

Tpr William Edward (Billy) Sing
DCM , Croix de Guerre 1886 - 1943
"The Assassin of Gallipoli"



In 1918, he was awarded the Belgian Croix de Guerre, which may have been the result of the Polygon Wood action

As the northern summer intensified in June 1915, the Australian Fifth Light Horse Regiment was allocated as its area of responsibility, the ground around what was soon to be called Chatham's Post.

It was a Queensland unit and its officers and men were primarily from the country areas.

Private William Edward Sing, like most of his fellow members of the Regiment, had grown up and worked with horses in the Australian bush. Part of their cumulative stock-in-trade was an ability to ride well, estimate distance carefully, track strayed stock and animal pests, and to fire both rifle and shotgun accurately.

Sing's considerable skills with a rifle were well-known in his central Queensland home district, even before the outbreak of World War One. He was a member of the Proserpine Rifle Club and a leading kangaroo shooter around his home town of Clermont (about 250 km south-west of Proserpine).

Sing signed his enlistment papers at Proserpine on October 24, 1914, two months after the outbreak of World War One. He became a member of the First AIF.

Another recruit from North Queensland was Ion "Jack" Idriess (the author of "Desert Column", "Cattle King", "Lassetter's Last Ride" and many other books on Australian history), who later became his spotter in the Gallipoli trenches.

Billy Sing travelled by ship to Brisbane. After a brief period of training, during which he was allocated to A Squadron of the regiment, the ship set sail for Egypt. It was five days before Christmas 1914.

The men of the Fifth Light Horse chaffed at the bit during April, 1915. They cooled their spurred heels on the Egyptian desert, while a few hundred kilometers away their infantry colleagues were creating Australian history at Gallipoli.

Finally, the rising casualty toll on the peninsula saw Sing and his mates embark for the Dardanelles on May 16.

For the first month, the Lighthorse men were scattered through the Infantry Battalions to gain some experience. But, by mid-June, the men from the Fifth Light Horse had farewelled their foot-slogger comrades and rejoined their Regiment, when it moved to the seaward side of Bolton's Ridge.

In honour of a young English-born Lighthorse Officer, the new position was called Chatham's Post. It was here that Billy Sing began in earnest his lethal occupation.

The sniper's daily modus operandi began with his taking up his 'possie' in the pre-dawn darkness. This, and the fact that he rarely left the area until well after dusk, ensured that usually there was no tell-tale movement near him during the daylight hours.

Once Billy and his spotter were in position and had settled in, the true discipline of rigidly maintaining a quiet and motionless patience began. This was not a job for fidgeters. It demanded infinite resolution, an almost unconscious yet alert tranquillity. And the steady pursuit of professional perfection - snipers rarely get a second shot at a specific target.

The equipment available to the Australian snipers at Gallipoli was basic and, in some cases, nothing more than the standard-issue Short Magazine Lee Enfield (SMLE) No. 1 Mark III .303 calibre rifle.

However, there is evidence that some former rifle club members were allowed to take their own privately purchased weapons with them when they left Australia.

Similarly, some of these same sporting shooters used rifles which had been fitted with various target and peep sights, primarily the "Lattey optical sight". But, in the end, the fundamental qualifications were, and still are, an above-average eyesight and a cold-blooded resolve.

Billy Sing, a methodical man, encompassed, exemplified and expanded upon all of these characteristics. His uncompromising commitment and business-like approach impressed the British commander, General (later Lord) W.R. Birdwood and other senior officers.

Major (later Lieutenant-Colonel) S. Midgely of the Fifth Light Horse, once candidly asked Billy how he really felt about killing men in cold blood. Sing replied that shooting "the illegitimates" had not caused him to lose any sleep. It was steely comments like these - and prominent personalities such as Billy Sing - that gave Australian commanders on Gallipoli opportunities to boost the morale of battle-weary troops.

It was probably with official blessing that word of Billy's steadily mounting macabre tally was passed mouth-to-mouth like a cricket score, along the Allied trench-lines. Each day, Sing's persistence, resolve and unerring accuracy brought a bereft wailing to households and families throughout Turkey during the campaign of 1915.

It was careless soldiers, as well as raw Turkish reinforcements, who presented easy targets of opportunity for the Anzac snipers. The nervous curiosity of these new-comers compelled them to snatch quick and often fatal glances over the parapet toward the Australian trenches. The actual area presented by their momentarily exposed bodies was minimal from the front. But it was the view from the flanks of the zigzagging trenches that gave a chance to the waiting Allied marksmen.

The world of the sniper of Gallipoli was appropriately described by Idriess as being like a cat watching a wall with many mouse holes. Behind the holes worked the cautious mice, with ever-watchful felines waiting for just one mistake.

As the campaign moved on and Sing's persistence and accuracy took their toll, it was inevitable that a response would come from the Turks.

