

Dawn breaks in the untamed wilderness. It is already uncomfortably warm, and the sun, which has just topped the horizon, rises ominously in a cloudless sky, promising unrelenting heat for all who toil under it. Though you certainly don't enjoy the heat of this near desert climate, that is the least of your concerns. You are soldier, and are duty bound to face a foe that is even now forming in the distance. Legend of the enemy's intimidating physical stature, toughness and almost unearthly speed has spread in hushed campfire conversations ever since you were deployed here, miles away from the safety of home. You are outnumbered, and you are in their world.

Your nation is a young one, only about three decades old, but that does not diminish your affection for her. You and a great many of your countrymen fought bravely abroad years earlier in the Great War, but this time it is very different. This time, the fight is not some intangible geopolitical crisis fought on foreign shores, but something much more immediate. This time, a great horde of invaders, born of your very same soil, threatens your home country from within. You are the last line of defense, called by your beloved country to repel this threat, regardless of the personal danger. You must somehow will yourself to extract the word fear from your vocabulary. Your enemy has already done so. In fact, your enemy has no words in their vocabulary. Your enemy also has feathers and a beak. The year is 1932. You are a soldier in the Seventh Heavy Battery of the Royal Australian Artillery, and your country has just declared war on 20,000 emus.

Tonight, Mr. President, Mr. Secretary-Treasurer, gentlemen of the Athenaeum Society, I present to you the story of Australia's Great Emu War, arguably one of the most noteworthy human v. bird conflicts of the 20<sup>th</sup> century.

A brief aside on the nation of Australia. Before delving into this particular topic, my knowledge of the Australian nation was essentially limited to kangaroos, Foster's beer, Crocodile Dundee and Kentucky's 2019 Ray Guy award winning punter, and close personal friend, Max Duffy. But after months of pouring over the historical records....there's really not a whole hell of a lot more than that. But I will say this. We as Americans think of ourselves as a young country, but as compared to our friends from Australia, we are at least middle-aged, and possibly trending towards eating dinner at 4:30 PM and falling asleep on the couch at 9:00 watching Gunsmoke. Though humans have lived in what is now Australia for 60,000 years, the Commonwealth itself was not founded until 1901. Famously, in terms of European settlement, colonization was established largely as a dumping ground for English criminals. The nation now boasts a population of about 25 million people, most of whom can look back proudly to a heritage of ancestors the British considered to be so repugnant that it was necessary to ship them to an entirely separate continent.

I don't know whether it relates back to being founded by felons, but Australia has never been great with timing. They were born as an independent nation just in time to be thrust into World War One, in which, to their credit, they vigorously participated. Almost 40% of the male fighting age population participated in the war, a total of 417,000 Australians. When these fighting men returned to their native country, the government, facing drought and economic despair, was unable to pay their war pensions.

So someone came up with a great idea. I don't know their name, but I am assuming they were Australian. Feel free to look that up during the break. Anyway, the government launched a program in 1915 called the Soldier Settler Program. As part of this initiative,

5000 veterans were granted farmland in Western Australia in lieu of military pensions. This seemed like a pretty good deal to the government which had plenty of land, but precious little cash. The veterans begrudgingly accepted as they really had no other option.

There were serious flaws with the Soldier Settler Program from the start. The land that was granted was mediocre at best. Australia is the driest inhabited continent on the Earth, and is comprised of the least fertile soil of any developed nation. Western Australia specifically has an arid climate making farming a tenuous proposition in the best of conditions. And these were not the best of conditions.

Australia suffered through a long-term drought for much of the post-World War I era. Then came the worldwide economic depression that followed the Wall Street crash of 1929. The government had promised subsidies for the production of wheat by the former soldiers, but had largely reneged on this promise. This combination of bad governance and bad luck left western Australia with this tenuous situation. 5000 disgruntled military veterans, whose government had already failed to deliver on promises of war pensions or crop subsidies, trying to scratch out a living farming in near desert conditions for very little compensation. On the bright side, it couldn't get any worse, right? 20,000 invading giant flightless birds beg to differ.

It was 1932, and you couldn't swing a boomerang in the district of Campion or Walgoolan without striking an emu. The emu, or *Dromaius novaehollandiae*, native only to Australia, is the second largest bird on earth, with a height of up to 6'2" and a weight of up to 130 pounds. I am certain many of you can guess the largest flightless bird. (Of course, that would be Larry Bird, 6 foot 9, 230 pounds. Indiana State.) Emus do not have

a fixed habitat, but instead are nomadic scavengers whose movements tend to follow the availability of water and food. And thanks to the Soldier Settler program, both were now available in the irrigated wheatfields of Western Australia. So in 1932, the emus rolled into Western Australia like Spring Breakers hitting Panama City.

