

On Danger in War

To someone who has never experienced danger, the idea is attractive rather than alarming. You charge the enemy, ignoring bullets and casualties, in a surge of excitement. Blindly you hurl yourself toward icy death, not knowing whether you or anyone else will escape him. Before you lies that golden prize, victory, the fruit that quenches the thirst of ambition. Can that be so difficult? No, and it will seem even less difficult than it is. But such moments are rare; and even they are not, as is commonly thought, brief like a heart-beat, but come rather like a medicine, in recurring doses, the taste diluted by time.

Let us accompany a novice to the battlefield. As we approach the rumble of guns grows louder and alternates with the whir of cannonballs, which begin to attract his attention. Shots begin to strike close around us. We hurry up the slope where the commanding general is stationed with his large staff. Here cannonballs and bursting shells are frequent, and life begins to seem more serious than the young man had imagined. Suddenly someone you know is wounded; then a shell falls among the staff. You notice that some of the officers act a little oddly; you yourself are not as steady and collected as you were: even the bravest can become slightly distracted. Now we enter the battle raging before us, still almost like a spectacle, and join the nearest divisional commander. Shot is falling like hail, and the thunder of our own guns adds to the din. Forward to the brigadier, a soldier of acknowledged bravery, but he is careful to take cover behind a rise, a house or a clump of trees. A noise is heard that is a certain indication of increasing danger—the rattling of grapeshot on roofs and on the ground. Cannonballs tear past, whizzing in all directions, and musketballs begin to whistle around us. A little further we reach the firing line, where the infantry endures the hammering for hours with incredible steadfastness. The air is filled with hissing bullets that sound like a sharp crack if they pass close to one's head. For a final shock, the sight of men being killed and mutilated moves our pounding hearts to awe and pity.

The novice cannot pass through these layers of increasing intensity of danger without sensing that here ideas are governed by other factors, that the light of reason is refracted in a manner quite different from that which is normal in academic speculation. It is an exceptional man who keeps his powers of quick decision intact if he has never been through this experience before. It is true that (with habit) as we become accustomed to it the impression soon wears off, and in half-an-hour we hardly notice our sur-

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roundings any more; yet the ordinary man can never achieve a state of perfect unconcern in which his mind can work with normal flexibility. Here again we recognize that ordinary qualities are not enough; and the greater the area of responsibility, the truer this assertion becomes. Headlong, dogged, or innate courage, overmastering ambition, or long familiarity with danger—all must be present to a considerable degree if action in this debilitating element is not to fall short of achievements that in the study would appear as nothing out of the ordinary.

Danger is part of the friction of war. Without an accurate conception of danger we cannot understand war. That is why I have dealt with it here.