THE EMU WAR

JAMES NASON

Contents

Sources

- Australian Museum
- Australian War Memorial
- National Archives of Australia
- State Library of Western Australia

The Unlikely Adversary

The year is 1932. Australia, still grappling with the effects of the Great Depression, faced an enemy unlike any it had encountered before. This was not a foreign power, nor a human adversary, but a feathered foe, a large, flightless bird that roamed the Western Australian outback: the emu. What began as a local problem soon escalated into a bizarre and almost comical episode in Australian history, a "war" waged against thousands of emus that threatened the livelihoods of struggling farmers.

The story unfolds in the Campion district and surrounding wheat-growing regions of Western Australia. Following the First World War, the Australian government had encouraged soldier settlement schemes, offering land to veterans to cultivate. These newly established farms, however, soon faced an unexpected challenge. A combination of factors, including a severe drought further east and the clearing of native vegetation for agriculture, led to a mass migration of emus westward. These large birds, numbering in the thousands, descended upon the farmlands, devouring crops, damaging fences, and exacerbating the already dire economic situation.

The emu, a national symbol of Australia, became an unlikely antagonist. These powerful birds, capable of running at speeds of up to 50 km/h (31 mph), proved surprisingly resilient and difficult to control. Their incursions into the farmlands were not merely a nuisance; they represented a significant threat to the farmers' livelihoods and their ability to sustain themselves during a time of immense hardship. The situation reached a point where desperate pleas for government intervention led to an almost unbelievable response: the deployment of the Australian military to combat the emu "invasion." This seemingly absurd decision set the stage for what would become known as the "Emu Wars," a peculiar chapter in Australian history where soldiers armed with machine guns faced off against a determined and elusive feathered enemy.

A Land of Opportunity and Ecological Imbalance

Following the immense sacrifice of the First World War, the Australian government, like many others globally, sought ways to reintegrate returning soldiers into civilian life and simultaneously expand agricultural production. The Soldier Settlement Scheme was a key initiative, and in Western Australia, it targeted vast tracts of undeveloped land for wheat farming. Thousands of returned servicemen, often with limited farming experience, were allocated blocks of land in areas like the Campion and Walgoolan districts of the wheat belt. They faced formidable challenges, including clearing virgin bush, establishing farms from scratch, and coping with the often-harsh Australian climate, all while striving for economic independence in a new landscape.

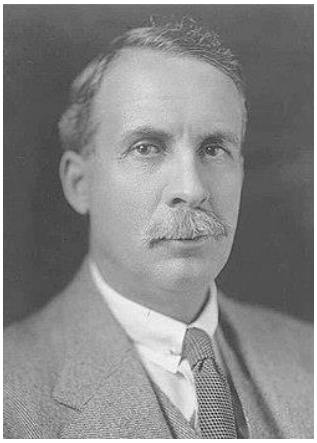
However, the ambitions of these settlers soon collided with an unforeseen and escalating ecological crisis. The early 1930s saw large parts of Australia gripped by the Great Depression, which amplified economic hardship, but it also brought a significant drought to inland regions, particularly further east. This drought severely impacted the emu population's traditional food sources and waterholes, compelling vast numbers of the birds to migrate westward in search of sustenance. Simultaneously, the very act of establishing farms – clearing land and planting crops – inadvertently created an irresistible new food supply for the migrating emus. The newly sown wheat fields offered a verdant, concentrated source of food that was far more appealing than the depleted natural vegetation.

Did you know that the Soldier Settlement Scheme, while well-intentioned, often placed returned servicemen on marginal land? Many schemes across Australia ultimately failed due to poor soil quality, insufficient infrastructure, inadequate funding, and a lack of specific agricultural training for the settlers, leaving many former soldiers struggling with financial ruin even before events like the Emu Wars.

