‘RUBBERY FIGURES’: THE PUZZLE OF THE NUMBER OF AANS ON ACTIVE SERVICE IN WW1

Dr Kirsty Harris

Australian female nurses from all states nursed overseas during World War I (WW1). But how many nurses actually served as part of the AIF? Historians often quote the official medical war historian for WW1, A G Butler, as stating that 2139 nurses served overseas in the Australian Army Nursing Service (AANS). This reference comes from Volume III of his three volume *Official History of the Australian Army Medical Services*. Most published secondary sources on Australian military nurses such as those by Jan Bassett, Rupert Goodman, Marianne Barker and Ruth Rae cite this number. However, is the number correct? This paper investigates the work done by researchers on just who was in the AANS, the conclusions drawn and the proffered total figures. It also explores the author’s journey to developing the most complete list of AANS nurses on active service to date. As a result, a new database shows almost 2500 AIF nurses’ names and demonstrates the breadth of the AANS’s military postings and consequent military experience. It also reveals that a number of nurses were quite mobile, serving with more than one allied nursing service.

One might ask does it matter how many women were with the AIF overseas in the Great War. Out of more than 300,000 Australians who served, does a few more (or less) really mean anything? The answer, especially for researchers, is a resounding yes. Identifying individual AANS, as Ruth Rae states, is important so that appropriate attribution came be made of their contribution. More nurses mean possibly more sources of information, and therefore more wartime experiences to tap. This is important information given the war became a watershed for Australian professional nurses. Additional nursing numbers may mean that the 3477 nurses of World War 2 do not overshadow all those who served with the First AIF. More nurses might be an explanation for more lives saved and more bodies repaired in Australian hospitals. And more nurses may partly explain the excellent reputation that the AIF nurses had for their resourcefulness and determination, particularly

4 At least fifty-four nurses transferred to or from the AANS during the war.
with British and other allied doctors and surgeons. So, were there more AIF nurses than Butler's usual number? The answer – from a large number of sources – is yes.

The National Archives of Australia (NAA) in Canberra holds all surviving personal files for WWI personnel. The RecordSearch catalogue actually lists 2207 files for those AANS who served overseas, and many more for those on home service in Australia. Three nurses have two B2455 files. Another eight have had their WWI file included in their World War 2 file as they went on to serve their country a second time. Files do exist for AIF nurses from South Australia who travelled by train to Fremantle and Melbourne to assist with influenza nursing in 1918-19 and these may be included in Butler's total. However, these nurses should be part of home service figures. So again, this number is higher than Butler's usually quoted figure. It also means that at least seventy-nine personal files are missing.

There is some indication that officials anxious to preserve the AANS's image expunged some nurses' records. The WWI section at the NAA believes that they have files of nurses probably not counted in official figures due to pregnancy outside of marriage, and suicide. However, as I have reviewed all listed files, if this is the case, the NAA RecordSearch catalogue does not list them. Bassett supports this theory writing, 'Nurses who were caught transgressing the accepted moral codes sometimes simply disappeared from the records, making any estimate of their numbers very difficult'.

**Butler numbers**

In another volume of the official medical history, Butler reveals a higher number of nurses, listing 2286 AANS as serving overseas. He carefully lists the nurses' postings: General Hospitals 326; Reinforcements February 1915-April 1916 340; Convalescent Depot (Harefield) 58; Hospital ships (& Transport Corps) 102; Sea Transport Sections and Special Staff 57; and General Reinforcements 1403. Therefore, there already are an extra 147 names than the usual total.

Butler also identifies 130 nurses who originally 'enlisted' with the AANS and whom the Australian Government then transferred to the Queen Alexandra's Imperial Military Nursing Service (QAIMNS, known as the QAs) Reserve at the request of the British government. As one nurse refused to go, only 129 nurses ended up as transferees to this Service. However, in his Volume II table, Butler indicates that 136 nurses were enlisted in Australia for the QAIMNS. In most B2455s of these women, enlisting officers have not completed the enlistment paperwork for the AANS. A complete list of these QA enlistees is available from Central Army Records Office (CARO) Melbourne.

