

THE LONG TOM RIFLE IN NEW ZEALAND SERVICE

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With the centenary of New Zealand's involvement in the Anglo-Boer War in South Africa 1899-1902 it is perhaps timely to look at the introduction into NZ service of the Magazine Lee Enfield rifle (MLE). In the early 1890's the British had introduced the .303 cartridge into service and New Zealand was in the transformation of moving from the .577/450 cartridge of the Martini Henry rifle to the new British .303 cartridge.

The 1899 Annual Defence Report was able to advise, "All North Island Units now are armed with the Martini Enfield .303 rifle and South Island Units, the Martini Henry .577/450 rifleⁱ. The Report went on to comment under Rifle Ranges that they were now "extended to allow for the increased range and power of the *new rifle*" (author's italics)ⁱⁱ.

From this Defence Report we note the embryonic beginnings of the New Zealand Government trying to arm its Defence Forces on the cheap. Britain, in conjunction with the new .303 cartridge, had introduced a magazine rifle into service in 1888, which grew from the magazine Lee-Metford rifle

(MLM) Mks I & II to the MLE Mks I & I*. The largest number of MLEs being produced, being that of the MK I* .Known to generations as the "Long Tom" rifle. The New Zealand Government opted for the cheaper method of arming its Forces by purchasing a quantity of Martini Henry rifles and carbines converted to .303 calibre, which were known as Martini Enfields (ME). These .303 ME rifles and carbines were used to arm the first three contingents of New Zealanders to the Boer War in 1899-1900. The weapon was a single shot rifle with no magazine requiring re-loading with each shot.

Fortunately the 4th and 5th Contingents, plus Reserves, when they arrived in theatre in late March/early April 1900, to form part of the Rhodesian Field Force (RFF) and were encamped at Marandellas, Rhodesia, a change of equipment took place. "On June 1 (1900) cork helmets were issued to the Regiment and the carbines (ME) we had taken from NZ were replaced by Lee Enfield riflesⁱⁱⁱ. The MLE was to equip all further New Zealand Contingents (4 - 10) to the War.

The new Service rifle had a "brass (or more correctly Delta metal) butt plate with a long tang for Regimental markings"^{iv}. A study of the New Zealand butt tang markings of rifles in NZ service show a large number of weapons bearing the date 1901. They were normally numbered as follows:

NZ
846
1901

The range of numbers viewed by the author for the year 1901 range from 846 to 18,086, however there are some weapons with the 1900 date, but no numbers.



Typical butt markings left C14 series rifles that entered service in 1914, the E series were similarly marked but with the E not the C. Note sold out of service stamps on the wood work. Right typical turn of the century markings for rifles returning from the Boer War. Authors collection - RNZAF Photograph, Crown Copyright Reserved, Neg. No. AKL1294/99 date 14/7/99

The 1902 Defence Report spoke of “all Mounted Rifles and Corps are now armed with the magazine rifle”^v and that “a lighter rifle (SMLE MkI) is shortly to be introduced in England and should be considered – at any rate as far as Mounted are concerned.”^{vi}

A 1903 Small Arms Return shows:

	<u>With Units</u>	<u>In Store</u>	<u>TOTAL</u>
MLE Rifles	15,490	3,295	18,785
MLE Carbines	1,370	108	1,478
M-E Rifles	10	2,693	2,663
M-E Carbines	1,353	111	1,464
M-H Rifles	-	4,709	4,709
M-H Carbines	-	614	614
Snider Rifles	-	6,850	6,850
Snider Carbines	1,417	1,691	3,108 ^{vii}

The 1903 Defence Report advised “... all Corps now armed with the Magazine Rifle and 23 of the Cadet Corps with .303 Magazine Carbines, and the balance of the Cadet Corps with ME Carbines.”^{viii}

By 1904 Defence was able to report, “... the establishment of a Reserve of Rifles and equipment has been effected ...”^{ix}

Whilst the Government through official channels had begun re-equipping the New Zealand Forces with the MLE rifle and the year of entry into New Zealand service was being stamped on the butt-marking tang, additional rifles were coming into New Zealand from the Contingents returning from the Boer War.

