

IN BRIEF

- Records the experience of a dental clerk-orderly at the beginning of the Second World War.
- Demonstrates the richness of contemporary material as a source for understanding dental history in a wider environment.
- Is presented as a companion piece to a *BDJ* feature article.¹

The Bagenal letters

M. Bishop¹

In 2006 Mrs John Bagenal made a gift to the British Dental Association archive of part of the correspondence of her late husband John Stuart Bagenal. The 13 letters were written to his family during the spring and summer of 1940, when, having enlisted as a private in Royal Army Medical Corps, he was posted to Colchester for training as a dental clerk-orderly. The letters are an invaluable record of the process by which new units of the Army Dental Corps were staffed by other ranks, and show a young man turning from civilian pleasures to soldierly responsibility (Fig. 1).

This paper is a pendant to the feature paper by Major Alastair Robertson¹ published in January 2007 in the *BDJ*, another contemporary account, describing the work of a field dental surgeon and his laboratory in 1944. In the introduction to that feature, Air Commodore Freddy Hulme gave a useful précis of the history of the Army Dental Corps which was founded by Royal Warrant on 11 January 1921.² The printed histories by Godden and Ward^{3,4} are recommended for those who wish to know more of the contribution, often heroic, which officers and other ranks made to the war effort, recognised by the royal honour bestowed after the war on 28 November 1946.⁵ Also of much historical interest, and compliant with the recognition of the value of 'oral histories' of those in both important and less than glorious positions, are the reminiscences published regularly in the *Journal of the RADC*.⁶

¹Queen Anne House, 2a St Andrew Street, Hertford, SG14 3NS
Correspondence to: Mr Malcolm Bishop

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Putting the dental services of England onto a war footing in 1939-40 was a huge task. Among the medical services, the particular difficulty with dentistry was the profession's need for unwieldy and expensive equipment, which takes a long time to manufacture, and demands materials and factory space that more pressing matters require, and which needs dedicated motor transport to move. Staffing was hardly less of a problem. For professional staff the army could call on qualified dentists, but for ancillary staff each new unit had to find what they could.

The value of the reminiscences edited here is contained in their immediacy and their ordinariness. They do not record deeds of valour, and nothing much happens; these are the apparently uncensored letters of a young man, which show how well informed the private soldier could be about the progress of the war, and unconsciously demonstrate his progress from raw recruit to responsible member of the dental corps in just six months of training.

Thanks to the fact that he was a most uncommon private soldier, and an amusing letter writer, and thanks to the family archive preserving his letters, a most valuable insight is given into the life of

a young man at that rather odd time in the war.

At the time the letters were written, the Dental Corps achieved autonomy, as Godden records, and it was the work of people like Bagenal that showed that the dental units could work independently of the Medical Corps:

Godden: 'By April 1940, the system whereby the officer commanding the nearest medical unit acted as accounting officer for the dental centre was abandoned. This move was an important advance in the development of army dental centres [162 at the end of 1939] ...established the independence of the dental unit and dental personnel proved that they were capable of organising an efficient and separate unit.'⁷

Those dentists serving in active units moved fast in mobile surgeries, and in the case of parachute troops with knapsack packs, to keep with their front-line troops. Theirs is a record of notable gallantry, and when surrender was necessary, volunteers stayed with those sent to prison camps in order to continue to offer their dental care.

In addition the army dentists were flexible, acting in any para-medical way, as emergency anaesthetists for

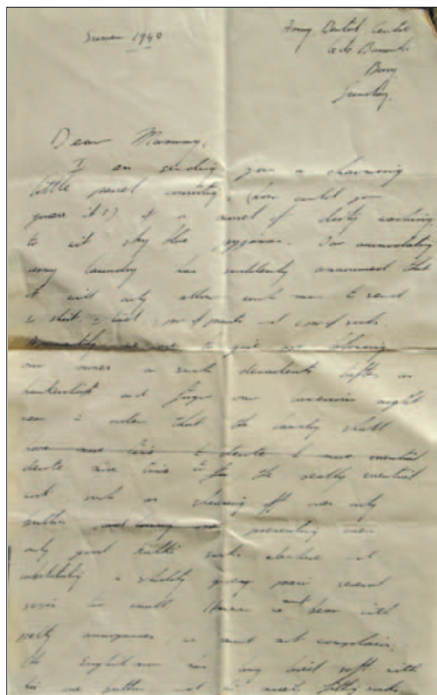


Fig 1 Letters from JSB to his mother at Leaside



example, when required. This flexibility was not limited to the qualified officers, and the orderlies carried out more than just the menial tasks recorded in Bagenal's account – some becoming inspired to qualify in the profession at the end of the war.

