

Dentists at war: 12 who went beyond the call of duty. Military dentistry through the ages

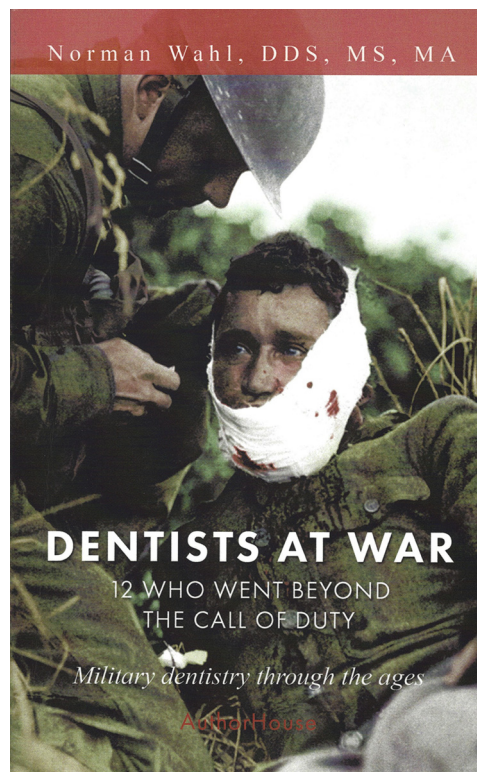
Norman Wahl, author; Bloomington: Indiana Author House; 2020; 214 pages; \$13.99 paperback, available at authorhouse.com and amazon.com.

Reviewed by Chris Burke

An untreated dental problem can incapacitate even the strongest among us. Military leaders have recognized for centuries that keeping their troops in fighting shape meant providing for their basic medical and dental needs. In his 2020 book, *Dentists at War*, orthodontist and historian Norman Wahl reviews the history of military dentistry and presents short biographies of 12 dentists who served in the military and who went above and beyond the call of duty.

Wahl cites a publication from 1492 titled the *Book of Wound Surgery*, a treatise on military surgery, as perhaps the first of its kind. It included a section on managing wounds to the mouth, and the author, Hieronymus Brunschwig, devised a chin support for stabilizing a broken jaw. France was a leader in dentistry, including military dental care, for many centuries, and by the mid-1800s, dental instruments were included in the surgical chests of the British Armed Forces. But priorities were different in the new world, where the first American president, George Washington, was famously edentulous. When the opening shots were fired in the Civil War, the United States had about 5,000 dentists and only 3 dental schools. The Union Army rejected many recruits because of dental problems and did not even provide toothbrushes for the soldiers they did accept. But that finally began to change in 1901, when the U.S. Army Dental Corp was established. Other branches of the military soon followed suit. Wahl reviews the progress in the dental care provided to members of the military, and in many cases to prisoners of war as well, from the 2 World Wars to Korea, Viet Nam, the Gulf, and more.

In Chapter VIII, he shifts from the general to the particular and presents a dozen dentists who served in the military during World War I or World War II and went above and beyond the call of duty. For most, this not only meant providing routine and emergency dental care for members of the military but also entailed acts of bravery and heroism beyond the scope of their dental responsibilities. The amazing stories of some of these



men have been previously documented, such as Coenraad F.A. Moorrees and Robert Edison Moyers. But others have been overlooked or lost to history until now. When Varaztad H. Kazanjian immigrated to the United States in 1895, he did not know English and had no money and few skills. But he worked hard and learned quickly and by 1905 had earned a Doctor of Dental Medicine degree at Harvard University. During World War I, he was 1 of 3 dentists working at a military hospital in France, where he treated soldiers who sustained horrific facial injuries during trench warfare. His work was innovative and heroic and performed under the most challenging conditions, and he became known as the “Miracle Man of the Western Front.” Alexander G. Lyle, a dental officer in the U.S. Navy during World War I, received a Medal of Honor for administering aid to a wounded soldier—saving his life—while they were both under attack. The stories of all 12 dentists are immensely interesting and well told.

The book is properly documented, with references provided for each chapter and a helpful index at the end. Several photographs are reproduced in black and white.

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