

# THOMAS ROBERTS WINS THE KINGS

South Australia's 20-Year-Old Marksman Who  
Conquered the King's Prize (1909)

In October 1909, at the National Rifle Association of New South Wales Jubilee Meeting at Randwick Rifle Range, a quiet boy from Kybunga, South Australia, known simply as Tom, came from far back in the field to win one of the most coveted prizes in Australian sport.....The King's Prize. Thomas Walter Bain Roberts had his image immortalized with a full-page photo in the Sydney Mail after the win because it was an age when rifle champions were celebrated like Australian Test cricketers.

Tom's victory in 1909, before the advent of newsreels, was a feat that captured the imagination of the nation, as his skill and accuracy at 1000 yards featured in newsprint across Australia. Its only now, as more of Australian records get digitized, that we can see how Tom's fame spread.

## The Kings Prize and stakes

Each State would hold rifle shooting tournaments to recognize their best marksmen, but the Tournament held at the Randwick Rifle Club was the most prestigious rifle meeting in the southern hemisphere drawing thousands of competitors from every Australian state, New Zealand and South Africa. Vice-regal parties attended, including the Governor-General (Lord Busby), who watched the entire competition until its climax. The

King's was an event where band music mixed with the crack of rifle fire as the crowd leaned over scoreboards to follow their favorites. The King's Prize in NSW had become the pinnacle of everything the British Empire aspired to be during Queen Victoria and Edward VII reign and its winner guaranteed to be a national hero.

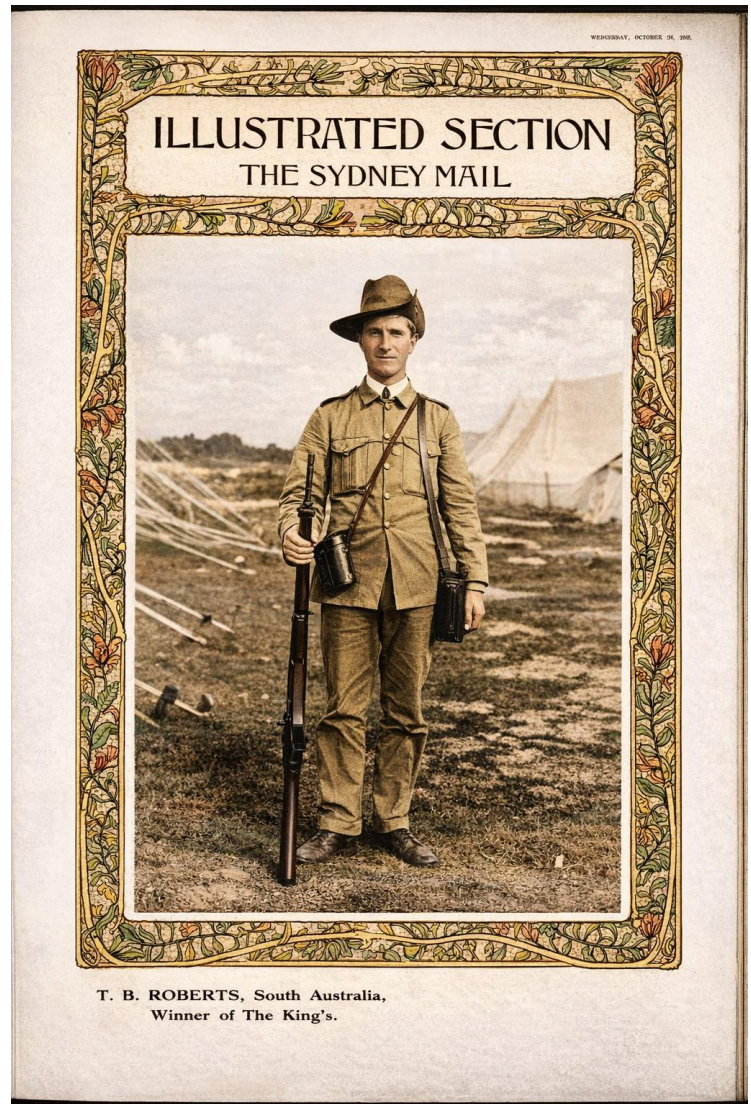
Rifle clubs in the Australian Colonies before Federation, were used as local militias that would be called upon to defend the Empire and its colonies against aggressors. It was from these ranks that troops were chosen to go to the Boar War in 1899. So their importance to the nation was deeply felt by all Australians and reflected in Rifle Club Constitutions. An example was preserved in the Adelaide Advertiser (22 Nov, 1909) as it described with pride the feat that Tom had achieved. The Blyth Rifle Club, established by Tom's father, Colonel Richard Roberts, contained the following paragraph at the opening of its Constitution

