

# New Zealand Mobile Dental Section in Korea (I) (December 1950 - January 1953)

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In 1950, when the security Council of UNO asked member nations to provide forces for service in Korea, the New Zealand (NZ) Government announced it would recruit about one thousand men. The main component of the force was a field artillery regiment equipped with twenty-five pound guns; the 16 NZ Field Artillery Regiment. Smaller units were a transport platoon, a base headquarters unit, a signals troop, and a reinforcement training unit. A mobile dental section - dental officer, dental technician, chairside orderly, and clerk/driver - was to accompany the force. Alan Cull, resident dental surgeon at Wellington Hospital and a lieutenant in the Territorial Dental Corps volunteered and was appointed Officer Commanding, the dental section. He entered Waiouru Military Camp (North Island NZ) in September 1950, where he organised the formation of the K-force Mobile Dental Section. He also assisted the regular force dental officers in rendering the force to dentally fit.



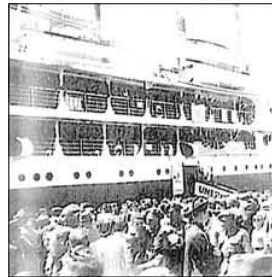
254. Dental Section, WAIOURU Military Camp 1950. Left to right M.Cottle, D.Wind, A.Craill, A.Cull



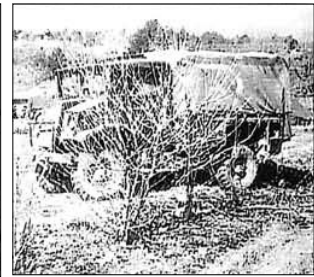
255. New Zealand Gun crew, 1951

## Equipment and transport

The field dental equipment was adequate for normal conservative, exodontic, prosthetic dental work. It included a foot-pedal dental engine, folding dental chair, two large panniers for dental equipment, and a folding table and foot-operated lathe for the dental technician. There was a tent for operating in and accommodation and a fifteen hundred weight truck for transport. Dental materials were ample and later, in Korea were replenished from English, New Zealand and Australian sources.



256. "SS ORMONDE" December 10, 1950



255. New Zealand Dental Truck

## To Korea

The NZ Force embarked for Korea from Wellington on the "SS Ormonde" on 10 December 1950. A cabin was provided on the ship for emergency dental treatment. After three weeks at sea, with calls at Brisbane and Manila, the ship berthed in Pusan on 30 December, and the troops disembarked on 31 December 1950. It was bitterly cold, grey day, and on the dock-side a US Army band played, "If we knew you were coming, we would have baked a cake".



258. Pusan

Official directive from director dental services, N.Z. Dental Corps, TO/ C K-Force Mobile Dental Section

The dental section was to be attached to the 16 NZ Field Artillery Regiment and, when practicable, was to inspect and treat other units in the field and at base. Policy: a. To provide emergency treatment to NZ troops and others in the area requiring attention. b. When circumstances permitted, to maintain the dental fitness of New Zealand troops by regular dental inspections and treatment. This policy ensured that the dental section was always fully occupied, and was a policy probably unique to the NZ Dental Corps.

The clothing issued to the New Zealanders was inadequate for the sub-zero temperatures, the coldest winter in Korea for some years. (A supply of good winter clothing was supplied before the following winter). The dental section had its own particular problems: the lack of heating and the “freezing solid” of dental materials (e.g. local anaesthetic solution) and later, of operating on a floor of “corrugated-ice” paddy fields.

The dental officer vividly remembers his first night in Pusan. In his tent, he lit a kerosene heater and placed a can of water on top for shaving. But in the next morning although the heater was still burning the water was a solid block of ice. The time in Pusan was spent mainly in unloading equipment and supplies from the ship. The dental section organised a surgery in a room of a deserted schoolhouse, and was open for emergency treatment. It checked all dental equipment, and prepared its truck for the eventual move northwards in convoy with the trucks and guns of 16 NZ Field Regiment.

On 13 January 1951, the convoy moved to Miryang, about forty miles north of Pusan, on narrow winding roads, in the lowest temperatures yet experienced. Progress was slowed by thousands of refugees moving south. Although the regiment was not yet in action, it suffered its first casualties of the war when a warrant officer and his driver, turning back to search for a missing vehicle, were waylaid and shot dead by guerrillas. The regiment camped by a river which was completely frozen solid. It was quite a pleasant spot, with a grove of conifers and chestnuts, but there was the usual difficulty pitching army tents on the rock-hard ground. The dental section was soon operational, coping with emergencies: conservative and prosthetic.



