

**22/12 MATRON CORA BEATTIE
ANDERSON, RRC, ARRC, MID*
(N.Z. ARMY NURSING SERVICE)¹**

Phil Lascelles MA(Hons), Auckland War Memorial Museum

Cora Anderson had an eventful life. She survived the ss Elingamite shipwreck on the Three Kings Islands off Cape Reinga in 1902, became one of the “first fifty” New Zealand nurses to serve in World War I and was highly decorated for her role as Matron of Hornchurch Convalescent Home in England where many of the wounded and sick Kiwi WWI soldiers recuperated.

Cora Beattie Anderson was born in Auckland New Zealand on 4 March 1881 and lived with her family on Roslyn Avenue, Remuera.

At the age of 21, Cora had a brush with death when returning from holiday in Sydney aboard ss Elingamite on 9 November 1909. The ship was carrying 136 passengers, 58 crew and a valuable (and now made infamous by diver Kelly Tarlton) cargo that included 6,000 gold half-sovereign coins. Elingamite was sailing through fog as it rounded the north of New Zealand heading for Auckland when it struck one of the Three Kings Islands and quickly sunk. In the mayhem that followed, 28 passengers and 17 crew died. Fortunately Cora was rescued and along with her brother-in-law, Dr Beattie, landed at Hohoura in Northland where they were cared for by local Maori before returning to Auckland.

“Dr. Beattie is also well known, being the medical man in charge of the Auckland Asylum, who had been on a pleasure trip. Dr. Beattie is among the saved: also Miss Cora Anderson, his sister-in-law, daughter of Mr. William Anderson, late Auckland city engineer.”²

In a subsequent interview, Dr Beattie explained the experience that he and Cora had endured.

“Miss Anderson and myself, with several others, whose names I do not know, got into what we believed was the last boat that could be launched. We were then fairly waist high in water on the deck, and remained there only with difficulty. We were only a short time on the boat when

¹ RRC = Royal Red Cross. ARRC = Associate Royal Red Cross. mid* = Mentioned in Despatches twice.

² Auckland Passengers. List of Steerage Passengers. N.Z. Herald, 12 November 1902, p. 5. Retrieved from <http://paperspast.natlib.govt.nz/cgi-bin/paperspast?a=d&d=NZH19021112.2.34>

she swamped and capsized. By this time we had launched the last lifeboat, which could not be launched previously. All the ropes were already cut, and as the boat floated gently off five or six passengers who were on the upper deck, stepped into her and made for us. Miss Anderson was the first to be picked up, then myself, and then a few other passengers, and soon after the first and second mates, who at once assumed command. By this time all the other boats had disappeared, and we remained to pick up all the passengers seen floating on the wreckage. We numbered 45 in all, and one dead body, and we set sail to find the Cape Maria light.”³

Cora Anderson went on to train as a nurse at Thames Hospital, passing her final examinations and becoming a registered nurse in January 1909. She subsequently resigned her position at Thames Hospital after 4 years and entered St Helen’s Hospital in Auckland to undertake midwifery training which she successfully completed at the end of that year.⁴

At the outbreak of WWI, it was not considered necessary to have New Zealand nurses sent to look after the Gallipoli casualties as the number of British nurses already deployed was considered adequate and the expected number of casualties was fewer than what eventuated. The reality of Gallipoli soon reached home and that decision was reversed.

“For several months it was not thought that New Zealand nurses would be required for our men. The authorities did not then realise the awful need which very shortly arose at Gallipoli for help for the sick and wounded. The nurses, however, made urgent demands to go with the transports, and the New Zealand Nursing Service, which up to the outbreak of war was merely a name, with a Matron-in-Chief as head of a phantom unit, was then rapidly organised, and in a very short time there were hundreds of applications for membership from all over the Dominion.”⁵

In 1915, Cora Anderson was working as a district nurse in the Rotorua area for the Native Department of the NZ Government. Cora enlisted for service with the NZ Army Nursing Service (NZANS) on 6 April 1915 and was immediately selected as one of the first 50 nurses to embark for overseas service.

“On April 8th, 1915, the first contingent of fifty nurses under the Matron-in-Chief, Miss Maclean, set sail from New Zealand in the s.s. *Rotorua*”.

“On May 17th this contingent landed in England and proceeded to London, where orders were given them to go on to Egypt to join the New Zealand forces. A busy fortnight ensued in

³ Wreck of the Elingamite. New Zealand Herald, 20 November 1902, p. 1. Retrieved from <http://paperspast.natlib.govt.nz/cgi-bin/paperspast?a=d&d=NZH19021120.2.88.4>

⁴ Kai Tiaki: the journal of the nurses of New Zealand, July 1909, p. 117. Retrieved from <http://paperspast.natlib.govt.nz/cgi-bin/paperspast?a=d&cl=search&d=KT19090701.2.46.4;>

Kai Tiaki : the journal of the nurses of New Zealand, January 1910, p. 39. Retrieved from <http://paperspast.natlib.govt.nz/cgi-bin/paperspast?a=d&cl=search&d=KT19100101.2.32>

⁵ Maclean, H. New Zealand Army Nurses. Vol. IV, in *The War Effort of New Zealand, New Zealand in the First World War*, by H.T.B. Drew, pp. 87-104. Auckland: Whitcombe & Tombs, 1923. p. 87.

procuring field equipment and again the contingent started off, in the troopship *Scotian*, in company with seventy Imperial nurses (among whom were two New Zealanders), to be later disembarked at Gibraltar and Malta, with nine hundred troops for Gallipoli. On June 18th Alexandria was reached.”⁶



MATRONS OF THE N.Z. NURSING SERVICE.

