American Red Cross base hospital no. 38 in the world war. United States army base hospital no. 38, organized under the auspices of the Jefferson Medical College and Hospital, stationed at Nantes, France, 1918-1919, by W. M. L. Coplin.

American Red Cross Base Hospital No. 38

2-1-1923

American Red Cross Base Hospital No. 38 in the World War - XV: Dental Service

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"American Red Cross Base Hospital No. 38 in the World War - XV: Dental Service" (1923). American Red Cross base hospital no. 38 in the world war. United States army base hospital no. 38, organized under the auspices of the Jefferson Medical College and Hospital, stationed at Nantes, France, 1918-1919, by W. M. L. Coplin.. Paper 12.

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DENTAL SERVICE

THE history of dentistry in the United States is one long incident of achievement; the American dentist has attained a professional distinction that has made him pre-eminent in other countries and has given to the profession an established position, unique in national and international recognition. So much is this the case that one finds abroad the sign "American Dentist," sometimes honestly deserved but far more frequently used to obtain unmerited popularity by the simple sinuous expedient of laudatory lying and unabashed charlatanism. Possibly there is a sound historical basis for the belief, or it may be no more than tradition, that during the American Revolution there came to this country, with the intrepid Lafayette, or with DeGrasse's squadron, two Frenchmen to whom the young republic was indebted for the real inception, the founding of the important practice comprising, at first probably little more than a crude art, but later acquiring sound scientific principles; the art grew apace; from medicine, metallurgy, chemistry, physics, bacteriology, pathology, surgery, and other phases of the ever-
widening domains of knowledge, science was added at first slowly, but through recent years with unprecedented speed, until lay and professional men in all countries gave to the American dental profession a clearly defined and universally admitted supremacy. Such was, and still remains, its distinguished repute in which all may feel a just and proper pride. Having won its spurs in civil life it remained for the World War to prove that, as no civilian could enjoy life and the unimpeded pursuit of happiness without his dentist, no soldier could properly and successfully fight a nation's battles without the skilled attention given only by the practitioners of this honorable and worthy calling.

In selecting members of the Dental Corps for "38" no other incident is recalled that so fully establishes the words of the oracle that "our friends make or break us." When engaged in enrolling the professional personnel my old teacher and warm friend, Prof. Brubaker, called to say that if the dental service was still open he would like to suggest the name of J. Howard Gaskill, D.D.S. This is late, but it is, nevertheless opportune to thank a colleague for bringing to my attention a man so eminently fitted to take charge of the important service. Dr. Gaskill was and is an able, experienced, conscientious and energetic practitioner who not only served nobly with "38" but when the A. E. F. University, at Beaune, was put in service he was called to an important teaching post, did excellent work and won highly merited recog-
nition and promotion. Through Captain, later Major Gaskill, Lieutenant J. Donald Stone, D.D.S., also an accomplished and well-known dental practitioner, came to the organization. Both men held commissions in the Dental Corps, U. S. Army, and in no other service was the selection of officers more gratifying or the results attained more highly commendable. In addition to the specific duties of his professional position Lieutenant Stone, for a time, officiated over and successfully performed the trying functions of Mess Officer to the Officers’ Mess.

One acquainted with the soldier’s selections, his habits, duties and customs might fancy that the office of Dentist in Ordinary to His Supreme Majesty the Doughboy, could easily be more or less of a sinecure; but it was not. Many men were inducted into military activity with mouths in a condition that one dare not describe. Well-meaning friends and domestic foes gave them tooth brushes of all kinds, frequently of the worst, and the establishments making nothing but “the only sure-safe-sound-scientific shampoo for teeth” put on day and night shifts to work the Army and Welfare society trade. All of which was very well, but, strange as it may seem, the world still contains men, often heroic warriors, actual or potential, who are tooth-brush-shy; again, in the advanced training sector toilets were neglected; when wading in the mud of combat zones, doing semisubmarine duty in flooded trenches, sleeping on and in mud
that so froze to clothing that often the only way to "get up in the morning" was to drag out of a coat and let the sun—if such there was—thaw the garment loose from the ground, and when exchanging shot, shell, and hand grenade discussions with "Heine," dental toilets were usually underdone, rare, or even raw. Furthermore, wounds about the face, frequently involving walls of the buccal cavity, were most abundant and a man with a few teeth extracted by a steel projectile exodontor, or with more or less of a jaw absent or in fragments, is not enthusiastic about tooth brushes and commonly is not interested in circulars and official orders giving erudite directions concerning the use of dental floss. A man who has been gassed, whose tongue is swollen and throat seems aflame, is in no condition to try out sample creams. Men, creeping like vermin, in and out of great foul shell holes, hiding from field flares while cutting barbed wire entanglements or seeking shelter from T. N. T. explosions, do not bother much about how their hair is combed and are not unduly agitated if some tartar is deposited. The cost of tooth brushes and accompanying outfits lost or thrown away in the advanced sector and combat zone, may, in part at least, account for the unprecedented military expenditures of the country; the evidence accumulated in hospitals, securely established the fact that such facilities were often overlooked or abandoned.

Whatever the cause or causes, no doubt there were many—unwounded men came back from combat details
with unspeakably foul mouths, frequently deeply and extensively infected, gums inflamed and often necrotic, and occasionally fever and other systemic phenomena could be traced directly to mouth conditions. At times the condition was called "trench mouth" or something of the kind, just as war brought out such terms as "trench fever," "trench foot" and the like; all were manifestations of human tissues revolted under the inhuman lash of barbaric abuse and atrocity directed against them. Where gas had denuded lips and buccal mucosa, wounds had involved the mouth and particularly in cases where projectiles had comminuted the jaw, torn out teeth and lacerated the soft parts, infection ran wild and indescribable destruction further extended damage already done. In addition, it is to be recalled, often days passed before the men reached sources of relief and not infrequently soldiers with badly infected or even wounded mouths fought on and, only after days got caught and ordered to the rear. The resulting disease and consequent suffering were intense; intelligent treatment required skill, patience, time and, on the part of both dentist and patient, endurance that tried men's souls quite as much as facing fire. The work, and it was all of that, was done under many trying conditions; of course, some patients could walk to the dental chair but others must be treated in bed when the results of gassing and the presence of wounds permitted the dentist no option as to the position of the patient, often where light
was unsatisfactory and not infrequently mouths had to be cleaned up and disinfected when the patient was only semiconscious or even delirious.

More than mere mouth sanitation was necessary. Men of the Dental Corps of “38” gave anesthetics with skill and for hours, often without relief, labored in operating rooms; for minor operations at the bedside, they induced preliminary or more advanced anesthesia; this blessed unconsciousness made possible difficult dressings and redressings that, otherwise, would have caused agony or have been accomplished with difficulty if at all.

Dental splints and other devices for treating bone injury about the mouth required hours and days of more careful work. Of course, all ordinary dental work came in for any available spare time. So the men of the dental service were always busy; during the periods of military activities there was no let up and afterward much remained to be put in shape. It is difficult to contemplate that period in the history of war when such a valuable service was not available; one cannot visualize the painful conditions that must have resulted and nothing more gratifying is recalled than the splendid service given by the dental officers of “38” which was also fortunate in having among the enlisted personnel William Haslam and William Wyckoff who had worked in dental laboratories and who, with characteristic enthusiasm, devoted themselves wholeheartedly to the task of helping comrades brought to our hospital.
It was only one of the services, but a highly important one—one that did its work well and fully merits special mention for the skill manifested, the industry portrayed and the efficiency attained.
Justice is better served in conferences of peace than in conflicts at arms.

President Harding.