



THE NAVY DENTIST: A DIGNIFIED POSITION

In the close confines of a ship at sea, certain positions have their own sobriquets, including the Dental Officer: ‘Fang-Bosun’, ‘Toothy’, sometimes just ‘Dentist’. But these nicknames are always used with a certain respect—even a tinge of affection. Australian Dental Officers (DO) have been in uniform since 1918, conspicuous by the burnt-orange colouring between their gold rings.

Since its formation in 1911, the Royal Australian Navy (RAN) recognised the importance of dental health in its serving members, and it paid civilian dentists to treat them, either in their own practices or in shore establishments in Victoria and New South Wales. In the early years of World War I, Australian sailors were treated by Royal Navy sources when available. But in December 1917, with enlistments increasing, the position of Surgeon Dentist was advertised for service afloat in the RAN, at a salary of £365 per annum. Honorary Lieutenant Milton Atwill (1888–1965, pictured opposite), a Dental Officer in the Australian Army Medical Corps, was selected from the 26 applications received. He was appointed on 8 April 1918, posted to Garden Island in Sydney and then to HMAS *Cerberus* to await passage to the UK, joining *Australia* (I) in July. Although his tenure was short, ‘paying off’ in September 1919, Atwill’s foresight in suggesting that the RAN create a structured Dental Branch, with the DOs supported by Dental Assistants and Dental Mechanics, was prescient.

The number of DOs steadily increased in the inter-war years, eventually having enough to warrant a Surgeon Commander (Dental) in charge of the Dental Branch, much as it is in 2020. With the onset and progress of World War II, the Dental Branch grew. In general the RAN’s larger ships, such as cruisers, carried DOs, while forward bases and the smaller fleet units, such as destroyers and frigates, were served by travelling DOs.

Three DOs and two Dental Sailors lost their lives in action in World War II: Surgeon Lieutenant (Dental) Mervyn Townsend (see page 130) and Sick Berth Attendant (Dental) (SBA) Stewart Laxton in *Sydney* (II); and Surgeon Lieutenant-Commander (Dental) Alleyne Tregear and SBA(D) Frederick Wright in *Perth* under the heroic Captain ‘Hec’ Waller in the Sunda Strait in 1942. SBA Wright had his own tragic story, surviving the sinking and becoming a POW on the Burma–Thailand railway, only to perish with more than

The Dental Department aboard the battle cruiser HMAS Australia: Surgeon Dentist Milton Spencer Atwill, RAN, attends to his patient, Leading Stoker Jack William Christian, 1918, photograph from half-plate glass negative. EN0020, Australian War Memorial.

1300 other allied POWs when an American submarine torpedoed the Japanese transport ship *Rakuyo Maru* in 1944. Both these DOs were University of Melbourne graduates. The third DO, Surgeon Lieutenant-Commander (Dental) Trevor Hall, died following a short illness, after serving in many ships, including *Hobart* and *Australia* (II). He was a son of Colonel Thomas Hall (pictured on page 153), who had been head of the Army Dental Corps in World War I.

Navy dentists have served at sea in most conflicts since, again with larger ships carrying the dental teams, such as the aircraft carriers *Sydney* (III) and *Melbourne*, the latter as flagship and bearing the fleet Dental Surgeon. *Melbourne* saw service during the Malayan Emergency, Korea and Vietnam; *Sydney* saw service during the Indonesian confrontation and Vietnam, with dental teams on board. A dental team was carried on *Tobruk*'s deployment to Somalia in 1992, and on *Tobruk*, *Kanimbla*, *Manoora*, *Success* and *Sydney* (IV) during later operations in the Middle East, the Gulf of Arabia, Rwanda and East Timor.

No matter the ship, dentistry is practised under the prevailing conditions, which are sometimes dangerous and warlike. Even in larger ships, the permanent surgery is metallic and cramped. Conditions are yet more cramped for a travelling dentist on a frigate or destroyer, working on a rolling deck even in calm seas, sometimes needing to be attached to the dental chair while operating. On board, DOs fill other roles as required by operational demands: acting anaesthetist, flight deck staff, Divisional Officer, Officer of the Day. There is also a softer side to their duties, with dental personnel carrying out humanitarian work in the Pacific region, educating Dental Assistants, helping to repatriate ADF personnel killed in World War II and, of course, treating our women and men in uniform. They serve afloat and ashore, still in the manner described in the editorial of *The Commonwealth Dental Review* of May 1918: 'taken on the whole then the position of Dentist in the Royal Australian Navy is a dignified one and one which the profession as a whole will be pleased to know has been established'.

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