

Demographics of an Australian Infantry Battalion during the Great War



A case study looking at the age, marital status and profession of an Australian infantry battalion in the First World War using the 5th Reinforcements 22nd Battalion that enlisted into the Australian Imperial Force in July 1915, combined with previously published literature.

Background

As the Great War of 1914-18 approached its first anniversary, hopes of a quick end had now disappeared. Trench warfare was now the reality in Western Europe, stretching from the Belgian coast to the Swiss Alps, pitting industrial nations against each other in what was now becoming a war of attrition. With no immediate end in sight, more men were required for the front. To meet the call for more men for the British Army and with mounting casualties within the Australian Imperial Force in Gallipoli, a concerted recruitment campaign began across Australia in mid-1915. Nowhere was this more the case than in the State of Victoria, which had been stung by criticism of a lack of recruits for the initial stages of the war. July 1915 thus saw the greatest number of Australians enlist during the entire war with 36,500 signing up across the nation, of which 21,500 of these were from Victoria.



AUSTRALIAN WAR MEMORIAL

FO0358 005 Throughout the land men would sign up at recruiting events and halls, and a few days later march into camps to begin

their training. After a couple of weeks of training the men would then be assigned to various reinforcement units attached to a particular battalion. One such group of men, many of whom marched into Broadmeadows Camp on the outskirts of Melbourne on the 19th July 1915, were assigned to the 5th Reinforcements of the 22nd Infantry Battalion. It is this group of 154 men that make up the 5th/22nd, who trained and then sailed together from Melbourne on the 29th September 1915, that provides the focus for this case study.

Using the information supplied by the men at the time of their enlistment and recorded on the nominal rolls, we are able to explore as a case study the demographics of an Australian infantry battalion during the Great War. We can compare and contrast the findings with previous studies on this subject, in this instance from L.L. Robson*, University of Melbourne, who conducted analysis into the statistics of a broad sample across the A.I.F. and produced a study entitled ‘The origin and characteristics of the first A.I.F., 1914-1918: some statistical evidence’.

Age & fighting ability

During the initial recruitment at the outset of war in August 1914, men were preferred if they already had some military background in the militia, and as a result tended to be in their twenties, the fittest and most able. By the time of the mid-1915 recruitment drive, restrictions were relaxed in order to meet the increase in demand for men. For example the age limits were raised from 18-35 to 18-45, and in addition height lowered from 5’6” to 5’2”.

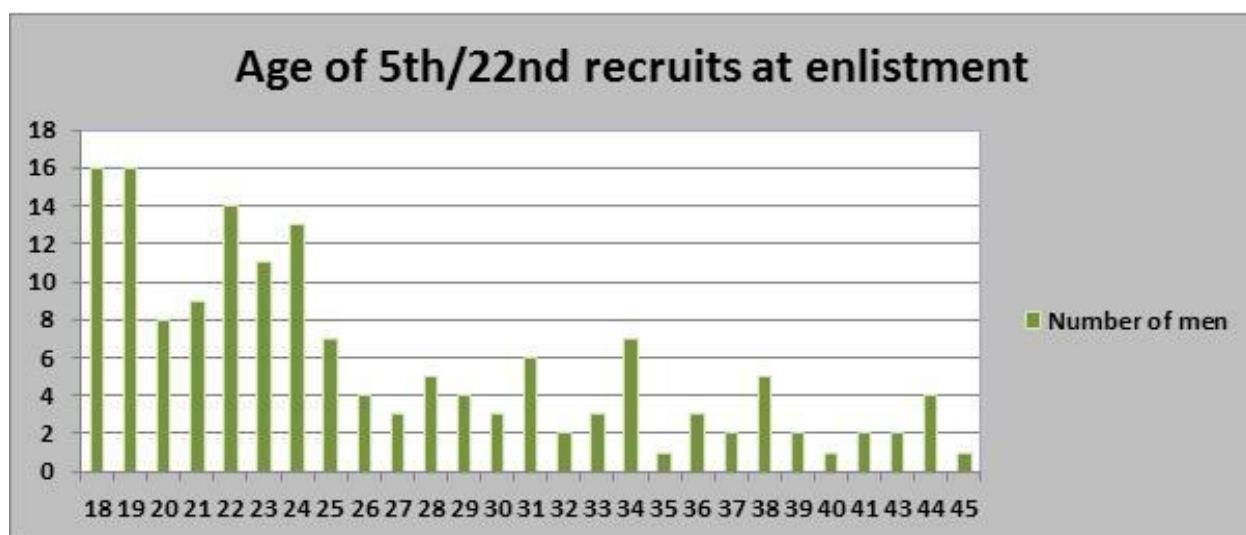
Robson, using a sample of 2,291 men from across all States and enlisting throughout the war, analysed the age demographics of the men recruited into the A.I.F. and it was found, as shown in Table 1, that the largest cohort was the 20-24 age group followed by the 25-29 age group.

