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Insurgent Tactics 307

T.E. Lawrence, Võ Nguyên Giáp, and the Great Emu War

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“The machine-gunners’ dreams of point blank fire 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 after about a month.”

Prelude to War

As the First World War was winding down the so-called nation-state of Australia began preparing for the inevitable influx of ex-soldiers from the battlefields of Europe and the Middle East. As part of the planning vast stretches in Southwestern Australia were earmarked for the returning combatants to turn into profitable grain and vegetable ranches. The economic chaos of the Stock Market Crash, and the concomitant failure of the Australian government to pay any promised subsidies, especially for wheat, brought the farmers to near ruin. Then when least expected a marauding force of some 20,000 Emus, struck. Brought into the area, no doubt, by the abundant irrigation water and all those tasty unharvested crops. The farmers demanded the government do something about the avian insurgents and in response war was declared in October of 1932. The eclipse of homo sapiens, as the dominant species on the planet, began in that instant.

The Emu is the second largest flightless bird on the planet, eclipsed only by its African cousin, the ostrich. Emus can reach heights of six feet, weigh up to 90 pounds and can run about 40mph at top speed. Then as now, little is known of Emu behavior, individual or social. In general they are considered skittish, the females can be very aggressive to each other during mating as they compete for male affections. Emus tend to forage in groups, likely family or hatchling related. Finally Emus are omnivorous, eating bugs, soft plants and seeds, and definitely wheat.

Weapons/Order of Battle

Emus: 20,000 Emus (a fuckload). The Emu is effectively weaponless, save their ability to run fast and the fact that when threatened they will dodge left and right as they flee.

Humans: Seventh Heavy Battery of the Royal Australian Artillery led by Major G.P.W. Meredith. Two Lewis guns, 500-600 rounds per minute, muzzle velocity 2,440 feet per second, effective firing range 880 yards. 10,000 rounds of ammunition.

Initial hostilities were postponed due to heavy rain on October 31, 1932. Giving both sides the time to plan for the coming engagement. On November 2, 1932 a group of about 50 Emus were sighted near Campion. The Australians began firing their Lewis guns from fixed positions and the birds, in a move described as “inspired chaos,” fled at top speed in all directions to minimize casualties. Only a handful of Emus were killed as a result of this first encounter. A modern commenter states that the birds,” mobility, durability and blind panic rendered them virtually immune to machine gun bullets.”

Lesson: Ninety percent of all insurgent activity is evasion (Lawrence, Giáp).

On November 4 the war continued. This time a group of about 1,000 Emus wandered into an ambush set by the Australians. The Australians opened fire with their Lewis guns, which promptly jammed and once again, the Emus escaped with only a handful of fatalities. In this encounter a new Emu behavior, never previously recorded, was witnessed—the breaking of the birds into smaller groups, each with a lookout bird to raise the alarm when enemy forces approached. In the words of one of the Aussie soldiers,

“The Emus have proved that they are not so stupid as they are usually considered to be. Each mob has its leader, always an enormous black-plumed bird standing fully six-feet high, who keeps watch while his fellows busy themselves with the wheat. At the first suspicious sign, he gives the signal, and dozens of heads stretch up out of the crop. A few birds will take fright, starting a headlong stampede for the scrub, the leader always remaining until his followers have reached safety.”

Lesson: Intelligence is the heart and soul of insurgency, find the enemy, detect his strength, and destroy him when you are able—run when you are not (Lawrence).

In a new twist it was decided by the human belligerents to mount the Lewis guns onto trucks in an attempt to shoot the birds as they fled. This closed the range for the gunners but it virtually destroyed their ability to aim the weapons they fired. And when they did get lucky enough to kill an insurgent Emu, the body—all 80 pounds of it—became enmeshed in the trucks steering mechanism causing the conveyance to careen wildly off the road and destroy a full 100 meters of fence.

Lesson: The more complex the weapon system, the simpler it is to destroy or render useless (Giáp). Oh, and Emu bravery and self-sacrifice is second to none.

By November 8, 1932 the Australians had expended 2,500 rounds of ammunition to kill about 200 Emus, a rate of ten to one. The Australian Parliament exploded in indignation, one state legislator asking sarcastically if medals were to be minted for the heroes of the Emu War. Another legislator shot back the decorations should rightly go to the Emus who “have won every round so far.”

Lesson: The essential battlefield in an insurgent struggle is the court of public opinion, controlling the discourse, as the Emus did, is of tantamount importance (Giáp, Lawrence).

Major Meredith launched a new offensive on November 13, but it too fizzled due to the superior tactics of the Emus. There seemed to be no way to increase the bullet per insurgent ratio of 10 to 1. And with 20,000 insurgent Emus a full 150,000 rounds of ammunition would have been required to even make a dent in the population. Meredith was recalled and the humans surrendered on December 2, 1932. Likely the celebrations down in Emutown included much wheat eating. Unfortunately, the war really didn’t end—it just entered another phase—the Australians adjusted their tactics—providing ammunition to the farmers and offering a cash bounty on Emu beaks. In one six month period in 1934 over 57,000 bounties were claimed for Emu beaks.

To sum up, a quote from an ornithologist who was a first-hand observer of the Emu War,