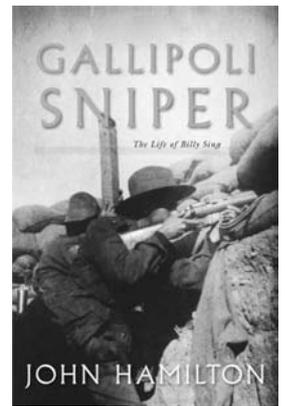


# Gallipoli Sniper: The life of Billy Sing

John Hamilton

Reviewed by Kenneth Thomas



For every soldier, fear of death on the battlefield causes anxiety. Where death strikes by an unseen hand this can also cause hyper-vigilance and even terror. Being stalked and killed by a sniper, for example, can become particularly high on the list of individual survival concerns.

The nature and topography of the Gallipoli campaign in particular were ideal for sniping by both sides – much more so than the Western Front where random or sustained artillery bombardment posed much greater risks. *Gallipoli Sniper* tells the story of Billy Sing (nicknamed ‘Assassin’), the most proficient sniper in the whole 1<sup>st</sup> AIF. With 201 officially confirmed ‘kills’ at Gallipoli and more on the Western Front he remains the most successful sniper in Australian military history.

For those who aspire to be a sniper, patience forms the cornerstone of a successful career. In that era, well before anyone had even heard of the Dardanelles, the art of patiently waiting for a target to appear and calmly, calculatingly, pulling the trigger to hit it was part of the way of life for many Australian men. Born out of the necessity to survive the unforgiving Australian outback, this natural ‘bush’ skill was quickly adapted to survive and beat the unforgiving Turk.

With *Gallipoli Sniper*, John Hamilton, author of *Goodbye Cobber*, *God Bless You* (reviewed in the Summer 2004 *Defender*), continues his love affair with the Light Horse regiments – this time when they fought dismounted as reinforcements at Gallipoli and concentrating on one special trooper. Having walked the ground to Chatham’s Post, Hamilton draws on his own personal fascination for the peninsula to impart a graphic level of detail when describing the landscape, the men and the utter waste of life.

Following a bedding-in period, the 5th Light Horse took position at the right of the line at Bolton’s Ridge and it was from here that they secured Chatham’s Post and the summit which would become Billy Sing’s sniping nest. The effect a sniper can have on the morale of troops under fire should never be underestimated. The constant thought of death affects thinking, actions and morale. Sing understood this and went to great lengths choosing his targets using cold calculation. Hamilton captures this methodical skill with explicit inserts from private accounts and official war diaries.

Sing left Gallipoli prior to the evacuation suffering from ‘rheumatism’ and perhaps mumps, recuperated on Malta and was transferred to North Queensland’s 31<sup>st</sup> Infantry Battalion. His illness delayed his departure for France and he missed the battalion’s participation in the battle of Fromelles where it suffered 572 casualties. In March 1916 Sing was awarded the Distinguished Conduct Medal for his efforts at Gallipoli.

Hamilton follows Sing to the Western Front where his precision marksmanship saw him awarded the Belgian Croix

de Guerre, but again at great cost. He was sent home to Australia in July 1918 after being gassed at Polygon Wood, and where he was recommended for a Military Medal. According to one version, he stalked a machine gun impeding his battalion’s advance and killed all eight Germans in the strongpoint.

*Gallipoli Sniper* is, however, a rise-and-fall story of hardship and tragedy as well as consummate professional achievement. Hamilton also takes the reader back to a time in Australian history when colour, heritage and class were daily obstacles. Born William Edward Sing to a Chinese father and an English mother in the rural Queensland township of Clermont in 1886, Billy, as he came to be known, grew up in an Australia that was increasingly fearful about threats of foreign invasion from Asian powers to the north.

At the age of 24, capitalising on his mother’s English heritage, Billy moved to Proserpine to open a new chapter in his life. Through hard work in the cane fields, membership of the Proserpine Rifle Club and participation in the local cricket competition, William Sing was accepted as a ‘natural born British subject’ and on 12 August 1914 enlisted in North Queensland’s 5<sup>th</sup> Light Horse (as trooper number 355).

Sing returned to a hero’s welcome in Proserpine after the war but, as is typical of many an Australian story of both post-war periods, he struggled with readjusting to ‘returned’ life. He started as a soldier settler but walked off the land heartbroken and later tried prospecting and mining. Plagued by ill-health and succumbing to alcoholism, his life underwent a steep decline. When he died in his sleep in a Brisbane boarding house in May 1943 he had only five shillings to his name and no longer possessed his DCM and Croix de Guerre. What triggered this decline is not well documented, however it would be a fair assessment that his time spent on the Gallipoli Peninsula and the Western Front contributed significantly.

With extensive archival research, and period accounts from Sing’s peers and commanders offering personal insights into the man, Hamilton does an exceptional job in drawing together the written accounts. This is a well-researched, detailed and compelling story. Hamilton’s easy writing style allows readers to immerse themselves in the detail and follow every shot as Billy Sing’s observer. A recommended read for any junior soldier aspiring to become a sniper and a worthwhile investment for the general reader. ♦

John Hamilton, *Gallipoli Sniper: The Life of Billy Sing*, Pan Macmillan Australia, Sydney, 2008, Softback, 331pp., RRP \$434.99.