*The riflemen of South Australia, believing that it is essential for the safety of the Commonwealth that every able-bodied citizen should become an expert rifle shot, have formed this club for the following purpose:*

*To foster a spirit of national pride in rifle shooting*

*To induce every man, who is not physically or mentally incompetent, to realise that he owes to his country, a sacred duty to become efficient in the use of a rifle.*

*To make rifle shooting the national sport and pastime of Australia*

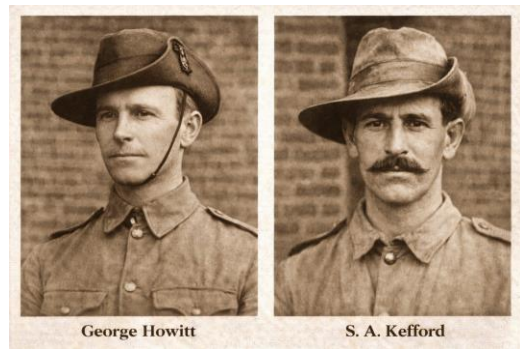


## The 1,000-yard miracle at Randwick

The Kings Prize is held over three stages

- Stage 1 - 7 shots at 300, 500 and 600 yards
- Stage 2 - 7 shots at 600 and 700 yards
- Stage 3 - 10 shots at 800, 900 and 1000 yards.

First Prize was £100 and a gold medal valued at £5. That's about \$15,000 in today's money.



For

In rifle target shooting, especially in traditional full-bore matches like the King's Prize, a *scoring ring on the target* consisted of :

- **Bull** = highest-value centre shot (5)
- **Magpie** = the next ring out (14)
- **Outer / Wash-out** = even lower or zero score

To appreciate Tom's challenge, translate the iconic 1,000-yard range to modern measure of 914 meters. At that distance, tiny errors can result in a complete miss of the target. When shooters talk about "MOA," they're talking about the Minute of Angle which is how much a shot can drift at long distances.

At 1,000 yards, a tiny adjustment makes a big difference.

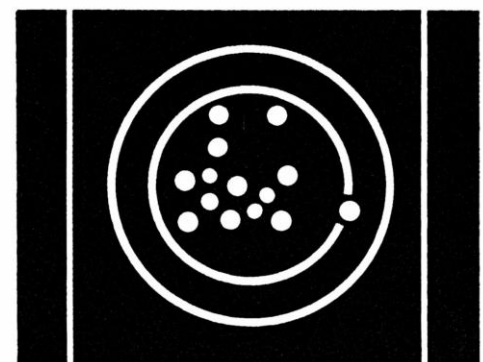
- Adjusting your aim by 1 MOA on a rifleman's sight will cause the bullet to land about 10.5 inches (around 27 cm) from where it last hit.
- Adjusting by 2 MOA, over a 1000 yards will move your bullet over half a metre on the target area.
- A steady 16 km/h crosswind can push a bullet about two metres sideways by the time it reaches a target that far away. That's roughly the width of a small car.

So the first shot, called the sighter, is crucial to the overall score. The further you are off target, the bigger the adjustments need to be.

Veterans like George Howitt of South Australia led the early stages, with strong showings from S. A. Kefford of Bathurst and W. Warne of Victoria. The final day intensified the drama, at 800 and 900 yards, as several shooters posted near-perfect scores from their ten shots, yet the outcome would be decided at the farthest 1000-yard distance, where a troublesome north-eastern wind was turning skill into guesswork. The riflemen were operating from the furthest mound, nicknamed "Siberia" for its exposed position. Tom needed an almost impossible score of 10 perfect bull's-eyes to overtake Kefford.

Tom's final card at 1,000 yards read nine unbroken bull's-eyes after an initial sighter that scored four. That tied him with Kefford and forced a shoot-off, which had never happened before at the Kings.

The pressure Tom must have felt, with the entire field and dignitaries watching, as he took on the a veteran with a fierce reputation, must have been overwhelming. For each of his next 10 shots, taken in turn, there would be the hushed silence after the shot rang out and



4, 5, 5, 5, 5, 5, 5, 5  
5, 5—49.

T. B. ROBERTS'S  
LAST SHOOT IN THE  
KING'S.

10 Shots at 1000Yds.

the crowd waited for the shot to be displayed. The wind had picked up, making the tasks all the more difficult, and both Tom and Kefford missed the target entirely with their first sighters as the nervous laughter went round the crowd. Tom adjusted elevation and windage and began to land clean inners while Kefford raised a magpie and even recorded a “wash-out.” When the last shot was made Tom was leading by a single point. The King’s Prize went to Tom and South Australia. The band struck up “See the Conquering Hero Comes,” and Lord Dudley congratulated the new champion, and the crowd chaired him into camp.