259. Dental Section. Miryang, January 1951



250. At Miryang, 1951. Left to Right Sgt. M, Cottle CPL, Craill, CPT. Cull and a patient.

The regiment spent this period in calibrating their twenty-five pounder guns, and getting ready for action. On 20 January 1951, the convoy headed north, and spent a miserably cold night at Nakdong. The dental section erected with difficulty a double pup tent for its overnight stay on an iced paddy field.

After an early morning move, the regiment set up camp at Naegon-Ni late on 21 January 1951, when it became part of the 27 British Commonwealth Brigade, relieving a US Artillery Battalion. On 29 January



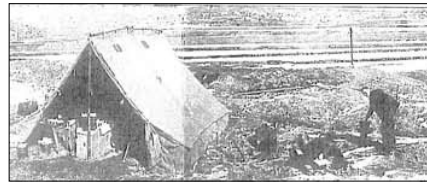
261 N.Z. Dental Section, Nakdong, January 1951 Overnight Stay



262 Packing Next Morning, Nakdong, January 1951.

1951, the regiment fired its first shell in anger. The 27 Brigade went into reserve at the end of January 1951, but the 16 NZ Field Regiment remained at the front near Hongchon, in support of US units. The dental section, operating in their tent, treated many of the US troops.

As the war was very mobile, the section soon became very proficient in packing up at short notice. After ten days, the 27 Brigade returned to operations, and the New Zealanders' time with the US units was over. They moved to Ichon, turned eastward, and headed for Yoju. Yoju was in ruins. The regiment encamped a few miles from the town. As there was a slight lull in the fighting, the dental section was thankfully able to reduce a considerable back-log of work.



263 At Yoju, February 1951



264. At Yoju, February 1951 Cpt. Cull in the tent

In the dental section, it soon became apparent that a fifteen-hundred weight truck was insufficient for travelling in the sub-zero temperatures. It was bitterly cold in the cab of the truck but for the two personnel who travelled on the back, with all the dental gear and personal equipment, it was almost unbearable. A smaller trailer, later acquired, went a little way to relieve the situation.

During the winter, the troops received a free rum issue to relieve the cold. It was at these times that the dental section became popular, as a queue would form for a tincture of oil of cloves (Eugenol) to supplement the rum.

During February 1951, at the request of Brigadier R. Park, Commander of NZ K-Force stationed in Pusan, the dental section travelled back to Pusan for a short period to examine the NZ troops based there. As it was unsafe to travel at night, especially when not in convoy, an overnight stay was made at Taejon. Here, a US unit kindly provided tented accommodation.



265. Dental truck and trailer



266. At Taejon, NZ Dental section leaving US Camp CPT Cull, SGT Cottle. Driver Williams

Next morning, the section proceeded to Pusan where a signals truck was made available for them to operate in.



267 Capt Cull and Signals Truck used in Pusan.



268. At Taejon Leaving N.Z. Transport Unit Driver Williams, SGT Cottle, CPT Cull, Driver, Lieut Allerby

The section spent ten days working in Pusan. It was a pleasant interlude after the constant travelling of the previous month or so. On its return journey, the section stayed overnight in Taejon, with a small NZ Transport unit, and took the opportunity to examine and treat the unit that night, using a room in the building they were occupying.

Because of the time lost in travelling, the dental officer decided that future tours of duty to Pusan would be by rail, on the EUSAK (EUSAK: Eight US Army in Korea) express. This was an overnight trip from Seoul to Pusan. The required dental equipment was taken from the regiment down to Seoul, where it was packed on the train, and the section had a comfortable overnight journey. This was a very satisfactory arrangement. Occasionally, this train was attacked by guerillas, but fortunately the dental section never experienced this. However, it was the duty of the occupants at each end of the carriage to be armed and ready for any overnight emergency, and on one occasion the dental officer assumed this role. Fortunately for all concerned, it was an uneventful night.

The dental section returned to the regiment during a relatively quiet period. Patrols had been mounted into enemy territory, but no contact had been made. It was on occasions like that the dental section was able to function fully, compensating for times lost during heavily active warfare and constant movement.

