

Short Communication

The Royal Canadian Dental Corps during World War II

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The first Canadian dentists served in the Boer War (1899-1902). The Decree #98 of July 2nd 1904 was signed under the pressure of the Canadian Dental Association and it helped the creation of 18 dental surgeon positions within the army. Then, the dentists were promoted to the rank of Honorary Lieutenants. On May 13th 1915, the decree #63 allowed the creation of a dental corps within the Canadian army. 30 officers served in the Corps and they were assisted by 74 non-commissioned officers and other officers. On that same year, the first dental clinic was implemented in Toronto. At the end of the war, 223 officers were still serving assisted by 459 non-commissioned officers and other officers. During the war, dental care was carried out 2,2 million times. 60 000 soldiers were demobilised within the month that followed the end of the war. A substantial effort had been made to improve the health of their mouths. Then, once the demobilisation was over, the dental corps was formally dissolved. On June 15th 1921, the dental corps of the Canadian army was implemented again, but this time, as a non-permanent active militia (no author, no date; Jackson, 1956; Becker et al., 2004).

Until 1939, the dental corps only dealt with a few dental officers scattered within the units of the health service (no author, no date; Jackson, 1956). This inefficient organisation ended when the dental corps of the Canadian army was once again dissolved and turned into a Canadian dental corps (CDC). It was placed under the high ranking authority of the Director of Dental Services. The brand new CDC soon had to get used to prepare the newly-mobilised soldiers at the beginning of World War II. In October 1941, a \$1 750 donation allowed to buy the first of the 184 dental care vehicles : a mobile dental clinic built in a three-ton lorry which was expected to move across the front where it was needed. The equipment and the mobility of service have elicited the respect and admiration of all other allied forces (no author, no date; Jackson, 1956). The first dental unit detachment to put out to sea on an operational vessel was established in 1943. The next summer, a dental staff was transferred to the Canadian hospital ship *Letitia* during a trip towards Manilla. Its objective and mission were to treat prisoners of war who had been released. The next year, a rotation system of the teams was implemented so that as many staff members as possible from other vessels could practice on the high seas (no author, no date; Jackson, 1956).

Dental records were often used to identify the war victims for legal proceedings. This new process became important during World War II. Many corps were thus recognised. Similar dental legal techniques were also used to identify deserters or those who had enrolled fraudulently. When the women were enrolled in the Canadian army in 1941, dental assistants were legitimately incorporated. Several hundred of them practised in clinics in Canada which allowed male dental assistants to go abroad. During the war, the Canadian Dental Corps deployed dental services throughout Canada upon recruitment and demobilisation, throughout the United Kingdom in support of the Royal Canadian Air Force, throughout the army training camps in North Africa, in Sicily and in Italy as part of the D-Day landings in Normandy and throughout Northwest Europe.

In 1944, the *Feuille d'érable*, the armed-forces newspaper, briefly described the experience of the dental corps during World War II: “*The Canadian dental corps is unique among the other armies of the world with regard to its staff, its equipment and its organisation. These professionals and their assistants have been tested in Caen, Vaucelles, including Falaise, during the long march across France, from Belgium to Holland and finally to the Nijmegen salient. They have administered the latest dental cares to the combatants and they know what it is to work under shell and mortar fire. Throughout the Canadian breakthrough in Europe, they have treated their fellow citizens, English, American, Czech, Dutch, Belgian and Polish soldiers, civilians and many others. They have made and repaired enough false teeth for a whole nation and they have maintained a great number of dentures to bite in ship's biscuits. They have assumed dental wounds, on the spot or through medical channels, each of them having a good knowledge of the surgical method of facial trauma treatment.* (Crawford, 2002).”

Canadian dentists succeeded in practising in captivity and in bringing out the best in them despite extremely reluctant adversity. In Oflag VIIb, a German prisoner-of-war camp for officers where captain Greenslade from the New Zealand dental service, captain Neal of the American dental service and lieutenant Brick, a Canadian student in dentistry worked, the Germans objected to fulfilling their obligations. “*Prisoners were being denied access to dental care by the Germans, except where the material was provided by the English Red Cross. When the equipment was sent by this organisation, they still continued to deny the prisoners the access to dental care. And yet, the soldiers urgently needed medical treatment. After four months, only three devices out of twelve were repaired by the German dental mechanics. The remaining equipment was never repaired. On June 5th 1943, they were allowed to make dental equipment on the camp. On June 18th, during a German medical officer's inspection visit, 53 officers stated they needed complete dental devices. Many prisoners' devices needed to be repaired. Some of them needed partial devices* (Anson, 1960).”

At the end of World War II, the dental corps of the Canadian army had more than 5 000 members, including 2 500 serving abroad. The corps's efficiency and effectiveness during the conflict persuaded the government to keep it after the demobilisation (no author, no date; Jackson, 1956). Fourteen officers and nineteen dental prosthetists died on the front in the Canadian dental corps's war effort (Sutherland, 2013).

In October 1946, the army was restructured and the dental corps was part and parcel of it for the first time. It was made up of 88 dental officers, 5 officers who were not dentists and 147 non-commissioned officers. In 1947, King George VI granted a royal commission to thank the Canadian dental corps for the services provided. Thus, the CDC officially took the name of the Royal Canadian dental corps (RCDC). In October 1950, the RCDC partnered with Royal Dental Corps of the British Army (no author, no date; Jackson, 1956). Brigadier Frank Melville Lott was the Commandant of the Corps from 1939 to 1946 (no author, no date).

After the war, there was a lack of interest in the RCDC and it had to face recruitment difficulties. The after war economy grew and the civilians gradually demanded dental care. However, this service was only made up of 22 dentists who essentially worked in the headquarters. Hence, in return, this organisation decided to focus on the implementation of some commitment within the RCDC for a limited period. This new measure was immediately successful and still is. At the end of the 1940s, the first dental officers were given a complete postgraduate training which is the cornerstone of their specialisation which became theirs (Protheroe, 1989).

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Distinguishing badge of the Royal Canadian Dental Corps from 1939 to 1947.



Mobile dental clinic of the Royal Canadian Dental Corps around 1942.



Mobile dental clinic of the Royal Canadian Dental Corps on a floating bridge over the Rhine.



The first dental assistants during World War II within the RCDC.



Dental care on the front during World War II.