Your Shortcut to... The Great Emu War

Thousands of hungry emus. Soldiers armed with machine guns. And a story that's become famous as the war Australia lost ... to birds....this is your Squiz Kids Shortcut to The Great Emu War. The podcast where we dive into the who, what, when, where, why and how of the wonderful world around us. I'm Christie Kijurina.

"[Bryce clears his throat in preparation for giving a speech]

Fellow emus. Distinguished birds. It is with enormous pride and very small wings that I accept this victory ..."

Hang on. Bryce? What are you reading?

A victory speech. Everyone keeps saying the emus won the Great Emu War, but where's their speech? The poor things never got their moment. I thought ... better late than never.

That's thoughtful. But there's a slight problem.

They'd prefer someone with a longer neck to deliver it?

The emus didn't know they were in a war.

Ah. That would explain why none of them wrote a speech.

Uh...yes... They were busy being emus. But back in 1932, in Western Australia, thousands of them were causing serious trouble for wheat farmers. So the government sent three soldiers and two machine guns to help.

Today we're asking the questions: HOW could ordinary emus cause enough trouble for someone to call in the army? WHAT actually happened? How much of this extraordinary tale is true? And WHY there's more to the story than a joke about birds beating humans. So grab your binoculars, lace up your running shoes and let's head into the wheat fields of Western Australia.

And listen carefully ... there's a S'Quiz at the end!

HOW

Before we work out HOW things got so out of hand, Bryce, let's meet the bird behind the headlines. Imagine an emu standing beside you. Shaggy brown feathers. A long neck. A watchful pair of eyes ... possibly looking down at you.

Quite a long way down, depending on how tall you are. An adult emu can stand nearly two metres tall and weigh around 30 to 45 kilograms, about the weight of your average

12-year-old.And those long, powerful legs can send it sprinting at about 50 kilometres an hour.

Which means the running shoes you told us to bring won't be much help.

No. I'm beginning to think binoculars were the better suggestion. Admire from a distance.

Emus are also great travellers. They move across the landscape looking for food and water, responding to the seasons and where rain has fallen. They'd been doing that long before anyone planted a wheat field or put up a farm fence.

And long before this story begins, Aboriginal peoples were living on and caring for that Country. For many Aboriginal communities, emus have been important as food, and in stories, knowledge and cultural life, and still are today.

So when we picture the place where this happened, we shouldn't picture empty land waiting for farms. It already had people, histories and relationships between the land, plants and animals.

Now, fast-forward to the years after the First World War, which ended in 1918. Western Australia already had a wheat-growing region… the Wheatbelt, but farming was spreading into more areas.

And some of the people setting up farms were returned soldiers. Government schemes helped them take up land, with the idea that farming would give them work and a fresh start.

Which sounds promising. But being a soldier doesn't automatically teach you how to run a farm.

Exactly. Some had farming experience; others had very little. Some were also living with injuries or painful memories of war. And starting a farm meant finding money for equipment, fences and seed, often by borrowing it.

Then, just as those families were trying to get established, wheat prices fell. The Great Depression made things worse. That was a worldwide economic crisis when businesses closed, jobs disappeared and money became desperately tight.

Imagine working for months to grow your wheat, only to discover it would sell for much less than you'd hoped. You still owed money. You still had a family to feed. Every bit of your harvest mattered.

And in 1932 … along came the emus.

An estimated 20,000 moved into the affected farming districts. Not one enormous flock marching together, but thousands of birds moving through the area.

And from an emu’s point of view, those farms had plenty going for them. Food growing across big, open paddocks. Water supplies built for livestock. Especially when conditions were dry, those were very attractive places to stop.

The emus weren’t planning an invasion. They were finding something to eat and drink. But they ate wheat, trampled crops and damaged fences.

And a broken fence could let in another hungry visitor: rabbits. An introduced animal already causing enormous problems of its own.

For the farmers, it was trouble piled on trouble. Low prices, debts, difficult conditions and now crops disappearing into beaks or being flattened under big, three-toed feet.

So some of the soldier settlers turned to something they knew from the war. Machine guns.

They asked the country's Defence Minister, George Pearce, for military help to kill the emus and protect their crops. And he agreed.

Which brings us to WHAT happened when three soldiers, two machine guns and thousands of very mobile birds met in the wheat fields.

WHAT

It’s November 1932, near Campion in Western Australia. Major Meredith and two other soldiers have arrived with two Lewis machine guns and 10,000 rounds of ammunition.

And they’ve already had their first setback, before firing a shot. Rain scattered the emus across the countryside, delaying the operation. Apparently, the birds hadn’t checked the army’s timetable.

But on November the second, the shooting begins. The soldiers spot a group of emus, and local farmers help try to herd them towards the guns.

Except the emus don’t stay together. They split into smaller groups and scatter. Suddenly, instead of one big target, there are birds running in different directions across the paddocks.

