

By Frank Gillard, Representing the Combined British Press

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This morning I had a tooth filled. That must seem a most trivial matter to write about but circumstances made it an unusually interesting matter. For instead of a well-equipped dentist's surgery the job was done in a tent and instead of white clad nurses the dentist's assistant was a medical orderly of the R.A.M.C. In fact it was dentistry under fire, for the enemy at that time was shelling the whole area where the dental centre was and indeed to reach the place I drove past a blazing lorry which had just been hit by a shell not half a mile from the tent.

A few hours earlier two big bombs had been dropped in this medical area killing some men and wounding others.

Yet the place was functioning just normally. There was a dentist's chair - a simple metal affair, nothing padded, no frills, and no arms to grip tightly when the drill got near the nerve. The dentist quickly put on a white overall over his khaki drill uniform and got to work. Water was heated on a spirit stove. The cavity in the tooth was quickly located and the dentist offered to give me a local anaesthetic if I wanted it. "I offer it to most of them" he said, "but it is not often they take it". I felt that that was a challenge so I, too, chose to grin and bear it. Actually the whole business was most painlessly and efficiently carried out.

While he had me gagged and quiet the dentist told me about his job. He had actually arrived with a field ambulance unit on the day of the invasion and had been ready to start right away. Since then he had averaged about ten patients daily. Most were ordinary toothache jobs but one or two were men with severe jaw injuries. Men on the whole were much more anxious to have their teeth filled than extracted. "That's the result of our educational drive in the last few years" he said.

When I could speak again I asked him what was the most difficult job which came his way. "Well", he said, "it is always the same on these combined operations. While they're at sea men will insist on holding their heads over the side and invariably some of them lost their false teeth. Then they arrive for an operation and have to live on hard rations and biscuits and they just cannot break up the food without teeth.

"So they come to me and in the early stages I cannot make them new dentures. My laboratory doesn't arrive for a day or two and often I have to keep them waiting a week".

To this Dental Officer it was obviously a minor calamity that a soldier should be toothless for seven days. That, and the very fact that the dental service was there this morning carrying on, shell or no shells, shows how carefully we safeguard the health of our men in this war.

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MINISTRY OF INFORMATION