

‘Hot Air, Aeroplanes and Arabs’: T E Lawrence and Air Power

By Group Captain John Alexander

Biography: John Alexander’s RAF career has some connections with T E Lawrence’s: he spent two years seconded to an Arab force; served at Tabuk in the Hejaz, in Iraq and Pakistan; was a visiting research fellow at Oxford; and speaks poor Arabic. Unlike Lawrence, Alexander accepted a commission in the RAF’s ground fighting force and a civil service appointment with the Air Historical Branch.

Abstract: The ever-expanding Lawrence literature overlooks the link between his concept of warfare and subsequent choice of the RAF for enlistment. Lawrence’s fame stemmed from the cultural difference between Romantic heroism in the desert and the industrial warfare on the Western Front. Yet pare away the myth and enigma of ‘Lawrence of Arabia’ using the official archives and one finds a proponent of air power and a strikingly modern way in warfare, using machines rather than men, and combining aeroplanes and armoured cars with Arab regulars and irregulars. The experience resulted in Lawrence’s subsequent post-war support of air power for colonial control in Iraq and probably influenced his choice of Service for enlistment.

Disclaimer: The views expressed are those of the authors concerned, not necessarily the MOD.

Introduction

On 17 May 1919, a No 58 Squadron RAF Handley Page O/400 bomber crash-landed at Centocelle airfield in Rome, killing the pilot and co-pilot. Lieutenant Colonel Thomas Edward (T E) Lawrence, a passenger en route from Paris to Cairo to collect material for his account of the Arab Revolt, survived with a broken shoulder blade and two broken ribs. By the end of 1919 Lawrence had become probably the most glamorous Briton to emerge from the First World War, matched only by the air aces, whom prime minister David Lloyd George called the 'knights of the air'.¹ More than a million people had watched Lowell Thomas's lecture and film show on the 'uncrowned King of Arabia' in London in 1919 alone, audiences were captivated by the contrast of Lawrence's Romantic heroism with the widespread experience of industrial warfare on the Western Front.² His fame caused his dismissal from the RAF in December 1922, just four months after he had enlisted as an aircraftman, when the *Daily Express* published the story 'uncrowned king as private soldier. Lawrence of Arabia. Famous war hero becomes a private', followed by other national newspapers.³ After re-joining the RAF in 1925, he was recalled from RAF Miranshah in Waziristan in 1929, when a fabricated story about his presence as a British agent alarmed Afghanistan,⁴ an incident later made into a Soviet propaganda film. There was a genuine sense of national loss when Lawrence died in 1935.⁵

One recent reviewer described the ever-expanding Lawrence literature as either hagiography or hatchet job, but in listing Lawrence's contested personae - 'Lawrence the colonial hero and faithful imperial servant; Lawrence the linguist, explorer and spy, pioneer of guerrilla warfare; Lawrence the Machiavellian betrayer of the Arabs; and Lawrence the preening, self-mythologizing sadomasochist' - he omitted Lawrence the airman.⁶ Yet Lawrence spent twelve years in the RAF and, after the difficult start described in *The Mint*, was reluctant to leave. Lawrence told his biographer Robert Graves that enlistment was 'the nearest modern equivalent to going into a monastery in the Middle Ages',⁷ and according to his brother Arnold, Lawrence chose the RAF because he 'obviously enjoyed the companionship and appreciated both the mechanics and pilots dedicated to their jobs and their skill'.⁸ In 1922 Lawrence told his friends Air Marshal Sir Hugh Trenchard, the Chief of the Air Staff, and the architect Harold Baker that he had decided in 1919 to join the RAF, telling Baker his 'ambition to serve in [the air force]

¹ Martin Francis, *The Flyer: British Culture and the Royal Air Force, 1939-1945* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2008), 168; David Lloyd George, *War Memoirs of David Lloyd George*, New ed., vol. 2 (London: Odhams Press, 1938), 1115.

² Lowell Thomas, *With Allenby in Palestine and Lawrence in Arabia* (Lowell Thomas, 1919).

³ *Daily Express*, 27 December 1922, 1.

⁴ *Empire News*, 16 December 1928, 3.

⁵ Lawrence James, 'Lawrence, Thomas Edward [Lawrence of Arabia] (1888-1935)', in *The Oxford Dictionary of National Biography*, online edition, Jan 2011 (Oxford University Press, 2004), <http://www.oxforddnb.com/view/article/34440>.

⁶ Justin Marozzi, 'T.E. Lawrence: From Young Romantic to Shame-Shattered Veteran', *The Spectator*, 16 April 2016.

⁷ T. E. Lawrence, Robert Graves, and Basil Henry Liddell Hart, *T. E. Lawrence to His Biographers Robert Graves and Liddell Hart* (London: Cassell, 1963), 183.

