

THE BAND PLAYED WALTZING MATILDA

I've recently returned from visiting Australia. That's always a good thing to do. Not that I didn't enjoy it there. It was great. I was at the Bendigo rifle range in Victoria - a cleared swath through the gum trees with green stripes where the watered firing points every 100 yards divide this otherwise barren one kilometre of reddish land.

We parked our vehicle in the dappled shade of the trees. The air was loaded with the scent of eucalyptus. The sun shone, the temperature was pleasant, the colourful birds sang with their peculiar Australian accent, the kangaroos waited in the shade to appear after the day's firing to bound and graze and defecate on the nice green mounds. The Aussies called the droppings truffles, (but the Kiwis knew better than to eat them,) and the competition was intense and sporting.

In another clearing in the bush to the side, is a building quaintly called the Pavilion - a galvanized iron shed-like structure with all the aesthetic appeal of a German airport terminal and the acoustics to match. Inside in the air-conditioned shade, lunches and cups of tea were consumed during the day, and later after the day's shooting, tinnies and stubbies were dispensed and dispatched as the events of the day, both good and bad, were reviewed.

On one wall of this pavilion are mounted two rifles. These are no ordinary rifles. They were made in China about one hundred and forty years ago, and are a double scale model of the British Enfield musket of that time. Three metres long and with a bore diameter of more than an inch, it required three men to operate; two to support and hold the barrel, and a third to fire it. Talk about massive weapons of destruction! According to the information plaque, the firer was "invariably killed". That's supreme sacrifice, a forerunner to the current suicide bombers perhaps. What relevance these rifles have to our sport, and why they are decoratively displayed in the pavilion eludes me. What they represent is not the image our sport needs to project.

On the opposite wall, hung high for all to see are the Honours Boards. The winners of the last hundred plus years are recorded in bright gold lettering. The winners of the Queens Prize, the Syme, and the Champion of Champions are all there. We read the names and quite properly honour them. They are part of our history and our sport's heritage.

Round the corner is the current leader board. The names of the leaders in the current competition are constantly updated and studied. The form is scrutinized as the ultimate outcome unfolds. At the conclusion of each day there is a medal ceremony. Up to twelve medals for each grade are awarded each evening; Gold, Silver and Bronze for each range and the aggregate. Those who best displayed their skills get to stand on the podium, have a medal hung around their necks and be

surrounded by applause from the lesser mortals whom they bested on the day. For a few moments they and those on the leader board enjoy their moment of glory. Next year one of their names will be on the honours board.

Further down the honours wall are two other boards. These have sixty eight names on them. The once gold lettering is dulled and tarnished. They are the names of riflemen from the district who “fell” - now there’s a nice euphemism - in the Great European War 1914 - 1918. Sixty eight men who were killed in Gallipoli, France or Belgium. These were men who went to use their marksmanship skills against a different target. These ones fired back, thousands of them. Massed weapons of destruction.

Not for these marksmen, any honours ceremony at the end of each day. No medals except perhaps a few posthumously. I was truly moved that such a number of people from a comparatively small area had died in a foreign war. How had their deaths changed our sport? How many of them would have had their names on the Honours boards had they not been killed?

I was further moved by the fact that these boards were not hung high and proud on the wall. They were sitting on the floor leaning against the tin cladding. They were mostly hidden behind tables and chairs, and wall braces and stays. Sixty eight names of truly significant people gathering dust on the floor.

In the words of the song;

“Every April they march.....

Those weary old heroes of a forgotten war,”

And the young people ask “what are they marching for?” Well I think we should know, and we should care.

At least on the boards there was no epitaph “Lest we forget.” I suspect that someone in authority did.