At first, orthodox military methodology was applied to put an end to the Australian who had taken out as many as nine of the enemy in a single day. One such Turkish reaction saw Sing's growing confidence shaken by a very near miss, one quiet morning in late August at Chatham's.

Billy and his observer, on this occasion, Trooper Tom Sheehan, sat silently surveying the enemy trenches, waiting for an unthinking mouse to appear. Their eyes and telescope swept the ground to the front, seeking the almost imperceptible giveaway signs. A quick hazy puff of vapour from a weapon discharge, the unguarded tell-tale movement of an arm or a body.

A Turkish marksman with a similar intent seized upon a sudden and inadvertent movement in the Australian sniping team and fired on them. His shot passed through Sheehan's telescope, end to end, wounding the Australian in both hands, before entering his mouth and coming out his left cheek. The almost-spent bullet travelled on, completing its pernicious run by striking Sing in the right shoulder.

Begrudgingly, the famed sniper would have been impressed by the Turk's skill or freakish luck. Tom Sheehan was evacuated to Australia to reflect on his own mortality. It was another week before Billy Sing was physically and psychologically able to climb back up to his elevated "possie" - and face the newly respected Turkish snipers once more.

The next attempt by the Turks to clear their left flank of the unrelenting Australian sniper was more formidable.

Reports of these efforts came to light later, from accounts by Turkish prisoners, as well as translated extracts from diaries removed from the bodies of their dead.

The Turks sent for their own champion near the centre of the front line.

Already decorated by the sultan for his proficiency, the Turkish sniper -whom the Australians called "Abdul the Terrible" - probably relished the challenge.

Abdul brought with him a determination which matched Billy Sing's. The Turk's hunt to locate his Anzac counterpart's position took on the professional vigour of a forensic scientist. Each fresh description of yet another sniping victim would see Abdul quickly sent to the spot. Here he would thoughtfully examine the crime scene.

There was an inexplicable ability by the Turks to separate the indiscriminate good fortune of some of the Anzac shooters from the true craftsmanship of the sniper Sing.

Accordingly, the only reports passed on to Abdul were those confidently assessed as having been the work of the deadly and unseen Australian rifleman.

Reconstructing each fatal shot, the Turk determined the bullet's angle of trajectory from the entry and exit wounds. And he studied the exact position and stance of the latest victim at the moment of impact, as recounted by those who stood nearby.

With each calculation, the Turkish sniper drew with his eye a line which ended at an area of the Australian trenches on Harris Ridge. Eventually a pattern began to emerge. His gaze consistently returned to fix on one specific location, a small rise on the heights at Chatham,s Post. At last he had found the lair of the too-efficient Australian killer.

Mirroring Billy Sing's pre-sniping preparations, the Turk selected a suitable sight. In the darkness of each night, he built his own position. When it was finished, Abdul - like his Australian adversary - took up his post each morning well before dawn. Many days were spent simply watching and waiting.

Despite tempting targets which appeared from time to time, the Turkish sniper held his fire. He knew that his quarry would not be among these unwise Australians. An opportunist shot might give him away.

Eventually, however, his persistence paid off. He returned to the Turkish trenches late one evening, certain that he had found his rival and that the new day would see him finally end Sing,s winning streak.

The next morning, Billy and his spotter took up their position. As Sing settled himself in, the observer began his day's first semi-alert yawning frontal sweep with the telescope.

Almost immediately the man,s movement abruptly ceased and he whispered to his sniper that he already had a target. Sing took the telescope and, glancing towards a point indicated by his spotter, he stared ahead - in the face and rifle-muzzle of Abdul the Terrible.

Carefully taking up his rifle, Sing made a final check that nothing would betray their position; then gently eased the loophole cover back and cautiously pushed the weapon forward.

The Turk also saw Sing and began his own firing sequence. As he settled the rifle into his shoulder, Abdul drew in a breath and steadily sighted it on Sing.

At that moment, a bullet struck the Turk between the eyes.

It was probably a short time after this extraordinary duel that the Turks once more discovered Billy. This time they were not prepared to waste their own men and instead opted for impersonal, but effective, heavy artillery. The first round was ranged with almost pin-point accuracy.

It landed close to Billy's position. Sing and his colleague took their leave. Seconds later another shell landed on the emplacement, completely destroying it.

Along with occasional mercilessness shown by Sing, there was often a macabre sense of dry humour surrounding his daily pursuit. This surfaced on one occasion when the Australian had as his observer, General Birdwood.

It was a windy day, not one conducive to long-range rifle accuracy. As Sing fired on a recklessly exposed Turkish head, his first shot missed, its path deflected by a fleeting gust. Billy waited for the wind to drop before sighting once more.

The second bullet spun a Turkish soldier out of the trench; a satisfactory effort given the blustery conditions.

With a hint of virtue, mixed perhaps with unintentional irony, the poker-faced sniper told the general that he would not add the latest kill to his score - he had been aiming at another Turk.