JSB did not wait to see such active posting; the reasons for his move to serve his country in other ways can be seen from the social accounts which accompany his record of dentistry in the year of the fall of France.

The subjects covered by the letters may be divided conveniently into dental (of most interest to the readers of the *BDJ*), political (essential to an understanding of the circumstances of the war at the time), social, and domestic.

Only one of the letters is dated; where dates are given these are derived from internal evidence, birthdays etc.

John Bagenal 7537343's introduction to the world of the dental clerk-assistant began in May 1940 with a week at the Military Hospital Colchester, which is where he was told that he was to be trained as a dental clerk-orderly [his own description of the job, and '...not what I had in mind when I joined the RAMC!'] with the Dental Corps 9 Company.

From Colchester he wrote to his mother:

JSB: 'This will be only a short note to tell you something of this place. Our barracks are on the outside of Colchester,

separated from the town by a common. Lines of red Victorian barrack blocks spread out on each side of us but on the other side away from the town the country begins suddenly. Luckily our block is on the outside at the back and we look out from our room on the first floor over fields towards Mersea. This is much better than it might be. I sleep with two others in what was the kitchen of a married quarters flat, and there is a scullery annexe where we wash under a tap. The place had not been occupied for years so we had to set to and spring clean the place from floor to ceiling. There is a range in the room which is a beaut, it is full of dust and soot and all sorts of horrible things which it ejects viciously just before inspection. My practical training makes this cleaning and scrubbing ordeal easier than it is for most, but even so my knees are raw and I must admit I'm more tired than I've ever been since I left Kirdford. [JSB worked there as a Farm Pupil 1936-37.]

'Our first back breaking job was sweeping, scrubbing and then polishing one of those endless hospital corridors which are obviously designed with the express object of giving the RAMC recruit unending raw kneed anguish. However, it was quite amusing, the usual hospital *melée* was coming and going around and over me; sister's silk stockings, nurse's cotton ones, patient's blue trousers and orderlies' khaki twinkled by as I pretended (for short periods) to be entirely engrossed

in applying a scrubbing brush to an uncompromising sort of floor. Two funny incidents occurred that day. I was sweeping a passage in a preoccupied sort of way, feeling hot and prickly in an army shirt, no coat, very civilian looking braces and a air of very much too large canvas trousers. Suddenly I became aware of a covey of officers bearing down on me and so, with unwilling alacrity I sprang to attention and let go of, oh horrors! the broom which fell between the legs of an MO. Of course, I forgot where I was and what I am supposed to be, and began to apologise profusely. The poor man looked alarmed, then astonished and later, to my relief, kindly and enquiringly at me.

'Later I was on my knees (an attitude now more natural to me than standing) polishing another passage when along came a nurse whose carpet I had previously brushed (You will say "of course") and offered me in return a marvellous special brush for putting on polish which I could stand up to use. The nurse was pretty and wanted to linger and I was tired and longed to talk, but of course, a sister appeared around a corner. The nurse fluttered round another corner and I bent my back to polish. Would you believe it, before I'd done a few yards, up came an officious sergeant and asked, "Where did I scrounge that from?", "Why wasn't I on my knees?", "And who gave you that brush?" What a test! Some of us may be moved this week, it is rumoured, to Aldershot. Write, and send me a cake – I'm very hungry.'

When the move took place, it was to Bury St Edmunds, and not to Aldershot which was the headquarters and training establishment for the Army Dental Corps. He wrote to his Father:

'Many thanks for your letter and money. Before I forget, I am being moved on Saturday and go to Bury St. Edmunds. Will you please tell Mummy and tell her if you please, to notify others. Will write and send new address on Sunday.

'This week here has been a constant dull drudgery because there are no proper jobs, so we are put on coal heaving, floor scrubbing and mortuary cleaning. I am told that I shall be trained as a dental clerk orderly which is a grim prospect but I shall give it a trial and then, perhaps, apply for a transfer to something else.'

