

THE LONG TOM RIFLE IN NEW ZEALAND SERVICE - AN UPDATE

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Since inheriting a sporterised 1903 Magazine Lee Enfield from his Great Uncles at the age of 16 the author has had a life-long interest in the Long Tom. More recently he noticed a significant number of ex-military Long Lee Enfields with BSA commercial barrels and receivers and decided to find out why this was so.



Long Toms

From the top: MLE MKI* - Enfield 1903 - (authors first rifle); MLM MKII -LSA Co 1893 -(with Clearing Rod. Note no safety catch on bolt); MLE- BSA Co (Commercial Body, with HV marked Barrel converted to Range Pattern), CLLE- BSA Co. (converted to Range Pattern & HV Barrel); MLE MKI*- BSA Co (Military) 1901 (Sporterised with 21 inch barrel - 9 inches shorter than issued); MLE MKI* BSA CO (Military) 1901 (produced from rejected parts and used as an Armourers tool and also as an instructional piece)

After looking at a number of Long Tom Rifles I noticed that in this range of rifles the majority had rear sight beds graduated to 500 yards but some were graduated to 600 yards, also some in the parts box had no graduations at all. Also noted the barrels of those with the 600-yard markings were marked in front of the rear sight with HV, which on investiga-

firmed my understanding and stood for High Velocity. Also many rifles had BSA Commercial receivers some with matching barrels the majority numbered with the prefix PB but a limited number with the QB prefix. A number of these barrels were dated '20 (for 1920 manufacture date).

Initial enquiries with fellow collectors drew a blank, however later one respondent commented ‘that it was as if the NZ Defence Department at some stage had stripped all of its Long Tom Rifles, dumping all the parts in a heap then reassembled in the mismatched condition we see today’ – what was the answer to this observation? Later some anecdotal information came to light that about 1920 New Zealand had purchased from BSA their stock of Magazine Lee Enfield (MLE) commercial barrelled actions and general parts to refurbish our service arms. Others gave me details of the mismatched numbers and parts on their rifles to support the above that something indeed had occurred to so many NZ marked MLE Long Toms.

Enfield and 15,000 from Canada. Of the Enfield Rifles 5,000 were perfectly new arms and 10,000 being part worn, but re-browned, re-sighted, re-tested, and thoroughly repaired as good as new. The Canadian rifles are generally in good order and serviceable and have been issued to the Cadets.’ These weapons came to hand in the latter part of December 1913 to March 1914. , So it is safe to assume that at this stage New Zealand had in excess of 50,000 Long Tom rifles of various types and marks.

On the butt plate tang, Canadian rifles were marked C14 with the better Enfield arms being marked E14. Many of the Canadian sourced MLE’s are also



Long Tom butt tang NZ issue marks

With the close of the Boer War 1899 – 1902 the NZ Army had rearmed with various marks of MLM/MLE rifles. The 31st of December 1904 Imperial Return noted that New Zealand had ‘19,985 MLE Rifles and 1471 MLE Carbines.’ These we find marked on the butt strap with the N^Z ownership mark, the rack number and the date of acceptance in NZ service, - 1901. More appear to have trickled into the Colony’s holdings from 1901 to 1913. The 1910 Defence report noting ‘an additional supply MLE Long Rifles is on order’.

By 1913 the Report showed we had 16,398 MLE (Long) MKI* Rifles on issue to Territorials and Senior Cadets and 2,935 MLE (Long) MKI* sold to Defence Rifle Clubs. I cannot account for the difference in numbers between 1904 and 1913. Another source states ‘by 1913 over 5500 service rifles had been sold to [Defence Rifle] Club members. These represented about 13 per cent of the rifles available in the dominion.’ Prior to the outbreak of WWI it was reported in 1914 that ‘during the year 30,000 MLE long rifles were imported into the Dominion, 15,000 from

marked in small capital letters on the right-hand side of the butt, M&D, the Canadian Government ownership marks standing for Militia and Defence. Canada had purchased 40,000 MLE’s in 1896 and many found in NZ bear this date. The Canadian purchase included 13,000 BSA, 8,150 from LSA and the remainder from Enfield. E 14 Rifles (the newer rifles) are the less common today due to them being used to arm the WWI Main Body and early Reinforcements; the majority were lost during the Gallipoli campaign.

By 1916 it was reported that ‘in order to maintain sufficient arms for training and reinforcements in camp and to equip drafts proceeding to the front, it was necessary to withdraw a proportion of rifles from the Cadets ... [they were] thoroughly overhauled and rebarrelled as necessary.’ 1917 commented on the arrival of some new SMLE’s and MK VII ammunition. 1918 noted that there were problems with the condition of some rifles and ‘...the supply of component parts is still limited.’

The poor condition of the MLE's was being felt 'Prior to the Armistice ... this left the Territorial Force with but 16% of the rifles with which musketry practice could be conducted.'

