

A Century of Service

Military Dentistry (Part Five of a Series)

Dentistry and the military have had a relationship going back to the 17th century, when the sole dental requirements for enlistment was healthy bicuspid so that a soldier could bite off the top of the paper cartridge of his muzzle-loading musket before pouring the gunpowder in the pan and down the barrel.



Although the weapons of war have changed through the years, the possession of healthy dentition has always been a requisite for an effective soldier.

The Boer War

The history of Canadian military dentistry began during the Boer War (1899–1902), to which Canada sent 7,368 troops. Reports soon surfaced about troops from all participating countries suffering from defective teeth. During the conflict more than 2,000 men were returned to the United Kingdom on purely dental grounds, and another 5,000 were found unfit for duty in the field because of lack of dentures. As a result, two Canadian dentists, Dr. David Henry Baird of Ottawa and Dr. Eugene Lemieux of Montreal, were recruited in 1900 and sent to South Africa where they served until May 1902.

CDA — September 16–18, 1902

Given that the Boer War had ended shortly before the CDA founding meeting in September 1902, it seemed only natural that the dental plight of army troops and the lack of military dentists would be discussed at length during the meeting. One short excerpt out of 10 pages of debate put

the issue in context: *“Most dentists here could tell lamentable experiences as related to them by our Canadian soldiers who served in South Africa. In one batch of fifty men, who offered to enlist in the Gordon Highlanders, eight who were otherwise fit were rejected on account of their bad teeth.”*

The following resolution, unanimously accepted in September 1902, set the stage for close ties between the Canadian Dental Association and dentists in the military over the next century:

The members of the Canadian Dental Association favor the adoption by the Militia Department of provision for a regular army dental staff, which shall be a distinct branch of the service, the members of which shall hold rank as do the general surgeons.

The efforts of the founding CDA members were crowned with success when, by General Order No. 98, dated July 1, 1904, establishment of a contingent of 18 dental surgeons in the Army Medical Corps was authorized.

World War I

When war was declared in August 1914, recruiting began immediately for the Canadian Expeditionary Force overseas. It was soon apparent that a significant number of potential recruits were being rejected for dental reasons, and dentists were asked to volunteer their services to help the few dental surgeons in the militia. Army headquarters realized that their dental organization was woefully inadequate. Consequently, on May 13, 1915, the Canadian Army Dental Corps (CADC) was authorized and placed under the administrative and professional control of the Director of Medical Services. In April 1915 the first Canadian military dental clinic was established at the Exhibition Grounds in Toronto. This was the first military dental clinic in the



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British Empire. By July 1915 the CADC had 30 dental officers, 34 non-commissioned officers (NCOs) and 40 privates providing dental service to Canadian troops in the United Kingdom.

Military Dentistry During WWI

By 1919, 233 officers, 221 NCOs and 238 privates of the CADC were serving in stationary hospitals, field hospitals and field ambulances in Britain, France and Belgium. From July 1915 to December 1918 the total number of dental operations performed by the CADC was an astounding 2,225,442.



**Military
dentistry in
France during
WWI**

The quality and success of the services provided were extolled by Sir Cuthbert Wallace, a British Army dental consultant: *“The Canadians have a very perfect dental organization. The British service might well copy the Canadians.”*

In November 1920, after all returning troops had received dental examinations and treatment, the CADC was demobilized. As a result of strong recommendations by the Canadian Dental Association to the government, the Army Dental Corps was subsequently reactivated but only as part of the non-permanent active militia and not as a permanent force. With control still resting with the Director of Medical Services and without personnel for its own administration, dissatisfaction was evident within the Dental Corps itself and throughout Canadian dentistry in general.

At the CDA annual meeting in Vancouver in 1938 — with war clouds again looming darkly over Europe — an in-depth analysis and report on military dentistry was adopted and sent to the minister of national defence. In calling for an autonomous military unit, it recommended that:

defense dental services should be directly under the Adjutant General's Department, not under the Director of Medical Services and that the Association, as representing Canadian Dentistry, be allowed to name the Director of Dental Services.

World War II

On September 3, 1939, the same day that Britain and France declared war on Germany, Dr. Stephen A. Moore,

president of the Canadian Dental Association, was summoned to army headquarters in Ottawa. Upon arrival he was informed that the old Canadian Army Dental Corps had been disbanded and replaced with the Canadian Dental Corps (CDC). He was also told that the plan submitted by the CDA had been accepted in principle and was asked to name, on behalf of the Association, the director of the newly created CDC. Without hesitation Dr. Moore named the overwhelming choice of CDA delegates at the Vancouver meeting — **Dr. Frank M. Lott** (right). Within months Dr. Lott's appointment as lieutenant colonel and Director of Dental Services in the Corps was subsequently confirmed. There was no one in all of Canada better suited for the responsibilities that lay ahead.



Dr. Frank Lott had been a lieutenant in the First Divisional Signal Company during WWI. After discharge he enrolled in the Faculty of Dentistry at the University of Toronto, graduating in 1923 with hundreds of fellow veterans commonly called the “Whizz Bangers” — a reference to the 77-mm German howitzer shells that had rained over the trenches. After some years in private practice, he returned to the University of Toronto as a professor in prosthetic dentistry. After earning an MSc and a PhD, he was the principal author of the plan of organization that had been submitted by the CDA to army headquarters.

In December 1939 the First Divisional Dental Company sailed to England with troops of the Canadian Active Service Force. It was the first of 18 dental companies that eventually served overseas: 14 were with the army, 3 with the air force and 1 with the navy.