JSB arrived in Bury in a rather low mood, after an adventure involving the

nurse mentioned above, who turned out to be the daughter of the General:

'You remember the pretty nurse I mentioned in hospital in Colchester? Well, such goings on! She took me for a ride in an enormous racing cream-coloured Lagonda and turned out to be the General's daughter.'

Much later JSB added this post-script:

'The car belonged to the brother of the General's daughter, and she took me for a ride in it to a country pub. On the way back the lights failed so we had to drive very slowly. On arrival at Barracks, I expected to be clapped in the cells as it was long past the time I should have returned, but to my surprise, I was told by the Sergeant on duty to "go back to your room and be – quick about it." I think my sudden posting to Bury St. Edmunds may have had something to do with this escapade!'

His start in Bury was inauspicious, lodgings were scarce, and he describes the circumstances to his mother:

'As you see I have been moved here to a small dental centre with two other men. I was sorry to leave Colchester in many ways for there were so many regiments and such a variety of types that it was easy to pick up interesting friends. Here we are attached to the Suffolks who seem rather a dull crowd. However, Bury itself is a charming little market cathedral type of town with pleasant gardens, ruins and quaint 18th century houses with large walled gardens and the Suffolk country itself is absolutely delightful.'

'I'm living in billets with another rather scruffy boy in the AD Corps. Unfortunately I have to share a bed with him. However, I have found a large quiet spacious Adam-like building overlooking a charming square which has been made into a canteen and reading room for the troops. I am sitting in a large, faded upper room at the moment; it is furnished after the manner of country clubs in the last century. Round about sit bevvies of prim little ladies being agreeable to the men, mending and serving tea in a genteel fashion.'

'Since I began this letter something very annoying has happened – the man with me in billets has gone down with scarlet fever and I am to be isolated in a tent alone for 10 days and not allowed within a building. I have got practically nothing

to do but read and walk about – pleasant enough in its way but one cannot help feeling restless and a little lonely when everyone else is working desperately hard.'

And to his sister he wrote:

'...I am now isolated alone in a tent for 10 days. This doesn't mean that I've been put on charge, it means that I have been in contact with scarlet fever and must not see people so I hover about the barracks like a leper, collecting meals through a window and eating outside.'

At this time there was an expectation of invasion at any moment, with the possibility of a parachute landing spearheading the German attack. JSB records the result of this jittery time in his letters, one written during his isolation:

'Friday May 17

1940

My Dear Grandma,

Thank you so much for your handsome parcel, it has brightened my meals considerably and thereby made me more cheerful.

There was a terrific parachute scare last night and all troops were rushed back, barricades across all the roads, formidable sentries at every gate and the barrack trenches positively bristling with bayonets. Some idiotic woman was said to have seen a parachute near Cambridge. My tent is on the very outside of the rest and a little apart consequently pickets and guards walk up and down and poke into corners all night. I wake up with a start to find grim looking helmets and bayonets shadowed against the sky and looking down at me, presumably to see if some Perseus like parachutist has not alighted invisibly, disposed of me and substituted himself.'

Finally started on his dental training, he wrote to his mother:

'Your cake arrived and it was good. Thank you so much, it was very dear of you to send it.'

'I am writing alone in the dental centre. One of us has to be here day and night, and as there are only two orderlies it falls to me to be here for the whole evening every other day. The days are stifling and stuffy but beautifully bright. I long for water to bathe in and deck chairs, instead of the constant sight of rotten teeth, blood and horrible bits of cotton wool all pervaded by the smell of antiseptics.'

'My job really consists in dancing attendance on the dentist, handing him appropriate weapons, mixing the right fillings, booking down patients' treatment, and clearing up gory messes.'

And to his sister:

'My Dear Kate,

You perceive that I have left Colchester, or rather that I have been sent away from there, for that more aptly describes the mood in which I left. Colchester is a Garrison town swarming with every branch of the army and every type of man and therefore it was easy to pick up kindred spirits. This place is charming in itself – a market town with picturesque ruins and a lovely park and pretty country but there is only one Reg[iment] here, the Suffolks who are very clodhopperish and rather reserved.