⁸ John E Mack, *A Prince of Our Disorder: The Life of T. E. Lawrence* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1998), 320.

dates – concretely from 1919, and nebulously from early 1917, before there was an Air Force.⁹ 1917 is when, as this article will show, Lawrence started utilising British air power in Arabia.

This article examines the evidence that Lawrence chose the RAF for enlistment because air power suited his concept of warfare, as well as being attracted to the new Service's social culture.¹⁰ Strategic studies literature still recognises Lawrence as the first to articulate, at least in English, the use of speed, mobility, depth and patience, in contrast to the early twentieth-century military doctrine of concentration and decisive battle.¹¹ Hence, Basil Liddell Hart, Britain's pre-eminent inter-war strategist and a future biographer of Lawrence, based his 1927 *Encyclopaedia Britannica* definition of guerrilla warfare on Lawrence's *Evolution of a Revolt*. Writing in Lawrence's name, Liddell Hart sent him the fifteen Guinee fee.¹² Furthermore, Lawrence's conception of warfare was recently rediscovered by twenty-first century soldier-scholars as a totem for cultural understanding and this Journal has previously considered how modern air power might counter an insurgency governed by Lawrence's concept of warfare.¹³

Lawrence's adult life spanned the period of air power's increasing importance to Britain's way in warfare, from Blériot's cross-channel flight in 1909 to the prioritisation of air rearmament in 1934. The article starts by examining Lawrence's exposure to air power before the First World War, Lawrence's increasing reliance on the utility of air power during the Arab Revolt, and considers his claim to have convinced the Secretary of State for War and Air, Winston Churchill, and Trenchard to give the RAF responsibility for military control of Mandate Iraq, thus helping secure the RAF's independence. This article concludes by considering Lawrence's advocacy of air power while serving as an aircraftman.

Before the Arab Revolt

Lawrence made little reference to flying or the utility of air power before 1914, though as his recent biographer Anthony Sattin notes, Lawrence's youth was ideal preparation for

⁹ T. E. Lawrence, *The Letters of T. E. Lawrence*, ed. by Malcolm Brown (London: Dent, 1988), TEL to Trenchard January 1922, 192; *T. E. Lawrence by His Friends*, ed. by A. W. Lawrence (London: J. Cape, 1937), 352–54.

¹⁰ Air power is defined as 'using air capabilities to influence the behaviour of actors and the course of events.' *Joint Doctrine Publication 0-30 UK Air and Space Power*, Second (Shrivenham: Ministry of Defence, 2017), 5.

¹¹ Beatrice Heuser, *The Evolution of Strategy: Thinking War from Antiquity to the Present* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2010), 400–405.

¹² T. E. Lawrence, 'Science of Guerilla Warfare', in *Encyclopaedia Britannica*, 14th edn (London, New York: Encyclopaedia Britannica Co Ltd, 1929), 950–53; T. E. Lawrence, 'Evolution of a Revolt', *Army Quarterly and Defence Journal*, 1.1 (1920), 55–69; Basil Henry Liddell Hart, *The Memoirs of Captain Liddell Hart* (London: Cassell, 1965), 1:84–85.

¹³ John A Nagl, *Learning to Eat Soup with a Knife: Counterinsurgency Lessons from Malaya and Vietnam* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2005); United States. Department of the Army, *The U.S. Army/Marine Corps Counterinsurgency Field Manual: U.S. Army Field Manual No. 3-24: Marine Corps Warfighting Publication No. 3-33.5* (Chicago ; London: University of Chicago Press, 2007); Caroline Kennedy and Sophia Dingli, 'Lawrence and the Study of War', *The Journal of the T. E. Lawrence Society*, Vol. XXIII.No. 1 (2013): 28–37; Group Captain Clive Blount, 'Modern Air Power, Counter-Insurgency and Lawrence of Arabia', *Air Power Review*, 13.2 (2010): 21–32.

his wartime role.¹⁴ Furthermore, Lawrence the warrior and scholar was shaped by his early immersion in military history and archaeology, Romanticism and Chivalry, and ancient and modern military theory.¹⁵ He tested himself in feats of endurance: cycling around France and walking over 1,000 miles through Syria in 1909 while researching Crusader military architecture. In letters home from Syria, however, Lawrence noted Blériot's cross-channel flight without commenting on its strategic impact or the use of air power in the Balkan Wars, despite his interest in warfare.¹⁶

Meanwhile Lawrence developed the traits he would continue in his military service. He acquired his passion for shooting, photography and long-distance cycling from his father.¹⁷ As his wartime colleague Lieutenant Colonel Pierce Joyce noted, 'Lawrence's own equipment was perfection [...] his pistol was of the latest pattern and his field glasses the most powerful made.'¹⁸ For his first expedition to Syria in 1909 Lawrence bought a Mauser automatic pistol, the same model used by Churchill at Omdurman, and used it against bandits.¹⁹ His father bought Lawrence and his brother Frank each a Colt automatic pistol when they joined the British Army in 1914.²⁰ As Lawrence later told Liddell Hart:

