter 6).

To sum up what seems to be David's important faculty when encountering boredom on board, it appears to be the ability to recognise the potential of a situation that otherwise seems to be quite locked. This can be done by creating a break or an unexpected alteration, as in the story of the petty officer who commanded the whole quarter to climb the mast and sing the national anthem. Such creativity is crucial when on a sea voyage. To be on board a sailing ship is to be decontextualised or separated from external sources of diversion. Living in a city, as most of the cadets do, one can easily alleviate situational boredom by visiting friends or by engaging in different kinds of leisure activities that the urban milieu offers. While on board, one is left to one's own devices, and to the creativity of one's colleagues. But neither one's own nor one's colleagues' creative abilities can be fully trusted in this respect. A sea voyage can turn out to be worse or better than first expected. One can never know in advance, and this makes the separation from the normal everyday situation more ambiguous.

The *vague fear* and uncertainty that could make the separated sea-traveller both *feverish* and *porous*, to quote Camus, is not necessarily a drawback – quite the contrary. The underlying uncertainty of separation from the normal possibilities of everyday life seems to act as a midwife for a vigilant observer. The separation causes old habits and structures to crumble, but causes at the same time a more open attitude and the possibility of gaining new perspectives. Hence, at its best, mobility contributes to the development of observational skills and may also reinforce concentration on relations and situations which have been encountered. Through their own efforts, the cadets must reassemble an incoherent world, which means accepting the actual constraints, while remaining open-minded and imaginative. For David, this appears to be the first and decisive step out of the mud of boredom.

### **The young cadets and the sea**

There is another interesting voice among the cadets that touches on some of the same perspectives as David's, but from a different angle, namely Ann's. Her experience of life on board, and her efforts to cope with routines and demanding tasks, gives us new insights into a cadet's mastering of a constricted and exacting maritime environment. Like the other cadets, Ann's upbringing was also marked by an abundance of activities, leaving no room to be bored. Ann grew up in an urban area, but developed an interest in horses and farming at an early age. The contrast between a farmer's and a seafarer's life seems initially to be quite sharp. The farmer is restricted to one single place most of the time, having to take care of the animals. The seafarer, on the other hand, is free to travel the world. But, despite the polarity between the fixed and the floating life, Ann shows that faculties acquired onshore also pay off at sea. The nautical and the rustic life have more in common than first expected. But first, let us look at Ann's reflections on being part of a small community surrounded by an endless ocean.

In everyday life, you normally have a lot of time to yourself. Hence, being together with other people is a positive experience. But here [on board] you are together all the time, and you really need a breathing space. This space is not only the lookout post and the buoy watch, you could also put on a harness and climb up the mast and just be up there. To look down from above gives you an interesting perspective on your own micro-society. You see all of them, running back and forth, and beneath this micro-society you see the endless ocean and

the sky above, and then you think: here I am, and I am a part of this micro-society. It is a fascinating bird's eye view.

In the prison-like life on board, with an endless ocean that resembles a desert of water, Ann is still able to make sense of being in a new and unknown environment. Even though she is free to travel to remote coasts, she is still restricted to one place, just like the farmer. It is even more restricted than a farmer's life. A farmer can leave for short periods; a seafarer only leaves the ship unwillingly while *en route*. Instead of receiving meaning from her surroundings, she has to make an interpretative effort herself.

From her vantage point high up in the rigging, Ann is able to do two things at the same time, a kind of pendulum observation: firstly, she achieves an inner reconciliation in which she fully recognises the endless ocean that surrounds her, and, secondly, she consolidates the perspective and understands the necessity of becoming involved in the small micro-society to which she belongs. By putting on the harness and climbing up the mast, as the petty officers and the rest of David's quarter did, she gains new and interesting perspectives on her own situation. Despite the almost claustrophobic feeling of being delimited by this dense micro-society, she is still able to perceive something 'more' in it, or beyond it. She knows that she is dependent on the rest of the crew. In a dual movement, she expands and confines her perspective, simultaneously confining the overwhelming perspective and expanding the constricted and claustrophobic. Meaning in this sense is not something she receives primarily from the outside, but is more the result of the choices that she 'as a traveller makes and of the defences one constructs against the condition of flux and disequilibrium' (Leed, 1991, p. 56). Ann could easily have succumbed to the feeling of being confined, but she does not. Instead she takes one step back, or rather up the mast, and by doing this she looks down on something more and different than just a boring group of people.

Having been asked if her experience of this bird's eye view might be somewhat overwhelming, she responds:

Sure. It's high and free and you actually have a good feeling being up there, but at the same time you want to hurry down to those people walking around on the deck, people on whom you are totally dependent. (...) It strikes me how small I am and how easy it is to disappear on the open sea. One day I saw a log drifting past our ship. I just got a glimpse of the log, and in the next second it was gone. And

you know it could have been a human being or even yourself, and you suddenly feel how safe it is to be on the ship.

These reflections on nearness and distance, safety and vulnerability, open up a new frame of reference for being on board. The demanding, and at times tedious, work on deck maintains and ensures everybody's safety. To see this common micro-society from above, surrounded by an overwhelming ocean, makes it clear that the work has to be done accurately. Ann strongly emphasises the necessity of being focused and alert. In this respect, boredom acts as a threat to their common safety. To think about those at home, or at one's destination when doing the job on deck, is out of the question for them. You have to forget the time and place of arrival *in order to get there*, and it all also depends on the individual's ability to do a good job, always.

When you are working together, you are not allowed to focus on anything but the here and now situation. 'Hi, concentrate! It's here, between us that things are happening!'

And she continues:

It's extremely difficult to do a good job if people have their thoughts somewhere else; you have to be aware of the problems that the group is dealing with here and now.

Later in the interview, Ann makes an interesting statement on this very subject: if you miss what's going on here and now (because you are bored and sad), you are in fact nowhere, and you also fail to relate to the positive things that are coming up. I became curious about her background. Ann exhibits an insight and maturity that remind me of an older and more experienced person. In spite of periods of seasickness and bad weather, she did not succumb to a state of boredom or apathy. Why this strong motivation and endurance? Her personality is an important part of it, but besides that, could there be something else that had informed her sense of practical wisdom?

I usually manage to do my job – even if it turns out to be an extraordinarily boring one – I just see it as something I have to do, and then move on. I'm not sure, but it might be that this is something I have brought with me from my year at agricultural college. We had to do a lot of odd jobs. Often you had to do them all by yourself.

Once, they ordered me to take a basket full of staples and walk along a fence through a deep forest. 'Check an' fix it,' they said to me. OK. Even though no farm animal had broken out, I still had to do it. You keep on doing it; you walk along and check every single stake and hammer in a staple here and a staple there. Though I lacked a higher motivation for doing it, I just did it.

She tells that she started to work at the local stables when she was six years old. She soon became responsible for her own horse, 'and the horse was much bigger than me, so I had to do things properly and step by step. I was allowed to ride for ten minutes, but then I had to spend two hours using the dung fork and grooming the horse.' She continues: 'You know a stable girl by her perseverance and punctuality. A stable girl shows up when she has said she will. A stable girl is always a person you can count on.' It struck me how her background, with her closeness to animals and life on a farm during the year at agricultural college, helps her to cope and act in this maritime environment, far away from the green fields and horses back home. The same grit that helped her to do a good job onshore also helps her offshore.

In this case, it is interesting to see how cultural background contributes to the steadfastness that confronts boredom. She has developed the ability to find meaning in boring situations and to endure different kinds of stressors. During her childhood and youth she has developed the ability to wait, to stay in a situation marked by boring routines even when instant gratification is not forthcoming. Work in the stable seems to have contributed to developing this ability. By taking care of horses in a rural context, she has acquired and developed the virtues of steadfastness and patience, abilities she easily converts and uses in a maritime setting. Her duties as a stable girl developed the skills that now help her to cope with a totally different and complex environment. The forming of this kind of ability resembles the competence that we earlier observed within the framework of the martial arts.

### **On accepting constraints**

Is it possible to recognise other faculties or traits that enable Ann to avoid the negative side of otherwise tedious work? One important element appears to be her acceptance of the constraints in the given situation. By acknowledging the limits of being aboard, she liberates time and energy and can devote attention to the situation in question. She confines herself mentally to daydreaming on the buoy watch and climbing up the mast.

By accepting these limitations, she paradoxically gains freedom of creativity and involvement. Her liberated energy, time and attention help her to create and discover meaning and new possibilities within this kind of highly regulated and restricted everyday life. The old slogan, *if you can't get what you love, love what you get*, appears to be her unconscious strategy.

When engaged in and concentrated on the actual challenges, one also has a chance to increase the experience of mastery and, hence, also the feeling of satisfaction and meaning. One needs to be in the situation in order to alter what is unpleasant and boring. If diverted or absent-minded, concentrating on other things, people easily lose their ability to alter the situation from within. To stay in the situation is a prerequisite for doing something active about it. As already touched upon in Chapter 3, a soldier who never applies the principle of limitation will never experience the big room of imagination and creativity, which has the potential to change an otherwise monotonous situation, making it both meaningful and refreshing.

The dual perspective, the swing of the pendulum between the view of the infinite ocean and the restricted and confined fellowship on board the ship, recurs in other interviews. Jack, a 19-year-old cadet, is the youngest of the interviewees selected. He grew up in the countryside on the west coast of Norway:

For my part, when I'm reflecting on the situation on board, I get the feeling of an ocean that is so tremendously vast and myself so very, very, very small. There is something religious about it. It is as if ... like something I learned in my childhood, that being in a dangerous and ominous situation, you are still being taken care of by something omnipresent. For my part, it is only this notion that can help me to calm the dawning feeling of uneasiness and anxiety that I get in my stomach. It is a risk being out here. But if you gain a foothold in the feeling of being taken care of (...) then you can turn your attention to your daily work, knowing that things are safe (...).

Jack seems to construct a bulwark against 'a condition of disequilibrium', a feeling of dizziness on the threshold, on the *limen* (Eng. borderline) of something unwieldy and immense. He activates knowledge he gained during his childhood and applies it to this new situation, resulting in a feeling of mastery and control. He stands up to forces that threaten to overwhelm him with uneasiness and anxiety. As a result, his interpretative effort enables him to stay calm and to turn to his daily tasks in a motivated manner.

It is interesting to notice how a scholar of maritime literature, Robert Foulke, recognises some of these same features in his studies of sea voyage narratives. His observations are similar to those we find expressed by the cadets:

[S]eafarers find their sense of space suggesting infinity and solitude on the one hand and prison-like confinement on the other. (...) The seafarer's sense of time is equally complex. It is both linear and cyclical: time is linear in the sense that voyages have beginnings and endings, departures and landfalls, starting and stopping points in the unfolding of chronological time; yet time is also cyclical, just as the rhythm of waves is cyclical, because the pattern of a ship's daily routine, watch on and watch off, highlights endless recurrence. Space and time have always merged more obviously at sea than they do in much of human experience (Foulke, 2002, pp. 8–9).

By his efforts at creating meaning within a prison-like confinement, Jack partakes in the old and winding history of all seafarers. When I ask Jack to reflect more on how meaning is established, he gives a new and interesting explanation. Meaning for him is not primarily tied to an overarching horizon, but to concentration on the small things that surround him.

Instead of relating the small things to something bigger in order to achieve meaning, you sometimes have to take it down to micro-level and forget all about the overarching connections. If you stay on this higher level, the details disappear. Everything becomes equal. But on a lower level you will become more aware of the nuances. The small details become a lot more colourful than they first appear to be.

Instead of climbing up in the rigging, as Ann and David did, Jack takes the opposite approach, descending into the small nuances of life. For him, it is small-scale diversity that creates meaning, not the bird's eye view. The monotony and colourlessness are broken by a vigilant mind, attentive to details and to the meaning of the relations between them. During his upbringing Jack had always been attracted to drawing. As a child he could sit for hours just drawing minute details. This ability to focus on details and their internal relations gives him an advantage. He is able to convert these skills he has developed earlier to a new setting and maintain meaning and interest even in the highly complex environment on board the ship. His aptitude for bringing old knowledge into

play and at the same time surrendering to the condition of motion, and being focused and committed to the tasks on the ship, is a prerequisite for being an active participant and actor in his own life. Becoming involved in and participating in the actual situation is the first step in adjusting one's mind to the new challenges and also being an agent of change in the new setting.

### **Boredom and the meaning of friendship**

Even if a cadet may have the ability to achieve a higher perspective, or make 'more' out of a situation, the risk of this skill slipping away always lurks beneath the surface. The conditions that influence and weaken this ability are most likely bad weather, the pressure of the daily routines and certainly loneliness. One important bulwark that helps the cadets to maintain their vigilance, even in these circumstances, seems to be friendship. Friendship is a central topic among the cadets.

Alienated from their normal social setting, the cadets have to participate in creating a new social body, establishing new relations and interacting with new persons. As strangers to each other, they need a new social network from which they can gain attention, recognition and a feeling of belonging. Without this social framework, and out of others' sight and mind, it seems to be hard to maintain motivation and to avoid the feeling of boredom. One of the cadets, Tom, vividly reports how important, but also how fragile, this process of getting to know each other is. Tom has lived alone with his father. The two of them have developed a close friendship through years of moving around, living in different towns in Norway. Living together with his father seems to have taught him the meaning and value of a close and trustworthy friend:

First there is a period when everybody just looks at each other. No one wants to rush into new relations immediately. Instead, we are all looking to see if we can find someone who resembles ourselves. For my part, I'm searching for a person who has the same sense of humour and interests as me. (...)

Tom seems to have succeeded quite well in his efforts at finding a new friend, a new relationship replacing those back home. Tom's description of his bond to this new friend on board does have some interesting aspects. He and his friend have established a fascinating evening ritual. After every watch they gather to share a bar of chocolate or

some crisps.

I and my new friend have decided to get together after every watch. We treat each other every second day. I treat him to crisps, and the next day he treats me to chocolate. We spend twenty minutes after every watch just me and him, telling each other how the day has been and talking about funny things. We discuss each other's daily experiences. In this way we take a retrospective look at the day. I explain to him and he explains to me what each of us has been through. And we repeatedly have this get-together around a small bag of crisps.

*So you share some sweets together...?*

Yes, and that is half the meeting. Well, I do not want to call it a meeting, rather a get-together. Without this bag of crisps, it would not be so... Well, without this bag it would perhaps not have been a get-together at all. But now we have something in common, and while eating together we can also talk together.

*So eating from the same bag or the same bowl does something with your feelings?*

Yes. And the good thing is that we can share every second day. We are not sitting together with a small bag eating separately, but we are eating from the same bag. By doing this we come closer to each other. Instead of having a chocolate for ourselves, we pass the same chocolate back and forth.

*Did you deliberately initiate this get-together, or was it established just by chance?*

We deliberately did it this way. But there are also other reasons for doing it like this... we have a limited amount of sweets. Our intention was to share something together. We have a common understanding of having this bag of crisps together.

Gathered around this small meal, they discuss the experiences of the day – the problems and frustrations they have encountered. This ritualised get-together, which marks a breach in the otherwise steady stream of time, seems to be of importance to both of them, and it helps them to remain focused on their tasks and to see a meaning in situations that otherwise threaten to be incomprehensible. Having a friend makes it easier to recreate a coherent understanding of a demanding environment.

One important element in this get-together is the breaking of the chocolate. Every second day they buy one bar of chocolate each and share it equally. They alternate between the role of receiver and giver. The piece of chocolate that the one gives to the other is a token of friendship. Tom emphasises that it would not be the same without these 'elements'. The chocolate and crisps are constitutive for the gathering and resemble a sacramental ritual, a sort of 'holy communion' consisting of words and signs. This evening ritual is, as it were, the hub around which the friendship between these two cadets revolves, and also an important part of the strategy of mastering the difficult and more boring parts of the voyage. It is interesting at this point to include a reference to the conception of redundancy and variety discussed earlier in Chapter 3. For the two cadets, the repetition of the ritual seems to represent good variation, a break in the normal structure of the day. And furthermore, redundancy, as a recurring tradition, appears to be a source of security, comfort and belonging, or, as Orrin E. Klapp emphasises, the ritual (and its redundancy) is so important because it helps people to feel more together (1986, p. 73).

