

NZART ID No: 85, Arm Type: Rifle, Date of Draft (V2) 6/10/2012, Compiled by Phil Cregeen

Pattern: Magazine Lee Enfield Mk I & I*, Introduced into NZ Service: 1900, Withdrawn 1930s

Makers: RSAF Enfield, ROF Sparkbrook, BSA Co, LSA Co.

Details of Arm:

Calibre: .303 British, Rifling: 5 grooves 1:10 in LH Twist, Barrel Length: 30.2in., OA Length: 49.5 in. (1257 mm), Action: Bolt with 10 round detachable box magazine. Weight 9 Lb 5 oz, (4.19 Kg)

Sights: barleycorn foresight, leaf back sight 600-1800 and bed 200-500 yards, long range aperture and dial 1600-2800.

Bayonet: (NZART #52) Pattern 1888

Markings: Makers name and date on RH butt socket, NZ Issue marks on Butt tang.



Right view Mk I* (bolt cocked) manufactured by Sparkbrook 1901



Left view MLE Mk I* (bolt open)

With the change from black powder to cordite in 1891 it was found that the existing Metford rifling of the magazine rifle (MLM MKII) was not as efficient as the new Enfield rifling which had proven to be successful in the Maxim machine gun. The square profile Enfield rifling was found to give a higher muzzle velocity and a longer barrel life with smokeless powder. As a result of this change to Enfield rifling the magazine rifle became the Magazine Lee-Enfield Mk I in 1895. In 1899 clearing rods were abolished and this resulted in an advance to MK I* with a resulting change to the nose cap and fore-end.



Makers marks on RH butt socket



NZ issue 1914 E 14



NZ issue 1901 & 1914 C14

NZ Service

At the end of the 19th century (1898) NZ forces were armed with the single shot Martini Enfield .303 rifle and carbine and the first five contingents of soldiers sent to South Africa in 1899 and 1900 were armed with the ME Artillery Carbine. However from June 1900 some members of 4-10 contingents were re-equipped with MLE issued from British stores in South Africa. Many of these MLE returned to New Zealand with the troops and were taken on charge by Government Stores.

The 1902 defence Report states: "all Mounted Rifles and Corps are now armed with the magazine rifle". 1903 Small Arms Returns indicated 18,785 MLE rifles and 1,478 MLE carbines held by NZ. Although rifles purchased and issued by NZ were marked NZ with a unique number and year, some retained by returning soldiers from South Africa (particularly the 7th contingent) were not NZ marked. From 1906 to 08 the MLEs were withdrawn from the Mounted Rifles and replaced by Short Magazine Lee Enfield Mk I & I*. Typically these early MLE rifles are marked on the butt tang NZ/ 846/1901.

A Return of Arms for 1913 shows 16,398 MLE Mk I* on issue to Territorial and Senior Cadets, while 2,935 MLE Mk I* had been sold to Defence Rifle Club members. The 1913 Defence Report stated "an order for 15,000 MLE Long (Mk I & I*) has been placed with the War Office.....15,000 MLE rifles (part worn) have also been obtained from Canada. These are marked E 14 and C14 respectively on the butt tang. These two shipments arrived in December 1913 and January, February and March 1914. Of the English rifles 5,000 were new and the remaining 10,000 were refurbished, these were issued to the Territorial Force, while the Canadian rifles went to the Cadets.

The NZ Expeditionary Force was equipped with MLE rifles (although the NZ Mounted Rifles were armed with SMLEs) on its departure overseas to fight in the First World War; however, they were exchanged for SMLE Mk III in Egypt in March 1916.

In 1919 MLE Mk I & I* held in store were refurbished. In the 1920s many of the New Zealand MLE were refurbished and re-barrelled with new barrels supplied by BSA which came complete with BSA commercial receivers, and so many NZ marked MLE are found today without Ordnance Board markings and simply BSA Co on the butt socket and the BSA stacked rifle logo on the knock form, these rifles have serial numbers prefix PB & QB. The upgraded rifles were sighted for Mk VII ammunition, with a new back sight bed graduated to 600 yards and the leaf to 1900 yards, they are marked HV in front of the back sight.



Typical marking found on MLE upgraded with BSA commercial barrel & action

It is believed that most of the HV rifles were sold to the Defence Rifle Association, some had their barrels shortened to the same length as the SMLE and some were fitted with heavy Lithgow barrels and are termed "Range Pattern".

The date when the MLE was finally withdrawn from Territorial Force and Cadet Service is unclear but probably took place in the 1930s. The MLE long rifles saw further use arming the Home Guard in WW II. (They are typically marked: 3 HG 1459). 1,410 MLE were issued to Home Guard in 1941. By 1943 24,110 impressed Rifles (mainly .303 Lee Enfields) were held by the army who started handing back rifles or compensating those whose weapon was either lost or damaged including the 725 that were converted to a Charlton.

Acknowledgements: John Osborne, Noel Taylor Photographs: Phil Cregeen

Reference: .303 MLM and MLE Small Arms Identification Series by Ian Skennerton

NZAAA Gazette Dec 1999 article-The Long Tom in NZ Service by Noel Taylor

NZ Guns & Hunting Sept 2012 article_ The Long Tom in NZ Service-an update by Noel Taylor

NZAHAA Gazette Mar 2009 article – Arms of the NZ Mounted Rifles during the Boer War by John Osborne

Appendix to the Journal of the House of Representatives