*Cora Beattie ANDERSON is standing in the centre, 3rd from left
(<http://nzetc.victoria.ac.nz/etexts/WH1-Effo/WH1-Effo088a.jpg>)*

The New Zealand nurses were quickly absorbed into the Imperial military hospitals in Cairo and Alexandria. The hospitals grew in capacity to handle the many soldiers who were evacuated from Gallipoli with serious wounds and sickness. “The serious cases of dysentery and of enteric [illnesses relating to the intestines] from Gallipoli necessitated nursing skill of the highest order, and brought forth all the loving kindness and patience that accompany the skill of a good nurse.”⁷

The New Zealand nurses were highly respected by their nursing and medical colleagues.

“They were always ready for anything and were so adaptable and resourceful. The surgeons found them well-trained and careful. The nurses were sought after by the matrons of the various Imperial hospitals. When directed to open a new hospital, one British matron said: “I will not mind doing it if I may have some New Zealand sisters.” They were given responsible positions and justified the trust thus placed in them. One matron said when so promoting them: “You girls

⁶ Maclean, H. New Zealand Army Nurses. Vol. IV, in *The War Effort of New Zealand, New Zealand in the First World War*, by H.T.B. Drew, pp. 87-104. Auckland: Whitcombe & Tombs, 1923. p. 88-89.

⁷ Maclean, H. New Zealand Army Nurses. Vol. IV, in *The War Effort of New Zealand, New Zealand in the First World War*, by H.T.B. Drew, pp. 87-104. Auckland: Whitcombe & Tombs, 1923. p. 90.

deserve it, for you have helped me through a most trying time and I always feel I can depend on my New Zealand sisters in any emergency. In fact I consider them the backbone of my hospital.”⁸

Whilst still in Cairo, Cora Anderson was promoted to Sister on 1 February 1916. Soon after, she embarked on the NZ Hospital Ship Marama at Alexandria for England on 9 June 1916. It was initially intended that she would take up the position of Matron at the No 3 NZ General Hospital at Codford in December 1916 but was instead sent to No 1 NZ General Hospital at Brockenhurst in England. On 4 April 1917, Cora was promoted to Matron and took over the NZ Convalescent Hospital at Hornchurch.

Her efforts “in connection with administration in Egypt” were mentioned in the despatches of Lieut. General Sir J.G. Maxwell who was Commanding the Forces in Egypt between 11 February 1917 and 1 August 1917.⁹ She was also “brought to the notice of the Secretary for State for War for valuable services rendered in connection with the war”.¹⁰ Both of these “mentioned in despatches” resulted in the award of a bronze oakleaf that she would wear on the medal ribbon of her subsequently-awarded Victory Medal.

The London Gazette of 24 October 1917 announced the award of the Associate Royal Red Cross (ARRC) “in recognition of her valuable services in connection with the War”.¹¹ Her award was personally presented at Buckingham Palace by King George V.

“I was the first of the other 12 (ARRC recipients) and when I reached the King he asked me how long I had been in England and said that he was very pleased to give me the medal. He did not make me feel nervous at all.”¹²

On 15 November 1917, Matron Cora Anderson was recommended by the Minister of Public Health to attend training in the administration of anaesthetics, a responsibility normally given to a trained doctor. These awards, recognition and promotions make evident that Matron Cora Anderson was a very respected and capable nurse and nursing administrator.

She continued in her role at Hornchurch until war’s end, and was returned to New Zealand on 3 April 1919 for demobilisation. She arrived in New Zealand still exhausted from her work. At her examination prior to discharge, the medical board determined that she was

⁸ Maclean, H. *New Zealand Army Nurses. Vol. IV, in The War Effort of New Zealand, New Zealand in the First World War*, by H.T.B. Drew, pp. 87-104. Auckland: Whitcombe & Tombs, 1923. p. 95.

⁹ London Gazette, 21 June 1917, p. 6184.

¹⁰ London Gazette, 3 March 1917.

¹¹ London Gazette, 24 October 1917, p. 10975.

¹² Letter from Cora Anderson to “Miller”, dated 25 November 1917. Retrieved from Biographies compiled by Brent Mackrell, printed 8 September 2015.

suffering from debility as the result of active service and granted her additional leave to recover prior to her discharge.

On 31 July 1919, the London Gazette announced the award of the first class Royal Red Cross (RRC) “in recognition of her valuable nursing services in connection with the War”.¹³ Her award was presented at Government House in Wellington by the Governor General, The Earl of Liverpool.

After the war, Cora Anderson married Eric Roberton who was a WWI veteran and dairy farmer. They settled near Tahora in Taranaki where they remained until retirement, then moved to Auckland. Cora died on 24 September 1962 and her ashes are interred at Purewa Cemetery in Auckland. Her husband Eric died on 12 April 1971 and he is buried alongside her at Purewa.

Cora Beattie Anderson was awarded the following Decorations and Medals for her WWI service:

Royal Red Cross (1st Class) (RRC)

Associated Royal Red Cross (2nd Class) (ARRC)

1914-15 Star

British War Medal 1914-19

Victory Medal, with oakleaf (for both her mentioned in despatches)

¹³ London Gazette, 24 October 1917, p. 10975.