

Australia: How a country could lose a war to an animal.

The title you just read may sound absurd, but it is true. In 1932, the Australian military declared war—not on another country, but on a species of bird: the emu. Even more remarkably, they lost.

How could that happen? Why did Australia declare war on these birds? And perhaps even more importantly, how could a modern army be defeated by animals?

In this article, we take a closer look at one of the most extraordinary—and almost unbelievable—stories in Australian history.



Flag Australia. Source: wikipedia.org

Why a war against an animal?

In the early 1930s, many former Australian soldiers who had served in the First World War had become farmers in Western Australia. Following the Great Depression, the Australian government sought to stimulate the economy by encouraging farmers to increase their grain production. More grain meant higher revenues and, it was hoped, a path toward economic recovery.

The government promised subsidies to support the farmers, but much of this financial assistance never materialized. As a result, many farmers grew increasingly frustrated as they struggled to make ends meet.

As if that were not enough, they soon faced another problem: emus. After the breeding season, thousands of these large flightless birds migrated into the farming regions of Western Australia. They consumed vast quantities of grain and destroyed fences, allowing other animals—



such as rabbits—to enter the fields and cause even more damage to the crops. The farmers were powerless to stop them.

Because many of these farmers were former soldiers, they were experienced in handling firearms. It was therefore only a matter of time before someone suggested shooting the emus. Australia's Minister of Defence at the time, George Pearce, approved the proposal.

Remarkably, the task was not left to the farmers themselves but was assigned to the Australian Army. Armed with Lewis machine guns, soldiers began shooting emus on 2 November 1932. This marked the official beginning of what would later become known as the Great Emu War.

The "war" lasted until 10 December 1932, coming to an end after just over a month.



A big swarm of Emus, these terrorised the Australian farmers. Source: footnotinghistory.com

Course of the (Great) Emu War.

In the end, the war lasted only 38 days and was a clear defeat for the Australian Army. During that time, approximately one thousand emus were killed, but the campaign had little overall impact. More than 20,000 emus were living in the affected region, meaning the population remained largely intact.

The birds also proved to be surprisingly difficult to eliminate. Emus were fast, unpredictable, and capable of spreading out over vast areas. Attempts to mow down groups of birds with machine guns often failed because the emus scattered in different directions, making them extremely difficult to hit. As a result, the military operation was largely ineffective.



A different solution was therefore needed. Since it proved impossible to reduce the emu population efficiently, the focus shifted toward limiting the damage they caused. Farmers were given permission to use hunting rifles themselves—something that, in hindsight, could have been allowed from the very beginning. In addition, stronger and higher fences were constructed to make it more difficult for the emus to enter farmland.

These measures enabled farmers to keep the birds away more effectively and helped bring the damage under control.



Article in a newspaper from 1932, there needed to be a solution for this Emu plague. Source: vocal.media

The (Great) War became a meme

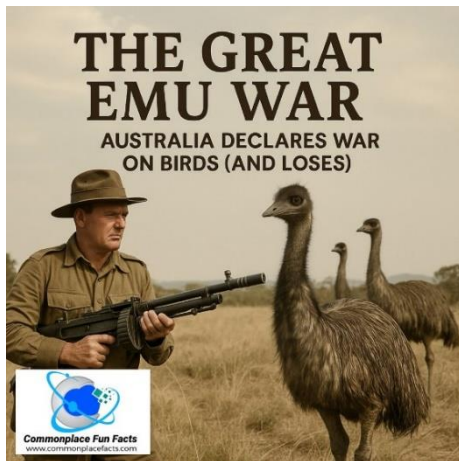
It has now been more than 80 years since the event took place, but if you search for the Great Emu War today, you are more likely to find humorous images than serious historical information. These often include edited pictures of angry emus wearing helmets or satirical propaganda portraying the birds as the true victors.

Although many Australians can laugh about it today, there are undoubtedly some who feel a certain degree of embarrassment about this unusual chapter in history. After all, it remains a remarkable story: a modern army that went to war against animals—and lost.



Example of Emu propaganda. Source: cards-the-universe-and-everything.fandom.com





AI generated photo about Emu propaganda where a human holds a gun to an Emu. 80 years after the war ended people still bring this up. Source: commonplacefacts.com

The story was considered so absurd that it even became the subject of jokes during an official session of the Australian Parliament. When George Pearce was considered for receiving an award for his role in the conflict, the decision was met with criticism.

One parliamentarian sarcastically remarked that the award might have been better given to the emus instead.

Conclusion

This story is truly unbelievable. There were even rumors that the emus had developed a kind of hierarchy and used tactics to outsmart the farmers. They were said to have split into smaller groups, hidden themselves in bushes and other hard-to-see locations, and even had a “leader” in each group that guided the others.

It had never happened before that modern humans attempted to wage a war against a species of bird—let alone that they actually lost. This makes the story not only bizarre, but also unique and, in a certain way, humorous. Although the original problem—the destruction of farmland and crops—was understandable, the circumstances and the approach taken were far from effective.

Despite the fact that it happened more than 80 years ago, the Great Emu War continues to bring smiles to people around the world. To this day, jokes are still made about it, and the story remains one of the strangest chapters in modern history.

And so, a country lost a war it had declared itself... against an animal.



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