The ritualised evening chat represents an event implying that meaning is both produced and discovered (Raposa, 1999, p. 15). Given that we know that boredom is closely connected with lack of meaning, this production of meaning, enabled through the sharing of thoughts and food, is a core element in mastering the situation. By feeding each other with sweets, they give *feedback* to each other in a literal sense of the word. Once more we see that relationships maintain elements that are highly important in confronting a boring situation, because meaning is to be regarded as a characteristic of a common interpretative activity (Raposa, 1999, p. 5). When people succeed in this activity, human experience is charged with meaning.

For one person alone, it could be more problematic to maintain focus and meaning during periods marked by boredom. Tom refers to some of his fellow cadets who are outside this caring community on board, and who have problems establishing a meaningful perspective on their duties and tasks. For those who do not succeed in the process of socialising, the problem of maintaining meaning and motivation could be problematic on an individual level. Left alone, outside the natural interaction and affirming recognition between friends, one is more vulnerable. Tom is aware of this situation and has further comments on it:

As I see it, there are some members of the quarter who do not participate in common activities and therefore become outsiders. It may be

because they lack self-confidence, at least that seems to be the reason. (...) This situation makes me sad. I have not done enough to try to make them feel included in our group (...). If you lack the ability to make friends or to participate in the conversation, your days will become longer and more boring. One can easily end up as a lonely person.

Tom has the ability to see the problem and he also has the intention of taking action to help those who do not participate in the social interaction. This caring and sensitive attitude might have something to do with his conscious understanding of the meaning of friendship.

Once more, the tension between community and solitude, and meaningful time versus boring time, is underlined in this quotation. Solitude can in many respects represent positive elements, to which we will return later, but in this particular context it is more likely that it will be a breeding ground for boredom. Tom had an unpleasant encounter with this negative solitude during the first stormy week, sailing north of Scotland and Ireland. For three days and nights he was completely knocked out by seasickness. Without food, hardly any water, and incapable of working, his days became dreadfully long and boring. The seasickness isolated him and caused a shift in his focal point; he was no longer capable of participating in daily routines and in comradeship, and instead became inwardly focused. He started to count the days after a while.

I started to think how boring the whole situation was...I'm so far away from home and there's still 70 days left. The three days of seasickness felt much longer than just three days. If you are unable to keep in touch with your friends and to participate in the ongoing conversation with them, boredom catches you. You end up in solitude. (...) One important lesson I learned during the first year at officer training college was that in order to while away the time you have to be together with other people and talk.

His description of his days of seasickness is interesting because it sheds a slightly new light on Tom's strategy of mastering boredom. He has learned during the years alone with his father, and also during the stay in the barracks in his first year in the navy, that friendship prevents one from falling prey to boredom. As the likeable person he is, it is no problem for him to befriend others, even in new situations. The question, though, is whether he has developed the ability to be alone to the same degree? It is possible to ask an even more critical question about

Tom's mastering strategy of preventing boredom: has his ability to make friends and to easily initiate new relationships simultaneously reduced his ability to master both himself and potentially boring times without the support of other people? It might be that his well-developed strategy for warding off boredom by making friends has simultaneously resulted in dependency on others.

If we try to sum up some of the main elements in Tom's experience of friendship in his encounter with different types of situational boredom, there seems to be an important pendulum-like movement from internal reflection to open, external dialogue between friends in order to maintain motivation and meaning. This internal reflection and external dialogue resemble the pattern of establishing meaning we found among the two first cadets we presented, an oscillation between two opposite positions, the infinite and the overwhelming, on the one hand, and the confined and manageable, on the other. The open space of the ocean provided room for the imagination, (daunting) dreams and longings, and the confined community on board established a place of safety and belonging.

Tom is worried about his fellow cadet who has not yet been integrated into the inner life of the quarter. The outsider's dilemma arises if the external dialogue ceases or never commences. A position outside the community easily ends up in an inner and more fragile monologue without the strengthening rhythm inherent in a vivid and ongoing dialogue between friends. Meaning in this sense is constituted in, and is dependent on, a relationship with others. Outside this relationship, the ongoing production of meaning is far more vulnerable and the situation can easily become boring and meaningless. This is the problematic side of being alone, but there is also a flip side, a more positive side, as we will see later.

Tom's contribution to the understanding of friendship in relation to boredom also has some other interesting components. To gain an understanding of these elements we have to examine his experience during the time he spent at officer training college. A closer look at his first encounter with military boredom might help us to answer the earlier question concerning whether or not the absence of boredom during childhood and youth is an unambiguous advantage. Could it be that the ability to always fill time with activities leaves other abilities undeveloped?

### **The brotherhood of barracks boredom**

Tom's description of his first year at officer training college, before he was enrolled at the Royal Norwegian Naval Academy, sheds light on

friendship as a buffer against boredom. At the start, the time at officer training college was hectic. They were burdened with all kinds of new activities, he reports vividly. But after a while things settled down and life became easier, but also more boring. The problem was reinforced by the fact that there was no TV, radio or newspapers in the barracks. Frustration increased, a feeling of boredom became more and more rampant, and they eagerly longed for leave back home. He had a girlfriend at that time, and this situation made him more impatient to see her again. To be forced to stay in a place where nothing was happening gave him a bad feeling. Dull evenings without any kind of entertainment, and days filled with nothing but uninteresting routines, made the whole situation almost unbearable. This situation is certainly marked by what Klapp in his metaphorical model might call boring redundancy (1986, p. 119), and which Doehleemann (1992) characterises as unbearable boredom.

I found it difficult to tell my girlfriend how things were really going, because this was not the way it was supposed to be in the navy. The reality of being in the navy could not match her and others' expectations. I had to invent stories, telling her that we did more 'military' and exciting things than we actually did.

When I asked Tom how this situation was related to the relationship between the officer cadets, he gave an interesting response. Precisely because the days became more and more wearisome and unexciting, they paradoxically became closer to each other; a kind of brotherhood of boredom grew out of the situation. This unexpected change was induced by the same factor that had caused the boring situation. The lack of any means of entertainment in the barracks gave no opportunity for emotional release, and they had to remain physically and mentally on site. In this incarcerated situation, they had no other choice than to entertain each other. To their surprise, their conversations became more fascinating, deeper and more interesting than any previous conversations, even better than with good friends from their childhoods. Because of this unexpected effect, friendship appears for Tom to have an alleviating and reducing effect on boredom:

When I'm home with my usual friends, we have no time for such conversations. Life is too busy, leaving no room for talk that we had in the barracks. Here, we had more time together, and we became closer to each other.(...) When I look back on it, [the tedious time at the

barracks] I am able to see the value of such a life, even though it could be frustrating not being able to watch TV for two months. There are advantages to living like that, and in fact it went well without these everyday gadgets. When people say they would never have lived in the 19th century, I disagree, based on my experience; life without all these technical devices could be interesting in the same way.

Barracks life represented something ambiguous, both boring and stimulating at the same time. For Tom, the encounter with a contextual, military boredom opened a new and unforeseen dimension, a room for friendship and unexpected closeness to other people. The unsatisfying days at officer training college, with few external impulses, with no possibility of escape, neither physically nor mentally, resulted in the formation of a new type of friendship, a mateship based on continuous, nightly conversations after lights out. These talks filled the potentially boring time with new meaning, thereby altering the actual situations, causing them to be both pleasant and enriching. To have time to talk for long periods provided opportunities for daydreaming and planning for common journeys in the future. This otherwise boring time nourished their common fantasy and imagination, and might be a part of what Doehlemann calls creative boredom (1992). What Tom describes as 'a simpler form of life' has given him a glimpse into a world he would otherwise not so easily have discovered. Actually, when he looks back, he regrets having had a childhood and youth with too little boredom. In the navy he has found that boredom, no matter how enervating it might seem, established friendships and conversations on a hitherto unknown level.

Tom's reflections show that the ability to kill time by constantly filling it with activities is an ambiguous strategy. Enduring emptiness without immediately filling it with activities could provide an unexpected richness in life and friendship. On the other hand, accepting empty time during which few things happen could give a new and more profound dimension to friendship, as Tom experienced. Restlessness may prevent one from experiencing this side of life, however.

Tom's perspective is shared by another cadet, Jack. Jack was the one who was fond of drawing during his childhood, and who was more concerned with details than with the overarching perspective when we talked about how to construct meaning. For Jack, the time of stillness is not seen as a vacuum; instead, it is filled with a new dimension. It is a question of awareness and the ability to see the unseen possibilities in the many details. The room, which, at a first (and hectic) glance, is grey,

boring and empty, is not grey and empty at all. Instead, it is a colourful room full of possibilities. It is just a question of seeing. Pointing to this problem, Jack raises the question of whether his mates suffer from anxiety regarding silence and loneliness. The silent and empty room scares some of his friends; they easily become anxious and restless, unable to see the potentials. They see only the limitations, Jack comments. Some of the cadets seem to have an underdeveloped ability to see. He himself developed and learned to love days with no activity during his childhood and youth, mostly by hiking alone in the mountains or spending days in solitude at the family cabin at the coast.

Even though both Tom and Jack have discovered an almost neglected value in periods otherwise marked by boredom, there are also signs that tell us of an awakening to this dimension also among the other cadets. There is one place on board that helps the cadets more than any other place to glimpse the value of non-activity – the buoy watch.

### **The buoy watch – meaning on the margins**

The lifebuoy watch involves responsibility for detecting and reporting man-overboard incidents, and providing a lifebuoy to the person in the water and marking the spot where the incident occurred. The number of persons assigned to this watch and the location of their stations varies with the type of ship. On *Statsraad Lehmkuhl*, the lifebuoy watch is located on the poop deck, the aftermost and highest deck on the ship. The person on watch sits on the back capstan with his or her back to the rest of the activities on board, looking into the backwash of the ship. This position is manned day and night. Every watch lasts for one hour. The buoy watch is a position outside the regular working community, external to all other activities on board. In this place, filled with nothing but passive observation, new kinds of awareness might arise. According to one of the cadets:

On watch you are sitting in solitude and just thinking about and reflecting on the day. Sitting on watch, your thoughts leave the ship; suddenly alone, your thoughts travel home and you wonder what you are going to do when you arrive in the US.

For a short period of time the cadet is estranged and marginalised. It is a position liberated from the routines and obligations of daily work. The margin is the place for 'those feelings and intuitions which daily life doesn't have a place for and mostly seems to suppress'

(Greene, 1995, p. 134). The buoy watch is hence the most popular watch, and if prolongation is necessary it is often no problem. The time free from other activities makes it possible to meditate, ponder, or ruminate on the situation.

Solitude, the ability to be alone, is an important precondition for reflection, which involves an inner dialogue and imaginative activity. But this type of contemplation requires both a personal ability and a practical possibility. The buoy watch offers exactly this convenient place of solitude within the established structures and routines. If the individual cadet has the ability to be alone, and also uses the place for reflection, he or she may achieve an altered position which transcends the everyday situation. As reported by the cadets, being cooped up on board with no safety valves easily creates a confined and sometimes claustrophobic feeling it is hard to cope with. Against this background we can see that the buoy watch, or simply sitting at the lookout post, opens a transcending room of contemplation. As one of the cadets puts it:

As I see it, it is so important to have some breaks in life. A lot of things are happening all the time on board. To have the opportunity to take the buoy or lookout watch is so good. Then, you can simply sit for an hour and gaze at the horizon and think other thoughts. Breaks are so important. But, if a break stretches out in time, then you start getting restless again and you need to make up something.

To have a pause – a break – seems to be important for maintaining motivation and preventing one from becoming disheartened. It is the break from the recurring tasks on the main deck that appears to provide such a good and liberating breathing space.

As I feel it, and as I think most of us feel it, the buoy watch is the only place you can be left alone, isolated from everything else on board. We live so closely together, and there are people everywhere all the time, so this is the only peaceful place to think. There is no other place I reflect more on the situation than here. (...) I spend most of the time thinking about my girlfriend and the good life. I was thinking about this yesterday, and also about goals I want to achieve in life, things I want to do.

The capstan on the poop provides a retreat into an area of freedom and non-activity. There is a kind of porosity there which gives the

mind an opportunity to move around freely, back and forth in time and space.

David, who explained the feeling of boredom by comparing it with sinking down in *mud*, uses completely opposite words to describe the beneficial feeling of the buoy watch:

You sit on buoy watch; the little man and the open ocean. And then I feel that I melt together with everything around me, for in the next moment to evaporate. And everything disappears, and then I start flying back home.

In this respect the buoy watch also supersedes climbing in the rig, singing the national anthem. On the capstan, the whole situation is taken one step further; he talks about 'flying back home'. The buoy watch situation contains a lightness that causes him to evaporate and to 'melt together with everything around' him. Instead of being dragged down into suffocating mud, he now experiences something close to a religious or ecstatic experience which implies a transcending movement.

It seems that to be situated on the margin opens a room for reflection and daydreaming, which provides both innovation and creativity. Jack, the cadet who liked to draw small details, describes the watch on the poop in this way:

The buoy watch is a good place to divert oneself, because you are left alone. Sure, when you live so close together you hardly have any time for yourself. I like to be alone (...) and I also have an urgent need to be by myself and have some distance to the people around me. Hence, I also like to be alone in nature or at sea. It is so good just to get some distance. The buoy and lookout watches are exactly the right places to be. Here you get an opportunity to think about completely different things. Last Monday I had a good time on watch, I reflected on the service on Sunday. It was in fact really OK. I also remembered my teacher at primary school who taught us a new hymn every Monday by writing it on the blackboard. The first thing we did on Monday morning was to write down this hymn. It paid off later in life, because when I go to church I know the hymns by heart. That is a good thing. [On the buoy watch] I memorised the hymns and also thought about what we had been listening to at the service on Sunday. I was so stuck in my own world of thought that I forgot I was on board. It was a bit daunting because I would hardly have noticed if someone really had fallen over board.

This isolated position, detached from all other activities, does have the hallmarks of a boring place. Few things happen, the duty is monotonous, and the cadet is confined to being in one place all the time. Still, however, none of the cadets reported boredom while sitting on this watch. How should we understand the positive evaluations of the buoy watch? And how can this be a place where new motivation and meaning seem to emerge?

### ***Vita activa, vita contemplativa***

In order to take the understanding of the buoy watch one step further, we may get some help from the German social philosopher Hannah Arendt. In her book *Vita Activa*, originally published under the name *The Human Condition* (1958), she makes a distinction between *vita activa*, a life of action, and *vita contemplativa*, a life of reflection. The *vita activa*, understood as labour, work and action, is fundamental to the human condition and for making a meaningful life. But, beside these vital activities in which we normally participate, it is also important to stop and reflect on the meaning of what we experience, the things we do, and the circumstances of which we are a part. This is what Arendt calls *vita contemplativa*. More often than not, our human activities will require a more profound meaning. Boredom in this sense can be an indication that an activity no longer provides any meaning and is therefore regarded as meaningless and boring. In itself, the action and work can be mute, and *without resonance*, as Kierkegaard describes one aspect of boredom. The fact that activities no longer yield any resonance or meaning seems to be an important part of what we have commented on earlier, as David's *mud experience*. He complains about the situation on board:

Work for the sake of work leads to nothing. Reef, haul, furl, take in and set sails combined with an unconscious response to biological needs; eating, sleeping, working, and once more sleeping, working, eating. If you forget your own responsibility and slide into passivity, you will be bogged down in the mud. The routines will never 'be broken by themselves,' you have to act in order to create meaning in it.

Work for the sake of work leads to nothing, it does not give any meaning. Daily routines need to be supplemented by an overarching meaning, goal or purpose. But this position presupposes a detached posture, an interlude, and a step back from both the everyday situation and

demanding activities. In this position of solitude, it is possible to achieve a broader perspective. To focus extensively on one task or detail, even though this makes the detail clearer, also results in a kind of blindness to the complex surroundings of which the small details are a part. It is an interesting paradox that one is never blinder than when most clear-sighted and focused. The problem of this clear-sightedness is that other options, perspectives and alternatives disappear, paving the way for the feeling of boredom: the lack of alternatives and alterations. Often, the cadet sees just one thing clearly, but that is the only thing that remains clear. Contemplation in this respect means to defocus, to loosen one's grip and relax. Contemplation represents liberation from the demanding surroundings that ceaselessly call for our response. The buoy watch represents a place where activities come to a halt, a place liberated from the urgent needs and tasks on the main deck.