'I am in the dental centre and spend a lot of time unpleasantly preoccupied with blood and extracted teeth.'

Training and responsibility advanced rapidly JSB wrote to his mother:

'Here is the promised letter. My arms are better and I shall feel thoroughly fit again just in time for the second inoculation which is to come.'

'I am frightfully lucky in having very jolly good-natured mates in the dental centre. There is a nice little corporal (who is an ADC Corps Veteran). He has been stationed all over England and Ireland at various times, Worcester, Cork and Bantry included, so we had places in common.'

'The corporal lives in a room overlooking the road, and we use it when off duty. The cookhouse food is so disgusting that we have started to cook our own meals now and then. Amazing supplies can be got from the store keeper in lieu of free toothpaste and an odd packet of fags. We cook in somewhat unconventional utensils and we are apt to eat with rather odd looking cutlery which on close inspection might turn out to be instruments for excavating decayed teeth (they are specially good for eating pineapple chunks out of a tin with). It is not unusual to see tinned meat stewing merrily in the steriliser. (How I wish the Captain could see it!) In fact, never was a dental surgery transformed a homely, smelly, untidy-looking humans' dwelling as ours in the evening. But rapid and frenzied exertion is needed in the morning. Traces of baked

beans give way to polish, fragrant human smells of food are ruthlessly subdued and drowned by disinfectant and there are quite extraordinary pains taken with that double faced little gadget, the steriliser, in case the Captain should look for a forceps and find a carrot.

'My life is really very odd indeed.'

In another letter to his mother he gives an account of the active inspection which the dental corps applied, and which was to lead to the tight and effective service described in the *History* when this summer of 1940 which turned young men into responsible adult soldiers came to an end.

'I have been spending a quiet rather solitary day on duty. The others have gone away for the day and I am left to tend to the telephone which never rings on Sundays, and to minister soothing balms to toothache patients who never come on Sundays, so it might seem rather futile to the outsider that I should have to be here, but the outsider would be sadly out; It is a great tradition that somebody must always be there, which applied to us means here. The other day none of us were here for the first time for weeks. "Surely no one would ring us up at that hour" "How could anybody expect anybody to be in then" "Anybody would be a fool to think that anybody would be such an ass to be there at that time" So we all went over to the cook house together to eat bread and margarine, and although obviously anybody wouldn't ring up, in fact somebody did and it turned out of course to be an odious individual called the A.D.D.S, [Assistant Director of Dental Service, usually with the rank of Lieutenant Colonel] the biggest dental bug in East Anglia, – Oh dear! Anyhow we shall never eat bread and margarine together again.

'Sundays always begin with a terrific cleaning up of the surgery, polishing instruments, polishing the floor, the door knobs the taps and the windows. If this frenzy is carried to a high pitch we finish by eleven o'clock and then we are usually inclined to make tea in our horrible tin mugs. Up till this moment we are all forced to do roughly the same things by reason of the routine and for a short time after the reaction produces the same inclination, in this case that of wishing for tea. After this we are free to do as we please except for the one on duty. I have a civilised tendency to wash myself

nearly all over in the surgery wash basin because at this moment one is dirtier than at any other. After this I am apt to put on a blue shirt with a white collar quite reminiscent of civvy street, and shorts because they are cool, – this is the most comfortable moment of the week, for I am both clean and able to stay clean, I can smoke for two hours on end if I wish, without having to hide my pipe suddenly, there is time to read and the prospect of a better lunch than usual augmented by young carrots and peas which I intend to cook myself in the surgery.'

The next letter to his mother recorded a week's secondment to the Army Dental Centre in Rouse Rd. Newmarket where a new dental centre was being established. The *History* records the problems the rapidly expanding Corps encountered:

Godden: *'Satisfactory accommodation was difficult to acquire and invariably needed much alteration and adaptation, considerable plumbing and electrical wiring was necessary for the establishment of a dental surgery, all of which had to be undertaken by the Royal Engineers who were, as was to be expected, hard pressed by the demands for their services from all arms.'*

JSB: *'...on Sunday I am going to Newmarket for a week to help with a new Centre which is opening. I am only being borrowed, so expect to be back here again.*

'I am glad you had some time in London and enjoyed yourself – I wish I could get there for a day. All weekend leave is stopped here for the usual unaccountable reasons, so I don't know when I shall see you. I shall try to get off the weekend after next, but even that is rather a dim hope because then I shall probably be in the new centre here, where there will be more work than 6 orderlies could cope with. However these hard days are a help in that time flashes past and I do get up to bed sometimes feeling as if I had done a little work. The great thing is that I feel marvellously well and able for anything.

