

# MISCONCEPTIONS ABOUT FAMOUS MARTINIS

## SOME OF HISTORY'S MOST FREQUENTLY ASKED QUESTIONS

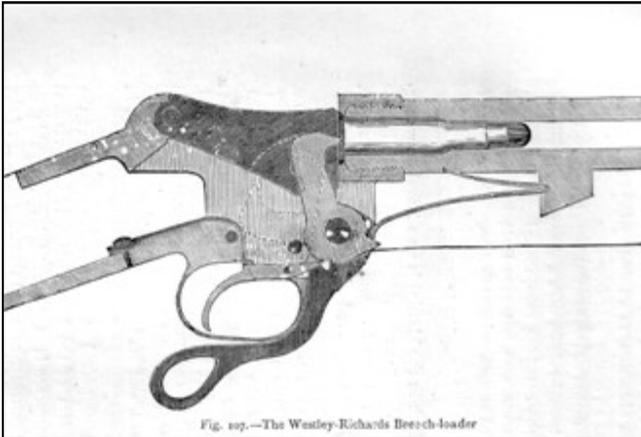


Fig. 107.—The Westley-Richards Breech-loader

A lot of us older collectors (I imagine) stand aghast at some of the nonsense proliferated on the Internet these days, much of which only goes to prove how little many posters know about their professed interest. One of my favourites is the enthusiast who requested replacement internal parts for a "Majuba Martini." The obvious response is that there is no such thing as a "Majuba Martini," mainly because the correct name for such an arm is the Westley Richards "Improved Martini," which is the name given by the man who actually made them, starting around 1870.

The bad news is that the battle of Majuba Hill was fought ten years later on the 27<sup>th</sup> February 1881, by which time there were four versions of the "Improved Martini" on the market, all of which were different internally, mainspring in front, mainspring at the back, kicking extractor etc so the name "Majuba Martini" as such tells us nothing useful.

The really bad news is that the battle only lasted for about the length of time it took the Boers to climb Majuba Hill, that is to say between about 9:30 am and 1:00 o'clock, when British general Colley was shot, and there is very little direct evidence that there were ever any "Improved Martinis" being used on the hill at all. The main source report of the action came from an English newspaper correspondent called Thomas Carter who was on the summit at the time and he only remarks on the Boer use of the Westley Richards Monkey Tail, which is a different rifle altogether. The commonly used name "Majuba Martini" is therefore hope-

**Later Model Westley Richards Improved Martini under Patent 1572 of 1871, two years later. Mainspring to the rear. So if we are ordering spare parts, which one was at Majuba in 1881?**

**First model Westley Richards "Improved Martini" under Patent 2427 of 1869. The mainspring at the front led to a very weak hollowed out fore-end.**

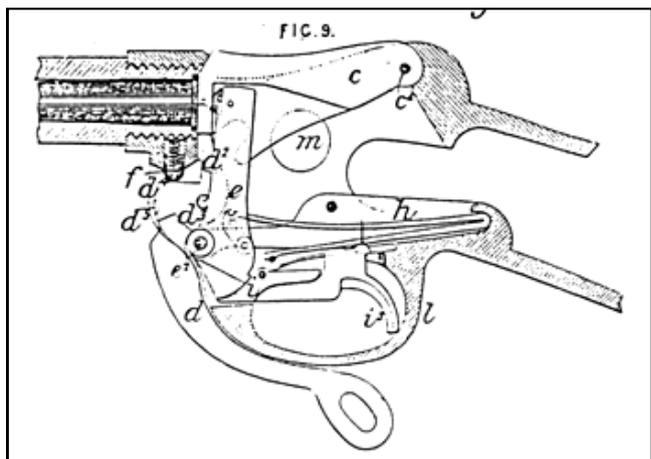
lessly inaccurate from just about every point of view.

So to help this "Majuba Martini" enthusiast, I wrote to him outlining these problems and making suggestions as to how spares could be manufactured once the correct model was identified, but I never got a reply. I have subsequently seen the identical request on other websites so I gather from this that our poster has learnt nothing about "Majuba Martinis" or indeed, much about common courtesy.

The best of these doubtful posts came from a really heroic individual who announced his arrival on the gun collecting scene (Fanfare of trumpets) and stated that he wished to start with a really good pristine example of a Martini Henry rifle that had provably been used at the battles of either Isandhlwana or Rorke's Drift.

Oh Yeah ? As if any of us who ever had such a Martini-Henry would willingly part with it without being physically tortured first. In any event, a moment's thought tells us that such things no longer exist either, so it is perhaps pertinent to set out the reasons why.

The battles of Rorke's Drift and Isandhlwana were fought on the same day, 22<sup>nd</sup> January 1879. Since the Martini was only widely issued among regular British forces after 1874, then the few Natal colonial government troops involved like the Natal Mounted Police did not have them yet and used .577" Sniders and Swinburne-Martinis in-



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*An early issue Mk I Martini Henry action body marked "1875" so it may well have been used in the Zulu War of 1879 but note the faint, off centre second "I" to the left, meaning that it has been upgraded to Mk II.*

*Further down is a cancelled "2" indicating possibly a down grade to a second class arm. On the other side of the action, the marking tells us that it was converted to .303 in 1894 and on top it is marked "DP" ie later deemed unsafe and to be used for Drill Purposes only. Maybe it was at Rorke's Drift but it's not pristine Zulu War issue.*

stead. We are therefore looking at the British regular troops only, and that means the 1<sup>st</sup> and 2<sup>nd</sup> Battalions of the 24<sup>th</sup> Foot, Warwickshire Regiment, who became the South Wales Borderers in 1881.