“Seddon announced in September 1901 that returning soldiers might keep their rifles providing they gave a written undertaking to keep them in order and promise to give them up if the authorities called upon them so to do. Seddon had forgotten that the rifles were not his but belong to the British War Office, and the British soon asked for them back. Those already returned to New Zealand said very strongly that ‘a promise is a promise’, and when military authorities attempted to relieve them they found their rifles strangely missing. When the 7th Contingent veterans on the transport *Manila* reached New Zealand, angry veterans aboard broke into the ship’s armoury and seized their former weapons, and bandoleers, and took them home.

There was little chance of their return and Seddon and the army headquarters would have done better to have left well alone. Many butts had been artistically carved during the long nights on the veldt, and veterans had hunting plans for their much-loved .303s. Army authorities soon found that the soldiers they visited were all ‘innocent’ men, with perfect alibis for the day the armoury was broken into. Few were able to give the slightest assistance in identifying or retrieving missing weapons.”^x



Calligraphy on the Butt of a Boer War MLE once belonging to 1028 Lance Corporal (later promoted to Corporal in South Africa) S. L. Jones 9th Company 4th Contingent NZMR and Lieutenant 10th Contingent. Grant Sherriff collection

It is my contention that the large number of MLE rifles encountered without formal Regimental markings and/or sold out of service markings on the butt tang were those that were taken by the soldiers of the 7th Contingent. Not all returning veterans were so lucky in obtaining their rifle. My grandfather received a letter stating "With regard to the rifle brought back by you to this Colony, I beg to state that as you cannot give the number of it, nothing further can be done in the matter."^{x1}

Problems for the Crown regarding the MLE rifles from the Boer War were again addressed in 1935:

22nd March 1935

MEMORANDUM for:

The Hon. Minister of Defence

Re: Rifles on Issue to Soldiers, ex-South African War Contingents

In accordance with instructions of the Prime Minister (Mr Seddon) dated 20th September 1901 (File 1901/5428) the rifles of men returning from South Africa were given to the men on condition that a written undertaking was given by each man to keep the rifle in good order and give it up when called upon to do so.

This was approved in Cabinet on 13th May 1901 (File 1901/5428).

One of these rifles, which was registered by Mr S. L. Retter of Palmerston North, has now been detained by the Police on the grounds that it is the property of the Defence Department, and is shown on our list of missing rifles. A letter of the 25th January, addressed to you by Mr Retter on this matter was referred by you to the Commissioner of Police for report. (see Police file attached).

Although nominally the rifles from the South African War are the property of the State, no action of any kind has been taken regarding them during the 34 years that have since elapsed. Undoubtedly, they must have changed hands to a considerable extent during this period, and hardship could occur if any attempt were made now to withdraw them. The whereabouts of these rifles is, of course, not known.

To enable Mr Retter's case to be dealt with, together with others as they arise, I have to recommend that rifles, which were handed to returned soldiers from the South African War, or to their next of kin, are to be considered a gift from the State, subject, in each case, to Police approval that the person holding the rifle is a fit and proper person to retain same.

'H. TURNER'

Under-Secretary of Defence^{xii}

On 15 October 1902 Carver acknowledge receipt of "Rifle Factory No 3301 Butt Plate No 3132"^{xiii} which means that this is one of the rifles taken on charge by Defence and New Zealand marked and numbered on the butt tang prior to being re-issued to him.

In 1911 the Army Reforms progressed the Army from a Volunteer to a Conscripted Army. Whilst progress had been made and some of the Mounted Rifles by 1914 had been armed with the (lighter rifle) SMLE Mk III, the majority of the Army still had the older MLE rifle. The Government of the day continued defence on the cheap. "It should also be mentioned that virtually the only rifles in the Dominion at the time were old pattern .303 Lee Enfield weapons which had been procured in Canada by the Minister for Defence the previous year, at the price of one dollar each. These were the only British rifles obtainable at the time and were intended for the use of senior cadets. They were destined to be the arm of the New Zealanders at Gallipoli, for the Mother Country found it impossible to re-equip the New Zealand Force in time for that offensive. The Rifles were without the charger loader. Until 1917 no other weapon was available for training purposes in New Zealand; the troops made their first acquaintance with the service rifle (SMLE) in training camps in England."^{xiv}

These rifles are evidenced by the butt tang markings most commonly encountered that show :

N↑Z
23963
C14

In the C letter series numbers viewed by the writer have been 347 to 23,963.

