

Martini Enfield .303 carbines in Queensland: a short story

In April 1900 the Queensland Marine Defence Force ordered 200 Martini Enfield .303 artillery carbines. Converted from Martini Henry .450 calibre, the carbines arrived in September of that year and it appears were for issue to the Naval Volunteer Cadet Corps. The carbines were marked on the butt with a brass roundel and the initials Q.N.C. A 50-boy company had been formed at both Maryborough and Cairns in late 1898, in Brisbane in 1900, and later at Bundaberg, Rockhampton and Mackay. They were armed presumably with the carbine, however it is likely it was replaced within the decade. By 1908 the naval cadet corps associated with the new Commonwealth Naval Forces seem to have been composed of Senior Cadets ie boys over the age of 17 years. Although there were proposals to form a naval cadet force in schools similar to the military cadets, there was no funding available to carry this out.

It fell to private schools and institutions to form junior cadet corps, and the first was in 1907 at Bowen House School, located for a time at 'Tighnabruaich' near Indooroopilly. The Bowen House School Junior Naval Cadets were formed without financial assistance from the Navy, though it did receive support from Naval instructors at annual training camps. The boys were all school-aged. Late in 1907 former Chief Gunner W Mudford of the Commonwealth Naval Force was appointed caretaker of the Brisbane Institute of Social Services, a benevolent organisation dedicated to giving opportunities to the youth of Fortitude Valley. He was asked to form a Boys Club associated with the Institute and came back with a proposal for a Naval Cadet Corps. The Institute approved the idea and Mudford made the most of his naval contacts, gaining the support of the local Naval Commandant. By February 1908 Mudford had obtained the loan of 50 carbines from naval stores, later increasing that to 100 carbines with accoutrements.

The Social Services Cadet Corps was extremely popular and had trouble meeting the demand of local boys to join the ranks. The Naval Commandant, Captain Weatherall, was a Board member of the Institute for a number of years, creating a strong bond between Navy and cadets. Junior Cadets were passed through the ranks into the Commonwealth's Senior Cadet Corps when they reached the age of 17. Chief Gunner Mudford also began to drill the Naval Cadets at Bowen House from April 1908, and probably secured a similar arrangement with the Navy for that school.

In 1915 the Bowen House School merged with St John's Church of England Grammar School and took their naval cadet unit, and their carbines, with them. Having been in the hands of the cadets for some years it was generally believed that the carbines had been transferred to the cadets, however that hadn't happened at an administrative level within the Navy. In 1921 the District Naval Officer (DNO) advised the Brisbane Institute of Social Services that he had received permission to donate to the Institute all carbines they already held, in addition to those held by St John's Grammar School. The DNO noted the carbines were given to the Institute as a gift on the condition that the breech blocks are removed, and arrangements were made for that to occur. The total number of carbines donated to the Institute is unknown, however by 1928 it is recorded that they had 160 arms available for cadets.

The Brisbane Institute of Social Services Naval Cadet Corps was still in operation at the beginning of World War II. There were attempts in the late 1940s to get the Navy re-interested in supporting the boys, but this was unsuccessful. It is possible that some members of the Corps passed into the ranks of the Navy League's Australian Sea Cadet Corps – TS Gayundah, but that has not been confirmed. It would seem likely that the former Queensland Marine Defence Force Martini Enfield .303 artillery carbines were disposed around this time. A few of the weapons remain the prized possessions of astute collectors.

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