

Calculating the number of Irish Anzacs

AIF Numbers

- 1 The number of enlistments for service in the Australian forces during the First World War is generally accepted to be 416 809: the figure appears in the Australian Official History;¹ the AWM uses it on its website;² and it was the figure that the Assistant Minister for Defence George Wise gave in parliament in September 1919 to a question from Dr William Maloney.³ It is also the figure stated in the official statistics of the war, which notes that Australia “mobilised, enlisted or trained 412,953 military and 3,856 naval men, making a total of 416,809”.⁴
- 2 The figure emerged as early as March 1919 when the Defence Department issued a statement that was reported in the press.⁵
- 3 On the website of the National Archives of Australia (NAA), the series detail for Series B2455 (First Australian Imperial Force Personnel Dossiers, 1914-1920) indicates that there are 375 957 items in the series on RecordSearch.⁶ The NAA’s “Mapping our Anzacs” website indicates that 375,971 service records can be located through the site.⁷
- 4 Accepting the figure of 412,953 for military enlistments as stated in the official statistics, there are 36 996 service records not available in Series B2455.
- 5 In response to an inquiry I made to the NAA in November 2013 regarding the shortfall, Andrew Cairns, Manager, Reference Services (a/g), informed me:

[T]he records in B2455 are not completely comprehensive, and some have been lost, misfiled, or intersorted with later service records before they came into our custody. That said, we do not believe that this accounts for the approximately 37,000 'missing' records. Our holdings of these records are listed in their entirety, so there are no further records in this series that are not yet listed on RecordSearch.

He added:

We also have series MT1486/1 in custody. This contains the attestation forms of those who enlisted for the 1st AIF, and were either rejected, discharged while still in training, or went on to serve within Australia only. There are currently 64429 of these records listed on RecordSearch, but the series is not completely listed, and more registrations are being added. If we

¹ Volume XI *Australia During the War*, Appendix 3, pp. 871-872.

² <https://www.awm.gov.au/encyclopedia/enlistment/ww1/> (accessed 17/2/2014).

³ CPD 17 September 1919, p. 12392.

⁴ *Statistics of the Military Effort of the British Empire during the Great War 1914-1920*, HMSO, London, 1922, p. 759.

⁵ See, for example, *The Sydney Morning Herald* 4 March 1919, p. 6 and *The Argus* 7 March 1919, p. 6. NB. the SMH report indicated the figure was for the Australian Imperial Force and not the combined military and naval enlistments.

⁶ http://recordsearch.naa.gov.au/SearchNRRetrieve/Interface/DetailsReports/SeriesDetail.aspx?series_no=B2455 (accessed 17/2/2014).

⁷ <http://moa-news.tumblr.com/post/178698221/service-records> (accessed 17/2/2014).

include these, then we get a figure significantly higher than 412,953 enlistments. However, I would assume that those who were rejected on medical or other grounds would not be included in the figure of 412,953, so only a portion of the records in MT1486/1 would presumably be included. How large a proportion is not clear.⁸

As at 17 February 2014 the number of items in series MT1486/1 is 66 390, of which only 1083 are digitised.

- 6 Nevertheless, as suggested by Andrew Cairns, not all those listed in series MT1486/1 would have been included in the figure of 412 953 for total military enlistments. This is apparent given that the total number of items in series B2455 and MT1486/1, are 442 347, which well exceeds the number of enlistments.
- 7 Questions arise as to the reliability of the figure of 416 809 and as to the criteria used to compile series B2455 and MT1486/1, particularly since a perusal of thousands of service records as part of the Irish Anzacs Project has turned up many soldiers whose service records are included in series B2455 but who “were either rejected, discharged while still in training, or went on to serve within Australia only”. There may be an overlapping of items between the two series.
- 8 In addition, the Official Medical History notes that “enlistments do not represent individuals, as multiple enlistments were common among certain classes of men who were unfit or for other reasons resorted to impersonation or misstatements at enrolments”.⁹ Many of the service records inspected for the Irish Anzacs Project relate to soldiers who enlisted more than once, some as many as four times. Accordingly, on that ground alone, the figure of 416 809 for enlistments must necessarily exceed the number of persons who enlisted and the number of items in series B2455.
- 9 In response to an inquiry I made to the AWM as to the reliability of the generally accepted enlistment figure, Ashley Ekins, Head, Military History Section, advised that “the official historian Charles Bean noted in 1938 that Base Records of the Defence Department held 510,000 personal files and over 1 million card records, leading researchers to wonder how reliable those estimates were (see C.E.W. Bean, ‘The writing of the Australian official history of the Great War—source, methods and some conclusions’, *Royal Australian Historical Society Journal and Proceedings*, vol. XXIV, part 2, 1938, pp. 85-112, 99)” (Email 19/12/2013).

Irish Anzacs Project

- 10 The Irish Anzacs Project aims to compile a database of all those members of the Australian Imperial Force who were born in Ireland. The purpose is to answer a number of questions regarding the Irish-born who enlisted during WW1, including: how many were they; where in Ireland were they from; what were their religious affiliations, their ages, their occupations; what ranks did they attain; how many died as a consequence of their war service; what decorations did they receive? In addition, the project aims to answer broader questions such as how did

⁸ Email 25/11/2013.

⁹ AG Butler, *Official History of the Australian Army Medical Services, 1914–1918*, Volume III – Special Problems and Services, AWM, Canberra, 1943, p. 882.

Irish-born enlistment compare with AIF enlistments generally and did events in Ireland, such as the Easter Rising have an impact on Irish-born enlistment?

- 11 Of the 375 957 items in series B2455 the project has identified approximately 5800 soldiers born in Ireland.¹⁰ Applying that proportion to the total military enlistments of 412 953 there are likely to have been about 6400 Irish-born members of the AIF, leaving about 600 service records to be found.
- 12 It is possible that some, if not all, of the missing 600 are included in series MT1486/1. Using the search term “Ireland” in relation to the series, a search returns 642 items of which 21 relate to the surname Ireland, with none of the latter showing Ireland as the place of birth. A search on county names adds another 41 items, none of which relates to the surname Ireland. However, 9 of those items relate to Clare in South Australia. Accordingly, in series MT1486/1 there are 653 items that might relate to persons born in Ireland. Of these only eight are digitised.
- 13 However, the figure could be higher as the Item Title does not contain a place of birth for everyone listed in the series. In fact, a search excluding the term “born” returns in excess of 20 000 items.¹¹ Nevertheless, as series MT1486/1 contains items relating to persons not included in the figure of 412 953 military enlistments it is difficult to estimate how many of the “missing 600” will be found in that series.

Jeff Kildea
17 February 2014

¹⁰ “Mapping our Anzacs” gives the figure of 4731 on its map of Ireland, which clearly understates the true figure.

¹¹ Series MT1486/1 uses “born – [location]” rather than “Place of Birth” or “POB” which are used in series B2455 to indicate place of birth.