Another misunderstanding is the use of the term 'R.A.M.C.' when referring to nurses in the QAIMNS. Some researchers have translated this term as meaning Royal Australian Medical

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8 Called B2455 files.
9 Bassett, pp 80-81 citing Miss Conyers in AWM 3DRL 251, Fetherston papers, bundle IV, item 7 (ii of xiii).
10 AG Butler, *Official History of the Australian Army Medical Services 1914-1918*, Volume II - The Western Front, Australian War Memorial, Canberra, 1940, p 829. Statement showing numbers of A.A.M.C. Units and Personnel embarked from Australia for service in the A.I.F.
12 AWM41 662, Report of Director General, Medical Services, Australia, Regarding trained nurses in Australia, 8 December 1916, p 3; *Army Nursing Services, Australian Imperial Force*, Extracts from Regulations and Orders, Seniority List (up to October 1917) lists 129 'Nurses Selected for R.A.M.C.'.
14 AWM27 373/12 also lists all the names of those transferred to the British service. See also *Una*, 30 May 1917, p 83.
Corps instead of its true meaning, Royal Army Medical Corps, part of the British Army. Thus, those who have interpreted this term incorrectly have allocated British nurses to Australian figures.

There are discrepancies within both primary and secondary sources as to the actual number of nurses who participated in the war. This is largely due to the absence of military serial numbers for nurses; the fact that nurses generally used each other’s surnames in their letters, diaries and professional journals; and the lack of official documentation for all nurses in state and national archives for this period. Researchers have said that nurses who served in the AANS Reserve prior to the war and afterwards were in the ‘AANS’, with no other qualifier. For example, Lindley Deacon uses the figure 2692 for all Australian nurses in WWI, the sum of adding 2139 AANS, 130 QA nurses who were ex-AANS, and 423 Home Service nurses.\(^{15}\) Officially, the authorities denoted nurses who served solely on home service as in the AANS AMF – Australian Military Force and nurses who served overseas as AANS AIF; however, some historians have often omitted or have misunderstood the AMF nomenclature.\(^{16}\)

Some researchers have included members of the Tropical Force and the Australian Naval and Military Expeditionary Force (AN&MEF) to New Guinea in figures for the AANS. However, as Butler points out, these were separate services. Some AANS did first serve with the Tropical Force in 1914 before taking a discharge and then enlisting in the AANS or QAs. Others served in the AANS and later joined the AN&MEF.

**Nominal rolls**

Researchers have not yet found a complete official nominal roll in Australia although historians have searched.\(^{17}\) It is not certain that one ever existed. However, both CARO Melbourne and the AWM hold four gazetted seniority lists covering various periods within 1915-1918, and these provide many AANS names.\(^{18}\)

The most regularly cited list, ‘1914-1918 War Australian Army Nursing Service nominal roll’, shows the names of only 1805 members of the AANS who served overseas.\(^{19}\) The first entry on this handwritten document, kept in a ring binder, is Staff Nurse Linda Acres. Bassett has used this roll to illustrate points in *Guns and Brooches* but the low number of AANS could be misleading, for example, the percentage of those who married during the war is given as 108 (or 5.98 per cent).\(^{20}\) My AANS database shows 179 nurses resigning for marriage while they were overseas, plus another three who were already married – Amy Curtis, who resigned in 1915, and Mary Kennedy and Marion Croll who married medical officers on active service and did not resign.

CARO Melbourne also holds half a nominal roll (A-Ki) that appears likely to be the one Butler used to calculate his 2286 nurses. This is a typed document headed ‘Nominal Roll of Australian Army Nursing Service, Australian Imperial Force’ and the first entry is of Staff Nurse Vera Abbott. The total of nurses listed in this document is 1009. Neither CARO nor

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15 Lindley A. Deacon, *Beyond the Call – the story of Australia’s First World War nurses with further chapters relative to the war*, privately published, Launceston, Tasmania, 1999, p.v. It is likely that he used the website www.cultureandrecreation.gov.au/articles/womeninaaction that also uses this figure and cites its source as the Department of Defence.