And like kids on spring break, emus will essentially eat anything they can find, ranging from seeds, insects, fruits and flowers to small vertebrates. And they have no qualms whatsoever about targeting a heroic World War One veteran's wheatfield. But more damaging than the pilfering of seeds and vegetation was the absolute destruction caused by thousands of giant emu feet kicking and digging throughout the countryside. It was a legitimate threat to the livelihood of the farmers in Western Australia, and they let their government know about it. The Soldier Settlers contacted Australian minister of defense, Sir George Pearce. As many of the farmers were combat veterans themselves, they asked the government to provide them with machine guns to quell the threat. Sir George did them one better, and sent in the army.

At the onset of the war, Sir George actually believed that the emu campaign might bring much-needed good P.R. to the Australian government. Things had become so bad in the western region of the country, that there was even talk of Western Australia seceding all together. Sir George hoped that the sending of the military to end the emu crisis would be an olive branch to the soldiers that had been short changed. He even sent a cinematographer from Fox Movietone to be embedded with the troops to showcase the upcoming precise military action to the world at large.

The Great Emu War, the world's only officially sanctioned military operation against a native bird species, began on November 2, 1932. The 7<sup>th</sup> Heavy Battery of the Royal

Australian Artillery was led by Major Gwynydd Purves Wynne-Aubrey Meredith. Though his name was complicated, his orders were simple. Total destruction of the invading emu army. Intelligence reported a sighting of around 50 birds in the region of Campion on the morning of November 2.

One might think a military division armed with machine guns would have a relatively easy time taking out a bunch of birds, who were by all accounts unarmed. But you, and Major Meredith, would be mistaken. In the initial skirmish, Meredith's men optimistically fired the first volley at the emus with their Lewis machine guns, but soon found they were ineffective at long range. They then enlisted the local settlers to try to herd the emus into firing range, but this too proved unsuccessful. Much to the chagrin of the military, the birds proved to be frustrating targets, refusing to stand still for the slaughter, and instead split in the small groups and ran, which an emu can really do by the way. (Up to 30 miles per hour.) So on day one of the campaign, the Army came up relatively empty, an inauspicious beginning.

Ornithologist Dominic Serventy summarized the Army's morale after the initial battle:

*The machine-gunners' dream of point-blank fires into serried masses of emus were soon dissipated. The emu command had 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.*

But Meredith did not rise to the rank of major for nothing. Recognizing that the birds were primarily in the region in search of water, he staged an ambush on November 4th at a local dam near the village of Walgoolan after reconnaissance reported that up to

1000 birds been spotted in the area. Meredith concealed his men near the dam and waited for their quarry to arrive, which they soon did. One can picture Meredith lurking in the shadows knowing vengeance was nigh for the defeat he suffered at the hands of the haughty enemy on the initial day of the campaign, twisting his mustache and laughing menacingly to himself. (I must point out at this time that certain portions of this paper may include my conjecture. There is no historical account of Meredith literally twisting his mustache and laughing maniacally like a cartoon character villain, but it seems like a plausible assumption.) Regardless, at the crucial moment that their fearless leader called for the thunder of the Lewis guns, the fates were once again against them, as several of the guns jammed, and the birds again proved evasive. Only twelve of the thousand birds were killed, with the remaining 988 rejoining the ranks of the emu force.

For the remainder of the first phase of the war, the Army dealt with similar problems. The birds proved far harder to kill than had ever been anticipated. One Army observer noted that “each pack seems to have its own leader now – a big black plumed bird stands fully six feet high and keeps watch while his mates carry out the work of destruction and warns them of our approach.” The birds were also said to have quickly learned the range of the Lewis guns, and would stay just beyond firing range. Keep in mind that we are talking about birds with a brain about the size of a walnut. Per A-Zanimals.com, emus are the 6<sup>th</sup> dumbest bird species on earth. Major Meredith had to already be feeling pretty bad about the war efforts. It is probably good that he did not have internet access. In his defense, Major Meredith tried everything he could think of. At one point, in an effort to deal with the freakish speed of the birds, he mounted one of the machine guns on a truck to attempt to mobilize the attack. This went about as well as

you would have thought, with the truck unable to catch the birds and the ride proving so bumpy on the harsh terrain that the gunner was unable to squeeze off even a single shot.

