

Report for AAHN H21 grant

Travels with a “freak unit”: Nursing work and women’s lives with the No 1 Mobile Military Hospital in the Desert War, 1941-1944

The aim of the research was to uncover the experiences of the contingent of Queen Alexandra’s Imperial Military Nursing Service (QAs) with the No 1 Mobile Military Hospital in the Desert War, 1941-1944, through the lens of the official war diaries of the unit and the personal testimonies of the nurse in charge.

The main source material for this study for which the AAHN H21 research funding was sought are the commanding officer’s (CO) military war diaries of the No 1 Mobile Military Hospital, which are located at The National Archives in Kew, London. It was funds for this archival research and the dissemination of the work that funds were sought. I had originally budgeted for 2 visits to Kew, as preliminary viewing of the diaries showed they were frequently written in pencil, or in the middle of fighting and were therefore challenging to decipher. However, the modernisation of copying rules, meant that I could photograph all the pages on my iPad. The use of this technology meant that I could not only view the documents in my own time at home but also enlarge as required to support their reading.

The diaries are a fascinating resource which speak directly not only to the work of the unit, but also the ongoing debates as to the presence of female nurses in far-flung war zones. As the medical officers and male orderlies became more used to the presence of the nurses – and there was eventually a compliment of 7 of them with the unit – the diaries demonstrate their value was appreciated. The nurses themselves clearly had to work outside the normal parameters of their gender and profession.

My plan for dissemination was to present at the Social History of Medicine conference. This was my choice as I wished to expand the reach of my work outside the history of nursing. However, there was a clash of dates, which meant that I could not attend. I was fortunate to have my presentation accepted for both the UK Association for the History of Nursing Annual Colloquium in Kingston, Surrey on 1 June 2026 and the Military Welfare Conference in Cluj Napoca, Romania from 18-21 June 2026.

The focus of my talk at the UKAHN colloquium was the debates about the nurses’ presence. The focus of the Military Welfare conference paper was the contradictions in their position as women expected to embody the very feminine profession of nursing, while at the same time, engage in work in a war zone. Both talks were well received and I welcomed some genuine interest in the history nursing and women’s work at the Military Welfare conference.

My intention now is to write up an article for *Nursing History Review* and one for a more general history audience. My plan is for the *NHR* article is to focus on the huge debate around the appearance and uniform of the nurses and the fear of ‘gender bending’ when women enter a war zone and wear trousers. My second article will focus on the more general issues around the work and travels of the unit.

I am most appreciative of the opportunity that the AAHN H21 award enabled. This is a fascinating project and I look forward to publishing on the topic.