Age	A.I.F. *L.L.Robson	5th/22nd – percentage	5th/22nd – recruits
18-19	14%	21%	32
20-24	38%	36%	55
25-29	21%	15%	23
30-34	12%	14%	21
35-39	8%	8%	13
>40	7%	6%	10

Table 1: Age of recruits on enlisting

In comparing the 5th/22nd to the A.I.F. it can be seen that the 20-24 age group is also the largest, but the second largest and with the highest number per individual age (see Graph 1 below) was the 18 and 19 year olds, possibly as a result of the intensity with which Victoria conducted the recruitment drive at this time on account of its previous poor enlisting levels. Both sets of figures in Table 1 show that just over one in four men were over the age of 30, and around 15% over the age of the old limit of 35.

In the following graph we can view in more detail the age of the 154 men of the 5th/22nd who enlisted in July 1915, and despite the raising of the recruitment age level the majority of the men were clearly in or below their mid-20's, with the mean at 23 years and an average of 26 years.



Graph 1: Age distribution of the 154 recruits assigned to the 5th/22nd in August 1915

With regard to the age data in the above graph, it should be noted that the verification of the individual's age (as well as medical investigation) at the time of enlisting was not as thorough as it could have been. It has been well documented that many young lads lied about their age in order to sign up for the Great War, and family evidence surrounding [2394 Pte Stephens](#) of the 5th/22nd supports this who was 17 at the time of his enlisting. Given the large number of 18 and 19 year olds in the 5th/22nd it can be assumed that he was not the only one. However, and perhaps with some greater significance, the same 'economy with the truth' was seen at the other end of the age spectrum. For example from the service records, [2479 Pte Wilson](#) gave his age as 36 when he was 46, and [2428 Pte Tullett](#) was not 45 as stated, but 55!

The raising of the age limit and the lack of scrutiny to both age and medical conditions had a negative impact on the calibre of the men being sent to fight and to the burden placed on the medical services. With the A.I.F. as a whole, the health of men recruited under the new standard was of great concern to commanding officers. An abstract from the Australian War Memorial website reads: "The second volume of the Official History of the Australian Army Medical Services in the War of 1914—1918 by Colonel AG Butler contains the following: On 30th March, 1917 General Howse wrote to General Fetherston: "I am trying to arrange transport for two or three thousand "B" class men; they are absolutely unfit for service. Many of them do not disclose any organic disease upon a carefully conducted clinical examination, but are in and out of hospital, and are quite useless for front line, and practically useless for Home Service....far better no reinforcements be sent from Australia as they do no duty, and only cause congestion in our hospitals and Command Depots. The class of reinforcements you are sending are not up to the old standard. Headquarters AIF Depots report that 20 per cent are unfit for the front line".

Using the 5th/22nd as a case study, all four of the men returned to Australia early through illness and before the Battalion had left training in Egypt in March 1916 for active service in France, were over the age of 30, including two of the 44 year olds. Of the seventeen men that returned to Australia before the end of the war as a result of sickness and without having been wounded, thirteen were from the over 30's, compared with just four from the cohorts that made up the majority of this unit.

Marital status & wartime romance

Given the age distribution of the recruits into the army it should not come as a surprise that relatively few of the men in the A.I.F. were married, and this figure of about 1 in 6 remained consistent throughout the war. As can be seen from Table 2 below, the percentage of married men in the 5th/22nd was slightly lower, probably on account of their lower average age than those from the Robson study.

Marital Status	A.I.F. *L.L.Robson	5th/22nd – percentage	5th/22nd – recruits
Married	16%	12%	18
Widower	not recorded	2%	3
Single	82%	86%	133
Unknown	2%	0%	0

Table 2: Marital status of recruits at time of enlisting

However, as the war progressed a number of the soldiers had wartime sweethearts, often met while on leave or recuperating from their wounds in hospitals and training camps in England. Many were married before the end of the war and returning to Australia. The 'Mahana', which sailed from England to Australia in September 1919 was called the 'bride boat' on account of so many newlyweds on board. In our case study unit, six men from the 5th/22nd married while in the A.I.F.: [2369 Pte Simkin](#); [2394 Pte Stephens](#); [2430 Pte Thompson](#); [2460 Pte Bain](#); [2470 Pte Faul](#); and [2483 Pte West](#).