However, the regiment was soon in action again, and the response of the twenty four guns to a call for a regimental target was a salutary reminder that the war was still on. At night, the concussion from the gunfire would 'whoosh' through the tent and extinguish all candles. Sleep was minimal.

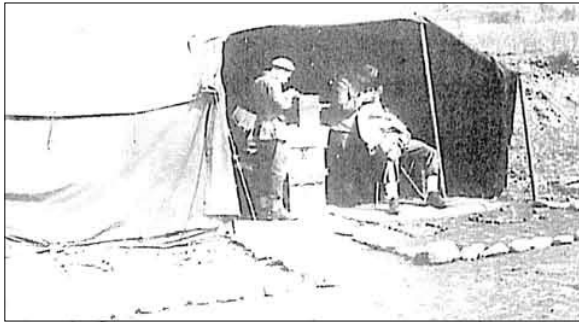


269. At Yoju, Cull, Wind, Cottle, Crail

About mid-April 1951, the 27 Brigade went to reserve just north of Kapyong, but the 16 Field Regiment remained in action to support the 6 ROK Division. This division, moving north, met little resistance, and there was a slight lull in operations. Although the dental section was always available for emergency treatments, it was during these "quieter" periods that its policy of routine dental inspections could be implemented.

But on 22 April 1951, at about 22:30 hours, the Chinese mounted a swift and massive attack, and the 6 ROK Division was pushed back. Rather than risk their guns, the regiment withdrew down the Kapyong Valley. The dental officer vividly remembers the scene that night. "In darkness, the road was congested with guns, vehicles and withdrawing troops: complete confusion and chaos."

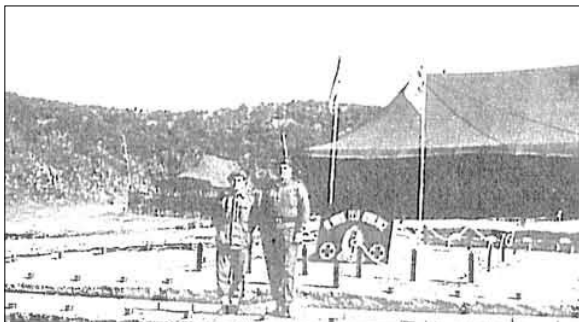
The regiment deployed to assist the 3 Royal Australian Regiment (RAR) infantry. However, there were further withdrawals to new gun positions. On 24 April 1951, the regiment continued to provide fire support for 3 RAR, which late in the afternoon completed a difficult withdrawal. The regiment then provided support for the Canadian infantry (2PPCLI), who were also part of the 27 Brigade. On 25 April 1951, the Chinese attack had been repelled, and the Battle of Kapyong was over. For their part in the battle the 16 NZ Field Regiment was awarded the Republic of Korea Presidential Citation. During these four hectic days of continual movement, the little sleep one managed was in the open air, or on the back of a truck. Fortunately, no toothaches were reported. At one place, an American unit in hasty retreat had left behind, among other items, a large tent which the dental section gratefully appropriated. After several moves, the regiment's final position was on the Imjin River.



270 Large tent acquired from US unit CPL. Crail, CPT. Cull, and a patient.



271. N.Z. Dental Section original tent used by section SGT Cottle, CPT. Cull. Note the foot-pedal lathe used by dental technician, and foot-pedal drill used by CPT Cull.



272 At 60 Indian (para) Field Ambulance. CPT Cull and CPT Sur (Dental officers)



273. Capt. A Martin, NZ Regimental medical officer CPT Cull, dental officer, preparing for a rainy season.

In July 1951, NZ Base Headquarters shifted from Pusan to Hiro Camp (near Kure) in Japan. This would now hold the Reinforcement Training Unit. A small Advanced Base Headquarters (HQ K-Force) remained in Pusan. The supplementary dental equipment that was used on the "SS ORMONDE" during the trip to Korea, was set up in a room at the base camp, and occasionally the dental section would inspect and treat the base troops.

At the end of July 1951, the 16 NZ Field Regiment (now of the 28 Brigade) became part of the newly formed 1st British Commonwealth Division comprising English, Canadian, Australian, New Zealand, and Indian units. The 60 Indian (Para) Field Ambulance was located about twenty to thirty minutes by road behind the front. This was a highly respected unit, which arrived in Korea early in the war. It included one dental officer during Captain Cull's time in Korea: Captain Rao and later Captain B. Sur.