In the field, each battalion or equivalent unit of a battle group was served by a dental attachment consisting of a dental officer, a dental assistant, a driver and a mobile dental clinic. One dental technician was provided for every two dental officers. The mobile dental clinics, which were built on standard three-ton truck chassis, had been developed early in the war. Thanks to the mobile clinic the Canadian Dental Corps was able to provide comprehensive dental treatment in all theatres of the war and worked closer to the front lines than any other nation's dental services.

The rapid growth of the Corps during wartime created a great demand for trained dental assistants and laboratory technicians. To meet the demand, the first Technical Training Wing was formed in Toronto in December 1943 to train personnel. Instruction in service dentistry was also provided for newly enrolled officers and refresher courses



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were provided for all officers. The Toronto Technical Training Wing was in operation until November 1945. Other training wings were established in England and continental Europe for field units.



Canadian dental officers in Normandy, 1944.

Left to right, front row: G. Merkley, F. Herbert, J. Neilson. Back row: G. Waldon, I. Hamilton, J. Willard.

As the war went on, the staffing situation became more and more critical, so the service began to accept female dental assistant volunteers. By 1945 these highly skilled women were serving with all three services in Canada and overseas.

During World War II the Canadian Dental Corps grew to a strength of 1,562 dental officers and 3,725 personnel in other ranks. Fourteen officers and 19 personnel in other ranks were killed or died on active service.

“Canada’s Dental Corps Is Second to None”

A December 1, 1944, news story from the armed forces newspaper, the *Maple Leaf*, proudly acclaimed the Dental Corps’ professionalism and reputation:

Canada’s Dental Corps is second to none in any army in the world in personnel, equipment and operation. These professional men and their assistants have been through the mill from Caen, Vaucelles, Falaise and the long run across France, Belgium into Holland and finally the Nijmegen salient. They take the latest in dental attention to the fighting men and know what it’s like to work under shell and mortar fire. Throughout the Canadian push in Europe, they’ve handled the Canucks, English, Yanks, Czechs, Dutch, Belgians, Poles, civilians and many others. They’ve made and repaired enough false teeth to keep a nation chewing and kept many a good set fit for hardtack. They handle battle casualties of a dental nature either on the spot or through medical channels, for every operator is familiar with the surgical method of dealing with facial injuries.

The *Maple Leaf* clipping quoted above has been in the possession of Dr. Kenneth Baird for years. **Dr. Baird** (right) is the son of Dr. David Baird, one of the dentists who served with Canadian troops in the Boer War. Kenneth Baird was a lieutenant colonel in World War II and was promoted to brigadier general in 1958, when he was appointed director general dental services, a post he held until his retirement in 1966.



Royal Recognition

In recognition of its splendid performance throughout the war, King George VI, on January 15, 1947, granted the Corps the title “Royal Canadian Dental Corps” (RCDC).

Following the reorganization of the Canadian Army in 1946, an RCDC Training Wing was established on Sussex Drive in Ottawa where it remained until the new RCDC School was opened at Camp Borden, Ontario, on June 13, 1958.

Canadian Forces Dental Services

The Canadian Forces Reorganization Bill, which came into effect in February 1968, abolished the Royal Canadian Navy, the Canadian Army and the Royal Canadian Air Force, creating instead a single service, the Canadian Armed Forces. With the reorganization came a name change for military dentistry. The Royal Canadian Dental Corps was renamed the Canadian Forces Dental Services (CFDS).

NATO and United Nations Peacekeeping

As Canada took its place in world events and assigned troops to NATO and peacekeeping missions with the United Nations, the Canadian Forces Dental Services (and its predecessor, the Royal Canadian Dental Corps) responded to the call of duty.

War broke out in Korea in June 1950, and Canada contributed troops to the United Nations Force. The 20 Dental Detachment established in November 1950 (later renamed the 25 Canadian Field Dental Unit) continued to serve in Korea until November 1954. Two dental sections remained in Korea and Japan until March 1955, and the last remaining section left Korea in October 1957.

During the Cold War in Europe, from 1951 to 1953, Canada established two dental organizations as part of the NATO forces. One was based in several areas in northern Germany and another was formed to support the RCAF Air Division in England and Europe. When the Suez crisis



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occurred in 1956, Canada again answered the call of the United Nations. The UN Emergency Force, dispatched to the Gaza Strip in November, included a Canadian contingent with a 10-man dental detachment.

Again, when Canada committed 1,000 troops to Somalia in 1993 the CFDS accompanied them. During the 149-day mission, 269 patient visits and 985 procedures were completed.



Royal Canadian Dental Corps during United Nations peace-keeping mission in Cyprus 1966.

Reorganization

In 1995, the Canadian Armed Forces were directed to reduce costs and staffing to meet federal government cut-

backs. CFDS was given the difficult choice between self-imposed downsizing or the acceptance of massive reductions and civilianization as dictated by external powers. A CFDS Team was established to produce a proposal, which was named CFDS 2000. The proposal won the day and was accepted and implemented. As a result, all dental units, their commanding officer positions and their staff positions were abolished and a single Dental Unit for all of CFDS was authorized. The Dental Laboratory Occupation was disbanded in favour of contracting out. Many dental clinics were closed or reduced in size. The DGDS position was reduced to Colonel and renamed Director of Dental Services. The changes were severe but the CFDS survived.

In 1997, CFDS was placed under a new organization — the Chief of Health Services — ending 58 years of “dental” autonomy. But one element remains constant: the relationships, trust and camaraderie between dentists in the armed services and the Canadian Dental Association have not changed in 100 years.

The Canadian Dental Association: 1902-2002 — A Century of Service is a Centenary project of the Canadian Dental Association in collaboration with the Dentistry Canada Fund, the charitable foundation for the dental profession in Canada. The 11-part series is written by Dr. Ralph Crawford, Historian and Past President of CDA.

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(All statements of opinion or supposed fact are published on the authority of the author and do not necessarily express the views of the CDA or the DCF)



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