Drew was not entirely correct in the official history as a considerable number of MLEs were held by Defence along with Mounted Rifles SMLEs prior to the outbreak of WWI.

The 1913 Defence Report recorded that in the “past year 2,000 MLE Mk III were imported ... and an order for 15,000 additional rifles MLE Long (Mk I and Mk I*) has been placed with the War Office ... 15,000 MLE rifles (part worn) have also been obtained from Canada ...

Rifles in use by the Territorials and Senior Cadets:-

MLE Short	Mk I	1,924
MLE Short	Mk III	11,895
MLE Long	Mk I*	16,398
ME		<u>1,124</u>
		<u>31,341</u> ^{xv}

It is the writer’s contention that those 1914 rifles marked with C14 are part of the worn weapons imported from Canada that mainly remained in New Zealand as a training weapon. The new rifles from England and marked E14 armed the New Zealand Expeditionary Force on its departure overseas in WWI on active service. These weapons in the main never returned to New Zealand – hence the scarcity of the E14 marked MLEs.

We do have evidence that whilst England and Australia via its new factory at Lithgow were re-arming with the modern SMLE rifle the New Zealand Government were again attempting to do defence on the cheap. The MLE in service was not charger loading and therefore required a specialist set of 1908 webbing pouches to accommodate the ammunition that was not held in charger loading clips, but tied in packets of 10 wrapped in brown paper. The top 08 pouch held 5 ready rounds for the rifle in specially constructed and sewn loops.

New Zealand soldiers landed at Gallipoli on 24 April 1915 armed with the obsolete single loading MLE rifles and New Zealand pattern 08 webbing pouches that reduced their first line ammunition carried on the soldier to less than that of the British and Australian Forces.

The problem of ANZAC inter-operability of Forces manifested themselves from day one of the campaign. Whilst it can be said that the landing was Australia’s morning (the first New Zealand troops from the Auckland Regiment did not go ashore until 11.30 am that day), it was certainly New Zealand’s late afternoon and evening, plugging the many gaps in the Australian line caused by the fierce fighting of that day.

Lt Westmacott (12/895 Auckland Infantry Battalion 15 Platoon 16th Waikato Company) reported “... someone tried to pass a box of Australian ammunition forward past us, it did not fit our long rifles”^{xiv}

How many New Zealanders were to die in the early days at Gallipoli by running out of ammunition believing that the Australian ammunition would not fit their older weapons or that they could not sustain the same high rates of fire as their allies and enemy, because of their lack of charger loading rifles.

The fact is that the Australian ammunition was .303 but have a later mark and higher velocity for use with the SMLE rifle. The Kiwi rifles in those short-range encounters in the scrub could still have fired it, but obviously troops had been warned by their Commanders that the ammunition was not suitable for the MLE rifle.

Major C.B.Brereton of the 12th Nelson Company Canterbury Infantry Regiment reported ‘Some boats had been upset a little distance from the shore, and their contents were clearly visible on the bottom. This was a great attraction, and all sorts of things were retrieved: but rifles gave the greatest delight, and men were everywhere on the beach seen cleaning up this treasure, although rifles were nearly the cheapest things on Gallipoli and were lying about in there hundreds. We had long before replaced our old L.E. Mark 1* rifle with the shorter and more modern one carried by the Australians by the simple method of picking them up. As we stepped out of our boat one lay on the beach, which I secured and carried. Officers are not supposed to use rifles, but a little shooting does not interfere with command very much, and many officers carried one, as with only a pistol one feels feebly armed. The men were not satisfied until they had secured the most modern weapon, although one rifle is as good as another.’^{xv}

A later arrival on Gallipoli 9/721 trooper J.L.Y.Martyn of the Otago Mounted Rifles from Gisborne noted in his diary ‘Numbers that have been issued to me for my equipment are as follows... Bayonet - 8296. Rifle – 8296 and my rifle bolt 19327.’ Showing the mismatched numbers suggests a older rifle made up from parts.^{xvi}

Within months of the landing we see from the Gallipoli photographs New Zealand soldiers kitted out with the standard 08 web pouches (5 aside) and the SMLE weapon, no doubt obtained from the battlefield being recovered from the Australian dead and wounded.