Further back was the Norwegian 8055 MASH (NORMASH), which also had one dental officer. Helicopters, which carried two stretchers, were used for the first time for the evacuation of wounded in the Korean War. This was a revolutionary step in evacuation, and especially valuable in Korea, with its rugged and hilly terrain. About this time, the dental

section replaced its fifteen-hundred weight truck with a three-ton truck, which was modified by the LAD 16 Field Regiment for use as a dental surgery. A canvas lean-to was added for the dental technician to operate in.



274. N.Z Dental-Section. 3-ton truck and lean-to. Capt. Cull operating.

Late in September 1951, the regiment pushed across the Imjin River to support the 1st British Commonwealth Division in "Operation Commando." The warfare was heavy and severe and the Chinese provided stubborn resistance. But a strong defense line was secured forward of the Imjin River.

The mobile phase of the war was now virtually over, and the static phase had begun

In October 1951, the NZ force in Korea was increased by about five hundred men with the arrival in the forward areas of the 10 NZ transport company. To facilitate his work, the dental officer used a Jeep to make quick inspections of the troops in their own areas. Those requiring treatment would then visit the dental section wherever it was located-usually at RHQ 16 Field Regiment, or HQ 10 Company. About this time, Sergeant D. Wind, who had been hospitalised for a period in Japan returned to New Zealand. His successor was Peter Glen, who had recently arrived in Korea.

The static phase of war meant a more comfortable existence. There were, of course, some strategic moves by the 15 Field Regiment and 10 Transport Company, but not of the urgent and immediate variety of the past. It was now possible to “dig-in” with the expectation of remaining in the one place for a reasonable length of time. Naturally, this was welcomed by the dental section, especially now that the number of troops for those dental welfare they were responsible had increased fifty percent.

But there was still very heavy fighting and in October 1951 the 16 Field Regiment fired more shells than in any other time during its time in Korea. The enemy stubbornly resisted all advances and in November still hit back savagely, but these attacks were repulsed.

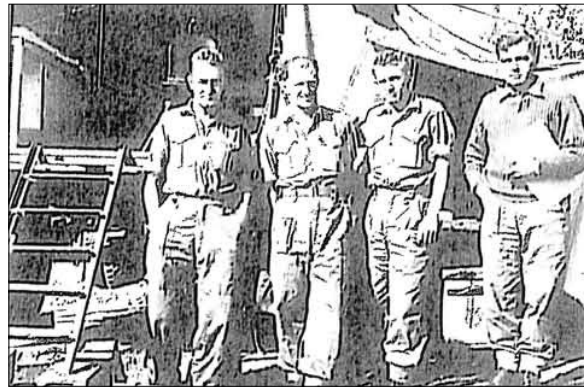
The second Christmas away from home - the first was celebrated on the ship to Pusan - was a white one, which for most New Zealanders was a novelty. As the regiment was being rested at the time it was a very joyous occasion. Most units now had suitable heaters (petro-fed), some of a “home-made” variety. Overheated flues, unsuitably insulated from the canvas, resulted in many-a-tent going up in flames. The dental truck acquired a very efficient heater which was of inestimable value for sterilising instruments, and for hot cocoa.

Because of the regular dental inspections, there were very few “toothaches” presenting in the field, although New Zealanders’ teeth in those years were notorious for dental decay. There were a few Vincent’s infections, especially with troops returning from R and R in Japan. As there was a high percentage of artificial dentures in K-Force, the dental originally Sergeant M. Cottle and later his successor, Sergeant D. Broadhurst, were kept fully occupied in making and repairing dentures.

Later, a gradual replacement scheme was initiated for New Zealanders who had served overseas for eighteen months. By July 1952, most of the original K-Force, including all of the dental section except the dental

officer, had returned to New Zealand. Captain Cull remained another six-and-a-half months.

The two new replacements in the dental section chairside orderly Les Everitt and dental technician Doug Broadhurst had relatively easy initiation to field dentistry. However, the latter appeared understandably bemused when after heavy rainfall on his first day with the section his lean-to was flooded and its contents, including artificial dentures, floated merrily away.

