



## ***Anzac: Gallipoli marksman***

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**T**he Short Magazine Lee Enfield, No 1 Mark III was introduced into the British and Australian armies in 1907. It used the standard .303 inch calibre ammunition and was sighted to 2000 yards. A supplementary sight graduated to 2800 yards was also fitted to the left side of the rifle for combined section volley fire. A bullet fired from this rifle could kill a man at a range in excess of two miles.

Shooting a military rifle accurately required a special skill, and pre 1914 Commonwealth armies' concentrated on training so that most soldiers could fire fifteen well aimed shots per minute. Military rifle clubs and citizen volunteers were also encouraged to practice marksmanship with a view to competition and sport. Australia had been very enthusiastic about rifle shooting since the 1850's and sent the first team from Victoria to the UK in 1876.

Prior to the turn of the century a number of shooters and armourers on both sides of the world experimented with specialised rifle sights and the technicalities of sighting for maximum clarity of aim. By about 1905 the manufacture of aperture rear sights as an attachment to the military rifle were perfected but these were not approved for use in competition or by the military authorities. Australia took the lead in 1908 by realizing the advantage of these sights and approved them for use. The National Rifle Association of Great Britain followed suit in 1910 and changed their rules after examining the results gained in the Antipodes. The irony being that the three main manufacturers in the UK, namely A. G. Parker Ltd. and Wesley Richards Ltd., both of Birmingham, and Martin of Glasgow were supplying these sights all over the world from 1907.



BSA Martin rear sight for attachment to  
the Lee Enfield rifle.

(Photograph courtesy of the author)

The most popular sight used in Australia was the Martin, which was manufactured in quantity after 1908 by the Birmingham Small Arms Company under license. Australia had its own versions that were made by engineers on a similar design. Only one, John Mues of Melbourne, Victoria patented his sight in 1908 and was put into small-scale production. To win a place in a major competition a rifleman had to use one of these new sights.



By the outbreak of war in August 1914 there were hundreds of Australians that had qualified for the marksman status. Many in their 20's and 30's flocked to the recruiting offices to join the Australian Imperial Force to assist the mother country. Of these quite a few would have taken their aperture sights with them knowing that they were still not approved by the military. C E W Bean in the *Official History of Australia in the War of 1914-18* makes mention of these sights being used on Gallipoli. They were easily attached to the SMLE rifle by undoing one screw, removing the rear long-range volley peep and replacing it with the adjustable aperture



Lee Enfield No1 Mk III rifle fitted with the Martin Galilean magnifying sights.

(Photograph courtesy of Mr D. Cotterill.)

sight. Most of them were designed to be folded flat alongside the rifle when not in use. Commanding officers turned a blind eye to the attachment of this accessory because of the results in the hands of a marksman.

Gallipoli proved to be ideal terrain for the marksman and hunter. However, being a good shot did not mean a soldier could survive. They had to be proficient in camouflage, fieldcraft and observation. These were the necessary skills of the 'sniper' which was not a recognized military designation until late 1915. Australian battalion rolls of 1914/15 refer to these men as 'Scouts'.

Soldiers using the aperture sight had an advantage over the standard military 'V' leaf sight because it gave a better focal length and clarity of target. A marksman with a well-tuned rifle could usually shoot a group within a minute of angle. This means that at 100 yards he could place 5 shots within a one-inch circle. At this range and back to 200 yards a .303 Mark VI bullet travelling at around 1,970 feet per second was rarely deflected by a cross wind under 10 miles per hour. With these two factors a man size target was difficult to miss for an undetected shooter.

One marksman that stood out from all the rest on Gallipoli was 355 Private William (Billy) Edward Sing, 5<sup>th</sup> Light Horse Regiment. On enlistment he was a Horse Driver from Clermont,



Queensland and a member of the Proserpine Rifle Club. Born in March 1886 of John Sing, an immigrant from Shanghai, China and Mary Anne (nee Pugh) an English nurse, he spent most of his young life in the outback on cattle stations and helping with the family milk run. At an early age he learnt the fundamentals of shooting with a .22-sporting rifle and graduated to be a marksman with the Lee Enfield.



Australian War Memorial C00429: Billy Sing and his observer (with telescope) occupying their sniping position in the front line trenches.

In October 1914 Sing joined the A.I.F. along with other recruits from around north Queensland. One of these was Ion 'Jack' Idriess who assisted Sing as his 'spotter' on Gallipoli and later became a famous post war author. He described Sing on Gallipoli as "a little chap, very dark, with a jet black moustache and goatee beard. A picturesque looking mankiller (sic). He is the crack shot of the Anzacs".

The Light Horse gave up their mounts in Egypt and were sent to serve on Gallipoli as infantry. The 5<sup>th</sup> Regiment embarked for the Dardanelles on 16 May 1915, and were initially used as support troops upon landing at Anzac. In June the regiment was moved to the South side of Boltons Ridge to Chathams Post, named after a British born Light Horse officer. It was here that Private Sing commenced his infamous tally of the enemy.