Hannah Arendt does not regard lack of activity as a disclaiming of responsibility. On the contrary, reflection and activity complement one another in a profound way. To overcome a situation marked by monotony, repetition, drill, restrictions and rigidity, it is necessary to expand the perspective through such contemplative activity. The result of an expanded perspective appears to be the ability to see new possibilities in a trivial and tedious situation. An imaginative ability makes it possible 'to look *through* the windows of the actual', and 'to bring as-ifs into being in experience' (Greene, 1995, p. 140). Tom, the cadet who established the evening ritual where he, together with a friend, got together around a bag of crisps, comments on this theme:

We have started to see the possibilities in the dead time and consequently there are no dead times left. Instead, we have started calling it a time in which we have an opportunity to do interesting things, or just fun things.

Tom goes on to describe a situation in which the whole quarter gathered to sing a song for each of the other cadets on their watches. The reason for doing this was to make the routine work more interesting for all parties. This informal gig reminds us of the anthem-singing in the rigging related by David. The creativity shown in this example is closely tied to the ability to be playful and imaginative. The imaginative mind does not stop perceiving. Such a mind will continue to see in the situation things that are not, but that could be. In this passive, but still active, mood, they may 'discover all sorts of new perspectives as the curtains of inattentiveness pull apart' (Greene, 1995, p. 137). The creative

force will take the imagined idea one step further in order to realise it. This also seems to be central to Arendt's notion of *vita contemplativa*.

In order to perceive what is not, but could be, one has to establish a distance from the actual situation. Through separation from the actual situation one commences on a path of liberation that enables a person to see a problem from other perspectives. Through this change of perspectives one may see solutions that were previously hidden. One can see threats not perceivable from the original position. This could well be the difference between life and death for a soldier. These dislocations of perspective presuppose both a physical change of standpoint, and internal flexibility. To quote Arendt: 'In order to appear to my mind only, it must first be de-sensed, and the capacity to transform sense-objects into images is called imagination' (Arendt, 1978, p. 85). The process of de-sensation as the first step of imagination requires people to turn their backs – their mental focus – away from ongoing stimulation. This is what happens when a cadet walks to the poop deck to take up his position on the capstan. When working on the main deck, the cadets need to be alert, aware and mindful of each individual task. But this valued relationship to one's actions also has a drawback: the ability to see and be aware of possibilities and solutions may be strongly reduced.

Arendt continues to elaborate on the necessity of imagination as another form of awareness:

Without this faculty [of imagination] which makes present what is absent in a de-sensed form, no thought processes and no trains of thought would be possible at all. Hence, thinking is 'out of order' not merely because it stops all the other activities so necessary for the business of living and staying alive, but because it inverts all ordinary relationships: what is near and appears directly to our senses is now far away and what is distant is actually present. While thinking I am not where I actually am; I am surrounded not by sense-objects but by images that are invisible to everybody else. It is as though I had withdrawn into some never-never land. (Arendt, 1978, p. 85)

When the cadets give an account of what they do during the buoy watch, they tell stories about re-presented people, past situations and experiences. Most of the thoughts seem to be after-thoughts. This position gives room for what Hannah Arendt calls (in line with Plato) *the soundless dialogue we carry on with ourselves* (Arendt, 1978, p. 6).

According to Arendt, it is necessary to maintain the pendulum-like movement between these two vital positions: work and contemplation.

Contemplation in itself is not enough. In order to be a responsible person, one has to engage in and respond to the call from everyday life. This tension is present among the cadets on buoy watch. Contemplation alone is no guarantee of an open and vigilant mind.

### The buoy watch as an ambiguous place

The buoy watch, with its opportunity for reflection, is nevertheless a place of uncertain outcomes. It is indeed a place of contemplation and innovation, but this potential does not necessarily imply positive outcomes. On the contrary, cadets often contemplate in a way that prevents them from returning to the *vita activa*, and their normal duties. Csikszentmihalyi warns against one-sidedness in these issues when he says that *action by itself is blind, reflection impotent* (1992/2002, p. 226). Too much reflection or too much activity destabilises the situation. The positive dynamic is established by the movement of the pendulum between these two modes, the *vita activa* and the *vita contemplativa*. Remaining in either of them is dangerous.

The room of reflection can also be a room of despair. In a position of solitude it may be difficult to keep one's attention up and to prevent one's mind and thoughts from slipping into a downward spiral of negativity. The solitude of the lookout post exposes the cadets to themselves. During the solitude of the watch, they may often encounter otherwise oppressive and depressing thoughts. To be in solitude often makes it difficult to keep unpleasant concerns out of one's mind (Csikszentmihalyi, 1992/2002, p. 169). The threat of depressing thoughts increases because of the absence of entertainment or diversion.

Two paths can be discerned leading from the buoy watch, the first one contributing to a more meaningful understanding of the situation on board and functioning as an empowerment in daily life. The other path acts as an amplifier of negative emotions and feelings. This second possibility is partly what Ann warns against in her interview. She confines her daydreaming to the buoy watch because she has experienced people who return physically from the buoy watch, but remain absent-minded and depressed. The inability to put a stop to dreams and longings and to return to focus on tasks often creates new tensions inside the quarter. The lack of attention is a kind of resignation from the obligations of the community. It makes the situation even more boring for all of the others on duty, and shows that the intermission at the capstan does not just have positive consequences.

To return and to refocus on the situation on board is the crucial point and challenge for cadets on the buoy watch. It is easy to become hung-up, to remain in dreams and longings in a negative way. Some are more focused on counting the days until arrival than on facing current challenges. To avoid this, one has to some extent to forget one's own needs and desires and to show willingness to focus one's attention on the relationships within the group. This shift of focus necessitates openness to the needs and goals of others. To cope with the complex environment on board a sailing ship, one must concentrate on the common tasks and, failing this, chaos lurks and the safety of crew and ship is endangered.

### **Boredom as egocentrism: From situational awareness to ego awareness**

The lesson learned from the buoy watch is that the position of solitude can open a room for important reflection that may help the cadets to actively participate in improving their own situation. But the same position may also cause a lasting and a more problematic shift of focus and attention, for example, from a collective involvement to a more egocentric one. Even though the position on the capstan provides a wide horizon, the perspective might well shrink and become solely egocentric. If shrinking and change of focus take place, concern for the needs and prosperity of others becomes of secondary importance. Boredom thus contributes to a lowering of awareness of the external world, and a heightening of awareness of one's own needs and wants. During a cruise in the Mediterranean some years ago, a bored cadet was observed using his mobile phone, talking to his girlfriend in Norway while he was standing on the helm watch. By doing this, he endangered both the vessel and the crew by taking the ship off course. His vigilance was directed solely at his own needs and longings, not our common safety.

Consequently, boredom may at one and the same time cause isolation of the individual and fragmentation of the community. This insight is also reflected in the interviews. One cadet, Jack, the one who was fond of drawing small details, comments on it when he is asked to describe the relationship between the individual bored cadet and the rest of the ship's company.

My impression is that a bored cadet is very preoccupied with his own situation, mulling over his own boredom and shifting focus from the community and the work towards...the tiredness of existence, and

when that is all that is focused on, everything else also becomes negative. [Bored] people lose some of their perspectives and thereby cease to give their best to the community. They start wearing blinkers and no longer find pleasure or see possibilities [in the actual situation.]

Jack portrays a bored cadet as an egocentric person who accentuates the negative sides of life. This perspective explains to some extent withdrawal from communal interests and tasks. There is no reason to become involved in a situation that is dull and immutable. One is no longer a 'change agent', just a victim who has fallen prey to negative external forces. Jack sees this inner development of boredom as a process of isolation and separation. But in this process there is an unexpected reconnection to the same community that was first abandoned. He describes the next stage thus:

But in addition [to this process of isolation], if enough persons get into this state of mind, the community re-emerges, but this time in a very negative form. A kind of mass hypnosis occurs (...). It starts with one person complaining about boredom, and others follow suit and the whole situation results in a downward spiral causing the whole community to agree with each other that the situation is boring (...). I have discussed this problem with one of the other cadets who complained he was bored and the work so characterised by routine that it gave no motivation or inspiration. My response was to ask him who he was together with, and their understanding of the situation. If they shared the same experience of boredom, I said it could amplify the negative feelings and end up with a cosy community of dissatisfaction, characterised by both a very negative mood and attitude.

The paradox we see here is that the same boredom that first causes isolation and separation can in turn revive the same community. A common shared feeling of boredom can reinforce the cohesion of the group and the impression of being an intimate part of a unified whole. The fellowship experiences a kind of revival through a common understanding that everything is actually boring. But the relief of being in this concord of misery is only fleeting, and, in the end, it will make the situation even more boring. Jack is warning his fellow cadets that this common understanding of boredom will simultaneously strengthen and weaken their cohesion.

Jack's reflections on boredom as self-centredness can help us to understand that boredom does not necessarily cause a reduction of awareness.

Instead, we can talk about a new and intensified awareness, a shift from a situational awareness to an ego awareness. This ego awareness consists of two parallel movements: first a contraction, and then an expansion. The *contraction* results from a feeling of inner emptiness and dullness, but the next stage is that this dull and empty feeling is attributed to the surroundings. The boring attitude casts dark shadows and obscures new opportunities, as well as the needs of others. The only unambiguous thing is one's own interests and problems. As Jack indicates, if no one in the community offers any critical comments on the situation, the situation becomes more critical than ever. The consolation of being part of a relaxed community also reinforces the problem. In rough weather at sea, or in a dangerous military operation, such a collective attitude could easily jeopardise everyone's life. That is why even a superficial and situational form of boredom represents a real threat to the lives and the security of soldiers and sailors.

## Conclusion

It is time to make some concluding remarks based on the different stories told by the cadets about their encounters with boredom. Do we find traces of a quiet despair among them? To some extent, yes, but restricted to temporary situations and experiences. This phenomenon – which we can call situational boredom (Doehlemann, 1992, p. 19), is provoked in part by demanding and tedious routines which threaten to dissolve identity and individuality, in part by the lack of privacy, and in part by a lurking despair at being imprisoned on a ship in the middle of a seemingly infinite and sometimes frightening ocean.

The cadets do not report major problems or experiences of boredom during their upbringing. The question is this: without much practical training in grappling with tiresome situations, how do they cope with the challenge of boredom in this new environment? It seems as if the years prior to their military career give us a clue. The cadets appear to be a relatively homogeneous group with a strong inner motivation to activate themselves and become involved, thus leaving no substantial room for boredom and idleness. Further, their involvement in sports and, for one cadet in particular, farming and caring for horses have helped them to develop personal qualities and skills that enable them to handle situations that might normally be interpreted as boring.

Friendship appears to be another important factor that lessens the negative impact of boredom. But strong cohesion in this context represents an ambivalent strength. Cohesion can also, under given

circumstances, result in collective acceptance and legitimation of being non-caring, *acedia*, lazy and idle. In order to endure and give meaning to the routine work on deck, it seems as if a break from the monotonous sequence of activities, represented by the one-hour-long buoy watch in particular, plays an important role. The buoy watch provides an opportunity for reflection, imagination and contemplation that imparts new dimensions and meaning to the daily activities. This pendulum movement between active involvement on the main deck and a more passive position on the capstan on the poop deck is further scrutinised with the help of Hannah Arendt's concepts of *vita activa* and *vita contemplativa*. This idea of engagement and relinquishment is a part of a hermeneutic process whereby a person is given an opportunity to oscillate between the particular and the general. The alteration of positions establishes a mind-refreshing rhythm, but not without a certain amount of ambiguity. There is no guarantee that the contemplation will always produce a positive outcome; the room of solitude and reflection could also easily be a place of desperation preventing the cadets from re-engaging in activities on the main deck. Traces of situational boredom as temporary silent desperation are found, but the negative consequences of this experience are kept at bay by a relatively resilient and well-functioning group of cadets.

# 6

## Submarine Boredom

The essence of submarine service was silence and secrecy; long stretches of tedium and waiting, interrupted occasionally by brief periods of excitement, terror and peril. From the standpoint of public visibility and wartime recognition, the role of the submarine navy was scarcely glamorous. When a submarine left (...) it disappeared from view.

Rear Adm. Corwin Mendenhall, USN

### **Swallowed by the sea: Life in a submarine**

When the hatchway closes and the water swallows the boat, the submariners return to a universe of their own, a micro-society far beyond the normal structures and rules of life. This detached and isolated community of the submarine is the final stop on our journey through different forms of military boredom past and present. This time, we shall listen to accounts of boredom told, not by novices, but by experienced officers with years of drill and training who have succeeded in becoming commanders of their own submarines. Through four interviews, with three commanders and one second commander, we will get to know how military personnel operating in these most extreme conditions have mastered the challenge of boredom. Together, these four officers represent nearly forty years of submarine experience. They have all worked their way up from positions as lower-ranking officers and crew members to their current position as commander or second commander.

The interpretation of the interviews will be supported by a distinctive historical backdrop. In his book *Submarine Diary. The Silent Stalking of Japan*, Rear Admiral Corwin Mendenhall writes in detail

about life aboard a Second World War submarine. The story is based on his own day-to-day log from his duty as torpedo officer, and subsequently as executive officer, on *Sculpin*, Submarine Squadron 2, part of the Asiatic Fleet and the war against Japan. Both historical and present-day contributions will be scrutinised in light of the historical account given in Chapter 2 and the theoretical perspective developed in Chapter 3.

The question we shall investigate in this chapter is how these high-ranking officers experience and encounter boredom, but also how they are able to lead and motivate their crew under such demanding conditions. This chapter, therefore, adds a pedagogical aspect to the individual experience of boredom. The military leadership's ability to buffer the most devastating consequences of this state of mind and its ability to convert the unstable energy harboured in boredom into a creative and constructive force are of the utmost importance when incarcerated for weeks and even months in a submarine. Under such demanding circumstances, military leadership must be marked by a high degree of both pedagogical maturity and psychological insight. This chapter aims to outline the different aspects of these faculties and reflect on challenges and experiences in the field of submarine boredom.

For those readers who have never been in a submarine, it is necessary to first give a brief description of life inside a steel tube. The actual submarine which acts as the stage for this study is called '*Ula-klassen*', and it is 196 feet long and weighs 1150 tonnes. The crew normally consists of 21 members.<sup>1</sup> Compared with the living quarters on board a surface ship such as *Statsraad Lehmkuhl* described in the previous chapter, the interior of a submarine is extremely cramped, with only the barest minimum of elbow room. This aspect is also reflected in a recruiting folder issued by the Royal Norwegian Submarine Service. 'Because it is so cramped on board you need to adjust to the environment on board', and 'developing good relations with the other crew members is extremely important for optimal operation in all kinds of demanding situations'. If conflicts escalated within such restricted conditions, the effects could turn out to be quite devastating. Technical skills are necessary for a crew member on board a submarine, but not sufficient. The human factor, social skills, is a necessary supplement.

In addition to handling all kinds of personal relationships, the submariners also have a lot of other, day-to-day problems to deal with. The peculiar smell of diesel fuel, cooking odours and human aromas also challenge their ability to cope with the demanding environment.

To endure requires more than just mental capacities; the whole body and all its sense organs are under pressure, not least for newcomers. This is described in Mendenhall's book *Submarine Diary*:

How time changed! On the first few patrols I remembered complaining about needing a bath, a shave, and clean clothes. Not having those luxuries was taken for granted now, and I didn't even notice the submarine's smell. (Mendenhall, 1991, p. 77)

While the submarine is submerged, the showers are closed in order to conserve water. Water is more important for the battery and cooking than for cleaning people. Only the cook has the privilege of taking a shower every second day. Food poisoning could cause a devastating situation; a clean cook is a good precautionary measure against such a situation arising.

As we will see, this obvious difference from ordinary life, which gives the submarine a kind of aura of the exotic, may be a key element in revealing the secrets of how the crew manages to live under conditions that normal people would regard as completely unbearable. It is interesting, therefore, to see how Orrin E. Klapp's (cf. Chapter 3) description of a 'perfect boring situation' is reminiscent of life in a submarine. He refers to a place where one is doomed to stay in the same environment and see the same people, hear the same conversations and see and do the same thing day after day (Klapp, 1986, p. 118). As we will see, the life of a submariner could hardly be described more accurately. In light of this description, a submarine would seem to be the ultimate place to experience boredom.