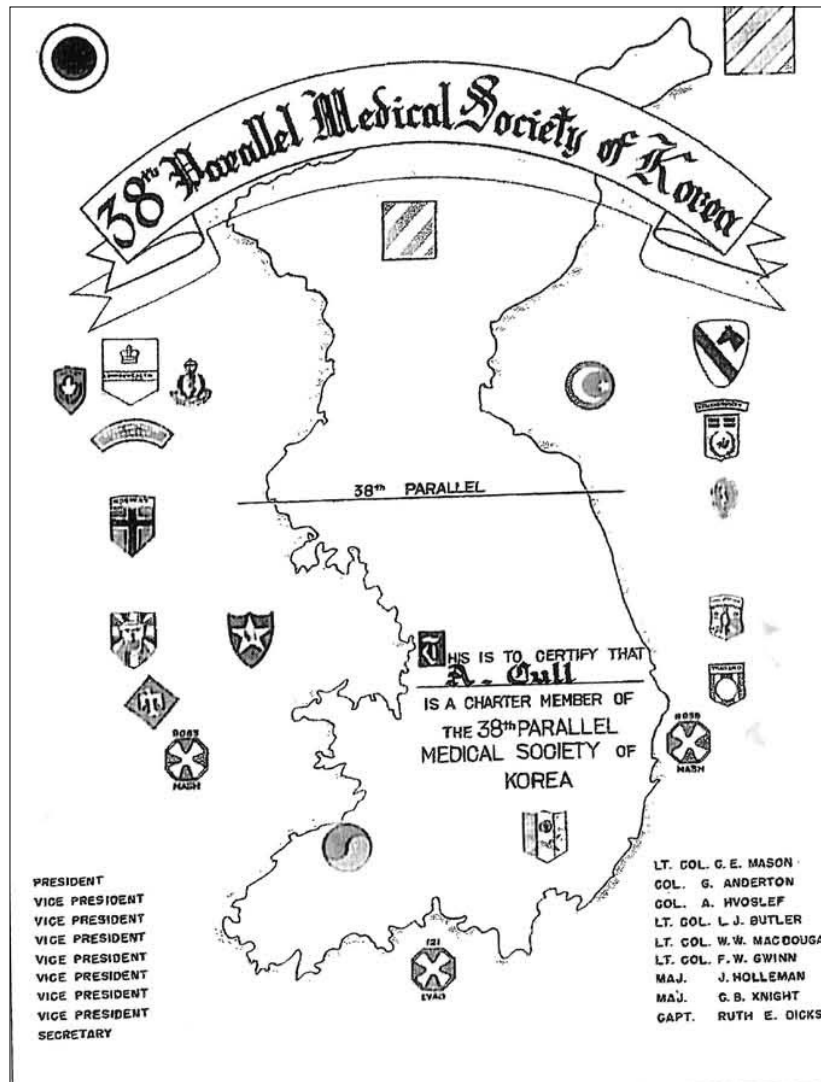


276. New replacements, Dental Section. P Glen, L. Everitt, D. Broadhurst, CPT. A. Cull.

The usual pattern of inspections and treatment continued 1952, with most of the time being spent at the 16 Field Regiment and the 10 Transport Company. A detailed account of these activities would be repetitive.

Contacts were made with other dental units in Korea: Indian, Norwegian, English, and Australian. On one occasion a US dental officer, Captain Johnston, who was based at an air force station, kindly hosted a number of dental officers for a day. Medical and dental officers of many UN units also attended meetings of the “38th Parallel Medical Society of Korea”. This unofficial gathering held at a MASH, discussed subjects of common interest. The New Zealand, regimental medical officers, and dental Captain Cull, attended these quite regularly.

Lieutenant Colin Wilson arrived in Korea in December 1952 and, after changeover period, he assumed command of the dental section. Captain Cull returned to New Zealand late in January 1953; and, on his return to New Zealand, was awarded the MBE for distinguished service in Korea. He entered private practice in Palmerston North, New Zealand, and continued his association with the Territorial Forces. He was promoted to Major, commanded 2 Mobile Dental Unit based in Wellington, and was posted to the retired list in 1964. He retired from practice in 1985.



276 UN dental officers at US air force station. From left of back line to right: CPT Johnston (US), Maj. Rooke (UK), CPT Cull (NZ), UK officer, Canadian officer, Canadian officer, Australian officer, (Photographer Norwegian Dental officer)

277 Charter members of the 38th Parallel Medical Society and the certificate

*\*In this text, as well as using my own records, I have gleaned information from other publications, including, "With 16 Field Regiment RNZA in Korea 1950-1951" by Colonel RKG Porter, OBE, and "New Zealand and the Korean War - Volume 2" by Ian Mccibbon. To these authors 'I express my thanks.*