WWI Canadian Dental Corps

SUMMARY:

Sir Robert Borden said that Canada became a nation on the battlefields of World War One. This article portrays the formation of the Canadian Army Dental Corps and the responsibilities and challenges it encountered and overcame. British Army consultant Sir Wallace Cuthbert, in describing the Canadian Army Dental Corps, said that it was a “perfect dental organization.” Lest we forget.

THE FORMATION OF THE CANADIAN ARMY DENTAL CORPS IN WORLD WAR ONE
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The centennial of the beginning of World War One is commemorated in 2014. The First World War began on 28 July 1914 and lasted until 11 November 1918.(1) Nov 11 has been commemorated as Remembrance Day since 1931 (2).

Until World War Two, World War I was referred to as the Great War. It is a war that claimed over 9 million lives including 65000 Canadian military casualties. (3)

Initially, recruitment was at a slow pace; but, as it became evident that the conflict was escalating more quickly than anticipated, the role of the recruiting offices expanded. At this point, it became evident that many potential recruits were being rejected for dental reasons.

As a result of an expanding dental need, efforts were undertaken to initiate a dental program for the growing military commitment. In May of 1915 the Canadian Army Dental Corps (CADC) was established under the professional and administrative control of the director of Medical services (4). It grew from an initial Corps of 30 dental officers, 35 Non-Commissioned Officers (NCO’s) and 40 privates to 233 Dental officers, 223 NCOs and 238 privates by the end of hostilities. Of those who served, twenty four died in the war as a result of various injuries. (5)

As with the war in general, the formation and expansion of the Canadian Army Dental Corps was based not only on needs as they arose, but also on unexpected developments. Many planned changes did come to fruition, while many others were altered as required by circumstance. In testament to the validity and efficacy of this well-oiled machine, a consultant with the British Army, Sir Cuthbert Wallace said. “The Canadians had a very perfect Dental organization” He also expressed the opinion that the British service might well copy the Canadians. (6)

At the onset of WWI the attachment of dental officers to military medical units was to be initiated, but in practice it did not occur. However, in August of 1915, dental officers were
permanently attached to field hospitals. As such, they served both in Canada before embarkation to Europe as well as in Europe. They served in hospitals in the UK, as well as at or near the front lines in France, Greece, Italy and Belgium. (6).

CADC personnel eventually performed several functions:

- Dental inspections of all Canadian soldiers on arrival in England
- Dental inspections of all returning soldiers before embarking for Canada
- Provision of normal preventative dental care
- Treatment of wounds and trench mouth
- Special care for reconstruction surgery in special clinics (8)

In January of 1947 the Canadian Army Dental Corps was designated the Royal Canadian Dental Corps. In 1968, as a result of what some consider an ill-conceived merger (7) of the three services, (Army, Air Force, Navy) the Royal Canadian Dental Corps was re-named the Canadian Forces Dental Service. In October of 2013 the designation of Royal Canadian Dental Corps (RCDC) was reinstated. From a historical point, there are some who feel that the RCDC is descended from the first military dental service in the world. (8). Some feel that Canada truly became a nation due to the extremely strong military service of our combat troops at Battles such as Vimy Ridge, Ypres, the Somme and many others. Along this vein, the Canadian Army Dental Corps too, was born of need. It served and continues to serve with distinction and valour.

Pte Elgin M. Wansbrough while serving with the Canadian Expeditionary Force in 1918 was awarded the Military Medal for bravery in action. He also became a dentist after the war

Cpl Dwight J. Coons while serving with the Canadian Expeditionary Force in 1918 was awarded the Military Medal for bravery under fire in the field. He also became a dentist after the War.
Maj. G. L. Cameron, while serving with the Canadian Expeditionary Force, 1st Canadian Infantry Brigade Group was wounded and subsequently awarded the Distinguished Service Order and MID for gallantry under enemy fire.

Pte Charles Bryce Climo, while serving with the Canadian Expeditionary Force during WWI from 1916 – 1919 was awarded the Distinguished Conduct Medal for bravery (the DCM is second only to the Victoria Cross for gallantry).

Maj. John F. Blair, while serving with 4FD Ambulance CAMC Canadian Expeditionary Force 1918 was awarded the Distinguished Service Order for conspicuous gallantry while under enemy fire.

OFFICERS, NCO’S ENLISTED CANADIAN ARMY DENTAL CORPS LOCATION UNKNOWN


4. http://www.cda-adc.ca/_files/cda/about_cda/history/HSPart5.pdf


6. The Story of the Royal Canadian Dental Corps  Lieutenant Colonel H.M. Jackson, MBE, E.D. Octavo, Toronto 1956

7. My opinion


ABOUT THE AUTHOR:

Michael Pilon is a graduate of dentistry from McGill University. He also has a post doctorate in Public health from the University of Toronto. He served in the Royal Canadian Dental Corps for 23 years. His service posting include CFB Gagetown, Summerside, Borden, Ottawa, Chilliwack, Halifax and UN Duty in Cyprus. He served in several roles as a practitioner, instructor, base dental officer and headquarters duties. He also earned the coveted Airborne Regiment Paratrooper wings. He is now in private practice in Ottawa. After witnessing a desecration of the Cenotaph and the Tomb of the Unknown Soldier in Ottawa, Michael Pilon single handedly succeeded in ensuring that a proper and respectful environment be maintained at this Monument which is a memorial to 110,000 Canadians who gave their lives in service.