



RADM Peter L. Andrus, MC, USNR  
National VP for Health Programs

## “It’s only a dental exam.”

cartoon character quote, “I have met the enemy, and he is us,” illustrates comically this truth about ourselves. This is highly applicable to dental disease.

To assist the military in avoiding dental disease and the occurrence of dental emergencies on the battlefield, dental classifications are made on all those who receive an annual examination. These classifications are placed into four simple categories, as follows:

Class 1: No dental treatment necessary.

Class 2: No dental emergency likely within 12-month period.

Class 3: Dental emergency likely within 12 months.

Class 4: Classification examination necessary for dental needs.

Military units desire optimal dental health. Due to the logistics of military necessity, this often cannot be attained. If Class 1 status cannot be reached, then at least Class 2 status must be maintained. This ensures some level of predictability in military dental fitness on the battlefield for a 12-month period. Anything less and the consistency of battlefield effectiveness can be severely compromised.

During the Viet Nam war, there was an approximately 15 percent rate of dental emergencies (150 per 1,000 troops). If you’ve ever had a toothache, you know that a dental emergency can be very distracting for the service member and that such a distraction can detract from battlefield effectiveness.

Knowing what a painful distraction a dental emergency can be, one can also infer that such problems could have led to additional injuries or even death to the sufferer or others. In the Viet Nam war alone there were over 58,000 deaths. Statistically 15 percent (8,700) of those killed could have had a dental emergency that may have contributed to their demise. For perspective, consider that this represents the manning of an aircraft carrier or nearly a division (three brigades) of ground troops.

Shortfalls in dental health affected battlefield work effectiveness in yet another way. Each dental casualty needed to seek emergency dental care. This resulted in one less effective person being available in a unit; therefore, another person had to take up the slack and assume the duties of the missing

service member, as well as his/her own duties. In effect then, 300 service members were being affected per 1,000, almost one-third of total personnel. One-third of any unit affected by any malady is an enormous compromise to battlefield efficiency, with profound effects on morale, fatigue, and unit cohesiveness.

It can be a very sobering thought to know that while you are in top dental condition, your fellow service member, who happens to have a painful and distracting dental emergency caused by neglect, is not. This service member may be in charge of the maintenance of an aircraft carrier’s arresting cable system, or of a unit crew-served weapon. The scenario can be as simple as a fighting hole. Your buddy can barely sight his weapon or keep a proper watch because of pain, thus permitting the enemy to breach your encampment. Would you want to be near that arresting cable system, that crew-served weapon, or in that fighting hole? I assume I hear a wholehearted “No” in response to this query.

“It’s only a dental exam” not only minimizes the importance of dentistry, but also, by metaphor, minimizes every military occupation. What seems mundane to us may, in fact, be crucial. How the oil is checked in a vehicle may cause loss of the vehicle and the death of its driver, as well as mission failure when supplies and personnel fail to be delivered at a critical time or place. We must see beyond the mundane in our jobs and those of others and recognize their contributions to military success.

To conclude, it may not be our enemies’ efforts that will defeat us, but rather our own neglect. “I have met the enemy, and he is us.” When your unit dental/medical liaison instructs you to get a current dental examination, do so and follow through with the findings, as necessary. Remember, the next time you hear someone say, “It’s just a dental exam,” remind them that it just may be your life or limb that will be at stake should he/she fall short in maintaining proper dental health. “Open wide!”

*This month’s article is contributed by CDR Steven Jaksha, DC, USNR. He currently serves with Marines and is attached to NR 4th Dental Bn, 4th Dental Co, Det 4 which supports 4th Tank Battalion and MAG 46. He maintains a private dental practice in San Diego, CA.*

As I walked past a group of young Marines, a lance corporal said to his friend, “Why are they making such a big deal about this for deployment . . . it’s only a dental exam.” Unfortunately, but understandably, this is the perception of many service members – Marine, Navy, Army, Air Force, and Coast Guard – when it comes to the dental examination as part of their medical check-ups.

That innocent statement by the lance corporal made me reflect on a recent photograph I had just seen of our Commander-in-Chief. His photograph appeared in *U.S. News & World Report* earlier this year with an overlay of his dental record. An accompanying article entitled “The Weekend Warrior Wars” related the political onslaught on the President’s Texas Air National Guard service record. It made me realize just how important dental exam documentation can be. For the President, his dental record was partial proof of his Air National Guard service.

A dental examination record has an even greater importance to our fighting effectiveness. One of the greatest attributes our Uniformed Services can boast worldwide is our unsurpassed standard of health. The greater the health of our forces, the greater our ability to fight effectively and not be distracted or compromised by pain. How can a simple dental examination be so critical?

This deserves an answer. In a study about weapons of war and public health, Dr. William Foege claimed that throughout history infectious diseases have killed more soldiers than their enemies’ weapons have. It is amazing to think that health, or the lack thereof, can be as incapacitating on a battlefield as the enemy can be. As cautious and vigilant as we must be against our enemies’ weapons, we sometimes pose the greatest danger to ourselves. The Pogo