

THE GREAT EMU WAR OF '32

The Emu War, also known as the Great Emu War, was a wildlife pest management programme undertaken in the Campion district of Western Australia in the late spring and early summer of 1932 in response to public concern over the number of Emus, *Dromaius novaehollandiae*, said to be running amok in the area. The attempts to curb the burgeoning emu population employed soldiers armed with machine guns—this led the media to coin the name "Emu War" when referring to the incident.

Following World War I, large numbers of Australian ex-servicemen, along with a number of British veterans, took up farming in Western Australia, often in marginal areas. When the Great Depression started in 1929, these farmers were encouraged to increase their wheat yields, with the promise of a government subsidy that failed to materialise. Meanwhile, wheat prices continued to fall, and by October 1932 matters were becoming extreme, with the farmers preparing to harvest the season's crop while simultaneously threatening to refuse to load the wheat unless the promised subsidy promise was fulfilled.

To add to the difficulties facing the farmers was the arrival of as many as 20,000 emus in the district. Emus regularly migrate after the breeding season, leaving the inland regions and heading to the coast. The cultivated lands and water supplies available for livestock were ideal Emu habitat, and they began to intrude into farm territory—in particular the marginal farming land around Campion and Walgoolan. They consumed and spoiled the crops, and opened large gaps in fences allowing rabbits to enter and cause further problems.

The farmers were very concerned about the birds ravaging their crops, and a deputation of ex-soldiers met with the Commonwealth Minister of Defence, Sir George Pearce. The soldier-settlers were well aware of the effectiveness of machine guns, and requested their deployment against the avian invaders. The Minister readily agreed, but attached conditions: the guns were only to be used by military personnel, and troop transport was to be financed by the government of Western Australian, and the farmers were to provide food and accommodation for the soldiers, and payment for the ammunition. Minister Pearce also supported the deployment on the grounds that the birds would provide good target practice for the troops, although it has also been suggested that some government members may

have viewed this as a way of publicising the help Federal Government was affording the Western Australian farmers, and towards that end a Fox Movietone cinematographer was attached to the military personnel.

The "war" was conducted under the command of Major G.P.W. Meredith of the Seventh Heavy Battery of the Royal Australian Artillery, with Meredith commanding a pair of soldiers armed with two Lewis Automatic Machine Guns and 10,000 rounds of ammunition. Military involvement was due to begin in October 1932, but Mother Nature intervened in favour the Emus and the operation was delayed by a period of rainfall which caused the birds to scatter over a wider area. The rain ceased by November 2nd, and the troops were deployed with orders to assist the farmers and, according to one newspaper report, to collect a hundred Emu skins to supply feathers for the hats of the Light Horse Brigade.

Meredith and his men travelled to Champion, where some fifty Emus were sighted. As the birds were out of range of the guns, the local settlers attempted to herd them into an ambush, but the birds split into small running groups making them a difficult target. Even though the first machine gun fusillade was ineffective due to the range, a second round of gunfire was able to kill "a number" of birds. Later the same day a small flock was encountered, resulting in "perhaps a dozen" birds being killed.

The next significant encounter was on November 14th. Meredith established an ambush on a local dam, and over a thousand of the "enemy" were spotted heading towards their position. This time the gunners waited until the birds were at point blank range before opening fire, the gun jammed after only twelve birds were accounted for. The rest of the flock scattered before the jam was cleared and more could be killed. No more birds were sighted that day.

Meredith received a report that further south the birds were "fairly tame, so the operation was relocated, but there was only limited success in spite of his efforts. It was then decided to mount one of the guns on a truck: a move that proved to be ineffective, as the truck was both unable to gain on the birds and the ride was so rough that the gunner was unable to open fire. Six days after the first engagement, 2,500 rounds of ammunition had been expended, but the number of Emus killed is uncertain: one account claims just fifty birds, but other accounts range from two to five hundred; the higher figure being provided by the settlers. Meredith's official report noted that his men had suffered no casualties.

Summarising the culls, the eminent Australian ornithologist, Dominic Serventy, commented:

"The machine-gunners' dreams of point blank fire into

serried masses of Emus were soon dissipated. The Emu command has evidently ordered guerrilla tactics, and its unwieldy army soon split up into innumerable small units that made use of the military equipment uneconomic. A crestfallen field force therefore withdrew from the combat area after about a month."

On November 8th, members of the Australian House of Representatives discussed the operation. As a result of the discussion, and of the negative coverage of the event in the local media, which included claims that "only a few" Emus had died, Minister Pearce withdrew military personnel and the guns.

When questioned on the operation Major Meredith compared the Emus to Zulus, and commented on the striking manoeuvrability of the emus, even while badly wounded:

"If we had a military division with the bullet-carrying capacity of these birds it would face any army in the world...They can face machine guns with the invulnerability of tanks. They are like Zulus whom even dum-dum bullets could not stop."

After the withdrawal of the military, the attack on crops continued. The farmers again asked for support, citing the hot weather and drought that caused the Emus to invade farms by the thousands. James Mitchell, the Premier of Western Australia, lent strong support to renewal of military assistance, and a report by the Base Commander indicated that three hundred Emus had been killed in the initial operation.

As a result of the farmer's request and the Base Commander's report the Minister of Defence approved the military party to resume their efforts on November 12th. He defended the decision in the senate, explaining why the soldiers were necessary to combat the serious agricultural threat of the large Emu population. This time the military agreed to loan the guns to Western Australian government on the expectation that they would provide the necessary people to man them. However, due to an apparent lack of experienced machine gunners in the state Major Meredith and his men were once again placed in the field .

Operations commenced on November 13th, and a degree of success was achieved in the first two days, with approximately forty Emus killed. However, the third day, November 15th, proved to be far less successful, but by the first week of December the gunners were accounting for approximately a hundred birds a week. The operation was terminated on December 10th, and Meredith recalled, in his report he claimed 986 kills for the use of 9,860 rounds, at a rate of exactly ten rounds per confirmed kill. In addition, he claimed 2,500 wounded birds had died as a result of the injuries they received.

In spite of the problems encountered with the cull, the farmers of the region requested military assistance in 1934, 1943 and 1948, but were turned down by the Government. Instead, the bounty system first instigated in 1923 was renewed, and proved to be effective: bounties for 57,034 killed Emus were claimed over just a six month period in 1934.

Word of the Emu War spread, reaching to Great Britain in late December 1932. Some conservationists there protested the cull as "extermination of the rare emu"; while Dr. Dominic Serventy, described the cull as "an attempt at the mass destruction of the birds".

Given the thousands of Emus claimed to be destroying the crops, and using even the most optimistic tally of the number of birds culled during the two campaigns the tactics of Dr. Serventy's "Emu command" seem to have been correct.

R.V.C. with help from Wikipedia