

STRONG TEETH, STRONG SOLDIERS

Before World War I there was no dental service in the Australian Army. The first Australian Imperial Force (AIF) contingent was sent to Egypt without accompanying military dental support—contrary to the advice of the Australian dental associations. Many AIF recruits were given dental treatment before they departed, through the volunteerism of the dental profession and the requisitioning of dental hospitals in each state. In Melbourne, the effort to make the departing troops dentally fit was overseen by the Recruits Dental Relief Committee, which included former prime minister Alfred Deakin, newspaper proprietor Geoffrey Syme, registrar of the Dental Board Ernest Joske, and acting dean of the University of Melbourne’s Faculty of Dental Science, Thomas FW Hall. Major Hall was appointed Senior Dental Officer for Victoria and was later promoted to Principal Dental Officer, responsible for organising dental services throughout the Commonwealth of Australia.¹

Once this contingent arrived in Cairo, those soldiers with dental disease had to seek treatment from local dentists, qualified or unqualified. In the first three months of the Gallipoli campaign, 600 Australian men were evacuated from the peninsula due to dental problems. Many more on Gallipoli suffered with broken teeth and toothache but were not evacuated; they sought treatment from the New Zealanders, who *had* sent Dental Officers, or from Australian soldiers who happened to be dentists or dental students and had brought some dental equipment with them. Finally, in July 1915 a military order was promulgated appointing dentists to the AIF. This formalised the role of Dental Officers and resulted in the first six, including Honorary Lieutenant John Down from Melbourne, being sent to the Middle East to work in the general hospitals and convalescent depots. By May 1916 some 174 Dental Officers and 356 non-commissioned officers and other ranks were serving in the Australian Army Medical Corps (Dental). They provided treatment in fixed dental clinics attached to hospitals, convalescent homes and training establishments, to prepare the troops before they went to the front, and also in mobile dental units, often attached to field ambulance units, closer to the forward edge of battle in order to minimise the time that a dental casualty was away from their unit.

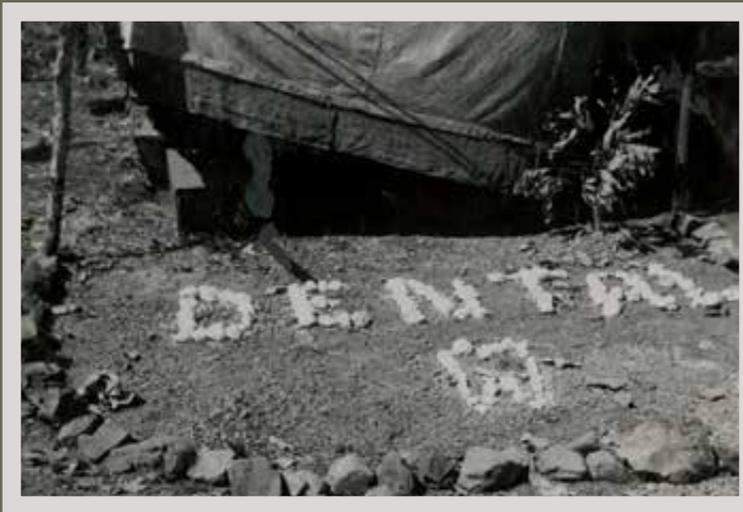
After 1918, Australia’s military dental services were allowed to run down. At the outbreak of World War II, John Down—now a Colonel and the Inspector, Dental Services—reported that Army dental services consisted of a handful of reserve officers, little equipment, and no dedicated facilities. The general population’s dental health had not improved significantly since 1915; once again the massive task of making recruits dentally fit resulted in Dental Officers reaching Don Bradman-like figures for extractions:



THE SURGERY AND CHARLIE



MACHINIC CPL ROSE AT WORK.



‘a century before lunch and a century between lunch and tea’. In this war, the Australian Army Dental Corps (AADC) extracted 1,550,000 teeth, inserted 2,850,000 fillings and constructed approximately 500,000 dentures.

The 23rd of April 1943 was a historic day for Australian Army dentistry, with the creation of a professionally autonomous dental service to improve the quality of service to our troops, and thus the AADC was separated from the Australian Army Medical Corps.² By the end of this war, 435 Dental Officers had served with the Australian Army. Dr Gordon Rowell, president of the Australian Dental Association, noted:

... the War created camaraderie within the dental profession among individual dentists both within and outside the Services. Dentists came to regard their former ‘opposition’ as their ‘colleagues’ and thus developed a new sense of professional maturity so sadly lacking in the pre-war days.

In 1948 the Dental Corps was granted a royal charter for its service in World War II, and has gone on to provide services in war, peacekeeping and humanitarian deployments. Since 1945, Royal Australian Army Dental Corps personnel have served Australia with distinction around the world, including in Japan, Korea, Malaysia, Vietnam, Iraq, Somalia, Rwanda, New Guinea, Bougainville, East Timor and Afghanistan.

Colonel Robert Adams

- 1 S Kuusk, *Fang farriers: Australian Army dentistry in war and peace; A history of the Royal Australian Army Dental Corps. Volume 1, 1914–1939*, Adelaide: Openbook Howden, 2015.
- 2 V Bird, ‘Director’s message’, *Cadmus: The Magazine of the Royal Australian Army Dental Corps*, 12th edn, 1993, p. 5.

Cat. 147 Eric Wollff (1919–2004), **Album of photographs featuring Dr Eric Wollff and his peers, 1941–46**, photographs, cardboard, ink, metal, cord; 22.0 × 28.3 × 2.3 cm. HFADM 3781, gift of Mrs Althea Oliver 2013, Henry Forman Atkinson Dental Museum, University of Melbourne.