'I am sending a packet of tooth paste to the Ridges [A family of seven evacuees billeted with JSB's mother at Leaside] so that they can have a Kolynos orgy.'

By early September, JSB was in sole charge of one of the new dental centres to be set up in a requisitioned house. This process of requisitioning and



Fig. 2 John Stuart Bagenal (1915–2005) c.1941

establishment of dental centres moved apace in 1940, there were 162 at the end of 1939 increasing to 486 by March 1941. He wrote to his mother:

'We are all very busy here arranging two new dental centres, one in the new camp and a second in a palatial home in the town.

'So many troops are about here now that 10 dental officers are being posted to the district. Being half trained I shall probably have to take over one new centre as orderly in charge which may be quite interesting although one great strain on my clerical accomplishments. So far the change in my condition is a black and blue, bruised and completely lamed foot got in an unpleasant engagement with a hundred weight crate containing a dental chair which fell off a lorry onto it (my foot). However it did less damage than it might 'cos there's nothing broken.'

He did indeed take over one of the new centres as orderly in charge, and wrote to his grandmother in the first or second week of September describing the process:

'I am having rather an amusing time settling in to an empty room in the Town which I am to live in. It's in a large empty house, 1 room of which is a dental Surgery. I have to have meals at the barracks, but its rather fun being alone again and having my own room and to do what I like in. So far I have only got

a sort of monk's pallet bed, a table, an orange box, some candles and an ash tray. This afternoon I spent trying to find suitable odds and ends in Bury in various antique shops with little success 'cos this is a frightfully unoriginal shopping centre. I thought the antique shop a brain wave but it was disappointing – I found a plentiful supply of Victorian sideboards, a great many rusty cavalry swords, not a few snuff boxes and one or two grandfather clocks, none of which struck me as particularly suitable to private Bagenal's bedroom which is only six feet wide.

'I must prepare my supper which will be eaten in barbarous fashion 'cos I haven't yet got my knife and fork with me. I shall break a piece of bread with my hands, spread it with butter with the handle of a tooth brush and eat it thinking of your horror.'

Biography and valedictory (Fig. 2)

John Stuart Bagenal's father Hope, by profession an architect, at one time librarian at the Architectural Association, and later to gain renown as the man responsible for the acoustic design of the Royal Festival Hall, had served with distinction as a stretcher bearer

in the Great War. John saw himself following in his father's footsteps as a non-combatant nevertheless playing a valuable role in the defence of his country, so he volunteered in his turn for the Royal Army Medical Corps, whence he found himself drafted to the Army Dental Corps as a dental Clerk-Orderly.

As will be seen from his letters, dentistry had not featured in his plans, but where the army directs, the private soldier goes. After his spell as a dental clerk-orderly – and he was obviously competent at what he was asked to do – ending the period as orderly in charge of his 'own' dental unit, he volunteered for the Regular Army, being Commissioned as an officer in the Queen's West Surrey regiment. He was seconded to the King's African Rifles in 1943, seeing service in the Far East in Ceylon, India, Burma and Mauritius.⁸

John had had a great uncle who had been a judge in Uganda in the nineteenth century, a cousin who was a Provincial Commissioner in Tanganyika, and a brother who was a Veterinary Surgeon in Kenya, so it is not surprising that he felt himself to be: 'Born to be a Bwana',⁹ and that he stayed on in Kenya

after demobilisation as an Assistant Agricultural Officer initially with the African Land Utilisation and Settlement Board, in his spare time climbing Mount Kenya. His family connections were no less wide in England and Ireland, and it was these that during 1940 meant that his social life was not entirely typical of a dental orderly.

He returned to Leaside in 1967, and died in 2005.

A bronze plaque in the London headquarters of the British Dental Association records the names of the 26 members of the BDA who lost their lives in the Great War and the 47 in the Second World War.

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