

We had been at our isolated Arctic post for four months—only a third of our tour of duty—when I realised that Corporal Bill Smith might become a serious problem. In Bill's increasing nervousness and ready withdrawal into himself I recognised a potential mental break-down.

It was the war winter of 1943, and I was a 28-year-old second lieutenant. This small, god-forsaken US Army Air Force weather station and observation post at Anoretok, on the south-east coast of Greenland, was my first command. I was eager to prove to the 16 men entrusted to my judgement that I was not a green "90-day-wonder" fresh from officer training school. A veteran of snow-and-ice operations, I was proud of the fact that I'd seen two years' service at similar Arctic stations and had been promoted from sergeant specifically to command this station. But how could I run an efficient post if Bill Smith, one of our all-important radio operators, went "psycho"?

Unfortunately, Bill was under a greater nerve strain than most of the others at the camp. Glued to his radio eight hours a day, seven days a week, he seldom got a chance to let off steam by shovelling snow or carrying coal like the other men. Alone much of the day, he had time to brood about our isolation. He spent most of his off-duty time lying in his bunk staring at the ceiling.

A grey prison of winter ice, silent and forbidding, cut us off from any escape for many months. Off-shore lay the frozen waters of the Denmark Strait. Behind us loomed the mountain-like rim of the huge Greenland Ice Cap. We could not travel more than a mile in any direction without encountering treacherous crevasses.

Unhappily for my own nerves, I had seen a man at my previous station begin to withdraw just as Bill was doing. Eventually, the poor fellow had gone berserk, attacking everyone within reach. It took three men to wrestle him into a strait jacket and drag him aboard a plane.

What if Bill became as bad as that? We hadn't got a strait jacket, or a landing strip from which to evacuate him. And Bill was big and powerful. What could I do with him if he went berserk?

"It was a spur-of-the-moment 'treatment'—and I'll never try it again," Donald Shaw writes.

Playing a psychiatrist

In late February, the week after the plane dropped us our first mail, Bill took a sudden turn for the worse. Everyone was restive over the letters from home, reminders of a life left behind. But Bill was crushed. He stopped eating, or speaking unless spoken to on official business.

The crisis came a few mornings later, I was alone in the mess when Bill, who had just completed a mid-night-to-morning watch, brought in some radio messages.

"Lieutenant?" I looked up, and his eyes were frantic and bulging. "Lieutenant, may I speak to you?"

Heart thumping with misgivings, I nodded. The long-dreaded fit of hysteria broke. "I've got to get out of here," he cried. "I can't stand it. I've got to go home!" He burst into sobs and began to babble incomprehensibly.

"But, Bill," I said, as quietly and sympathetically as I could, "you know that's impossible. We're a thousand miles from nowhere." I explained that it was 200 miles even to the command headquarters at Blue West One — and to get there he'd have to cross the Ice Cap.

"The Ice Cap—that's it!" Bill shouted. "I'll go over the Ice Cap." He glared at me and edged towards the door. "I'm leaving now and don't try to stop me."

My first impulse was to strike him and try to starve him into sanity. But would he fight back, and if so, could I take him on? I had been an amateur boxer, but even if I won the bout, mightn't he be resentful and dangerous?

Somewhere at the back of my mind I heard a phrase: Use psychology. Then an idea came to me.

"Wait a minute, Bill," I said. "I'll go with you."

He hesitated for a second. I pressed the advantage. "Look," I confided, "I haven't told anyone else, but I'm fed up with

this place, too. And I know the way across the Ice Cap. You don't. Let's go together."

His scepticism lasted only a second. Then he took the bait. "Okay," he muttered.

I fired some quick instructions at him. "Get your Arctic clothing and skis on. Go to the stores and fill your pack with tinned meat — enough for a ten-day trip. We can get to Blue West One if we hurry."

The tinned meat was the heaviest food I could think of for Bill to carry. I filled my own pack with the lightest stuff I could find—some crumpled pages torn from magazines. On the mess table I left a note for the cook: "Smith and I are going for a ski run on the glacier. We might not be back for lunch."

Bill joined me at the ski rack within minutes. I had fastened on to the bottom of my skis the seal-skin "climbers" that make uphill going easier. I didn't remind Bill that he had forgotten to do the same.

"Right," I said. "Follow me."

I set out up the slope as fast as I could go—which was fast. I had been a professional ski instructor, and I was in the pink of condition. Bill, soft from his indoor work, was hard put to keep up, especially with that 60-pound pack of groceries on his back. My plan was simply to exhaust him as quickly as possible.

He was panting hard before we finished the first steep, mile-long slope that brought us to the foot of the glacier. Looking up at the mountain of ice still to be conquered, he gasped. "Let's rest a minute."

"Rest?" I pretended alarm. "We'd never get across the Cap before the blizzards set in. We've got to hurry."

The track up the glacier was a frightful thing of sharp, untamed ridges, twisted up along ridges, between crevasses and crossed snow-bridges flanked by chasms yaw-

ning hundreds of feet deep on either side. I had been over it with experienced teams of men and dogs, and I had tested the bridges and found them thick safe. But I knew that to Bill the chasms must look like gigantic traps, waiting to swallow him up at the first false move.

I kept goading him. "Come on, Bill! Stop lagging! We'll never make it!"

My strategy was becoming clearer to me. I hoped now to convince him of the impossibility of the trip.

Bill, however, was putting on an amazing exhibition of nerve and endurance. He kept floundering doggedly on behind me as I chided and berated him each time he cried out to wait and rest.

I had begun to wonder about the wisdom of my treatment, and to fear that it would result in a ghastly accident when finally, a mile up the glacier, Bill collapsed. I pulled him to his feet and exhorted him with more wild statements about the need for haste. He couldn't budge farther. He merely shook his head.

"Perhaps," he gasped, "we'd better talk this thing over... Lieutenant. Perhaps we'd better reconsider."

I'd done it! The exhausting climb had worked some of the pent-up emotions out of Bill's system and had left him rational. This was precisely what I had hoped for. I breathed a sigh of relief. I felt the way a doctor must feel when he has just saved a patient. But my moment of self-congratulation was brief.

"Have a smoke, Lieutenant," Bill said. He poked a cigarette at me, lit it for me and placed a paternal hand on my shoulder. I was flabbergasted to realise that he was addressing me gently, as if I were a child—or a mental patient.

"Now let's try to reason it out, sir. Blue West One is a long way from here, and we just couldn't get across all this ice, could we? Besides, they might call it desertion. So we just can't go home until our tour's over, can we? Don't you think you'd feel better, sir, if you went back to camp and slept on it for a few nights?"

I blinked at him, stunned. If Bill's run up the glacier had shocked him back to sanity, my wild dash and all my shouting must have convinced him that I was crackers. There was compassion in his eyes as he strug-



Behind me Bill was almost gasping.

gled to make me see logic. Painfully clear-headed now, he was determined not only to talk himself out of the peril of being led over hazardous terrain by a madman, but to see to my own safety and therapy.

It was ten minutes before I recovered sufficiently to agree with his intense, kind and overwhelming arguments. "All right," I said finally. "Perhaps we had better go back."

"That's the ticket, sir!" Bill almost chortled. He was visibly relieved. Then, after a pause, he said, "Lieutenant, I'll never mention this to the other fellows if you won't." We shook hands on it.

That's the last time I ever tried to practise mental medicine. Bill Smith (which, of course, is not his real name) was a paragon of stability from that day on.

He never again attempted to go home across the Ice Cap, and I'm sure he was relieved that his "mad" commanding officer didn't either.