Scout marksmen worked in pairs. One observed or 'spotted' the terrain while the other shot at the selected target. Both would be good marksmen and they would often change roles of shooter and spotter. The designated pair would usually creep out into no man's land before dawn and select a position that provided good natural cover and a field of fire. The job was



not one for the fidget and patience was of all essence. Once the spotter had selected a target the rifleman would slowly move to take aim. Only one shot was required to improve the tally but it was only credited if the spotter saw the victim fall. An immediate second shot could easily give away their position. It might be hours before another shot was taken. The best one-day tally for Sing was nine confirmed kills.

Between the months of May to September 1915 'Billy' Sing was credited with 150 Turkish dead. He was becoming a legend on the peninsula and his company officer, Major Midgley, brought him to the attention of General Birdwood who in turn mentioned to Lord Kitchener that "if his troops could match the capacity of the Queensland sniper the allied forces would soon be in Constantinople. It is said that on one occasion Birdwood joined Sing as his spotter from the 5<sup>th</sup> Regiment lines. Taking aim at a Turkish soldier, Sing fired but missed due to the wind strength. He quickly fired again scoring a hit. Birdwood was impressed but Sing refused to add the kill to his tally because he said that he hit the wrong man.

Recognition of Sing's prowess as a marksman became well known overseas from letters home. Reports of his successes appeared in a prominent London newspaper and in the American press. Such accolades did not go unnoticed by the Turks and they were well aware of the deadly Australian enemy on the Southern end of the line. They sent at least two of their own marksmen to deal with Sing. The first nearly succeeded by shooting Sing's observer, Pte Tom Sheehan, in the face and hands after hitting his spotting telescope. The near spent bullet continued on to hit Sing in the shoulder, which unnerved him considerably. It was a while before Sing regained his confidence and returned to no man's land.

Not all Australian troops on Gallipoli regarded Sing's trade as sporting. Many referred to him as the 'Murderer' because of his callous approach towards the enemy. This came about when an elderly Turkish soldier was seen to be trapped under a fallen trench support. Australians observers thought this was a great bit of entertainment; but Sing had no qualms about despatching him to 'put him out of his misery' on the justification that every Turkish soldier was just another target.

Towards the end of November 1915 Sing's credited tally had risen well over 200. His scores had slowed considerably since September due to the unsuccessful attempts to locate his positions. Any hint of a sniper brought artillery fire on the area. General Birdwood was kept aware of Sing and recommended him for his bravery in the face of the enemy. On 10 March 1916 Private Sing received the Distinguished Conduct Medal for 'conspicuous gallantry as a sniper at Anzac Cove between May and September 1915.

After the evacuation of Gallipoli, Sing transferred to the 31<sup>st</sup> Battalion A.I.F. and sailed for France. His skill with a rifle was still recognized but by this time there were many soldiers with a similar cold-blooded talent and few were singled out for recognition. However in September 1917 Sing led a fighting patrol, which successfully eliminated some German snipers who were causing casualties amongst the Australians. For this action he was recommended for the Military Medal but it was not approved. It is possible that in early 1918 the award of the



Belgian Croix de Guerre for good work at Polygon Wood took into consideration his earlier actions.

At the cessation of hostilities William Sing returned to Australia with his wife, Elizabeth Stewart, whom he had married in Scotland while on leave in 1917. The residents of Proserpine turned out in numbers to welcome home their local hero. Unfortunately the years he had spent on Gallipoli and France were soon to take their own toll. He had received two gunshot wounds, sustained shrapnel wounds to his back and both legs as well as being at least once gassed. No longer could he work the land and his attempts as a gold prospector failed. The hardships of the outback did not suit the new bride and she soon left him for the city. After a few years he moved to Brisbane to live with his sister and on 14 May 1941 William Edward Sing, aged 57, died of a ruptured aorta in a boarding house.

The house at 304 Montague Road, West End where he died was demolished in the 1960's and a warehouse was constructed on the site. Research undertaken by the Queensland Military Historical Society established the location of the old house and erected a plaque on the wall of the existing building in memory of their marksman.

On a historical note the word 'sniper' usually conjures up a vision of a soldier with a telescopic sighted rifle. This during the early part of the war for the allies was not the case. On Gallipoli I have not seen any documentary evidence or photographs to show that telescopic sights were issued to marksmen. The British may have received a few towards the end of the campaign but even in France they were not in abundance. The first attempt at telescopic sights for the Lee Enfield were the Galilean type that were merely lenses fitted to the front and rear sights. These magnify the image of the target. Martin's of Glasgow manufactured these accessories, as did the small companies of Lattey and Gibbs in England.

Unlike Germany, Britain was not prepared for a trench war that necessitated the use of dedicated snipers. The British high command insisted that the Lee Enfield should have the bridge charger guide unrestricted and therefore the telescope was fitted to the left side of the rifle. Unfortunately no one informed them that the armoured 'key hole' plates used in France were so small that they would blank off the use of the telescope. The rifle also had to be used with both eyes. The right for observation and the left for sighting through the telescope. A most awkward arrangement that took a lot of practice to master. I have used one of these rifles and they are exceptionally accurate but I now know why my uncle, a sniper in WWI with the 21<sup>st</sup> London Regiment, preferred to use the captured German G98 telescopic rifle. This was a well-designed weapon having the detachable telescope on top of the action. The Turkish army did not have any of these rifles on Gallipoli but if they had the story of 'Billy' Sing might have had a different ending.