This narrows the field down to about 600 Martinis at Isandhlwana (five understrength companies of the 1<sup>st</sup> Battalion 24<sup>th</sup> and one company of the 2<sup>nd</sup> Battalion 24<sup>th</sup>) with another detached company of the 2<sup>nd</sup> Battalion at Rorke's Drift, which adds another 95 rifles or so to our area of interest. The remainder of the 24<sup>th</sup>'s rifles were with the rest of the 2<sup>nd</sup> Battalion as part of Chelmsford's advance force which had been decoyed miles away from Isandhlwana camp by the Zulus. Since these rifles never fired a shot in either battle, they fail to meet the criteria set by our newly hatched collecting friend.

Regarding the condition of these rifles : As it happens, both battalions had been engaged in the Ninth Frontier War of 1878 down in the Transkei , which meant that they had been exposed to the elements in open bivouacs for at least a year or more, so by time they got to the end of January 1879 in Zululand, their 1874 issue rifles can hardly have been in pristine condition any longer.

It gets worse. Let us assume that all 600 Martinis were taken at Isandhlwana. They were definitely shown to Cetewayo after the battle as evidence of the great Zulu victory but he allowed his warriors to take them home as personal trophies (Laband). None of these were used at Rorke's Drift for the simple reason that the Isandhlwana battlefield had to be picked over first after the shooting stopped, say at 2:00 pm (Lonsdale), plus we already know that it was the uncommitted Zulu reserve regiments

*For comparison, a purpose built Mk II Martini dated 1889 by BSA with the "II" mark evenly centred under the crown.*



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ground or hidden in the thatch as there were no gunsafes available in Zululand at that time. So the best guess is that the 550 or so remaining Isandhlwana Martinis are still out there, either destroyed, rusted away or still buried but definitely not pristine.

Is it possible to identify any such specific Martini from its markings? The answer is "No." Following Skennerton in *"The Broad Arrow,"* British arms may well have had a serial number under the barrel but that was of academic interest as no-one is going to unpin a Martini forearm just to look at the number whenever it was issued to the troops. More likely it would have a "rack marking" on the butt, that is to say that the battalion would make its own marks to keep track of its arms. Woodgate at Kambula states that the recovered Martinis were marked for either the 24<sup>th</sup> or the 80<sup>th</sup> regiments (Intombi Spruit).

Under the conditions of active service on foreign stations, with drafts of "short service" soldiers and wounded coming and going all the time, it may be all but impossible to say who had which rifle at any specific time. If such records did exist at regimental level, they were likely lost at Isandhlwana as many visitors to the battlefield remarked on the amount of paperwork strewn about. For sure, no such records have ever been published to my knowledge, bearing in mind that there is a whole cottage industry of writing about the Zulu war these days.

Similar considerations apply to the rifles used at Rorke's Drift. The defenders were notoriously left in squalid conditions in the burnt out remains of the Rorke's Drift buildings for several months after the battle and lost more casualties from disease than from enemy action. Since Chelmsford's entire column had lost so much equipment we can reasonably presume that any spare rifles would be kept as a company reserve on the spot and which is where any personal recording system would break down as troops came and went.

Indeed, casualties in both regiments were made up very quickly after the battles of the 22nd January such that there may well be Martini-Henrys marked for the 24th with the correct 1879 provenance but they would have been carried by riflemen drafted in after February 1879. For sure, many photos of the Rorkes Drift defenders included those who were never further north than Pinetown for the whole war!

But that is not the end of the story. The Martini-Henry was an arm that was continually being developed, gaining a new trigger system, sights and several kinds of extractors over the years and all of

these improvements would be stamped on the side or top of the action. In later times these rifles would be handed in for either refurbishment or use by other colonial troops or have .303 barrels put on in the 1890's before the Lee Metfords were in full supply or even adapted to .22 training rifles by Bonehill and Greener. The rifle illustrated went all of the way from front line service to second class arm to .303" conversion and ended up becoming unsafe and marked "Drill Purposes only."

Presumably the original rack numbers would be lost when the conversion to other uses took place as there is no point in retaining some other regiment's rack number in a new regiment or in a civilian shooting club.

The point is that there are a great number of Martini-Henry actions around in South Africa which are stamped with pre Zulu War dates on one side but a reading of the other markings tells us that the original Mark I's of 1874 were upgraded to Mark II's by 1877 and might later have been altered to something else altogether, so it is very likely that any Martinis remaining in British hands after the Zulu War are still in existence but converted to something else, so there is no way they can either be in "original pristine condition" or be positively identified.

Maybe it would be possible to make an original Mk I up by selectively grinding off the later markings but it would still need an original trigger kit, tumbler and extractor to make it theoretically "correct" but it would still be a fake.

Which means that the answer to the original question is still "They don't exist anymore, so No, you can't have one."

### SOURCES

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