The whole genre of submarine movies contributes to supporting this impression of the exotic. They generally focus on how claustrophobic, dangerous and restricted life on board can be. A Norwegian submarine commander commented on the role of films in an interview on the official site of the submarine flotilla: 'We do what others see on film. I am proud of it, and it is in fact our job.' We will later return to this impression of the exotic attached to subsurface service. It might be one important key to understanding the submariner's ability to endure boredom.

Motivated by curiosity to understand more about this peculiar life beneath the sea, and also with a wish to unwrap the secret of how the submariners endure life in a 'perfect boring situation', let us immerse ourselves in the subject and listen to what those who have served beneath the surface for many years have to say.

## **Redundancy – a source of boredom, but also of security and safety**

### **Routines and repetition**

When asked to describe everyday life on board, one of the interviewed officers gave the following account:

A normal day is marked by watches and tasks that belong to each position on board. Beside the normal activities, we have a lot of exercises. We have continuous safety drills, often over and over again every day. All this training adds to the basic education we already have. Life on board a submarine is characterised by routines. In our spare time, we play cards, and we also have long and deep conversations.

For the crew, as for the officers, time is continuously filled up with training, repetition and drill. For this commander, even off duty he still has to work, whether he is planning the next operation, participating in a fire drill or writing a report. In the worst case, that is, operating at the bottom of narrow Norwegian fjords, he will need to stay awake for almost 36 hours at a time. But, nevertheless, there are windows of time with room for more enjoyable activities, such as playing games and engaging in personal conversations. The ability to relax and take a break is necessary in order to maintain a high degree of alertness. The healthy pendulum movement between focusing and defocusing, as we found among the cadets on their Atlantic crossing in Chapter 5, seems to be equally important to submariners. A kind of buoy watch, a time-out to recover and slacken one's grip for a moment, appears to be equally crucial for the submariners. Without this perpetual alternation between work and diversion, redundancy will start threatening the ability to stay alert.

This alternating rhythm is addressed by Mendenhall in his vivid account of life aboard submarines during the Second World War. Mendenhall writes (*Submarine Diary*, 1991):

Training periods and submarine qualification sessions were fitted into the schedule. No one had time hanging heavily on his hands. One way or another we were occupied twenty-four hours each day, standing watches, eating, sleeping, working, and learning, with a few minutes sandwiched in for a game of cards, acey-deucey, cribbage, reading, or just talking among ourselves. (Ibid., p. 12)

As Mendenhall remarks, for a submariner 'war consisted of days of dull, monotonous training, preparation, and vigilance, with infrequent periods of intense activity and excitement.' Again, we see how military operations consist more often of waiting than of action. To endure the time of non-action, and the monotony of training, there has to be a kind of rhythm.

Days of dull monotony are also an aspect touched upon by one of the officers we interviewed. He also had experience of peacekeeping operations.

Peacekeeping operations are not always as exciting as they are assumed to be. To get there, you have to endure the long legs of transportation. Normal exercises on the West Coast of Norway are filled with more demanding activities and challenges than being deployed on peacekeeping operations, for example in the Mediterranean.

Hence, such operations do not always meet the expectations of the deployed forces. This discrepancy between expectation, preparation and training, and the situation military personnel often encounter in a war zone or in a post-conflict area, was described in earlier chapters of this book. As focused on by the commander, the paradox is that a real military operation could be more demanding in terms of the problem of boredom than conventional military exercises in peacetime. And also, as clearly demonstrated in Chapter 4 (*Bored in Afghanistan*), being bored in a war zone will normally have more fatal consequences than in an exercise situation. Comparing activities in the tranquil Norwegian fjords with the situation in the unstable and war-ridden area of the Eastern Mediterranean, the commander describes the areas of war and conflict as more boring than the training back home.

The question then arises: how can this problem be dealt with? How does the submarine crew prevent its work becoming habitual to the point of going stale? What kind of 'anchors' can keep the crew from drifting into lassitude and drowsiness when deployed in an area of war or on an operation in treacherous waters? One of the answers has to do with the importance of routines and procedures. Asked what kind of leadership skills are needed to maintain permanent alertness under such conditions, one of the commanders responded:

Alertness is closely connected to the procedures of every watch. You are always thinking through situations in advance. You need to know exactly what to do whatever happens.

*So the procedures and routines help you to stay focused?*

Absolutely! Every departure from the procedures is pounced on very hard. Procedures have to be followed down to the last detail, verbatim. Even the smallest mistake will be commented on. If you slacken your grip on minor details, you will soon slacken your grip on more salient matters as well. Hence, you have to pounce on every deviation immediately.

To reach this point of painstaking accuracy in every single task and on every level, there is just one word that seems to count, *repetition*. Contrary to what we would normally imagine, repetition helps to establish a firm grip on the situation. This seems to be the core element in the commander's statement. To avoid dangerous situations, it is necessary 'to follow the rules down to the last detail'. But repetition in itself is not enough; the commander also adds another ability, namely *foresight*, the ability to see what is likely to happen in advance, and to take appropriate action. This also seems to be an important ability. Hence, technical skills acquired through training and drill combined with situational awareness produce an important flexibility. In addition to the details, it is also necessary to have a *broad perspective* in which different scenarios are mentally prepared for in advance. To know the rules is one thing, but to know how and when to apply them in an emergency situation requires the skills of a master. A good commander knows when to wait and when to act. The rigidity of routines seems to result in an unexpected flexibility.

Repetition appears to contribute to a kind of mental protection that helps the individual crew members and the commander to maintain trust and confidence in an otherwise dangerous and hostile environment. The standardised procedures establish a predictable 'micro-universe' which induces a feeling of mastering and safety. The fact that everybody knows how to act in an emergency situation is a source of security and trust. As stated by one of the commanders:

There is a very high professional standard on board. The demands on individual crew members in terms of knowledge ability are very high. You also know what each of them is capable of. That means a lot. It is easier to trust your men then.

*And underlying this common knowledge are drills and exercises?*

Yes, courses and drill. Everybody must take an introductory course, an S1-course, before they board the boat (...). In addition, you go

through the same thing over and over again when you have first come on board. You also immediately start reading and preparing for an examination for the bronze wing and finally for the gold wing. There is continual repetition of the same basic knowledge; you just expand the field little by little. From the minute you embark on the boat (as a newcomer) you are taken care of by the crew on board, and we therefore also get a general view of the individual's weaknesses and strong points.

According to Michael Raposa (1999, p. 107), the effect of redundancy seems to be a 'source of security and comfort. By doing the same thing over and over again one contributes to establishing pattern and order out of complexity and variety' (Klapp, 1986, pp. 72–3).

### **Repetition and self-forgetfulness**

This is also a point made by Csikszentmihalyi while elaborating on the issues of flow relating to different work situations. He tells a story about an old woman who farms in the Alps, a welder in South Chicago and a cook from China who all participate in activities that are highly marked by redundancy (1992/2002, p. 151), and concludes thus:

(...) their work is hard and unglamorous, and most people would find it boring, repetitive, and meaningless. Yet these individuals transformed the jobs they had to do into complex activities. They did this by recognizing opportunities for action where others did not, by developing skills, by focusing on the activity at hand, and allowing themselves to be lost in the interaction so their selves could emerge stronger afterwards.

His account of people from three different continents, and from three different professions, resembles the situation on board a submarine. The submariners' work is hard and unglamorous, but the crew and the commanders are still able to recognise opportunities, and even to feel a kind of satisfaction through doing the same thing over and over again. There seems to be a paradoxical freedom and creativity amidst the severe limitations of the submarine. One key to understanding this paradox is found in what Csikszentmihalyi calls 'to be lost in the interaction' with the environment. When the hatch closes down behind them, and they are submerged in the depths, the submariners do not allow themselves to become immersed in their own inward sentimental feelings and longings for more than short periods at a time. As long

as they are on watch, all their attention is directed towards the details and tasks to be done. This situational awareness prevents their psychic energy from being absorbed by the 'concerns and desires of the ego' (Csikszentmihalyi, 1992/2002, p. 204). All the officers interviewed in this study focus on this form of self-forgetfulness. As one says, 'you can never allow yourself to be private while on duty'. Private concerns, feelings and thoughts are limited to free watches.

Self-centredness causes energy and attention to be wrapped up in the self, representing a shift from situational awareness to ego awareness. This point reminds us of the findings we also made among the cadets on *Statsraad Lehmkuhl*. The cadets' inability to limit their focus on dreams and longings and to concentrate on the details to be done created a kind of alienation and isolation. To return from free watch or buoy watch required a certain self-forgetfulness and willingness to direct one's attention outwards. This shift of focus represents openness to others' needs and a readiness to pursue common goals. The secret to coping with the complex environment of a sailing ship and of a submarine seems to be awareness of external details and maintaining routines. If one fails to maintain such attentiveness or the interactive relationship with one's surroundings, chaos lurks and the safety of crew and ship is endangered.

In this context, Csikszentmihalyi quotes an interesting passage from Charles Lindbergh's biography in which his epoch-making solo crossing of the Atlantic is described (quoted in Csikszentmihalyi, 1992/2002, p. 205, emphasis added):

My cockpit is small, and its walls are thin: but inside this cocoon I feel secure, despite the speculation of my mind....I become *minutely conscious of details* in my cockpit – of instruments, the levers, the angles of construction. Each item takes on a new value. I study weld marks on the tubing (frozen ripples of steel through which pass invisible hundredweights of strain)... – all such things, which I never considered much before, are now obvious and important....I may be flying a complicated airplane, rushing through the space, but in this cabin I'm surrounded by simplicity and thoughts set free of time.

The situation in the cockpit of a fragile airplane crossing the Atlantic reveals some of the same mechanisms seen both on the old sailing ship and in the submarine; the focus on the details is what counts. The result appears to be the same in all these three settings: the more

one focuses on and masters the details, the more one liberates one's mind from apparently boring situations. Energy and perception are directed outwards and not inwards. This makes it easier to adapt to the circumstances and also to see new and unexpected possibilities in an otherwise tedious and threatening situation. Energy is not consumed by inner feelings of dissatisfaction or anxiety, or by the 'speculations of the mind', to use Lindbergh's phrase. Nor is one's vision narrowed or even blinded by despondent thoughts about what *is not* (i.e. family, friends, the situation back home), but one is able to concentrate on what in fact *is*. Likewise, the submariners also need to turn their attention from the situation at home to the situation on board. In order to return safely, they have to suspend the home for a period. An effective detachment in the here and now is necessary in order to experience attachment later. Only if attention is fully immersed in the present situation can the person become an integrated part of the system. When both perception and energy are focused on the actual situation, one achieves a higher degree of control, and hence of security. Lindbergh's attentiveness to the details (as a kind of good redundancy) provides him with a kind of security.

The focus on the actual situation helps the sailor, the submariner and the aviator to develop and keep a playful, open and creative mind that is able to collaborate with the surroundings, and also to thrive on chaos in an emergency situation. This mind is aware of alternatives and is able to see and use small windows of opportunity when everything else seems to be blocked. This is the explicit aim of the leadership philosophy of one of the commanders:

What I am aiming at is to give my crew and my subordinates such mental strength that they will resist even if the world collapses around them. They need to learn and develop a steadfastness and courage that can keep them going whatever happens. They must learn to turn every negative situation to their advantage (...) if the worst comes to the worst, none of my crew would be left behind at the bottom.

As will be shown later, this goal is based on a very demanding pedagogical philosophy in which loyalty to the minute details, rules and regulations is one of the main hubs of life on board. The point seems to be: to avoid the devastating entropy of boredom, it is necessary to have the present situation as one's focal point. Persistent attention to detail appears to be the means of achieving this goal.

### **Repetition as wordless communication**

Adaptation to these highly regulated activities also seems to have an impact on communication among the crew members. Within the submarine one does not need to discuss the actual rules of action. They are understood and accepted by common agreement; the redundancy seems to give rise to a kind of *wordless communication*. A commander describes communication during an emergency situation on board:

Everybody has taken their correct positions. The situation is very tense and silent. Nobody talks. A nod, a knock, a glance is all that we need. It is wordless communication. We all know what the others are doing and thinking. The only situation in which the silence needs to be broken is when something is wrong.

Redundancy, therefore, helps to make the world under water familiar. The repetition makes it easier to execute a piece of work; it is no longer a strange and unknown act, but a familiar and known one. What is familiar and known appears to increase security and confidence in an otherwise threatening environment. The common concentration on procedures contributes to the growth of knowledge, participation and confidence between the commander and the crew, but also between newcomers and old-timers.

Shortly after the interviews with the commanders, we discussed some of the findings with a monk who had lived in a monastery for 16 years. The similarity between the submarine officers and the monks is striking. Both groups are in a way incarcerated within a very restricted space. The word cloister, from the Latin *claudere*, literally means *a closed space* or room. During his 16 years in a cloister or a monastery in Austria, he could hardly remember having been bored. A second commander with 10 years of service on board his 'cloister' said the same thing: he could never remember having been really bored. Repetition and routines are the main elements both in a submarine and a cloister. As the monk said: routines open a room of freedom. 'Your mind is free because the work to be done is done automatically.' Routines, rituals and ever-recurring exercises enable a separation between mind and body, between the different organs, such as eyes and ears, and the mind. A commander describes the newcomers as appearing to be more 'staccato', their mind and eyes connected in a way that makes it necessary to see and assess one single item at a time. How can it be that redundancy, which for the most part is experienced as boring and tedious, seems to liberate both energy and creativity?

### Redundancy as incorporated knowledge

Repetition can be understood as a conserving activity that stores and preserves important knowledge and insight. Earlier experiences and skills are stored in bodily practices or as habits. Through practice, knowledge is internalised and embodied. This kind of knowledge is learned not only by sticking to the rules or by reading the manuals, but also by participating in training and daily activities. The submarine crew is a community of practice in which an exchange and continuity of knowledge takes place through its transmission to new generations of submariners. For a submariner, the redundancy of practice is therefore a recycling of information from the past to the present. When submarine crews participate in activities that have always been done on board, they gradually unwrap and acquire the silent and tacit knowledge embedded in the routines and procedure. The vital and important knowledge is accumulated and remembered by being a member of a working community. This fellowship is like a community of memory. The redundancy provides continuity, and this is how a community remembers its own tradition and knowledge.

Redundancy, therefore, is closely tied to the formation of habits. Habit is also called second nature. Second nature (Raposa, 1999, p. 106) is (in) formed by practice, repetition, exercises and drill. Learning is not only a cognitive activity; it also engages the body. This is what Paul Connerton calls *incorporated knowledge* (1989, p. 72), knowledge that has become part of a habitual activity, a kind of *savoir faire* which does not require explicit reflection on the performance of the knowledge. It is a kind of habitual memory deposited like sediment in the body. 'Every group will entrust to bodily automatisms the values and categories which they are most anxious to conserve', according to Connerton (1989, p. 102). This is especially true of submariners. The automatism of the work seems to be an important condition for the liberation of the mind. Serious involvement in training and drill liberates the mind from the activity. The body remembers and knows how to operate the system, while the mind is free to ponder upon other questions or problems. A skilled master is not burdened with the task of 'having, consciously, to think about each thing that he has to do' (Raposa, 1999, p. 106). The mind and eye can do more things simultaneously. While the eye sweeps the horizon, the mind is free to think, reflect and imagine different scenarios.

This bodily practice has its counterpart in Connerton's concept of *inscribed knowledge*. Inscribed knowledge is stored in books and manuals. Such knowledge is obtained by reading. First you read through a manual, but then you have to convert the contents of your reading

into practice, into a bodily repertoire of actions. This is what one of the interviewed commanders said in his interview. During the first two or three years on board, he spent most of his spare time reading the submarine's manuals. He tried to memorise all the details required to do a proper job. But, as time passed, the contents of the pages became more and more part of his autonomous and habitual repertoire.

This indicates that the formation and remembering of the necessary skills are closely tied to practice and the bodily integration of knowledge. As a newcomer, you have to read, but gradually the newcomer will be integrated into this community of memory and practice, and he or she will gradually become adjusted to the situation and the demands of the context. The knowledge of the old-timers is transmitted or circulated to the newcomers in the context of shared practice (Lave and Wenger, 2002, p. 49). Learning, embedded and embodied in the redundancy of practice, involves the whole person; it means relating not only to specific activities, but also to the social community on board (*ibid.*, p. 53). Hence, the circulation of knowledge through regulated and repetitive activities also contributes to the formation of a specific identity as a submariner.