Profession and character

As can be seen in Table 3, Robson's study showed that well over half of the recruits into the A.I.F. came from manual professions such as labourers or working in industry, farming and mining. This high proportion of physically active men helped define the image of an Australian infantryman as being larger, fitter and stronger than his Tommie equivalent. In addition many people lived and worked in remote and lonely places so initiative and resourcefulness was developed further. This independence of thought did however create a different attitude towards accepting orders that the British High Command was accustomed to and hence discipline was an issue for officers leading Australian units throughout the war (subject of a forthcoming case study). However as C.E.W. Bean recorded right at the start of his Official History, the profession and abode of the Australian soldier had a major impact on his approach to the war. As Bean recalls "As for his creed, it was a romantic one inherited from the gold-miner and the bushman

that a man should at all times and at any cost stand by his mate. The strongest bond in the Australian Imperial Force was that between a man and his mate. No matter how hardened a sinner against camp rules or against the establishment, an Australian never seemed to fail in his self-imposed duty of staying with a wounded friend whenever his task in the battle enabled him to do so.”

Profession	A.I.F. *L.L.Robson	5th/22nd – percentage	5th/22nd – recruits
Labourers	22%	34%	53
Industry	20%	12%	19
Primary Production	17%	13%	20
Commerce	12%	10%	16
Transport	9%	15%	23
Clerks	5%	3%	4
Professional	5%	3%	4
Other	10%	10%	15

Table 3: Profession of recruits in the AIF at time of enlisting

The 22nd Battalion was raised in Victoria and the majority of the men came from Melbourne and the surrounding area. For the 5th/22nd the top ten places of abode according to the nominal rolls were: Richmond – nine men; Port Melbourne – six; Kensington – six; Albert Park – five; Collingwood – five; Williamstown – five; Carlton – four; Footscray – four; Kew – four; Northcote – four. The fact that this group of men came from an urban area is hence reflected in their professions when compared with the national picture observed by Robson. Consistent with Robson’s findings, Labourers in the 5th/22nd made up the largest group, but whereas other regions of the country would have had a sizeable proportion of their workforce in either Industry or Primary Production, within the Melbourne area these working class men were instead employed in the Labourer or Transportation sectors. In both the national and 5th/22nd samples professional and office based professions made up only a small proportion of the total that enlisted.

Rank and profession

Robson in his study found that approximately one in five men would at some time take the rank of Officer or Non-Commissioned Officer. However for the Australian soldier leadership went beyond the formal levels of rank. As Bean recorded “The British soldiers instinctively looked up to the Australian private. He was a leader, even to the Americans that followed. Such men could not be easily controlled by the traditional methods of the British army. However they were intent upon learning and were readily controlled by anyone that was competent to teach them.”

Rank	A.I.F. *L.L.Robson	5th/22nd – percentage	5th/22nd – recruits
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Officer	5%	3%	5
NCO	17%	26%	40
Privates	78%	71%	109

Table 4: Proportion of recruits in the AIF that took leadership positions

As can be seen in Table 4 the overall figure of men taking a rank above Private is higher in the 5th/22nd than in the A.I.F. as a whole, possibly as a result of 5th/22nd seeing all of the campaign in Europe – the 22nd Battalion was one of the first in the A.I.F. to land at Marseille and they fought in the last engagement by the A.I.F. in October 1918. The 5th/22nd consequently suffered a higher casualty rate compared with the A.I.F. as a whole (subject of a further case study), therefore requiring the replacement of the officer ranks which statistically bore a higher rate of attrition than other ranks.

Robson also noted that the leaders predominately came from three of the lower populated professions, namely Commerce, Clerks and Professional, and that there were relatively few from Labourers and Miners (within Primary Production). This is slightly skewed within the small sample size of the five Officers within the 5th/22nd, with [Captain Evans](#) a Pastoralist (Other), [Lieutenant Kilduff](#) a Salesman (Professional), [Lieutenant Turner](#) a Grocer (Commerce), whereas [Lieutenant Archer](#) was a Farrier (Primary) and [2nd Lieutenant Robbins](#) a Carpenter (Labourer). However within the 5th/22nd the two highest providers of NCO's were in fact Labourers with twelve, possibly on account of their high overall number, and Primary Production with five. With the exception of Transport which saw only three out of 23 of their profession making it above the rank of Private, the other professions were fairly much equal with about one in four of them receiving a promotion.

References and further reading with respect to this article:-

* **The origin and character of the first A.I.F., 1914–1918: Some statistical evidence.** LL Robson, University of Melbourne, <http://www.tandfonline.com/doi/pdf/10.1080/10314617308595502>

Official History of Australia in the War of 1914-18. Vol I – The Story of Anzac; C.E.W. Bean