The US Navy Dental Corps in Desert Storm

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Navy dental personnel treated over 2,450 emergency patients during Operations Desert Shield/Desert Storm, both on board ship and ashore in the Fleet Hospitals. The author details the distribution of dental personnel in Southwest Asia, and discusses their primary and secondary duties during the war.

Jan 17, 1991 — Operation Desert Storm was the largest naval operation since World War II. The Navy's involvement included the Middle East Force, six carrier battle groups, the battleships USS *Wisconsin* and USS *Missouri*, two Marine Expeditionary Forces and selected combat logistics force ships. By mid-January 1991, the Navy-Marine force totaled over 94,000 sailors and 83,000 Marines, both afloat and ashore. Of this number, 11,515 were members of the US Navy Medical Department.

In addition to the USNS *Mercy* and USNS *Comfort*, the Navy's two hospital ships, dental officers and enlisted personnel served aboard the following combat/combat support ships: USS *Denver*, USS *Ogden*, USS *Duluth*, USS *Juneau*, USS *Germantown*, USS *Fort McHenry*, USS *Acadia*, USS *Jason*, USS *Sacramento*, USS *Blue Ridge*, USS *Tarawa*, USS *New Orleans*, USS *Okinawa*, USS *Tripoli*, USS *Ranger*, USS *Midway*, USS *Kennedy*, USS *Eisenhower*, USS *Independence*, USS *Saratoga*, USS *Roosevelt* and USS *LaSalle*.

Representing the Navy Dental Corps in the Middle East conflict were 199 dental officers and 550 dental technicians. This number included 18 Reserve dental officers, 48 Reserve dental technicians, 8 female dental officers and 46 female dental technicians. These personnel were responsible for the dental care provided in 12 United States Marine Corps (USMC) clinics, one mobile van (USMC), two hospital ships, three fleet hospitals and the combat/combat support ships mentioned above.

Eighty dental officers and 120 dental technicians supported the Marine Corps units located in Kuwait and Saudi Arabia. These dental personnel were attached to both medical battalions and dental companies. They were responsible not only for dental care and emergencies but were also assigned contingency roles in anesthesia, triage and decontamination stations. With the onset of Desert Storm, most of the Dental Detachment personnel concentrated their activities on bunker construction and other aspects of personal survival.

As the war time scenario shifted to Desert Storm on January 17, the mission of the dental personnel also shifted. Their traditional role as oral health care providers quickly changed to a contingency mode in support of the medical needs of the fighting forces. Many dental officers received additional anesthesia training, enabling them to assist in the operating suites as members of the surgical teams. Dental officers and dental technicians were utilized as triage teams at clearing and collecting stations. Dental technicians staffed decontamination stations established near combat zones. In anticipation of the ground conflict, eight dental officers and 19 dental technicians worked with the Air Force Air Evacuation Team located at Al Jubail Airport. This team supported the transportation requirements of Marine and Navy casualties bound for the fleet hospitals or out of theater.

The Navy Medical Department established three fleet hospitals in Saudi Arabia during the conflict. Fleet Hospital 5, staffed with active duty members, was established on Sep 2, 1990 at Al Jubail. The dental department consisted of five dental officers (two oral surgeons, a comprehensive dentist and two general dentists) and 16 dental technicians. Due to the large influx of US Army forces into the area, one Army dentist and one Army dental technician augmented the hospital staff.

When Desert Storm progressed to the ground war phase, the anticipated large influx of combat casualties did not materialize. However, Fleet Hospital 5's two oral and maxillofacial surgeons, in concert with the otolaryngologists, treated six major injuries involving multiple body systems: intracranial, thoracic/abdominal and extremities. Only one of these patient's injuries was secondary to missiles, the rest involving motor vehicles. Fleet Hospital 5 closed to all patients on March 11, 1991.

Fleet Hospital 6, located in Bahrain, consisted of a mix of active duty and reserve personnel. The five dental officers included one oral surgeon and four general dentists; the 12 dental technicians included three laboratory technicians. Additionally, one dental hygienist was on board.

Fleet Hospital 15, staffed by reserve dental officers and technicians, developed during the final preparation for the ground campaign. The six dental officers included an oral pathologist, two oral surgeons and three general dentists. Thirteen dental technicians supported these six officers. Fleet Hospital 15 was located near the First Marine Expeditionary Force combat zone and the Al Jubail Airport, the site of medevac reception of Marine Corps wounded in action. This was the most northerly deployed naval medical facility. Fleet Hospital 15 received and treated 88% of all Marine Corps casualties during the ground campaign and 71% of all Marine Corps casualties during the entire Desert Storm operation.

Dental emergency data collected during Desert Shield/Storm revealed that Navy dental teams treated over 2,450 emergency patients. This included Navy, Marine, Air Force, Army and allied forces. No Navy or Marine

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personnel failed to perform his/her combat role because of a dental emergency. This is a tribute to the Navy dental personnel in the Middle East at the time, as well as to the emphasis Navy and Marine Corps unit commanders and their supporting Naval Dental Centers and Marine Dental Battalions placed on maintaining a high state of operational dental readiness during peacetime. ●