### **We few, we happy few, we band of brothers**

Learning not only expands knowledge and skills, it also contributes to the construction of identity. Hence, the strong focus on the necessity of acquiring skills and technical dexterity in order to operate the submarine seems to explain the strong interdependency which characterises this special subsurface community. Everybody is needed and recognised as an important part of the community. Precisely this element, that the individual crew member's contribution is valued, might be a crucial buffer against the feeling of boredom and, at the same time, this appreciation of their worth will reinforce the experience of meaning and belonging. The combination of being totally separated from the rest of the world with the ritualised life on board appears to form and strengthen the *esprit de corps*, a feeling of comradeship, or, to borrow the words of Shakespeare's King Henry V, '*we few, we happy few, we band of brothers*'. In this respect, identity appears to be based on two apparently contradictory forces: separation and integration. For a submarine crew, their separateness is evident. To quote Mendenhall once again, 'when a submarine left (...) it disappeared from view.' They are out of sight and therefore also often out of mind. The submarine is the invisible snake in a summer meadow, as one commander puts it. But the flipside of this invisibility and separateness is a strong commitment and integration

within the group who have become separated. They are a distinctive and unique group united by common knowledge, traditions, symbols, experiences, practices and tasks. These elements unite and contribute to homogeneity and a feeling of solidarity.

The feeling of *esprit de corps* is a frequently recurring theme, both among the commanders interviewed and in various pamphlets and folders presenting the flotillas. To quote from one of the folders: 'Of 4.5 million Norwegian men and women, there are only one hundred submariners...' The website presenting an officer club for submariners called *The Periscope* underlines the same message: 'They are specially chosen every one of them.'<sup>2</sup> This strong feeling of belonging is reflected in the different commanders' descriptions of a normal weekend in port. In fact, all of them tell the same story when asked whether the crowded community on board creates an urgent need to be alone whenever possible. Are they not bored with each other?

Well, you might think that we all need to stay apart when possible, but the fact is that the whole crew very often ends up stowed together in a small hotel room drinking beer.

Instead of being bored with each other, it appears that they feel a very strong internal attachment. Given an opportunity to split up and cultivate individual interests, they stick together as if they were still on the boat. The ritualised life creates a strong cohesion that outweighs the feeling of being tired of the others' presence. Their pride in carrying on an honourable tradition and in being a chosen group of men appears to reinforce the unity between them. On the other hand, this strong bond could also weaken their ability to stay on their own, to attend to individual interests and to raise objections if necessary. A more problematic aspect of cohesion might be too strong a dependency. Even if this is not a theme in the commander's account of life on board, it is worth pondering on.

Is the crowded hotel room also a token of insecurity? Could it be that so-called 'normal life' appears to be more frightening than the irregular, yet still extremely regular, life on board? One interesting question is whether they are able to make use of the abilities they have developed on board the submarine when the hatchway opens up and they return to ordinary life. To reach the necessary level of mastery, they need to endure the boredom of each other's company and of all the repetition, but, when they have first adjusted to the brotherhood and life in the depths, the complexity seems to lose some of its power. To handle all

the details in the confined world of a submarine does not necessarily mean that one easily masters all the details in a normal everyday situation. Could this be the reason why some military personnel return again and again to zones characterised by danger and boredom? The life outside the hotel room, ordinary life, is no longer their first choice. The demanding brotherhood of boredom and danger in the depths represents a preferable place to be.

## **Redundancy as a pedagogical challenge**

### **Keeping up endurance and motivation**

Practice (and repetition) makes perfect, creates a feeling of control and contributes to a strong feeling of unity, but, nevertheless, the same activities are constantly threatened by boredom. The fear of boredom, given that it can result in negligence and lack of awareness, seems to be a concrete threat to security on board. One of the commanders expresses this concern, but adds, 'as long as I can trust my crew members to observe the rules and procedures, we are safe.' Awareness, which is the goal of all this training, is one important guarantee of survival in all kinds of difficult situations. Hence, the commanders face a pedagogical challenge: both to motivate the crew for the training and to avoid the devastating consequences of boredom which is embedded in all kind of redundancy. Asked how he meets the challenge of boredom on long voyages and during monotonous periods of training, one of the commanders answers:

I spend a lot of time motivating my crew members because I know how important it is to have a motivated team. To what degree I succeed in my efforts is another question, but I still spend a lot of time doing it. At least once a week I have a gathering at which I talk to them, try to say some inspired words, boast about them, and, to the best of my ability, motivate them.

Earlier in the interview he outlined the central themes on which he normally addresses the crew during his weekly gatherings.

As commander I frequently talk to the whole crew. I attempt to motivate them for the actual operation we are engaged in, but also to emphasise the fact that to serve as a submariner is a very special and demanding duty. I also appeal to their team spirit; we are the best team, we can manage every situation, we can defeat every enemy,

and we will certainly win because we are so good at doing what we do. Some of the operations we are engaged in are rather extreme, which creates a strong sense of belonging and also of pride because we are able to accomplish such demanding tasks.

The commander motivates his crew by boosting both their self-esteem and their group pride. By underscoring the fact that they have been chosen and are engaged in a special service, he seems to give his crew the impression that they are also an invincible group of men.<sup>3</sup> In exercising his leadership he aims to make the crew strong enough to endure even the worst situation. This is how he formulates his goal:

They must learn to turn every negative situation to their advantage. It is possible for them to reach this level of mastery, but then they need to learn resistance. I have to instil this resistance in them myself. In doing so they might start to dislike me, but I have to cope with such a reaction. I have to surrender something that is good, my wish to be liked, to achieve something even better, that they should be the best officers. The easiest way to be liked is to be kind, but you cannot achieve the same goal by just being kind. You need to bring them to the point where they want to give up.

Pausing for a moment to reflect on his own pedagogical programme, he has to admit that, for some of his crew members, his programme has been too rough:

I have experienced that some of my crew members have not been able to stand the pressure of my training and they have left for another boat. But those who manage to handle it have later thanked me for what I have done. (...) During a party, over a drink or two, some of them have said to me: 'the previous commander was far more decent than you, but in the event of war we would choose you'. In war they go with me, but in peacetime they prefer someone else.

It is interesting to recognise how this commander pushes his pedagogical programme to the limits to reach his goal. During the training, he is their worst adversary. He presses them to the limits of their endurance in order to make them harder and develop their staying power. This strategy carries the risk of conflicts arising and hence of losing their confidence and recognition, but he is willing to pay the price. And he pays it: more of his crew members have left the boat. But this loss of

acknowledgement and confidence is compensated when the remaining crew give him credit and recognise his method of leadership. For him as a commander to know that he is their first choice in the event of war outweighs the problem of being disliked in peacetime. According to his own understanding, he seems to be left with a crew with a very high degree of loyalty. He appears to be a man of 'the old school', hard, intransigent, but fair. Later in the interview he supplements this picture of himself as an uncompromising type in training and action, adding:

In a combat situation there is no room for democracy on board a submarine. But in all other decision-making processes I try to allow more democracy.

In an emergency situation, there should be no doubt that he alone is the commander. But this fact does not prevent him from relaxing his grip in other situations. His confidence in his men is high. Knowing very well how he depends on them to handle difficult situations, he therefore fully relies on them. Because, as he says:

As a commander, you can never put yourself in a position where you have to do everything yourself. You have to take maximum advantage of your team. But to do that, you have to train them to know exactly what to do in an emergency situation. My own decisions are completely based on their reports.

The question is, however: is this the only pedagogical approach if you wish to achieve a high level of trust and cohesion on board a submarine? The picture seems to be a bit more nuanced. Asked whether he had experienced risking the loyalty and recognition of his crew by imposing too much drill and training on them, one of the other commanders answers:

Yes, there will always be a risk of that. Or – of conflict! But – how should I put it? You always want to be as good and professional as possible. To reach that goal you need to train and work hard. But now and then you must stop and think. We are already good at it; we cannot just keep training and doing exercises. If all the training erodes motivation, we will experience a negative effect in the end, even with the best of intentions. You need to find a balance – both ways. If you are too kind and never do the hard things, then they will not learn under any circumstances. The secret is in this balance.

You need to push them to maintain a certain level, but not so much that their motivation is affected.

*In situations of war and conflict you certainly need to know the quality of the crew you bring with you?*

Yes, exactly. You need to satisfy that requirement, but you can always be better. You always wish to be better. The question is: how do I do it, how do I become better? Will more drills do the job? That is not certain. This is what I have learned during intensive periods of training. When the level of performance is very high and everybody is highly motivated, then you know it. But if, in this situation, you continue to do even more of the same, motivation is very quickly lost. At one point you know the routines, but you start failing because you are no longer able to concentrate. In such a situation, it might be more efficient to reduce the training, and just maintain the level achieved.

This commander has also felt the tension between the need for training and the fear of losing the necessary loyalty of his crew. But, in his experience, there are times when less is more, when reducing means maintaining or even strengthening the crew's capabilities. Even though a submariner is trained to stick to the rules and routines and to follow them painstakingly, there appear to be situations when breaking them seems to be required in order to maintain the safety the rules are intended to ensure.

### **Maintaining the rules by breaking the rules**

In the battle against boredom in everyday situations on board, marked by training and monotonous watches, there seem to be times when deviation is needed. In order to maintain the necessary routines, it is as if it is essential to break them once in a while. A sudden change, an alteration, some variety creates a required rhythm, a diversion, a kind of irregular regularity. Mendenhall writes in his diary that, during a patrol west of Java, under conditions which required the crew to stay alert for a long time just waiting without any real contact with the enemy, he proposed an attack just to break the monotony (1991, p. 43):

I tried to interest Charlie and the captain in moving close inshore at night to lob a few shells into the activity there and perhaps generate some excitement, but they didn't like my suggestion.

It is necessary to generate some excitement when work and waiting cease to provide any feedback. This seems to be a problem that all the

commanders in this study have encountered. One of them tells of times when he has ordered some spectacular manoeuvres just to give the crew some excitement. Taking the submarine into very demanding areas, such as a shallow and narrow Norwegian fjord, and hiding on the bottom, always causes a lot of excitement. Doing this kind of unexpected manoeuvre prevents the crew from drifting into a zone of boring redundancy and appears to be what Klapp terms 'good' variety. It corresponds to Klapp's metaphorical maritime reflections on how to avoid the trap of boredom. 'The ship (...) may venture into strange waters of discovery and exploration (good variety) while missing the shoals of redundancy and mistakes of bad variety' (Klapp, 1986, p. 121). Boredom calls for a change of course or a diversionary exploration. Such an initiative might lead to learning and the discovery of new and interesting perspectives. In such a situation, an alteration could be both a force for and a source of more meaningful experience.

### **Boredom and information overload**

Another aspect of a commander's life on board is that he has to listen to the intercom system constantly, 24 hours a day, seven days a week. He can never turn it off. Even when sleeping, he needs to listen. Asked how he is able to maintain vigilance and to distinguish between important information and what might sound more like noise, one of the commanders says that he cannot say for sure. But if there is some information of importance, some kind of irregularity going on, his attention is immediately turned on. He knows the voices of his crew members and can hear when they feel insecure.

*Is this combination of experience and knowledge what we might call intuition?*

Yes, it is. There is nothing else. You can only listen to the conversation on the intercom. (When sleeping) there is no other means of controlling the situation.

*And then, suddenly you know that something is wrong?*

Yes. Roughly speaking I do. Often it might simply be some trifling matter. You can hear when they [the crew] start to become uncertain. Then I pad out of my cabin just to see what is going on. Many times it is just some minor details. I make some small comments before I leave them alone again. As a commander I have all the responsibility, and that makes me more aware. So, even when I am sleeping, I wake up easily.

It is as if there is a continuous vigilance and tension, a spring which is released by the smallest deviation from the normal situation. It may be a kind of intuition formed by years of drill and exercises, and maintained and sharpened by being responsible for both his crew and the boat. In his book *Sources of Power: How People Make Decisions* (1999), Gary Kline describes intuition in the following terms: '*Intuition depends on the use of experience to recognize key patterns that indicate the dynamics of the situation.*' In a situation of information overload, only a trained and experienced ear is able to be cognisant of what is really important. The commander's intuition is the ability to discern between noise and critical information, to identify key patterns in a normal situation. His sensorial ability is a decisive guarantee for the security of his crew in every situation. Interestingly enough, this permanent vigilance does not exhaust him. Despite his watchfulness and his burden of responsibility, he actually sleeps well all the time.

*So the sleep you have is of a different type?*

Yes, or ... I don't know whether it is a different sort of sleep, but I do in fact wake up more easily. I neither feel exhausted nor in urgent need of more sleep when we are in port. And even when I come home, I don't need fourteen days of sleep to recover.

The commander is relaxed in the demanding situation aboard. He seems to combine being relaxed and vigilant at the same time. He is apparently not bored or distracted by all the interruptions during his free watch or while asleep. Even after weeks on duty, he still manages to stay alert. It is as if he is simultaneously focused and defocused, attached and detached. He has taken part in the different drills and exercises hundreds of times; the skills are incorporated in his body. That might be one of the reasons why he performs his professional duties with such seemingly effortless ease. In an emergency situation, he will certainly be able to unleash his energy and all his know-how at the right moment, but in the meantime he seems to relax. He trusts his crew, which means he has no need to intervene all the time. If his intuition tells him that something wrong is about to happen, he 'pads out of his cabin' just to see what is going on, and if everything seems to be under control he just leaves them alone. This might be an over-interpretation, but it seems as if his style of leadership leaves an open room for initiative and responsibility within which his colleagues can act.

This may be a glimpse of how a person in a situation that is regarded as extremely demanding and, from the outside, also rather boring is

still able to endure both the prevailing limitations and the monotony. A combination of relaxation and a mastery of detail and procedures seems to generate the ability to endure, or even to thrive on, boredom. Given a slightly detached style of command and control, it is possible to stay alert for a longer period of time, expending the minimum of energy. His temperance, understood as an acquired distance from all the details and tasks, may also give him the necessary room for reflection. Since his mind is liberated from the details, he can participate in a continuous process of interpretation. Noises and voices are continuously monitored acoustically. As long as the different pieces of information merge into a known and familiar pattern, he hangs back. The individual pieces of information fit neatly into the more comprehensive perception of a normal situation. But, as soon as something jars on his ears, all his attention and focus is fully directed at the situation and he is ready to take action.

So far, the focus of this chapter has been on the abilities of the commanders to handle the internal challenges of boredom, among the crew as well as for their own part. This is certainly decisive, but, as will be demonstrated, still not sufficient to deal with the complexity of boredom. According to the commanders, boredom also has external implications that add to the total picture – and challenge – of submarine boredom.

### **Boredom and invisibility – the quest for recognition**

When confined on board, separated from the rest of the world and not able to see anyone but the other crew members for weeks, it can be a challenge to stay alert and vigorous, and also to maintain one's overall motivation. But, even when these challenges are met, there turns out to be another important question for the commanders, namely the quest for *recognition*. The need to be recognised by society plays an important role for one of the officers, especially in order to maintain his motivation for doing his job. During the discussion on how he motivates his crew, he also reflects on his own sources of motivation.

At the end of the day, one question remains: who motivates me really? But I get no motivation from other people. The pleasure and feeling of gratitude I get from performing this service has been enough motivation for me. However, what I have experienced as a demotivating factor is the whole situation that has arisen in and outside the Norwegian Armed Forces lately.<sup>4</sup> You are left with a feeling of not

being appreciated, that what you do is of no value. No one really wants to have a Defence; there is no need for it. You get this impression when you watch television, but it is also partly reflected in the attitude of my leaders.

The commander turns his attention to external factors. If I understand him correctly, his need for and sources of motivation are to a great extent located outside his work on the submarine. The perceived neglect of the military forces on a more general level concerns him. It impacts on his service as a commander within the military system, and consequently also on board.

It is a pity when you know you have a very good crew who give their best, a crew who in an extremely difficult situation are willing to sacrifice their lives for the country, yet they receive no positive recognition from society. This situation makes me incredibly disappointed. This applies in particular to developments during the last ten years. Earlier, before this development set in, you could be proud of serving in the armed forces. You had a feeling of giving something back to society by protecting our common values.

The commander regrets that his military profession is no longer appreciated or highly regarded by society. Recognition is thus linked to the feeling of meaning and motivation, and, hence, also to the question of boredom.