The SMLE was to be the weapon of the New Zealand soldiers in France from 1916 onwards and the Mounted Rifles in Sinai and Palestine.

This was not the end of the MLE in New Zealand service as large numbers of the weapon were used by the Home Guard in WWII and many bear the additional markings on the receiver such as 1/HG1105. The Government for war service called many of these

weapons up from their civilian owners. Some of these rifles were also converted to the Charlton machinegun and some of the old barrels for the early manufacture by New Zealand Railway workshops of the 9mm Sten gun.

An enduring rifle, which served the New Zealand Army for 40 years, and much loved by Rifle Club members and hunters for its accuracy.



Albany Platoon, Takapuna Home Guard Battalion, Drill Parade Browns Bay Beach c1942 with Long Tom Rifles, East Coast Bays - RSA Collection.

ⁱ Appendix to the Journals of the House of Representatives of NZ (AJHR) 1899 Vol III – H19 page 8

ⁱⁱ *ibid* – page 8.

ⁱⁱⁱ ‘With the 4th New Zealand Rough Riders’ by James Moore – published by the Otago Daily Times 1904 – page 47.

^{iv} ‘The British Service Lee – The Lee-Metford and Lee Enfield rifles and carbines 1880-1980’ by Ian D Skennerton – Arms and Armour Press 1982 – page 298.

^v AJHR 1902 – H19 – page 4.

^{vi} *Ibid* – page 4.

^{vii} ‘British and Commonwealth Bayonets’ by Ian Skennerton – published by Ian D Skennerton – 1984 – page 362.

^{viii} AJHR 1903 – H19 – page 5.

^{ix} AJHR 1904 – H19 – page 4.

^x ‘Scars on the Heart – Two Centuries of New Zealand at War’ by Chris Pugsley with Laurie Barber, Buddy Mikaere, Nigel Prickett, Rose Young – published by David Bateman – 1996 – pages 62 & 63.

^{xi} Letter from Under Secretary of Defence to W Taylor 31 March 1902, Defence Personal File of 2709 Pvt and 5434 Saddler Sgt W Taylor 5th & 8th Contingents.

^{xii} Letter Defence Personnel File of 1262 Pvt J N Carver 4th Contingent

^{xiii} *ibid*

^{xiv} ‘Official History of New Zealand’s War Effort in the Great War’ – Vol IV ‘The War Effort of New Zealand’ edited by Lt HTB Drew – published by Whitcombe & Tombs Ltd 1923

^{xv} Gallipoli The New Zealand Story by Christopher Pugsley published by Hodder and Strongman 1984 page 116

^{xvi} AJHR 1913 – Vol IV – page 19 – para 52 – Small Arms

^{xvii} Tales of Three Campaigns by Major C.B. Brereton published by Selwyn & Blount Ltd 1926 page 91

^{xviii} Gallipoli 1915, a tribute to those who were there, Compiled by Colin Townsend page 89

PHOTO CAPTIONS

1. Typical butt markings left C14 series rifles that entered service in 1914 , the E series were similarly marked but with the E not the C . Note sold out of service stamps on the wood work . Right typical turn of the century markings for rifles returning from the Boer War.

Authors collection. RNZAF Photograph, Crown Copyright Reserved, Neg. No. AKL1294/99 date 14/7/99

2. Calligraphy on the Butt of a Boer War MLE once belonging to 1028 Lance Corporal (later promoted to Corporal in South Africa) S. L. Jones 9th Company 4th Contingent NZMR and Lieutenant 10th Contingent.
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3. Albany Platoon, Takapuna Home Guard Battalion, Drill Parade Browns Bay Beach c1942 with Long Tom Rifles, East Coast Bays RSA Collection.

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