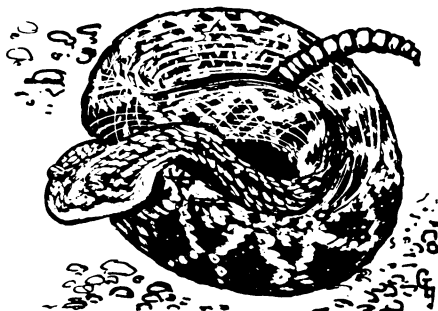


HERPETOLOGY
NATURE RAMBLINGS
by Frank Thone



Speaking of Snakes

► **POISONOUS SNAKES** are one of the first terrors of the tropics that fond relatives think of when their special soldier is ordered overseas. Actually, states Dr. Doris M. Cochran of the U. S. National Museum, the chances of being bitten by poisonous snakes are exceedingly small. And the victims themselves are often contributors, through excess of curiosity or foolhardiness: one person out of every 15 bitten receives the bite while handling or "playing" with a poisonous snake.

This does not mean that snakes are harmless; far from it. But relatively few of them actually go out of their way to look for a fight, and those that do are the biggest and wickedest among venomous serpents, like the bushmaster of Central America and the king cobra of southeastern Asia.

Indeed, many of the deadliest, including the coral snakes of our own continent and the ugly, thick-bodied rhinoceros viper of Africa, will put up with a great deal of handling before they suddenly strike. The deadly little krait of India is particularly obstinate at this deceptive trick of "playing 'possum," Dr. Cochran states.

So far as numbers of venomous serpents are concerned, and likelihood of encountering them, we probably do just about as well right here in the United States as any tropical country. We have several species of rattlesnakes, the larger of which are "plenty pizen," though the little pigmy rattlers are not especially dangerous.

Then we have two species of coral snakes, one in the dry Southwest, the other in the moist Southeast, the latter with an extension of its range up the Mississippi and lower Ohio floodplains.

There is also the pugnacious water moccasin or cotton-mouth and its more widely distributed cousin, the copperhead.

The United States and Mexico also share the dubious fame of harboring the two solitary species of lizards known to be poisonous, the Gila monster and its near relative, the beaded lizard.

The only comfortable place for a soldier afflicted with ophidiophobia (that's what ails you if the mere sight of a snake makes you ill) would be in the Far

North, and on some fortunate islands, like Ireland, Iceland, most of the West Indies and practically all of Polynesia, including New Zealand.

Snakes can't stand the climate much north of the Canadian border; though one hardy European viper has been seen above the Arctic Circle in Scandinavia. Their absence from many temperate and tropical islands seems to be largely a matter of transportation lack, for most snakes cannot swim.

The one exception, however, makes the



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Navy no refuge for snake-fearers, for the flat-tailed sea snakes (no kin to the mythical sea serpent!) that swarm in the warm seas around southern Asia are real snakes, all right, and highly venomous. Just one member of this group has some-

how found its way into tropical American waters.

Dr. Cochran's discussion of venomous reptiles is offered in a new Smithsonian Institution publication, tenth in the series listed as War Background Studies.

Science News Letter, May 22, 1943

PSYCHIATRY

War Nerves Predicted

Considered inevitable for three out of four merchant seamen who have been torpedoed or bombed. Men need gentle care when first rescued.

► WAR NERVES are inevitable for at least three out of four of the merchant seamen subjected to torpedoing or bombing.

This is the finding of four New York physicians who have made a special study of seamen waiting their turns to go to sea again.

Many of the men do go back to sea in spite of persisting difficulty with war nerves, it is stated, and repeated catastrophes at sea will add cumulatively to the troubles of a man who has not yet recovered from his last tragedy. A period of convalescence in a rest camp is recommended in the report which appears in *War Medicine* (April). The physicians reporting are Drs. Sydney Margolin, Lawrence S. Kubie, Mark Kanzer and Leo Stone, all of New York.

The doctors give this advice: If you

should ever help in the rescue of seamen from a torpedoed ship, do not be afraid that a show of patience, sympathy and gentleness will "coddle" the men into an increase of emotional outburst. Gentle care does not encourage emotional upsets, as the layman often imagines, but is essential to their relief and prevention.

"The men should never be bullied or shamed into suppressing their feelings," the physicians warn, "but should rather be encouraged to go off by themselves for a chance to blow off steam alone so that one man's upset will not become a source of disturbance to the others."

The ordeals faced by these seamen ranged in severity from having their ship torpedoed without being sunk or with little or no injury to the personnel up to the major catastrophes in which the men were severely hurt or burned and

suffered prolonged exposure to cold, hunger and thirst; were trapped by fire or debris; watched other men killed or injured all around.

"Perhaps the worst situation occurs," the physicians state, "whenever a group of men are trapped in a spot from which only a few can escape. Escape from such a predicament leaves the survivors haunted by the memory of those who were left behind, with a sense of guilt as great as if they had murdered them."

The severity of the case of war nerves is not matched to the severity of the experience as closely as would be expected. In some cases there was little or no effect. In the most severe cases there were persisting symptoms that make it inadvisable for the man ever to go back to sea.

Some men faced with tragedy at sea are calm and self-possessed, make a careful choice between various possible avenues of escape, weigh the relative risks rapidly and act freely. Other men show blind confusion and panic, child-like states of terror, rage or stupor-like trance states. Some men clung to a red hot rail, or buried their heads between their arms. Some leaped blindly into a blazing sea when they might have escaped in another direction where there was no burning oil.

Later symptoms include terrible nightmares in which they re-live the catastrophe with details so vivid and terrifying that the men are waked up and driven out of their rooms "to seek the comfort of human companionship much as a terrified child climbs into a parent's bed." During the day, the men may have sudden "startle" reactions. There are sudden attacks of intense restlessness which drive them to get up and dress in the middle of the night and to walk endlessly, blindly seeking human companionship or oblivion in drunkenness.

Seamen who show signs of being disturbed should be treated if possible before they are allowed to go home or to their usual haunts, the physicians recommend. Otherwise the undischarged neurotic disturbance will attach itself to their everyday walks of life, interfering with their ultimate return to sea and becoming more resistant to treatment.

After a period of rest and convalescence, seamen who have had serious disturbances should have a graded return to sea duty, the physicians urge. The first trip should be on a safe route such as inland waters or shore waters, proceeding from this to convoys in not too exposed areas and finally to routes which are exposed to full danger.

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