By November 8, six days after war was declared and the action was commenced, it was apparent that the operation was, to this point, a dismal failure. Per military records, approximately 2500 rounds of 30-ought 6 caliber bullets had been fired from the Lewis machine guns with very limited success. Maybe as few as 50 total birds killed, or  $\frac{1}{4}$  of 1% of the total target.

You may recall that Minister of Defense Sir George Pearce had initially believed that the campaign would produce some positive publicity for an ailing Australian government. Now that his chief fighting force was losing a war to the sixth dumbest bird species in the world, this was decidedly not the case. The cinematographer who was sent to archive the expedition was quietly dismissed, with any film that he had captured of the debacle never to be seen. The national media was not kind, ridiculing the wasteful and fruitless expedition, and referring to the Australian fighting force as "Meredith and his merry men."

The matter was debated in the Australian House of Representatives, which also criticized the expedition citing that "only a few" emus had died. Not wishing further embarrassment, it was decided that the troops should withdraw from the region.

Not surprisingly, Major Meredith, in an effort to explain his public failure, perhaps exaggerated slightly the challenge of facing the emus in the field. In a defensive letter to his superiors, Meredith expressed the difficulty of facing emus on open ground. "It must be realized that an emu full out can do 45 miles per hour, consequently the target is, after



the first burst, a very rapidly moving one, and is only visible for a very short time." He went on to extoll the near invulnerability of the emu: "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."

Although Meredith's claims were no doubt exaggerated, there is evidence that the emus were incredibly durable. There were reports of emus taking direct mortal hits, and running for up to 2 miles before finally falling. One farmer reported that after being able to kill an emu with a rifle, it was observed that the carcass already contained five machine gun rounds from several days prior.

After the decision to withdraw the military, the farmers again called out for aid. The premier of Western Australia, James Mitchell, called upon the Australian government to make a second run at taking out the emu threat. On November 12, Minister of Defense Pearce authorized the resumption of military action, and once again placed Major Meredith in command. Though the actual reason for this is lost to history, I suppose we can at least agree that no one on earth had more experience leading a machine gun division against emus in Western Australia than Major Meredith.

In the approximately one month second campaign, Meredith and his merry men had some degree of success, at least on paper. Meredith claimed that in one month of fighting that 986 birds were killed. That claim, however, is somewhat dubious as the official post-action numbers reflect 9860 rounds of ammunition spent. Thus, if you believe the figures provided by Meredith, he claims exactly 10 rounds per kill, which he reported as "an extremely high percentage."



Australian historian Murray Johnson notes that the second campaign “fared only marginally better.” Not only is it likely that the numbers provided by Meredith were exaggerated, but even if they were to be believed, it is evident that the mission did not accomplish its goal. In fact, Murray goes on to suggest that the entire operation may have backfired. “It is highly probable that the machine-gunners actually exacerbated the crop losses, for every time the guns were able to open fire the birds scattered widely, trampling the maturing wheat as they desperately sought cover.” Whoops.

Though no peace treaty was ever formally entered, the Great Emu War ended on December 10, 1932 when what remained of the Western Australian wheat crop was finally harvested, and Meredith and his men returned home to no great public fanfare. With the lack of overall success, and the abuse taken in the press, the Army never again declared war against the mighty emu. In future years, the government enlisted a bounty program, which had a bit more success.

So who won the Great Emu War? In some traditional means of analyzing conflict, you could argue the Australian Army got the upper hand. Though casualties were far fewer than expected on the bird side of the ledger, official records reflect Australian Army casualties as zero. On the other hand, it was the human Army, not the feathered one, who was forced twice to retreat from the area while the emus continually held their ground.

We all remember the Winston Churchill quote “[H]istory will be kind to me, for I intend to write it.” One might think this quote would bode well for the human side of this battle. After all, the emus didn’t even have pen or paper. But oddly enough, it didn’t really work out this way. The emu clearly left the conflict held in higher esteem than the Army. One need look no further than the Australian coat of arms itself as well as the \$.50 coin,

both of which depict not Minister of Defense Sir George Pearce or poor Major Gwynydd Purves Wynne-Aubrey Meredith, but the mighty emu, true victor of Australia's Great Emu War.