The sheer scale of the emu invasion was staggering; estimates suggest over 20,000 emus descended upon the agricultural areas. The damage they inflicted was devastating for the struggling farmers. The emus would stampede through fields, devouring entire crops of wheat and other grains, effectively destroying months of labour and investment. Beyond consuming crops, their powerful legs and sheer numbers caused extensive damage to fencing, allowing rabbits and dingoes free access to the farms, thus compounding the agricultural destruction. Farmers reported fences being flattened for miles, leaving their properties vulnerable to further pest incursions. With their livelihoods under direct threat and already burdened by debt and the economic downturn, the farmers became desperate. They appealed repeatedly to the government for assistance, highlighting the severe economic impact and the apparent inadequacy of conventional pest control methods against such a massive and mobile avian force.

The Military Mobilises: Operation Emus

As the emu plague continued to devastate crops and livelihoods in Western Australia, the desperate farmers escalated their pleas for intervention beyond local authorities. Their appeals reached the federal government, largely due to the efforts of Major Gwynydd Purves Wynne-Aubrey Meredith, a Royal Australian Artillery officer who was also a Member of Parliament for the affected region. The political pressure mounted, particularly given that many of the struggling farmers were returned servicemen from the First World War, for whom the government felt a particular obligation to support.



The decision to deploy military personnel was ultimately approved by the Minister of Defence, **Sir George Pearce**. This move was not solely an act of agricultural pest control; it also provided an opportunity to conduct what was officially termed a "training exercise". This allowed the military to test the effectiveness of Lewis automatic machine guns in a real-world setting, as well as assess the logistical challenges of deploying troops in remote areas. The government agreed to supply the weaponry and ammunition, with the understanding that the farmers would be responsible for providing food, accommodation, and the cost of the ammunition used.

The military contingent sent to combat the emus was relatively small but significant. It was led by Major Meredith, who, alongside Sergeant S. O'Halloran and Gunner J. Johnson, comprised the main operational team. Their primary armament consisted of two Lewis automatic machine guns. These were highly effective light machine guns, firing .303 calibre ammunition from a pan magazine, capable of a rate of fire of 500-600 rounds per minute. They were regarded as formidable weapons, well-suited for sustained firing against a moving target, and were intended to make quick work of the large bird flocks.

Did you know that the Lewis machine gun was originally an American design, but it was most famously adopted and extensively used by the British and Commonwealth forces during the First World War? Its distinctive pan magazine and air-cooling system made it a recognisable and reliable weapon, even when deployed against an unexpected foe like the emu.

The "emu war" officially commenced on 2nd November 1932, when Major Meredith and his team arrived in the Campion district. Their initial strategy was straightforward: to drive large mobs of emus into ambushes where the machine guns could be deployed to maximum effect. They hoped to herd the birds into kill zones, using their vehicles to manoeuvre the flocks and then opening fire. The soldiers believed that the emus, being mere birds, would be easily intimidated and controlled by the presence of vehicles and sustained gunfire. Logistics involved transporting the men and equipment via trucks, essential for traversing the rugged outback terrain and keeping pace with the mobile emu population. The plan seemed simple enough on paper, but the reality of facing thousands of agile, unpredictable birds in their natural environment would soon prove far more complex than anticipated.

Fowl Play: Tactics, Challenges, and Public Scrutiny

The military's campaign against the emus began on 2nd November 1932, and almost immediately encountered unforeseen difficulties. Major Meredith and his team, armed with Lewis machine guns, attempted to implement their strategy of herding large mobs of emus towards ambushes. However, the emus proved to be far more intelligent and adaptable than anticipated. Their initial attempts to round up the birds were met with surprising agility; the emus would scatter in small groups, making it nearly impossible to concentrate their fire for maximum effect. Their remarkable speed, reaching up to 50 km/h (31 mph), allowed them to quickly escape danger, often outmanoeuvring the military vehicles.

The Lewis machine guns, while formidable, also presented challenges. Despite their high rate of fire, hitting a small, fast-moving target like an emu in the vast, open terrain was incredibly difficult. The guns were also prone to jams and overheating with prolonged firing, requiring frequent pauses for maintenance and reloading. Early reports from Major Meredith highlighted the tactical difficulties, noting that if the military had a specialised machine for herding, it might be more effective. On the first day of operations, an estimated 500 rounds of ammunition were fired, reportedly resulting in a kill count of around 300 emus. However, this initial success was misleading, as the majority of emus were learning to evade the threats.