With the war over the Defence Rifle Clubs were again shooting but '... owing to Rifle Clubs not using service rifles for rifle-shooting competitions, arrangements have had to be made to import specially manufactured rifle barrels. Shipping difficulties prevented their arriving in time for the Dominion Rifle Association Meeting [March 1920] but adequate supplies are now available.'

With the introduction into service of the SMLE MKIII* Rifle, this fired MK VII ammunition and the MLE Long Toms fired the older MK VI ammunition. Due to wartime shortages The Colonial Ammunition Company (CAC) had only commenced manufacturing this later mark of ammunition in NZ in 1917.

of commercial and War Office spares from BSA in the 1920s to refurbish our aging MLE's. This would account for the many BSA commercial barrelled receivers that are attached to the profusely marked military parts giving us the unique hybrid MLE's we find today. These commercial parts usually have the Birmingham Proof Marks, BM under the Crown that was in use from 1916 to 1925.

Some confirmation of what occurred comes from the Fielding Star, noting the '... landed cost of body and barrel 3 pounds 13 shillings each, [and] ...that part worn Lee Enfield rifles now available for sale to bona fide members of rifle clubs ... cost per rifle 1 pound.'

I have been unable to discover the exact dates when the MLE's were replaced in NZ service by the SMLE's or the MLE's of the Defence Rifle Clubs were converted to Range Pattern length, but certainly



HV



BSA Co.



QB or PB prefix Serial No, BSA Logo, Govt sale mark

Typical Markings found on BSA commercial barrelled actions.

Looking at these HV marked barrels they are BSA Commercial manufacture dated '20 (1920) with the rear sight bed marked to 600 yards for the higher velocity MKVII ammunition and would have been fitted to the Defence Rifle Association private purchase from Defence MLE rifles. These barrels and sight beds would have originated from the introduction of Mk VII ammunition in 1910.

At the end of WWI service rifles also needed serious attention. The Defence Reports whilst advising the MLEs were in very poor condition at wars end and parts were short and unavailable from England are silent on what was done. Anecdotal evidence supported by observation of surviving rifles suggests that as part of the HV barrel buys from BSA for the Defence Rifle Clubs, NZ purchased a large quantity

by the late 1930's this had occurred and they were also using heavy barrelled SMLE's for target shooting as evidenced by the purchase of target barrels and 'converted barrels' for the MLE's. Some indication is contained in the following: -

'Until the early thirties, it might be said that the long Lee Enfield was the most popular.

This was due to its being the rifle released by the army authorities to riflemen at a reduced price.

Unquestionably, this rifle was, and indeed still is, one of the most accurate .303 rifles ever produced.

Somewhere in the early 30's the S.M.L.E. rifle was similarly released, and while it was viewed somewhat dubiously it has come into prominence more as the years have passed...

Thus it may be said that for "Service" purposes only the standard S.M.L.E. was superior to the Long Lee-Enfield. Similarly, for bull's-eye shooting, where accuracy is more important than speed and general service ability, the long Lee-Enfield is the better weapon. Despite this, riflemen possessing the "long" have shown an increasing tendency - which is now almost universal - to "cut-down" their "long" to the same length as the SMLE. Such rifles are usually referred to as "cut-down longs," and these have given and still are giving excellent results. These rifles retain the same bedding principles as in their long form and resemble the SMLE in length only.' "

And later it was noted: -

‘ RIFLES.

The long Lee Enfield cut down barrel may be used.

If cut down, the barrel must only be cut to the length of the barrel of the SMLE rifle, and no other alteration in length will be allowed."

"The use of the SMLE rifle fitted with the heavy barrel will be allowed.'

During WWII many weapons were called up for war service, some serving with the Home Guard (HG) and again being refurbished with what parts were available. I suspect not all HG weapons were marked as such which accounts for so many non- HG marked MLE's.

These rifles were still exercising minds in Defence in the late 1950's as found in various archives files. They eventually decided that the unserviceable, impressed, unclaimed arms were to be destroyed and the serviceable arms put up for tender, many on the schedules do not have a HG number whilst others have.

So back to one observer's statement 'all had been stripped dumped in a pile and reassembled'. This is plausible. When a junior Captain in the late 1970's I visited the Armourers Shop at Trentham and saw many dissembled SLR's in metal baskets undergoing the re-phosphating process prior to re-assembly and re-issue. It is possible that at some stage our Long Toms underwent a similar process of re-browning, which may account for so many mixed parts.

In summary then our MLE's were tired at the end of WWI and with the mismatched spares that were available were refurbished for continued service. Special new HV barrels were procured for those weapons used by the Defence Rifle Clubs. Later the Second World War Call-Up and refurbishment where necessary, finally followed by the post war civilian Gun Trade handiwork, all-adding to the mismatched collection of arms that survive today.

To have a perfectly matching MLE today must give rise to speculation of how it escaped intact!



BSA Co MLE Mk I* with commercial body and barrel

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This article has been abridged, the full text is available from the author at : njtaylor@ihug.co.nz (ED)

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