According to the German philosopher Axel Honneth, recognition is not only a courtesy we owe people, it is a constitutional dependence of humans on the experience of recognition, a vital human need (Honneth, 1995, p. 136). The sense of having nothing of value to offer to society, or that society does not acknowledge one's contribution, threatens both one's dignity and identity. For the commander, marginalised and detached from ordinary life and also needing to keep his achievements and activities hidden, such lack of recognition represents a major challenge to his self-respect and self-esteem. As the commander admitted, 'I have never talked to anyone but you outside the submarine community about what I do as a commander.' The need for social approval in the form of honour and recognition is decisive when risking one's own life on behalf of the nation. Earlier, when this external approval was felt to be present, he felt proud of his profession; now that this support is lacking, the days on board have become more burdensome. It is worth

noticing that the recognition asked for here is not specifically on behalf of submariners, but rather recognition of the armed forces in general. Even though the submariners seem to be proud of being a chosen group or a community with a strong internal identity, the need for external approval appears to be important. The sources of self-esteem are not only to be found on the internal level.

Submarine 'space', marked by separation and distance from ordinary life, is filled, as it were, by society's approval. A lack of acknowledgment, on the other hand, seems to increase the feeling of estrangement and, consequently, also the feeling of boredom understood as lack of meaning. When asked about the sources of boredom, one of the commanders highlights precisely this aspect. The fact that people back home recognise what they are doing is a core element in both motivation and meaning. Hence, a more general disregard of the armed forces is for him a reason to feel bored by what he is doing.

Military boredom cannot be 'solved' merely by developing internal strength or capabilities. There is also a social dimension to this, exemplified by the need for external recognition and support. If this recognition is withheld by those who are in a position to give it, this could result in a feeling of meaninglessness. On the other hand, when it works, such cultural and social approval seems to be an important anchor that can prevent the crew from drifting into the treacherous waters of entropy. Recognition is the tie that fills the space of separation and distance, and increases the feeling of meaning and self-respect.

Lack of recognition, the problem others have in seeing what the submariners are really doing and what they can accomplish, seems to be a challenge to the crew. Mendenhall describes this problem when he states (1991, p. xiv):

From the standpoint of public visibility and wartime recognition, the role of the submarine navy was scarcely glamorous. When a submarine left Pearl Harbour, Australia, Majuro, or, later in the war, Saipan and Guam, on patrol, it disappeared from view. Although listening for radio directions from headquarters, submarines were rarely heard from or seen again until the patrol was over and the submarine was out of enemy territory.

To be appreciated and acknowledged for one's efforts, especially when doing one's best and perhaps suffering heavily under conditions necessary to achieve the goals, appears to be a deep human need.

### **The battle against boredom as a struggle for public recognition**

Recognition and boredom are recurring themes in this book. In Chapter 2, we referred to the memoirs of David Pye (1998), an Australian soldier who served in Vietnam and who described boredom as a major component in his war experiences. For him, war was a lonely and senseless place to be and also a situation no-one really cared about. His descriptions greatly resemble Mendenhall's unglamorous account of maritime war:

Contrary to the perception that many people have about wars, they're not places of excitement and glamour, but places of boredom, long periods of time alone and thinking, places of fear, of bone-weary tiredness, thirst, hunger, frustration, living in rain, mud, dirt, heat, sweat and most of all, wonder at why you're there at all. There are no cameras, glamour or heroics as the movies portray, there is only YOU, doing what YOU have to do, simply because you're there.

This warfare had a devastating effect, especially on the Americans, causing both the use of drugs and 'fragging' (to kill an unpopular superior), which for him was unknown among the Australian soldiers. Pye explains the national differences in terms of what he calls 'the bonds of mateship':

I believe the Australian soldier was much more disciplined and better thought of (by our government) than the US troops. We trained together in Australia, sometimes for a year or more before going 'in country' and we went there as a complete unit. Whereas the US seemed to send a whole bunch of conscripts to Vietnam, then split them up and send them wherever a replacement was needed. They were all individuals and strangers to each other and the bonds of mateship that we had were uncommon amongst the US soldiers.

If this description is correct, both the bonds of mateship and the government's acknowledgement served as a bulwark against the calamitous consequences of estrangement and boredom. According to Pye, the battle against boredom requires at least two major components, an internal and an external form of recognition. First and foremost comes internal cohesion among the soldiers. But external social support, an experienced solidarity from those who had sent them to war, is also important. External recognition appears to form the basis for both self-esteem and a feeling of group pride (Honneth, 1995, p. 128). Through

this experienced support and solidarity from the community at home, the individual soldier knows herself or himself to be a member of a social group that can collectively accomplish things whose worth is recognised by the society to which he or she belongs. One's abilities, knowledge and contribution are valued as important. The experience of recognition creates bonds of belonging, and hence also contributes to strengthening one's identity.

These bonds build on social recognition, and an experience of social belonging can also have moral implications. Mutual recognition seems to have a preventive function in relation to improper behaviour, and it can also be one of the important anchors that prevent a community from drifting towards reckless behaviour. In Pye's opinion, the absence of such bonds appears to be one important reason why the American soldiers started to sink into the muddy waters of drug abuse and fragging.

The feeling of being abandoned by society not only seems to be a breeding ground for boredom, it also erodes moral integrity. Acknowledgment and appreciation contribute to establishing a mutual loyalty to shared values and norms. And, conversely, the feeling of being abandoned seems to have negative results. Lack of recognition may weaken respect for common rules and norms of behaviour. Inner strength and the ability to maintain meaning and motivation largely depend, in this respect, on external conditions.

If we return to the submarine commander we interviewed, it is precisely this feeling of worth and respect that is at stake. The solution to his personal battle against boredom and his motivation to endure his demanding occupation is not merely founded on mateship or mastering his duties as captain, but also on the perceived support and attitude of society back home.

In his unique study of recognition, Paul Ricoeur emphasises the meaning of recognition when claiming that a person who does not experience recognition is like a person who does not exist: 'privé d'approbation, il est comme n'existant pas' (Ricoeur, 2004, p. 280). If the relationship with those who are able to give recognition ceases, the feeling of loneliness and boredom appears to increase. The meaning and value of what we do is produced, not only by the actions themselves, but by social approval and the verdict on what we do.

In light of this perspective, it is interesting to turn to a previously posed question: what kind of boredom are we talking about when dealing with military boredom? In Chapter 5, we mainly found what we called *situative boredom* among cadets on their Atlantic crossing. This was a temporary

feeling of dissatisfaction caused by the situation they found themselves in. As soon as they were out of the situation which caused the feeling of boredom, they were relieved from the unpleasant feeling.

The boredom we encounter among one of the submarine commanders seems to be of a slightly more profound nature, simply because it is related to society's way of regarding his profession. This external view, the other's eye or opinion on who you are and what you are doing, matters very much. To be disregarded by society seems to act as a breeding ground for a feeling of more existential boredom, boredom as a crisis of legitimacy. Why remain in such a demanding situation when society does not give you any credit for what you are doing? Why do it at all? Hence, it seems that what we called *public boredom* in Chapter 2 can impact heavily on the boredom of individual soldiers. Public boredom represents an attitude of disinterest which also influences and affects soldiers abroad. Without a kind of moral support from those at home, it is hard to maintain meaning and the motivation to do one's duty in a proper way.

### **Loneliness and boredom among the commanders**

The quest for recognition also leads us to another aspect of commanding a submarine. The interviews reveal a less discussed problem: *loneliness*. A feeling of loneliness may be the flipside of the coin of the quest for recognition. One commander describes the problem:

As second in command, you are the chopping block for both the crew and the captain. You get complaints and criticism from both sides. There are hardly any barriers holding people back; no one hesitates about coming to you. But this situation changes as soon as you are promoted to the rank of captain. Then you step out of the community, as it were. You are no longer part of the community on board in the way you experienced it earlier. The proximity to and contact with the rest of the crew ceases a bit, and you feel more or less estranged. (...) For some colleagues, loneliness has been one reason among others for resigning their position as captain.

To be estranged from the rest of the crew makes it more difficult to receive attention and recognition and achieve a feeling of belonging. Without this social framework, it seems to be hard to maintain motivation. The former position of being a second commander and a chopping block for all the others on board seems to be experienced as better than the freedom one has as a commander.

To counteract the feeling of boredom and loneliness the commander tries to become involved in the daily life of the crew. As the only one with a cabin of his own, it is easy, and at times tempting, to remain detached. To avoid this, he must deliberately involve himself and bridge the gap between himself and the crew by *agere contra*, doing the opposite of his first inclination. This may, for example, involve playing games, eating together and joining in normal conversations. Once more we see the function of communing round a table, the gathering around meals and games. These daily rituals play a constitutive role in terms of identity and bonds of belonging, but they are also a place for interpretive and hermeneutic activity. If one person fails to find meaning in a situation, other crew members may help to see new and refreshing options and alternatives or to remember old or lost knowledge. This is reminiscent of the case recounted from *Statsraad Lehmkuhl* where two cadets had a ritual which consisted of exchanging crisps and chocolate, through which they helped each other to stay focused on their tasks and to find meaning in situations that otherwise threatened to be incomprehensible. The power of the 'team mind' is also an important element in Gary Kline's study on decision-making. He writes (Kline, 1999, p. 245):

A team can learn its own capabilities and acquire a strong identity and a shared understanding of the situation. Once this awareness is in place, the team can monitor its own performance and select strategies to avoid weakness and capitalize on strengths. (...) This is the power of the team mind: to create new and unexpected solutions, options, and interpretations, drawing on the experience of all the team members to generate products that are beyond the capabilities of any of the individuals.

The commander knows that the performance of his duty depends on being part of such a community. He needs the other crew members' knowledge and experience in order make good and well-founded decisions. The advantage of being an integrated part of the team makes it possible for him to do a job beyond his own capabilities and limitations. The crew's awareness and monitoring can also provide him with necessary feedback on and recognition of his own performance. All these positive elements threaten to evaporate if he becomes isolated in his own cabin. He therefore needs to redirect his attention away from his internal feelings and sentiments of estrangement, and actively become involved in the common activities on board.

The quest for recognition is also at stake for another commander encountered earlier in this chapter. As already noted, his pedagogical programme, marked by a very tough approach, has caused a lot of tension and disapproval. For some of the crew members, his regime has been too tough, and some of them have already left. For the commander, this is to be expected. As he says:

In order to prepare my crew for the worst thing that can happen, I have to renounce my need to be liked by them in favour of an even more important goal, namely to make them as good as possible. When the world breaks down, and we are sitting on the bottom with no chance of surviving, my crew members will still survive. This goal is the most important. If they dislike me, so be it, they will still survive.

This is a commander with a high degree of self-esteem. His need for others' recognition seems to be of less importance than reaching more overarching goals. But in his description we still find an underlying recognition. He says:

During a party, over a drink or two, some of them have said to me: 'the previous commander was far more decent than you, but in case of war we choose you.' In war they go with me, but in peacetime they prefer someone else.

For a commander, it is difficult to achieve more profound recognition. This statement of acknowledgement from his crew members gives him the security he needs to conduct his work. Even though he is willing to renounce his need to be liked by his crew, he still needs to know that he is not alone, if not for the time being, at least in the event of an emergency situation.

### **Seeing by hearing – the ability to see the invisible**

The ability to see what it is not possible to see is perhaps the single most necessary virtue for commanding a submarine successfully. To be unable to see the situation on the surface or the terrain on the seabed and still be able to manoeuvre, to act and react adequately in all situations, is extremely difficult. When submerged, it is like sailing in complete darkness. Even with all the technical equipment available for navigation, the commander still has to collate all the information in his

own mind. 'You cannot look out of the window to see where you have to go,' says one of the commanders with humour. Often the maps are inadequate, and the fairway unknown. To be foresighted and to take precautions, to foresee the different situations before you enter them, and to solve the problems as they arise seems to be the key.

One of the commanders underlines the important ability to transform acoustic signals from the sonar<sup>5</sup> into an imaginary picture of the world outside the submarine.

The signals that the navigator gets from the sonar need to be converted into a picture of the real world. The ability to create a relatively true picture of the surface and the world beneath you from reflected sound impulses alone is of the utmost importance. (...) The picture of the situation is compiled partly from the information from the sonar and partly from your earlier experience.

*So the gap between the electronic or acoustic signals and the actual situation has to be completed or filled in by your own experience?*

Yes, that's right. But if the previous position is far behind and you hardly get any new information from the sonar, then you are driving in the dark. In such a situation, you really need to have good safety margins. If you *then* start compromising your margins, things could easily take the wrong direction (...) you cannot take your bearings by looking out the window. You need to make the most of the information you already have.

To *see* in a submarine context seems to be more about *listening* than about seeing. The sonar operator's ears are the captain's eyes. The acoustic sound waves have to be converted into internal pictures of the external situation in the commander and the navigator's mind. This ability to see the unseen by listening also resembles the commander's ability to decode, utilise and interpret the continuous stream of information passed on by the intercom. The ability to handle a huge amount of information, and to transform what would otherwise be experienced as boring and irrelevant noise (Klapp, 1986, p. 81), seems to be a decisive faculty for a commander.

This faculty may also have other important areas of application. In the relationship between the commander and the crew, the same aptitude for seeing by listening would appear to be highly relevant.

Living so close to each other, it is of the utmost importance to adjust to the other members of the crew and to accept their diversity and

to live with it in such a manner that you see the possibilities instead of being irritated by it.

When one is incarcerated for weeks together with more than 20 other men, with hardly any privacy or any place to escape when life becomes difficult, the ability to transcend the limitations and the annoying peculiarities of others is of vital importance. This is a recurring theme among the commanders when discussing military leadership. Technical skills and theoretical knowledge are just part of what constitutes a good commander. Situational awareness and imagination also appear to play a significant role. One of them refers to another colleague who failed the commanding officer's course for submariners.

My colleague was very good at maths, but he lacked the ability to pull together the individual elements of information into a more extensive picture. Without such an overview it is not possible to judge situations properly, or to make good decisions.

Knowledge and skills are important, but not sufficient. It appears to be a major challenge for a commander to be imaginative and to help the crew to understand why this is necessary.

In Chapter 5, we dealt with some of the same questions and saw how the cadets, during their Atlantic crossing, needed an expanded perspective which enabled them to look through a window and see beyond the present situation. If this is true for the cadets and their well-being on the sailing ship *Statsraad Lehmkuhl*, it seems to be no less true for the submariners. The imaginative mind does not just perceive the concrete situation here and now. Such a mind will see beyond the limitations of the present reality, things that are not, but could be. The submarine crew, and the commander in particular, may 'discover all sorts of new perspectives as the curtains of inattentiveness pull apart' (Greene, 1995, p. 137). Again, boredom as lack of vigilance and situational awareness affects precisely this important ability and weakens a commander's ability to carry out his work in a proper and responsible manner.

## Conclusion

We started this chapter with the question of how high-ranking submarine officers experience and encounter boredom themselves, and how they were able to lead and motivate their crew in confronting the

same problem. Our findings relating to submarine boredom may throw a slightly new light on military boredom in general.

Interestingly enough, the problem of boredom on board submarines appeared to be less prevalent than first expected. That does not necessarily mean that the expectations were wrong. A submarine may still be the ultimate place to experience boredom, but, despite this fact, the submariners seem to have developed countermeasures that enable both the individual crew members and the community on board to endure and handle the threat of boredom in different ways. So what seem to be the main elements in these more or less conscious strategies for coping with this complex phenomenon? The focus on details and procedures is the first striking factor. Contrary to the normal assumption that a surfeit of drill and details would lead to an increased feeling of boredom, and therefore be best avoided, the opposite appears to be the case.

This finding may help us to see a more profound meaning in drill and training in the military context. The secret of this strategy is apparently that, by mastering the details automatically, the mind and energy are thus liberated from the same, otherwise boring, details. The liberated and open mind is free to adapt and interact with the ever-changing surroundings and circumstances. The mastering of the details also results in a more relaxed style of leadership. Through years of training and drill, the commanders seem to have developed a kind of intuition that makes them able to monitor the situation through the intercom system even when sleeping.

Beside the effect of the regulated life on board, the personal faculties found among the commanders appear to be marked by endurance, openness and the ability to envisage new possibilities within a confined situation. This aptitude for becoming actively involved within the confines of reality is most valuable in a military context and also seems to be a key in the struggle to endure days of boredom. But the clues to understanding how these commanders handle the underlying threat of boredom are not found in the submarine alone. There is also an external element that plays a decisive role, namely social recognition of their profession. This recognition seems to strengthen the motivation and loyalty of the commanders in the performance of their professional duties in a demanding and detached situation.