Think back to those powerful legs. These are fast-moving animals in wide, open country. Having a powerful weapon doesn’t mean you can get close enough, or aim accurately enough, to hit them.

So the soldiers try a different approach. Wait somewhere the emus will come to them.

A dam. Two days later, they set up an ambush near the water. Around a thousand emus approach. The soldiers wait until the birds are close, then open fire.

But one of the machine guns jams. It stops working. Twelve birds have been killed, and the rest scatter.

Then comes another idea: mount a machine gun on a truck and chase the emus.

A moving gun to keep up with moving birds. You can see the thinking.

Except the ground is rough. The truck bounces around, the gunner can't aim properly, and the vehicle struggles to catch the speedy birds.

That's right! The emus have legs very well suited to the job. No wheels required.

News reports started describing the birds as though they were soldiers themselves, with leaders, lookouts and clever battle plans. One newspaper account described a bird keeping watch while the others ate, then the flock fleeing at signs of danger.

So were there emu generals organising all this?

No. That was people describing animal behaviour in military language. The birds weren't drawing up battle plans. But their watchfulness, speed and habit of scattering made them difficult to shoot.

Even Major Meredith sounded impressed. He was quoted saying: "They could face machine guns with the invulnerability of tanks." Invulnerability means being impossible to hurt.

And emus certainly weren't that. Birds were being killed and wounded. His comparison tells us how frustrated he was, not that emus were bulletproof.

Meanwhile, people were hearing about the operation through newspapers and cinema newsreels - the short news films shown before movies.

Some laughed at the army's difficulties. Others were upset by the suffering of the birds. Even in Parliament, politicians were making jokes. One suggested any medals should go to the emus.After roughly a week, the soldiers were withdrawn. But the farmers still had damaged crops and hungry emus. They asked for help again and within days, the soldiers were back.

That's right! There was a SECOND attempt!

There was. And that's a part the quick version often skips. The soldiers returned in mid-November and killed more birds. The operation finally ended on December the tenth.

Meredith reported 986 emus killed, using 9,860 rounds of ammunition. Those were his reported figures; the total number of birds that died, including wounded ones, is uncertain. So ... did the emus win?

Well, Bryce, if you mean the soldiers left while plenty of emus remained, that's where the famous line comes from. But there was no surrender, no peace treaty, and certainly no emu accepting a trophy.

And it wasn't a happy ending for all the birds, either. Shooting continued, including through a bounty system: people were paid for killing emus. Fences were also used to try to protect farmland.

The strange military mission became the famous story. The struggling families, the animals and the changes to their shared landscape are easier to leave out.

Which brings us to WHY this story deserves more than a laugh. Were people tackling an emu problem, or struggling to understand the country they were farming?

WHY

Christie, I can see why "Australia lost a war to emus" is the bit everyone remembers. It's surprising. It's funny. And you can tell it in one sentence. Whereas "struggling farmers, falling wheat prices and a complicated relationship with the Australian environment" doesn't exactly fit on a T-shirt.

No. But when we squeeze history into a punchline, we can squeeze out the people and the reasons things happened.

Those farmers weren't calling for help because an emu had pinched their afternoon snack. Their families depended on those crops. Some had returned from a terrible war and were trying to build a new life.

And the emus weren't villains. They were native animals finding food and water in a landscape people had changed. The same paddock could be a farmer's livelihood and an emu's next meal.

Which is a much harder problem than choosing whose side you're on.

That's why understanding a place matters. Its soil, its water, its seasons, and the living things already there.

Including listening to the people whose knowledge of that Country stretches back through generations.

Farmers still need to produce food. Animals still need places to live. And everyone needs water. There won't always be an easy answer.

But we can ask better questions. Before deciding how to get rid of an animal, ask why it's there. Before changing a landscape, ask what else might change with it. And ask whose knowledge is missing from the conversation. That applies to growing crops, looking after rivers and managing fire. You've got to understand the place you're working with.

And it applies to the stories we tell, too. Next time you hear that Australia lost a war to emus, you'll know there's a lot more behind that sentence.

Sooo… I think I need to rewrite my victory speech.

What have you got?

"Fellow emus. Distinguished humans. We've been told we won a war. This comes as quite a surprise. We thought we were having lunch."

A very different version of events.

Which is why it helps to hear the whole story.

THE S'QUIZ

This is the part of the podcast where you get to test how well you've been listening…

1. In which Australian state did the Great Emu War take place? [Western Australia]"

2. What crop were the farmers trying to protect from the emus? [Wheat]

3. How many soldiers were sent to deal with the emus? Was it:

a) three

b) thirty or

c) three hundred?

[a) three]

That's all we have time for today. Thanks for joining us as we explored the who, what, how, where, when, and why of The Great Emu War

Now get out there…and have a most excellent day!

Over and out.