

"99% BOREDOM, 1% TERROR"— REPRESSION OF RESPONSES TO BOREDOM AND TRANSGRESSIVE BEHAVIOR IN MILITARY BODIES

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■ Abstract

Military campaigns and maneuvers were defined in 1915 as “months of boredom punctuated by moments of terror”. Since then, many scholars have demonstrated boredom is a common experience for military bodies as a result of long periods of inaction and surveillance. A few less have focused on the fact that the sustained experience of boredom over time leads to repressed responses translated into an increase of violence, anger, and pathological behaviors. Even though boredom is considered a risk factor in this sense, there is still a gap of knowledge of ways to reduce boredom in such circumstances to avoid transgressive responses in the long run. This contribution does not aim at returning to empirical studies evidencing that the militaries experience boredom when they are doing nothing, doing something repeatedly, or are just waiting. Beyond that, it focuses on how boredom leads military actors to dangerous reactions because of a combination of poor stimulating situations and the need to repress the inherent reactive power of boredom itself. I will share a definition of military boredom based on the psychodynamic theory, the arousal hypothesis, the cognitive theory, and the reactive boredom approach to outline an explanation for military violent and transgressive behavior resulting from boredom that claims for more research on intervention models developed by both boredom studies researchers and military studies scholars to reduce boredom.

Keywords: Army, Boredom Proneness, Military, State-Boredom, Violence.

My husband was a member of the Spanish Navy for some years. He was assigned to a submarine unit. His performance elapsed between alternative periods of approximately three months in which the ship was docked in the port —periods during which he had to go to his workplace, but he had to do nothing at all— and of 30-40 days of navigation monitoring the neighboring coasts. From that time, I remember specifically his complaints about the boredom he and his colleagues experienced in both situations due to the long hours of inactivity both in port and offshore. Over time, he learned to avoid the boredom of doing nothing on-shore. He took advantage of the possibilities of the military base facilities and started practising sports for the most part. However, during the navigation periods the environment was so unstimulating and restrictive that it prevented any creative response on the part of the sailors to the excess of free time and the consequent boredom. While the rigid military discipline restrained the sailors frustration during navigation, upon returning to port it was common to give transgressive behavior free rein as a way of responding to the accumulated boredom. Although I shall not go into detail about what such behaviors consisted of —since they were disclosed to me in an intimate setting— I must say that such virulent reactions to boredom in military contexts, in which there seems to be no other chance than to bear the tedium of long hours of inactivity, made me think. They are common, they have an explanation, and of course they demand a solution. On many occasions, boredom suffered during moments of inactivity, waiting, or monitoring

tasks is only overcome by an irrepressible increase in the desire to *swing into combat*.

The presence of boredom in periods of inactivity, typical of war campaigns and surveillance maneuvers, and the reaction translated into the attraction to violence and glorification of war have been widely referred to in the literature for centuries. Although it remains a matter of ongoing discussion by experts in boredom studies, when it comes to tracing the earliest mentions of this experience we often go back to the war campaigns created by Homer. In these scenes, boredom is linked to the excess downtime of the periods between battles and is often translated into a greater craving for fight.

Professor of Classical Studies Peter Toohey (University of Calgary) states, in “Some Ancient Notions of Boredom” (1988), that one of the first references to boredom in history may be present in the *Iliad*, book 24. 400-404, when Homer makes the former Hermes —who is pretending to be one of Achilles’ Myrmidons— say, in a conversation with Priam, the mythical King of Troy, that the Achaeans would begin fighting the Trojans at dawn because they felt they had been waiting too long and wanted to enter in combat (trans. 2015, p. 450):

We cast lots, and I was chosen to serve
[out here;
and now I’ve come to the plain from the
[ships, for at first dawn
the sharp-eyed Achaeans are going to
[attack around the city.
Sitting idle has made them impatient: the
[Achaeans’ princes
can no longer restrain them, so eager
[they are for battle.