Competitor	Stage 1	Stage 2	Stage 3			Total
			800	900	1000	
T Roberts (S.A)	101	59	48	42	49	299
S Kefford (NSW)	102	63	50	44	40	299
O Alexander (NSW)	98	59	47	48	46	298
T Hill (NSW)	99	64	49	44	42	298
G Fisher (NSW)	99	63	47	44	44	297

### A new sight for a new champion

Tom’s victory highlighted a technological shift. He used a B.S.A. aperture (peep) sight, which in 1909 was a subject of spirited debate. Traditionalists derided it as an “old man’s sight,” but proponents argued it sharpened definition at long range. Early-20th-century B.S.A. aperture sights, such as the No. 8 series which he used (shown to the right), provided a rotating eyepiece with multiple apertures and vernier adjustments for windage and elevation, allowing finer correction than many open rear sights. A peep sight’s small aperture improves depth of field and perceived target clarity, a boon when the bull at 1,000 yards looks scarcely larger than a pinhead.



Australia’s armed services and match shooting in that era revolved around rifles like the Short-Magazine Lee-Enfield (SMLE) chambered in .303 British. Typical .303 Mk VII ball began its flight around 2,440 feet per second (about 744 m/s). At 1,000 yards, the bullet was in the air for over a second, bleeding velocity and entirely at the mercy of wind gradients, gusts, and angle changes. Shooters therefore read the mirage and flags, watch dust, and feel the breeze on their faces, even then, their aim is down to judgment and experience.

### Why Toms’ feat shocked the nation

Tom’s nine consecutive bull’s-eyes at 914 metres was not just a statistical wonder; it was a masterclass in wind reading and mental control for a 20 year old. The Randwick course was known to be the most difficult in Australia. Nobody expected that Tom could achieve an outcome like this under the eyes of Australia’s highest officials. It was hailed as a reflection of the depth of training in rifle clubs and cadet programs across the Commonwealth when you consider that Australia’s Standing army was only established in 1903 after the passing of the Defense Act. It also explains the adulation, the King’s winner was feted, photographed, and literally carried shoulder-high from the field.

News of Tom’s win travelled quickly for the time. Papers from Queensland to Victoria reported that “Tom Roberts, of Kybunga” had taken the King’s at Randwick, confirming South Australia’s rising reputation in interstate and Empire matches.

The Melbourne Argus reported that the event attracted several hundred spectators and commenced early, with the “first shot at 300 yards... fired at a quarter to 8 o’clock.” The paper highlights that the decisive moment came at the

1,000-yard range, where Tom B. Roberts of Blyth, South Australia, delivered an exceptional performance. The article states his win was “*entirely unexpected and was due to his excellent marksmanship at the 1,000 yards range.*” At that range, “*he secured one short of the possible,*” which pushed his aggregate high enough to force a shoot-off. The paper also reported that Tom was from a “shooting family” as Tom’s father, Colonel Richard Roberts, was well known in the Commonwealth for his service to the local militia, which was being brought together for the first time in the Commonwealth to form a standing army.

Back in Adelaide, the news was greeted with absolute pride. The Advertiser framed Tom’s’ win as a standout example of the rise of talented young riflemen in South Australia. Early in the article, the paper highlights how a new generation is eclipsing the old

“Young marksmen are springing up on every hand, making the older shots look to their laurels.”

Tom is presented as the clearest proof of this shift. The article states plainly:

“A striking instance of the success of the younger generation of riflemen was afforded a few weeks back, when T. B. W. Roberts, of this State, who is only 20 years of age, won the King’s Prize at the jubilee gathering of the National Rifle Association of New South Wales.”

In the years that followed, Australian rifle culture continued to evolve under the National Rifle Association of Australia (founded in 1888), linking state associations into a national body and embedding full-bore target rifle traditions that still echo through today’s Queens and Kings meetings. In that lineage, Tom’s 1909 victory remains a touchstone as it was .retold over the years whenever a young shooter summons poise and precision at the longest range.

While we can’t be sure, it is likely winning the Kings would have singled Tom out when he enlisted in World War one as he was quickly elevated from the ranks to the rank of Lieutenant in the 43<sup>rd</sup> Infantry Battalion. He would go on to win the Military Cross on August 8<sup>th</sup>, 1918 east of Hamel.

