

NZART ID No: 8, Arm Type: Rifle, Date of Draft (V2) 9/6/2012, Compiled by Phil Cregeen

Pattern: Short Magazine Lee Enfield (No 1) Mk III, III *, Introduced into NZ Service: 1909, Withdrawn: Post WWII

Makers: RSAF Enfield, BSA & Co, LSA Co, SSA Co, Lithgow(Australia) , Ishapore (India)

Details of Arm:

Calibre: .303 British, Rifling: 5 grooves 1:10 in LH Twist, Barrel Length: 25.2in., OA Length: 44.5 in. (1130 mm),

Action: Bolt with 10 round detachable box magazine. Weight: 8 Lb 10 oz, (3.9 Kg)

Sights: blade foresight, leaf back sight 200-2000 yds. with windage adjustment, long range aperture and dial 1600-2800 yds.

Bayonet: (NZART # 57) Pattern 1907

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



SMLE Mk III made by BSA Co in 1908 marked N^Z 2384/09

Note: cut off removed as this rifle was converted to .22 MK IV* in NZ c1927

Introduced in LOC 13853 dated 26 January 1907 the Mk III SMLE included a number of changes designed to improve its effectiveness and also simplify manufacture. This included the addition of a charger bridge to replace the charger guide on the bolt, a blade foresight with more open protector wings, a stronger rear sight assembly with U notch and finer graduations and repositioned protector. The inner barrel band was also repositioned.

As a result of the introduction of the Mk VII ammunition in 1910 changes were made to the sights of the rifle to accommodate the lighter pointed bullet and flatter trajectory. These were introduced in LOC 15638 dated 1 October 1911 to govern alterations to existing rifles and new manufacture. This included altering the profile of the rear sight bed, re-graduating the dial sight and altering the magazine plate and cases. However it did not result in a change of the rifle mark designation, but altered rifles were marked HV on the barrel immediately behind the back sight.



SMLE Mk III* made by BSA 1918 fitted with cut off



SMLE MK III* made by Lithgow in 1942

The SMLE Mk III* was introduced by LOC 17622 on 2 January 1916 and was brought about primarily to speed up war time production. These changes included omission of the cut off, long range sights, windage adjustment on the rear sight, swivel lugs in front of the magazine replaced by wire loop, and later omission of the brass butt disc. However some Mk III* rifles were fitted with a cut off.

It should be noted that the changes to the design of the rifle were not always implemented immediately following the LOC and many examples will be found unmodified and made at a later date or upgraded during FTR (Factory Thorough Repair). For example Lithgow SAF did not introduce the changes for Mk VII ammunition until November 1917.

In 1926 the nomenclature was changed from SMLE Mk III* to Rifle No 1 Mk III*

Production of the SMLE No 1 Mk III* continued at BSA until 1942 and at Lithgow and Ishapore until after WW II

New Zealand Service

The Defence Report of 1910 states "A further supply of MLE short rifles Mk III is on order from England" implying that some are already in the country. Rifles have been observed marked N^Z xxxx/09 indicating their first appearance in New Zealand in 1909. 7,000 of the new rifles were ordered in 1911 and by 1912 8,000 were reported to have arrived that year. This allowed for the arming of the RNZA, Territorial Field Artillery, Garrison Artillery, Engineers and Mounted Rifles with the Mk III, while the Infantry was armed with the MLE.

It is understood that SMLEs supplied to New Zealand prior to WW I were not upgraded to the Mk VII ammunition, since that ammunition was not manufactured here and the manufacture of most of the rifles pre date the change. Another factor was a matter of logistics: the large number of MLEs on issue that were sighted for the Mk VI cartridge.



Two examples of NZ issue marks 1909 and 1912. Post WW I they were marked N^Z on the LHS of barrel & receiver.

A further 2,000 Mk III were imported in 1913 and stocks of this rifle then stood at 11,895.

The New Zealand Infantry went off to fight in WW I armed with the Magazine Lee Enfield Mk I and Mk I* (Long Tom), however, on landing in Gallipoli many Kiwis picked up SMLEs from fallen Australians (3). In March 1916 the New Zealand Division in Egypt were armed with SMLE Mk III and MK III* from British 11th Division (4). These British issued rifles may well have come back to New Zealand with returning troops after the war, in fact it has been reported that they exchanged their battle worn rifles for new ones from stores before returning and a number of NZ marked rifles with manufacture dates of 1918 have been noted.

In 1917 the Colonial Ammunition Company in Auckland began manufacturing MK VII ammunition for the New Zealand Government as required for the MK III and III* rifles and a further supply of these rifles was received in the country upgraded for the new ammunition and thus marked HV. (2)

In 1919 SMLE Mk III were issued to Camps and Districts within New Zealand. MLE Mk I and I* held in store were converted to charger loading and sighted for Mk VII ammunition.(2)

A programme of stripping, cleaning and preserving stocks of SMLE Mk III* was undertaken in 1937/38.(2)

In 1939 a supply of SMLE Mk III with heavy Lithgow barrels was received from the Australian Government for sale to members of the Defence Rifle Clubs.(2)

The SMLE Mk III and III* remained the service arm of the New Zealand forces until they were replaced by the No 4 rifle at the end of WW II.

MKIII* SMLEs were still in use by the RNZA in the late 1950s, by the RNZAF till late 1960s and the NZ Police for several years after that.

Observed NZ marked SMLEs below:

NZ Marked				
Arm	NZ Marked	Maker	Dated	Serial No
SMLE Mk III	N^Z 5409/II	BSA	1908	U46096
SMLE Mk III	N^Z 2705	BSA Co	1908	
SMLE Mk III	N^Z	LSA Co	1918	
SMLE Mk III	N^Z 2602/09	BSA	1908	33518
SMLE Mk III	N^Z	Enfield	1918	
SMLE Mk III	N^Z 11520/12	BSA	1910	
SMLE Mk III	N^Z 2384/09	BSA Co	1908	U 33105
SMLE Mk III*	N^Z,	Lithgow	1941	R 68719
SMLE Mk III*	N^Z		1918	
SMLE Mk III*	NZ	Enfield	1918	L9233
SMLE Mk III*	N^Z		1918	
SMLE Mk III*	N^Z 8 28 34 36	Enfield	1917	
SMLE Mk III*	N^Z 8 28 3416		1918	V16311
SMLE Mk III*	NZ	BSA	1915	L9043
SMLE Mk III*	N^Z		1918	55829
SMLE Mk III*	N^Z		1918	48466
SMLE Mk III*	N^Z		1918	42474
SMLE Mk III*	N^Z	Lithgow	1941	77986

Acknowledgements: John Osborne, Noel Taylor, Rod Woods, Phil Cregeen

Photographs: Phil Cregeen & John Osborne

Reference: 1. The Lee Enfield by Ian Skennerton

2. Appendix to Journal of the House of Representatives (AJHR)

3. Tales of Three Campaigns by Major C B Brereton 12th (Nelson) Company NZEF 1st Edition 1923.

4. The New Zealand Division 1916-1919 by Col H Stewart 1921