Did you know that Major Meredith reportedly remarked about the emus, "If we had a military division with the bullet-carrying capacity of these birds it would face any army in the world"? This quote, often cited in historical accounts, highlights his grudging respect for the emus' resilience and the surprising difficulty of the military campaign.

As the campaign progressed through early to mid-November, the frustrations mounted. The emus developed a highly effective strategy of dispersal, breaking into smaller units whenever threatened, which rendered machine gun fire inefficient. Major Meredith, in his reports, famously noted that the emus "can be practically invisible" once dispersed. Attempts to mount the machine guns on trucks proved equally challenging, as the uneven terrain made stable firing impossible, and the trucks often couldn't keep pace with the birds over long distances. The expenditure of ammunition far outweighed the number of confirmed kills, leading to concerns about the cost-effectiveness of the operation.

The unique nature of the "Emu Wars" quickly caught the attention of both the Australian and international press. Newspapers, initially reporting seriously on the agricultural crisis, soon adopted a humorous and often mocking tone. Headlines frequently highlighted the military's struggles against the birds, painting the conflict as a comedic failure. The British press, in particular, found the story highly entertaining, portraying the Australian military as being outsmarted by flightless birds. This widespread media attention led to public scrutiny and, in some quarters, ridicule. Questions were raised in the Australian Parliament about

the wisdom and cost of using military resources for pest control. Facing mounting public amusement and criticism, and with little tangible success to show for the effort, the military operation was largely scaled back by mid-November 1932, officially concluding the main "war" on 8th December 1932. Although some minor follow-up efforts occurred, the primary military intervention lasted only a few weeks, with **Major Meredith**'s official report stating 2,878 rounds had been fired for an estimated 986 emus killed by the end of the initial campaign.

The End of Hostilities and a Lingering Legacy

The military intervention in the "Emu Wars" officially concluded on 8th December 1932, following weeks of operation that had yielded disappointing results and significant public scrutiny. Major G.P.W. Meredith's final reports to the Minister of Defence, Sir George Pearce, detailed the expenditure of nearly 10,000 rounds of ammunition and an estimated kill count of around 986 emus. This stark ratio of ammunition to kills highlighted the profound ineffectiveness of the machine gun campaign as a viable solution to the emu problem. The government officially withdrew military involvement, citing the high cost, the logistical difficulties, and the clear strategic failure against the highly mobile and resilient birds.

The primary military campaign was widely regarded as a failure in achieving its stated objective of significantly reducing the emu population and protecting crops. Contemporary critics, both within Australia and internationally, often lampooned the army's inability to defeat the birds, viewing it as a symbolic embarrassment. However, for the affected farmers in Western Australia's wheat belt, the end of the "war" did not signify the end of their struggle. The emu problem persisted, and the agricultural devastation continued.

In the aftermath of the military's withdrawal, the government reverted to more conventional, albeit less dramatic, methods of pest control. The most effective approach proved to be the bounty system, where farmers were encouraged to cull emus themselves for a small payment per bird. Between 1932 and 1934, official records indicate over 57,000 emus were killed through bounty programs, a significantly higher number than achieved by the military. Additionally, the development and erection of more robust emu-proof fencing, particularly the No. 1 Rabbit-Proof Fence (later partially adapted for emus), offered a more sustainable long-term solution by physically excluding the birds from agricultural areas. These methods, though less glamorous, proved to be far more practical and successful in mitigating the emu threat.

The "Emu Wars" has cemented its place in Australian folklore and global historical curiosities. It is remembered not as a glorious military victory, but as a peculiar, almost absurd, confrontation between humanity and nature, often recounted with a wry sense of humour. Beyond its comedic aspect, the event serves as a valuable, albeit unusual, historical lesson in environmental management and the complexities of human-wildlife conflict. It underscored the limitations of brute force against an adaptive natural adversary and highlighted the need for more nuanced and ecologically informed approaches to pest control. The 1932 campaign remains a vivid testament to the unforeseen challenges faced by settlers in the Australian outback and the resilient spirit of both the farmers and their feathered antagonists.