# 7

## Enduring Boredom – But How?

### Introduction

The identification and interpretation of enduring and virtually omnipresent boredom in war and peacekeeping operations has been our main focus in this book. The question we will raise in this last chapter is this: how can military personnel endure and cope with boredom? As clearly shown, even in its simpler form, boredom can endanger a military operation. Ignoring this problem is poor military leadership and can easily cause tactical and strategic problems. Thus, these questions also have implications for military leadership and the way prudent officers and their personnel deal with this challenge. Understanding military leaders must know some of the destructive and constructive aspects of boredom, as well as its causes and consequences.

As shown in Chapter 3, boredom is a highly complex phenomenon. The ambiguity of boredom, its causes and sources, makes it necessary to take a wide-ranging approach. Simple solutions without a deeper conceptual understanding could reinforce rather than solve the problems. According to Doehlemann's classification of different levels of boredom, its intensity and seriousness will vary (Doehlemann, 1992). The first two levels – situational and intolerable boredom – are caused by a more transient, undesirable situation. To create a buffer against this kind of boredom will require different measures than if one is facing a more chronic and enduring kind of boredom, which tends to colour servicemen's whole life and is far more difficult to come to terms with. Even though the causes and seriousness of these different forms of boredom may vary, the effects appear to be similar: a lack of psychological involvement, alienation, dissatisfaction, lack of awareness and a feeling of meaninglessness. These consequences can be described as an individual incapacity to interpret or

perceive a situation, an object or a task as meaningful, or can be ascribed to external causes, for example to a defect in the social system. In the first case, the person him/herself is responsible for being bored; in the second, the circumstances are to be blamed.

Our study has shown, through both historical and more recent examples, how entertainment in different forms has served as an attractive antidote to boredom, helping to prevent or avoid negative or even devastating consequences. But can it really help? It is time to take a closer look at the entertainment strategy in light of the battle against boredom.

### **Maintaining by entertaining – the meaning of social placebos**

As shown in Chapter 2, entertainment in war and conflicts ranges from playing cards, reading books, writing letters, all kinds of physical activities and even regular ‘front theatres’ during the First World War, to electronic and digital activities in recent operations, such as online computer games, surfing the internet, Playstations and watching films and news on satellite TV. As the chapter on boredom among soldiers in Afghanistan concluded, military personnel have literally taken along more devices, films and games than a normal boy’s room would contain back home. In this respect, the zone of war is also a zone of entertainment.

Aristotle was one of the first to observe the purging effect drama had on people’s emotions. Under strain, we all need a break, a shift of focus, something that can relieve stress and the inherent tension of demanding situations, not least during times of war. According to Aristotle, diversion (literary: the ability *to turn* focus and attention in another direction) has a stabilising effect. The dramatic elements in games, music, sport, theatre etc. evoke feelings of laughter, anxiety, pity or sorrow, with a resultant revitalising effect on the spectators and participants’ inner lives. Chills, thrills and excitement help to relieve emotional tensions and to make it easier to forget an otherwise intolerable and tedious situation. What provides emotional excitement also seems to provide relaxation. Diversion appears to avert or prevent a situation of a more serious nature. Without a temporary distraction, a moment of forgetfulness, life would be less tolerable. Entertainment eases the burdens of life, and it has always been a means of refreshment from fatigue and boredom. The original meaning of entertainment catches this point. The old French word *entretenir* means *to maintain*, to hold together.

Entertainment helps people to stay put under pressure by focusing on something more enjoyable. Temporary relief makes it possible to endure frustration and strains in everyday life.

Orrin E. Klapp (cf. Chapter 2) uses the word *social placebo* to describe the use of entertainment to cope with emotional tensions such as boredom. *Placebo*, a medical word, is closely tied to the power of imagination. If a person believes that a medicine has an effect, then it has one, even if there is no proven therapeutic effect of the pill itself. A placebo works fully only if the patient is deceived. The cure depends on the patient's own faith and expectations, supported by the physician. The patient is cheated, but so what? If the patient experiences a better life, why not use it?

Klapp applies the placebo effect to the social context. Institutions that do not function well can use different kinds of social placebos to console their members in a compensatory way for something that is wrong or lacking (Klapp, 1986, p. 134). Forms of entertainment used as social placebos have traditionally included gambling, big sporting events, carnivals, music etc. Klapp also includes chemical placebos such as alcohol and drugs. The use of such remedies helps to relieve tensions that otherwise threaten the stability and balance of the system. It can also help to avert a crisis of meaning by taking people's minds off real troubles, and reducing awareness of negative sides of life. The relevance to the problem of military boredom is obvious. Different forms of amusement and entertainment break the monotony and give temporary relief from unpleasant situations. Entertainment helps people to flee from boring reality into a world of leisure and pleasure, imagination and fantasy. It allows people to escape from ordinary restrictions and regulations.

Entertainment can serve as a safety valve in a world marked by ubiquitous boredom. Soldiers' demand for entertainment is therefore both understandable and legitimate. This is still the case even if the frustrating situation itself does not change. As with all other effective placebos, the changes take place in the spectators' minds. Entertainment diverts the soldiers' attention, helps them to change focus and gives them a break from their monotonous lives in camp. Switching between hard and demanding work and entertainment creates an enriching rhythm in life. These rhythmic changes seem to be a key element. The rhythm makes it possible to 'sail windward' towards what, according to Klapp and his maritime metaphor referred to in Chapter 3, is a rewarding and meaningful direction. A military leader who is responsible for the well-being of his or her men and women must support his personnel by providing some form of entertainment. This is in line with Klapp's

*meaningful variety*, in which games of chance are relevant elements (see Figure 1, Chapter 3).

It is important to note, however, that the term entertainment also has more complicated and problematic dimensions. As we noted in Chapter 2, Philip Caputo's vivid account of his war experiences in *A Rumor of War* tells a much darker story of amusement and diversion. *La cafard*, the French word used to describe a deep and more profound feeling of existential boredom that was caused by the extreme conditions in the jungle of Vietnam, was a breeding ground for a more unrestrained use of sex, drugs, gambling and alcohol. These activities produced a temporary purifying result, but the long-term effect contributed to the pervasive degeneration of self-respect and human dignity. Instead of improving the soldiers' lives, the entertainment became an important part of their downfall. It may be the case that Caputo's story is a more accurate description of how amusement and diversion have been practised in wars throughout history. Nevertheless, the stabilising effect of entertainment is fragile, and not long-lasting. Blair Talley, journalism student at Doane College in Crete, Nebraska, blogs about his experiences while on deployment in Iraq:

There's just nothing to do when you're not working! Most of us try to entertain ourselves with video games, movies, books, card games or working out, but we all reach a certain point when none of it holds our attention or interest any longer ... My roommate and I are both in the same trouble. We're just thinking of warning our neighbors to look out when we run out of movies and TV seasons to watch! You know what they say ... 'Idle hands and the Devil's playground'.<sup>1</sup>

At some point, entertainment also loses its purging and refreshing potential and turns into *boring redundancy*. Even though the different cures for boredom have become more and more sophisticated, people do not seem to feel less bored. The cure has to be stronger and stronger to have any effect. Where productive occupation and mere distraction will not suffice, there is surely a problem. What is to be done, then, when entertainment no longer has any effect and turns into boring noise, and the situation remains dull and uninteresting? Even though entertainment represents a justified and important strategy in the efforts to cope with boredom, this strategy alone is not sufficient. To use entertainment as the only source of motivation and comfort is to navigate blindly into treacherous waters, as Caputo has so clearly demonstrated in his Vietnam memoir. Used without deeper reflection,

the cure could increase the problem by hiding both the sources and effects of boredom. Entertainment can never fill or kill the feeling of something being missing, or satisfy the hungry heart, to quote Bruce Springsteen. For a while, military leadership can handle the tension of boredom through entertainment, but it will fall short in the long run. As Blair Talley so clearly states, entertainment is easily caught up by the monotony one tries to flee from. It gives instant gratification, but no lasting satisfaction.

Diversion is important, but also problematic in another aspect. It can easily divert military personnel's attention from important issues that need to be changed in order to improve or master the total situation. Entertainment eases the pain, but the situation remains the same. Entertainment prevents structures from changing and leaves the disagreeable elements unsolved. A lot of medicine contains a little poison; in small amounts it has a curative and revitalising effect, but too much of it kills you. The same seems to be the case for entertainment as a cure for boredom; moderate use has a good and healthy effect, but too much threatens to spoil it all. Knowing this damaging effect of entertainment is important to a military leader. Entertainment can never compensate for poor leadership or active involvement in the ordinary lives of military personnel. To fob off soldiers with entertainment could cost a military organisation dearly.

We now switch focus from an external perspective with the focus on the role of entertainment to a psychological one. What kinds of attitudes or skills are needed to live with boredom in a military context, and to even turn stressful and negative circumstances to advantage? This is closely linked to the fact that the experience of boredom and meaninglessness is a sign of individual failing rather than a failing or a defect of the circumstances or the social system itself (Gemmell and Oakley, 1992, p. 360). The question is how to develop attitudes that help individuals to cope with and endure boredom in addition to moderate use of entertainment.

## **Hardiness and boredom**

Studies of military personnel in various stressful circumstances, on combat missions and peacekeeping operations, have found that there are specific personal characteristics that moderate or serve as a buffer against negative consequences of stressors such as boredom, as emphasised in Chapter 2 (Bartone, 1999; Bartone and Adler, 1999). The term *hardiness* is used to describe these particular characteristics, which not

only reduce stress, but also help to develop skills that benefit the individual as well as the whole organisation. From a psychological perspective, hardiness is perceived as consisting of three major components: *commitment, control and challenge* (Maddi, 2002, p. 174). These three hardy attitudes serve as a source of resistance in the encounter with stressful life events. Individuals with this specific personality structure are not merely able to passively resist; they are also able to engage and interact despite the boring situation. Involvement and awareness make it possible to transform a boring situation into an opportunity. New meaning is established and also a new motivation for further action, which is especially valuable in military contexts. Let us therefore take a closer look at the three characteristics of hardiness.

*Commitment* is understood as a predisposition to become involved with people, things and contexts rather than remaining detached, isolated or alienated. It is also related to a belief in one's own values and experiences. To engage in life is the opposite of a passive and powerless attitude. Committed people also have the ability to look beyond themselves and their own interests. These personal traits imply self-forgetfulness and a feeling of responsibility for helping others. Instead of staying outside waiting, one engages in projects and possibilities. It represents a kind of mindfulness, an ability to fight a situation by acting, and not taking refuge in diversions or other social placebos.

*Control* refers to the belief that, instead of sinking into passivity and powerlessness, one has control or influence over outcomes going on around oneself. The feeling of control is also a critical component in the promotion of resilience, the ability to endure chaos and complexity. It is also interesting to note that hardy individuals take an optimistic approach to life. The feeling of optimism is correlated with perceived control.

*Challenge* signifies wanting to learn from one's experiences, be they positive or negative. Instead of playing safe, one is willing to take risks. New experiences are interpreted as meaningful and interesting. What does not kill you makes you stronger. This attitude reflects the notion that changes are more an opportunity than a threat to personal security. Changes can contribute to personal growth and development. Instead of avoiding new challenges, one engages with them freely and actively. Failures are to be expected, but it is possible to profit from them. Mistakes provide new insight and understanding, and help people to do things better in the future. One's own contribution is important and valuable; it is therefore important to actively take part in personal relationships.

These interrelated attitudes are called the 3Cs of hardiness. People with all three of these stress-buffering variables seem to deal with, for example, boredom more easily than those who lack these characteristics. As a context-specific adaption of psychological hardiness, military hardiness helps us to understand how commitment, control and challenge can help to serve as a buffer against or prevent the negative consequences of boredom. As stated by Maddi (2007), 'hardiness emerges as especially relevant to military settings, due to their being inherently stressful and demanding on the personnel involved' (Maddi, 2007, p. 67). Hardiness refers to a kind of courage to remain patiently in painful and wearisome situations. By being patient, one can achieve more than by using even military force. Temperance or patience is a virtue which helps soldiers under strain to 'think through and carry out necessary coping and social interaction efforts' (Maddi, 2007, p. 63). The restlessness and impatience that mark the state of boredom can be a valuable resource in resolving conflicts and problems, but such attitudes can just as well be major obstacles. To know when to act and when to stay back is important to soldiers as well as military leaders. The ability to wait opens the possibility of new solutions, or provides an opportunity to consider other, more peaceful options. In a military or a peacekeeping operation, hardy individuals will certainly handle strain and boredom more adequately than others. Hardiness represents an important counterforce in facing tedious times.

### **Military-pedagogical implications for enduring boredom**

Are we dependent on selecting people with hardy attitudes and skills, or could military leaders help to develop such attitudes? According to Maddi (2002, p. 176), there are studies that provide an empirical basis for assuming that hardiness can be developed. In fact, the results suggest that 'hardiness is learned, rather than inborn' (Maddi, 2007, p. 67). One important element in such a development is social support, especially from the leadership. If people are encouraged by their leader to believe that they can turn adversity into opportunity and they observe themselves actually making this happen, it will stimulate a feeling of mastery and control. Feedback from the leader and the organisation is needed to deepen hardy attitudes. A hardy organisation will contribute to develop hardy individuals. As shown in Chapter 2, cohesion, or the bonds of mateship, can function as a bulwark against the erosion caused by boredom. One of the main goals for military leadership is,

therefore, to encourage both horizontal and vertical cohesion. Vertical cohesion describes increased trust and social bonding between leaders and subordinates. Horizontal cohesion is a kind of social bonding that develops among peers who share tasks and collective activities in a unit (Bartone and Kirkland, 1991, p. 396). This process fosters an acceptance of the leaders' goals, standards, and values, but also such crucial components as competence, caring, respect, and commitment.

Relevant training and drill improve competence and cohesion, as shown in the context of submariners in Chapter 6. The value of daily training and routines should not be underestimated. On the contrary, maintenance of procedures is essential in both garrison and battle. The leaders are at once guides, teachers, and critics. A military organisation low on cohesion will be less able to cope with stressors and demanding surroundings. Paul Bartone (2005) focuses on this problem in his study of prisoner abuse in Abu Ghraib, where he also found boredom to be one important explanatory variable for the devastating consequences. Combined with ambiguity, uncertainty in the chain of command, *laissez-faire* leadership and a lack of training and discipline, this mental element undermines the soldiers' ability to give meaning to their activity and to ward off the negative consequences of monotony and lack of action. These findings underline how important it is for military leaders to have a theoretical, as well as a practical, understanding of both the causes and the consequences of boredom.

A leader's main task in this respect is to expand and deepen perception and to mobilise coping strategies. The prudent leader should lead his or her charges out of the mire of boredom by suggesting alternative ways of thinking and acting when encountering tedious times. According to Michael Raposa, all experience is interpreted experience (Raposa, 1999, p. 3). Through cognitive motivation, one can be stimulated to commit and engage in a situation, instead of letting the negative experiences block the positive alternatives. Cognitive elements are an important part of developing control and commitment. In this respect, the military leader is both a sage on the stage and a guide on the side – a sage who can conceptualise the different aspects of boredom and at the same time be a living role model, not only in words, but also in deeds.

In addition to cognitive and interpretative elements of coping with boredom, Maddi (2002, p. 63) also adds a more practical element. He counts physical exercise as part of the development of hardiness. Training and drill provide a feeling of control. This is what Klapp calls good redundancy. Research indicates that repetition *per se* does not necessarily result in boredom (Gemmell and Oakley, 1992, p. 359). This

is also a lesson learned from the study of the submarine officers. For them, training and the continuous drilling and repetition of procedures relieved their minds and gave them an opportunity to reflect on life and tasks more freely. Repetition can be a source of boredom, but also a source of security and comfort, as appears to be the case for the submarine crew. As seen in the previous chapters, training and working out are one of the main activities, not least in peacekeeping operations. Physical and mental fitness seem to prepare the ground for mastery and meaning, and for commitment and control, the main attitudes in the concept of hardiness.