16 B2455 files list both AANS AIF service and AANS AMF service.


18 The seniority lists are for: August 1915, up to October 1917, October 1917, and January 1918.

19 Bassett, p 95 citing CARO, Melbourne, ‘1914-1918 War Australian Army Nursing Service nominal roll’. I counted 1806 names.

20 Bassett, p 95.
the AWM holds the second half of the database.\textsuperscript{21} Compared with the database above, for A-Ki there are 834 names, already a discrepancy of 175 nurses. Both databases list similar information: rank, surname, Christian names, birthplace, place of joining, date of joining, date of embarkation and disposal.

There is evidence of one unknown administrator numbering the nurses’ files as they returned to Australia, possibly with the intention of calculating a total at the end of the war. Many of the NAA B2455 files carry an AANS record number such as S0001 or N12. Out of 2207 files, some 1083 have these identifying numbers, the highest being S1212 and N150. Cleverly, the ‘N’ numbers relate to nurses who took discharges in England or resigned their appointments overseas, thus indicating that they found at least 150 AANS who did this. However, it seems that this administrator gave up the task before all nurses had returned. In addition, some files have the same number, indicating the difficulty of allocating numbers to nurses arriving and remaining in different states.

\textbf{More recent calculations}

The Department of Defence’s website, used as an official source, indicates that it was ‘at least’ 2139 AANS personnel who served overseas, leaving us to guess how many more nurses exist.\textsuperscript{22} Contemporary historians mention various figures. Bassett says 2500 ‘or so’ in \textit{Guns and Brooches} but there is no indication of where this comes from as she repeats Butler’s 2139/130 figures later in the book.\textsuperscript{23} She also states that Victorian nurses made up a very large proportion of the AANS although ‘exact figures are difficult to establish. An \textit{Age} article of 1929 claimed that: ‘Out of 2000 fully qualified nurses who volunteered from Australia, 1007 were from Victoria. Of this number 850 and 5 masseuses were sent on active service’.\textsuperscript{24} Thus, it is obvious that newspapers also ‘invented’ figures. Bruce Scates and Raelene Francis also use the figure of 2500 nurses but at least they are including all nurses who overseas served from Australia.\textsuperscript{25} Historian Ken Inglis says ‘about 2300’ women had gone to the war in the AANS and appears to have calculated this by adding 2130 and 130.\textsuperscript{26}

Much research has occurred to try to identify all those nurses who did serve overseas. Four secondary sources publish lists of WW1 nurses. Marianne Barker, Ruth Rae and Neil Smith identify all but thirty-seven of the AANS with B2455 files.\textsuperscript{27} While publications such as Ruth Rae’s \textit{Scarlet Poppies} claim higher figures, like other historians, she includes 2270 names of nurses from all allied services who served overseas and multiple entries for the same AANS nurse.\textsuperscript{28} Her roll of nurses also includes those who worked for the Red Cross, not seen as a military nursing service. Rae also doubts the number of Australian nurses whom the government transferred to the QAIMNS Reserve and identifies some nurses with misspelt names as new entries.

\begin{itemize}
\item \textsuperscript{21} The AWM does hold AWM27 373/26 that contains a roughly alphabetized list of nurses’ initials and surnames followed by the name of a ship and date of embarkation.
\item \textsuperscript{23} Bassett, pp 2, 95.
\item \textsuperscript{24} Bassett, p. 97 citing Melbourne \textit{Age}, 24 April 1929.
\item \textsuperscript{25} Bruce Scates and Raelene Frances, \textit{Women and the Great War}, Cambridge University Press, Melbourne, 1997, pp 4-5.
\item \textsuperscript{26} Inglis, p 185.
\item \textsuperscript{27} Neil C. Smith, \textit{The Australian Army Nursing Service – A Short History with World War One Nominal Roll and Award Citations}, Mostly Unsung Military History Research and Publications, Melbourne, 1996.
\item \textsuperscript{28} Rae, \textit{Scarlet Poppies}, p 56.
\end{itemize}
Mervyn Collins, an interested volunteer at the AWM, created another list of AANS nurses in 1995. Titled *An alphabetical listing, embarkation nominal roll of nurses who went overseas with the AIF in World War I, 1914-1918*, Collins used the typed up AWM Embarkation Rolls and found 2198 names. However, while updating his amended list of 2172 names in 2005, the author discovered significant numbers of nurses who, for example, embarked in Fremantle and whose names were not in the Rolls. Presumably, this was due to compilation in Melbourne and inadvertent omission of these names. One complication was the fact that so many nurses actually departed Australia more than once during the war; some of these multiple departures are noted, others are not. The embarkation lists also do not show those who transferred from the British nursing service to the AANS, some ward assistants and masseuses.