Billy's comment underlined the latent and seemingly ambiguous integrity that was part of his professional make-up. The way his Turkish casualties were recorded bears this out. It has been suggested that the official tally was only updated if a Turk was seen to drop by either a Sergeant or an Officer. If the umpire raised his finger to signal the fall of another Turkish wicket, the score-keeper-clerk back at Fifth Light Horse headquarters adjusted the authorized score-sheet accordingly.

However, this seems to have been impractical, given the requirement that there be as little movement as possible near Sing's sniping post. In addition, neither Billy nor his observer, were in a position to call for a suitably-ranked member of the regiment every time they were ready to fire on another target. It was more reasonable that someone apart from Sing himself actually confirmed the hit. In most cases this would have been the man working with Billy at the time.

Eventually, official recognition of Billy's exceptional sniping skills began to appear.

On October 23, 1915, General Birdwood issued an order announcing his compliments on Billy's performance in accounting for 201 Turks. The general was obviously happier in accepting the higher, but less official score.

But what compulsion drove Billy Sing on, as he recorded more and yet more kills at Anzac, during summer and autumn of 1915? Certainly the support of the Australian High Command placed no official obstruction in Billy's way. Sing's accuracy received almost exalted sanctioning.

This was, of course, at a time when young Australia sought its own heroes as it came to world attention. Billy Sing slid comfortably into the national role his rifle had created for him.

There is clear evidence that the international press knew of the Queensland marksman.

Reports of his Gallipoli successes appeared in London and American newspapers.

By the time 1916 arrived, the last of the Anzac troops were regrouping on the sands of Egypt, following the evacuation of Gallipoli. In February, Sing was also mentioned in the despatches of the Commander of the Allied forces, Sir Ian Hamilton.

On March 10, Sing was awarded the Distinguished Conduct Medal for conspicuous gallantry as a sniper at Anzac. By June, the AIF, apart from the bulk of Lighthorse Regiments, had either gone from Egypt, or were in the process of leaving, bound for the big league on the distant battlefields of France and Belgium.

Sing joined the 31st Infantry Battalion and in August, sailed for England. After further training, he was sent to France.

Over the next 19 months, wounds caused Sing to be frequently in and out of the line.

He also suffered the recurring effects of old illnesses and injuries from Gallipoli.

During his recuperation, he travelled to Scotland where he met waitress Elizabeth Stewart, 21-year-old daughter of a naval cook. They married in Edinburgh on June 29, 1917.

It is not clear if Sing continued to carry out sniping duties with the Battalion in France. Snipers did operate there - but the heavy use of artillery meant snipers were used only on a limited scale. But Sing's army file provides occasional hints that whatever he was doing, he was often involved in hazardous activities against the Germans.

Once again, his worth as a soldier was recognized by the Allied High Command. In October 1917, the Army Corps Commander expressed his appreciation for Sing's "... gallant service during recent operations".

This may have taken place at Polygon Wood in late September 1917, when Billy led a fighting patrol which succeeded in eliminating German snipers who were causing casualties among the Australians.

Sing was recommended for the Military Medal - for his work in identifying and dealing with German marksmen. But this was never approved.

However, early in 1918, he was awarded the Belgian Croix de Guerre, which may have been the result of the Polygon Wood action.

In July, Sing was posted to a submarine guard on an Australian-bound troopship. It had been almost four years since he had left Clermont for his grand adventure.

When Billy and Elizabeth Sing arrived in Proserpine in late 1918 or early 1919, the town's residents turned out in force. A large procession, led by a local band, accompanied the couple from the railway station to the town hall, local dignitaries made welcoming speeches.

The transition from the green hills and ancient culture of Edinburgh to the dust and rough life of the mining district around Clermont must have been traumatic for Elizabeth Sing.

This might account for her disappearance from the scene only a few years after she and Billy had arrived in the area.

As the post-war exuberance waned, Billy returned to Clermont. He moved on to a mining claim on the Miclere goldfield.

In 1942, he left the district for Brisbane. He told his sister Beatrice that it might be cheaper to live in the city.

In December, Sing was living in Brisbane and took on a labouring job. It did little to help his poor health. A workmate, Joe Taylor, who had also mined with him on the Miclere goldfield, later recalled that Sing was stubborn and would never see a doctor.

Billy's Gallipoli reputation faded from memory with the increasing number of Anzacs who passed away each year.

On Wednesday, May 19, 1943, William Edward Sing's aorta ruptured and he died alone in his room at the house where he boarded in 304 Montague Road, West End. He was 57. Apart from five shillings, which were found in his room, and six pounds ten shillings and eight pence, owed to him in wages, the only thing of value left by Billy was a hut, probably on the Miclere claim, worth twenty pounds. It was a pathetic postscript to the life of a man whose name was once known to an army and a nation.

by Brian Tate

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