To sum up, the following implications can be drawn for military pedagogics and leadership. Acquisition of techniques and skills through training and drill, combined with cognitive learning about the nature of boredom, its sources and causes, plays an important role in preparing military personnel to meet the challenge of boredom. Mutual social bonding between leaders and soldiers caused by the fact that soldiers perceive their leaders as dedicated to their success and welfare, in which entertainment is an important element, will give necessary help to cope with the negative effect of boredom. Not only time and strength but also their creativity and intellectual faculties will, as a result of mutual trust and respect, be devoted to the organisational goals, either in garrison or at the battlefield.

### **Generative boredom – boring times as a prelude to creativity**

Boredom is often only recognised as a problem, as is also the case in this book. We will now change the focus somewhat and show how boredom can be a positive source or stimulus for action, thought and creativity. The hardiness perspective makes it easier to understand a generative perspective on boredom and how this annoying feeling can be a prelude to creativity. To endure boredom means not only to passively resist, but also to actively engage in turning stressful or unpleasant circumstances into opportunities. Entertainment takes the mind, awareness and energy off the realities of life; hardiness pulls in exactly the opposite direction. Hardiness is a kind of courage needed to grow and develop in interaction with the real world, rather than denying and avoiding it (Maddi, 2007, p. 63). Boredom is pain caused by unused power, energy with no outlet and repressed feelings. The tranquil surface of boredom stores unused energy ready to be used by persons with a hardy attitude. The annoying feeling of boredom is a source of power for those who

are aware of it. In addition, the emptiness and slowness so prevalent in boredom allow room for making and creating. The most creative people seem to be those who can tolerate boredom and lack of stimuli for a long period of time. This emptiness turns into a valuable resource that enriches life because it opens the door to reflection and imagination. This matches our main findings in the chapter on 'Voyage boredom' and the experiences of sitting buoy watch. One of the cadets gave an accurate description of the enriching effect of emptiness and solitude on the buoy watch.

As I see it, it is so important to have some breaks in life. A lot of things are happening all the time on board. It is so good to have an opportunity to take the buoy or look-out watch. Then you can simply sit for an hour, just gazing at the horizon and thinking other thoughts. Breaks are so important. But if a break stretches out in time, then you start getting restless again and you need to make up something.

The slowness makes it possible to be in tune with oneself. If time is filled up, there is neither room nor time for anything else. Instead of pulling back in dissatisfaction and alienation, an employee with the will to influence and participate in further changes will recognise this situation as an opportunity. Such a creative approach is also found among the soldiers in Afghanistan and the way they cope with boredom. As one of them expressed it:

If every day is not filled with positive things, they are at least normally filled. Together with the team, you also have to make something enjoyable out of what is boring. Some days are more boring than others, and some more interesting than others. But when, occasionally, there is hardly anything interesting happening, or what I am doing is extremely boring, I try to find something fun to do. If we are doing something together, we try to talk together, especially about something positive or funny. We may invent a 'game' as we are doing those other things. If I am alone, I try to make something more out of what I am doing. I try to do it another way, to make it more enjoyable, or to make myself more concentrated. Otherwise, I try to think positively. Everything goes more smoothly then. It happens, of course, on duty, hating intensely, that you just feel sorry for yourself, but this only causes time to pass much more slowly.

This soldier displays creative and proactive behaviour rather than passivity and avoidance. Activity, not passivity, is seen as an individual

responsibility – with social consequences – to avoid boredom. This can be seen as a matter of both *transformation* and *innovation*. Transformation represents activity deliberately chosen to alleviate boredom by changing the situation for the better, while innovation is characterised by inventing something new and interesting that may create satisfaction. Both elements are present in this soldier's strategy. He does not entrench himself against boredom, as Nietzsche puts it. Instead of succumbing to the boring forces, he stands up and fights back. This hardy attitude makes it 'possible for him to drink the strongest refreshing draught from his own innermost fountain'. He resembles what Maddi calls a 'hardy employee' who engages in building patterns of interaction with significant others that emphasise mutual assistance and encouragement (Maddi, 2007, p. 63). The ability to turn obstacles into opportunities seems to be a trait of hardiness in this soldier's personality. This example also demonstrates Doehlemann's fourth level of boredom: *creative boredom*. The struggle to get out of a boring situation can create positive experiences and also lead to constructive, social activities.

Should boredom always be alleviated? If boredom were only regarded as a negative phenomenon, the answer would be yes, but, with a more complex understanding of the phenomenon, the answer is not so simple. As a prelude to creativity, one should not always try to alleviate boredom. To quote Nietzsche (1974, p. 108):

For thinkers and all sensitive spirits boredom is that disagreeable 'windless calm' of the soul that precedes a happy voyage and cheerful winds. They have to bear it and must wait for its effect on them. Precisely this is what lesser natures cannot achieve by any means.

The disagreeable 'windless calm' precedes a happy voyage. But, in order to experience the positive effect of boredom, one has to wait and endure the pain of waiting. Once more, boredom and the joy of creativity are closely related to the attitude of hardiness and resilience. The most creative people seem to be those who tolerate and endure uncertainty and boredom for long periods of time. A hardy soldier will see a boring situation as a challenge, a situation in which it is possible to take control, and to engage in order to alter the circumstances to make it a more rewarding place. Innovation and creativity normally require some kind of boredom from which to break out (Hübner, 1991, p. 34). A soldier with no time for him/herself, for rest or to be alone, will run into problems as soon as the surroundings cease to stimulate or entertain.

Boredom can provide a positive stimulus to thought and creativity, say Belton and Priyadharshini (2007, p. 579).

Studies of the psychological significance of boredom and its implications for learning and development provide us with important insight that is valuable for any military leader. This knowledge also tells us that constant access to television and electronic entertainment may reduce opportunities for developing imaginative and reflective capacity (*ibid.*, 588). It may take a little bit of tolerance of an initial feeling of boredom to discover a comfort level despite not being engaged and stimulated every second, says Jerome C. Wakefield.<sup>2</sup> Both boredom and loneliness are doorways to something better, as opposed to something to be abhorred and eradicated immediately.<sup>3</sup> The entertainment strategy could easily be part of such an eradicating force. If military troops are no longer trained to tolerate these empty moments without filling them immediately, their ability to cope with boredom, and to thrive on it, is dramatically reduced.

The external causes of boredom could be eliminated, but the inner capacity to endure boring conditions and to take the advantage of them could at the same time be reduced, or, even worse, not developed. Always receiving stimuli from the outside, always waiting for someone to entertain and serve me makes me dependent and superficial. Strategies for reducing the negative effects of boredom are always double-edged. It is far easier to remove the symptoms than to cure the 'sickness'. When the boredom is alleviated, the space for imagination and reflection shrinks. The fear of boredom reduces the inner capacity for creating meaning. The breakdowns – the chaos and complexity – help people to activate their own inner strength and abilities. To remain and tolerate these unsatisfying pockets of time is a precondition for creativity. To flee from emptiness is to flee from one's own possibility of re-establishing a new and more profound stability in life. Mastery and control are achieved through these efforts that are generated from the inside. Does good boredom exist? Yes, boredom can rightly be conceived as being the prelude to creativity, and loneliness as the prelude to engaged imagination. If military troops are no longer trained to endure moments of waiting, quiet desperation and emptiness without instantly filling them, these doors of opportunity and creativity may be hard to open.

# Notes

## 2 Boredom in military history

1. Available at [http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/The\\_Idler\\_\(1758-1760\)](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/The_Idler_(1758-1760)) (accessed 2 August 2006).
2. However, desertion is a rather complex phenomenon. See Rose (undated) where fear of death or injury in battle is mentioned as 'obvious factors', whereas 'less dramatic' factors include: simple discontent with military life, homesickness, boredom with garrison duty, personal or financial problems. Clearly, some of these factors are culturally determined, and surely not all would apply in the same way in a nineteenth-century context. During the American Civil War, the Army of the Potomac alone had 85,000 desertions. Many of them would desert after the winter ('snowbirds'), since travel and jobs in the mines or at the transcontinental railroads were more available.
3. For an overview, see Koury, 1987, p. 107.
4. <http://www.cr.nps.gov/museum/exhibits/gettex> (accessed 27 May 2005).
5. For an interesting interpretative study of the social dimensions of card games within a military unit, *in casu* an Israeli unit, see Feige, 1991. He shows how card games had the potential to shift the power balance between privates and officers through spectacular card games attended by almost the entire unit. This may be interpreted as one rarely observed dysfunctional aspect of card playing.
6. Quoted by Christopher Ridgeway in his introduction to the 1984 edition of *Death of a Hero*.
7. No. *stemningsreligion*; he also found an 'expeditionist religion' among the soldiers.
8. [http://www.thetimecapsule.org.uk/TimeCapsule/EC0615B2C01D47D5BBFB64A83A759C87\\_40E350C7022C43539E6B028B3E841AB2.htm](http://www.thetimecapsule.org.uk/TimeCapsule/EC0615B2C01D47D5BBFB64A83A759C87_40E350C7022C43539E6B028B3E841AB2.htm) (accessed 27 May 2005).
9. Holmes, 1985, p. 229, a quote from John T. MacCurdy, *War Neuroses*, 1918.
10. *The Journey Not the Arrival Matters: An Autobiography of the Years 1939 to 1969*, London: Hogarth Press 1969, pp. 9–11, quoted in Fussell, 1989, p. 76.
11. Gaddis Smith, *Foreign Affairs*, January 1978.
12. See Healy, 1984 (chapter 1), who traces the history of the 'semantic smoke-screen' from the acedia of the desert fathers up to our ambiguous notion of 'boredom'. See also Svendsen, 2005, chapter 2 ('Stories of Boredom').
13. According to Sergeant Tony Meserve (Sean Penn) in the film *Casualties of War* (1989), Stuhldreher, 1994.
14. Merle Miller, *Plain Speaking: An Oral Biography of Harry S. Truman* (New York: G.P. Putman's Sons, 1974), p. 48. Quotation taken from Peters, 1975, p. 473.
15. The importance of resilience and hardiness in coping with operational stressors in peacekeeping missions has also been demonstrated in another study by Bartone (1996).
16. See Healy, 1984, p. 20.

17. In an article on the topic, Gerard DeGroot of St Andrews University in Scotland has explored the issue of gender difference in peacekeeping operations (DeGroot, unknown date). He maintains that 'women might indeed make a difference.' In an interview that is paraphrased in the article (which was published on a website that promotes women military personnel as UN peacekeepers), Ingrid Gjerde, a former commander of a Norwegian rifle company in Bosnia, is said to hold the view that 'when the men in her unit acted provocatively to a stressful situation it was often because of their impatience for action. The women, by contrast, were better able to deal with boredom that characterises most peacekeeping operations.'
18. 'American Soldiers Shoot Dogs Out Of Boredom!'; <http://www.dumpalink.com/post/1111394478> (accessed 27 May 2005).
19. 'Books of the Times: A Warrior Haunted by the Ghosts of Battle', see <http://query.nytimes.com/gst/fullpage.html?res=9904EEDD163DF93AA25751C0A9659C8B63> (accessed 23 May 2006).
20. 'Wisconsin base bursting with GIs: Boredom engulfs troops awaiting Iraq deployment', *Chicago Tribune*, reportage by John McCormick, 25 March 2004. Available at <http://www.globalsecurity.org/org/news/2003/030325-wisconsin01.htm> (accessed 23 May 2006).
21. Anonymous report, first published in the Northern Echo on 22 January 2003, available at <http://archive.thisisthenortheast.co.uk/2003/1/22/106887.html> (accessed 23 May 2006).
22. Ibid.
23. <http://www.pbs.org/wgbh/pages/frontline/shows/company/interviews> (accessed 8 March 2005).
24. Holmes, 2006; subsequent page references in parentheses in this section refer to this book.
25. Interviewed 25 August 2005 in a programme called 'Fresh Air', available at <http://www.npr.org/templates/story/story.php?storyId=4814647> (accessed 26 July 2006).
26. <http://www.telegraph.co.uk/news/main.jhtml?xml=/news/2005/08/28/wkayla28.xml&sSheet=/news/2005/08/28/ixworld.html> (accessed 26 July 2006) [N.B. This link leads to today's Telegraph].
27. <http://smh.au/news/World/American-tortures-driven-by-boredom/2005/05/20/1116533538564.html> (accessed 27 May 2005).
28. <http://thewaruponboredom.com> (accessed 24 May 2006).
29. <http://thewarontroopboredom.com> (accessed 27 May 2005).
30. 'Fight against boredom', published 22 April 2005; <http://theindependent.com/cgi-bin/printme.pl> (accessed 27 May 2005).
31. <http://www.uniquegiftbasketsnow.com/boredom-buster-basket.html> (accessed 9 May 2009).

### 3 Navigating against the wind of entropy

1. *Inside the Third Reich*, 237, quoted in Fussell, 1989, p. 77.
2. See, for example, his *Either-Or* in the chapter on 'Crop Rotation'.
3. Richard Paron *et al.*, *Raid! The Untold Story of Patton's Secret Mission*, New York: G.P. Putnam's Sons 1981, p. 86, quoted in Fussell, 1989, p. 77.

4. Thrill seeking does not necessarily belong in the same category as the others. See, for example, the study of boredom among so-called 'sensation seekers' by Marvin Suckerman (1994).
5. Bartone, 2004, p. 108. His understanding of hardiness depends on the studies of S.C. Kobasa and S.R. Maddi.

#### 4 Bored in Afghanistan?

1. [http://www.feedshow.com/show\\_items-feed=e5eabab6b41918d4040387fbd4a1a21f](http://www.feedshow.com/show_items-feed=e5eabab6b41918d4040387fbd4a1a21f) (accessed 1 April 2007).
2. In December 2005, almost around the time when 'our' diaries were filled in, Newsweek interviewed some army soldiers going home from Iraq as conscientious objectors. One of them, Cliff Hicks, tells about extensive use of hallucinogenic drugs, valium, painkillers and heavy consumption of alcohol. 'They'd go on raids and patrols totally stoned', Hicks said, thus 'killing the wrong people all the time' [http://www.williambowles.info/gispecial/2006/0606/050606/gi\\_4f3\\_050606.html](http://www.williambowles.info/gispecial/2006/0606/050606/gi_4f3_050606.html) (published in *Newsweek* 12 June 2006; accessed 1 April 2007).
3. About how Australian soldiers viewed their level of *mateship* as an advantage they had over US soldiers in Vietnam.
4. This is supported by the reactions of the soldiers to another statement, namely this one: 'I feel that the other soldiers are aware of my needs, and that we have a good team spirit here.' The majority of the soldiers describe comradeship as good or very good, and that it is permitted to have a 'bad day'. They even describe their peers as 'good friends', when asked about 'new friends' in another 'diary statement'. However, it still seems that there have been somewhat tense relations between some of the officers and the rest of the teams, in both Kabul and Meymaneh. Here is the version of one of the officers: 'We are strong personalities, which means that the temperature can get quite high.' Despite this comment (or rather because of it?), he also thinks that the team has had a high degree of loyalty.
5. A similar list could have been made from their reaction to another statement: 'I mostly find my service here to be meaningful.' The vast majority of the soldiers see their service as meaningful.

#### 6 Submarine boredom

1. The total number of officers and men serving in the Royal Norwegian Submarine Service is close to 100 as of 2007. The proportion of women serving on board is 5 per cent, three officers and two ratings.
2. <http://periskopet.no/content/index.php> (accessed 13 April 2007).
3. Even though the Royal Norwegian Navy was one of the first to appoint a woman as commander of a submarine, the percentage of women serving in the flotilla is still very low. Hence, the word 'brotherhood' seems to cover the situation fairly accurately.
4. The reason for this statement seems to be more of a personal nature than related to objective facts.
5. Sonar is an abbreviation of so(und), na(vigation) and r(anging).

## 7 Enduring boredom – but how?

1. <http://media.www.doaneline.com/media/storage/paper1214/news/2007/12/11/Blogs/Fighting.Another.Enemy.Boredom-3141803.shtml> (accessed 1 August 2008).
2. [http://www.boston.com/bostonglobe/ideas/articles/2008/03/09/the\\_joy\\_of\\_boredom/?page=4](http://www.boston.com/bostonglobe/ideas/articles/2008/03/09/the_joy_of_boredom/?page=4) (accessed 13 August 2008).
3. Edward Hallowell quoted in *Boston Globe*, available at [http://www.boston.com/bostonglobe/ideas/articles/2008/03/09/the\\_joy\\_of\\_boredom](http://www.boston.com/bostonglobe/ideas/articles/2008/03/09/the_joy_of_boredom) (accessed 13 August 2008).

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