Neil Smith's text on the AANS does not indicate which of the CARO references he uses to compile his list of 2203 names. He states that he obtained the extra 200 names 'from a variety of official records, and many are clearly part of the contingents and reinforcement [sic] who served with British Hospitals in India'. Again, confusion is obvious between the numbers of nurses who embarked more than once, and his text has multiple entries for the same nurse. Some nurses who served only on Home Service also included.

**Latest findings**

Through extensive primary research at the NAA, the author has compiled a new comprehensive list, revealing 2303 confirmed as being in the AANS overseas, a figure that includes 14 ward assistants, 1 stewardess/seamstress and the masseuses who served under the banner of the AANS. Appendix L of the author's history thesis on the AANS at the University of Melbourne shows an extract from the database. In addition to the 2303 confirmed AANS, some primary data exists for another 195 nurses as possibly having overseas service with the AANS, giving 2498 names. However, without official documentation or further primary sources, more research is required to establish their bona fides. This work must include both British and Australian military archives as such a large percentage of the AANS served in British hospitals and on British ships. This new figure is consistent with an article in the Royal Victorian Trained Nurses Association journal *Una*, which after the war quoted a 'return compiled by the Defence authorities' stating, 'no fewer than 2,379 nurses embarked from Australia'. The *Leader* newspaper in Melbourne also used the same figures in 'Magnificent Story of the Australian Army Nurses' in 1931.

Other new databases available from the author reveal the names of about 720 other trained Australian nurses and masseuses who served overseas with other allied services in addition to the AANS. These databases list Australian trained nurses and masseuses serving in the Tropical Force and Australian Naval and Military Expeditionary Force to New Guinea, the British QAIMNS and British Territorial Force Nursing Service, Red Cross, New Zealand Army Nursing Service, South Africa Military Nursing Service; Scottish Women's Hospitals; St Johns Ambulance; Australian Massage Service, and other organisations such as...

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30 Smith refers on p 3 to early Army Record Office data which 'listed only 1995 ladies'.

31 Those who served as ward assistants were not nurses. Florence Raines served as the one seamstress (see NAA B2455 F.L. Raines).

32 Kirsty Harris, 'Not just 'routine nursing': the roles and skills of the Australian Army Nursing Service during World War I', PhD thesis, History Department, The University of Melbourne, 2006.

33 'Army Nursing Service' in *Una*, 30 Jul 1919, p 138; 'Magnificent Story of the Australian Army Nurses' in *The Leader*, Melbourne, 2 May 1931, p 42.
as YMCA, Free French Corps, Volunteer Aid Detachment nurses/workers who served overseas, and the Australian Volunteer Hospital, France.

The compilation of these figures—2498 AANS and at least 720 nurses in other services—suggests that nearly as many Australian nurses served overseas in WWI as in World War 2, a point not previously emphasised.34

The future

Butler notes that the Australian Matron-in-Chief in England kept no records after the war. However, there should be papers for Matron E. Tracy Richardson, the Australian Matron-in-Chief, based in Melbourne from 1916. Unfortunately, a search at the NAA Melbourne reveals no listings for Matron Richardson. According to nursing historian Wing Commander Maxine Dahl, these were stored at Directorate of Nursing Services - Army, Canberra in the 1990s but are no longer there.

In conclusion, this article seeks to correct the historical record. Official publications should at least upgrade their figures to Butler's greater figure of 2286, thus bringing the additional nurses to light out of the archives until such time that researchers can confirm the 2498 names. In this way, the contribution of all who served is finally acknowledged, and the breadth of their experiences more fully understood.

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34 Bassett, p 112.