If I used a weapon well, it was because I could handle it. Rifles were easy. I put myself under instruction for Lewis, Vickers and Hotchkiss. To use aircraft, I learned to fly. To use armoured cars, I learned to drive and fight them.²¹

There is no evidence Lawrence piloted aircraft during the war though he did fly, privately, when at RAF Mountbatten after 1929.²²

Lawrence first observed the utility of air power after joining the Military Intelligence Department in Cairo in December 1914, receiving reconnaissance reports and aerial photography from the French and Royal Naval Air Service (RNAS) seaplanes reconnoitring Palestine, Syria, Gallipoli and the Red Sea. Over Sinai the seaplanes were critical in detecting Turkish attacks on the Suez Canal before 1916.²³ Lawrence helped develop map-making in

¹⁴ Sattin, *Young Lawrence*.

¹⁵ Bruce Leigh, *Lawrence: Warrior and Scholar* (Ticehurst, East Sussex: Tattered Flag Press, 2014).

¹⁶ T. E. Lawrence, W. G. Lawrence, and F. H. Lawrence, *The Home Letters of T. E. Lawrence and His Brothers* (Oxford: B. Blackwell, 1954), 100, 217.

¹⁷ Sattin, *Young Lawrence*, 24.

¹⁸ Liddell Hart Centre for Military Archives (LHCMA) Joyce/2/18 Television Script, for Transmission at Alexandra Palace. Talk on service with Lawrence in Arabia, dated 30 April 1939.

¹⁹ Lawrence, Lawrence, and Lawrence, *The Home Letters*, 107.

²⁰ *Ibid.*, p.617.

²¹ T. E. Lawrence, Graves, and Liddell Hart, *T. E. Lawrence to His Biographers*. Lawrence to Liddell Hart, 26 Jun 1933, 75.

²² Jeremy Wilson, *Lawrence of Arabia: The Authorized Biography of T. E. Lawrence* (New York: Atheneum, 1990), 855.

²³ H. A. Jones, *The War in the Air: Being the Story of the Part Played in the Great War by the Royal Air Force*, History of the Great War Based on Official Documents by Direction of the Historical Section of the Committee of Imperial Defence, 5 vols (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1935), 5:160–66, pp.202–208.

Egypt in 1915 using aerial photography, a topic ripe for further research.²⁴ Lawrence, safe in Cairo, felt guilt when his brothers Frank and Will were killed in France, the latter in a No 13 Squadron B.E.2c after less than a week as a Royal Flying Corps (RFC) observer.

Lawrence will also have observed Geoffrey Salmond's increasingly active 15th Wing RFC after it deployed to Egypt in 1915. Lawrence visited Egypt's Western Desert in early 1916 where aircraft from Nos 14 and 17 Squadrons RFC, in combination with former RNAS Roll Royce armoured cars and Yeomanry, defeated the Ottoman-backed Senussi tribes.²⁵ A flight from No 14 Squadron made a major impact in General Sir Reginald Wingate's Darfur campaign.²⁶ Wingate was the Sirdar (commander-in-chief) of the Egyptian Army, who in June 1916 was appointed British director of operations for the Sharif Hussein of Mecca's revolt against Ottoman suzerainty. After the Darfur campaign Wingate had proposed to Salmond that Britain used aircraft rather than 'expeditionary forces' for colonial control in such difficult terrain.²⁷ Finally Lawrence saw No 30 Squadron RFC's failed attempt to resupply the British 6th (Poona) Division besieged in Kut Al-Amara when he was sent to bribe the Turkish commander in April 1916.²⁸

The Arab Revolt

'Three inefficient and rather antique seaplanes took Jeddah'

Lawrence observed from Cairo the critical role of RNAS seaplanes in the outbreak of the Arab Revolt. Hussein's irregulars quickly captured Mecca, but Jeddah's Turkish garrison repulsed the opening attack on 9 June 1916 and withstood five-days of bombardment from the guns of Captain 'Ginger' Boyle RN's Red Sea Patrol. On 15 June the Turks promptly surrendered when three seaplanes from the newly-arrived seaplane carrier *HMS Ben-My-Chree* bombed and strafed their positions. Commander C R Samson, *Ben-My-Chree's* captain and lead pilot, who had the heel of a shoe shot off in the raid, later wrote 'there is no doubt that three inefficient and rather antique seaplanes took Jeddah'.²⁹ Boyle established a base at Rabegh to support the Sharifian siege of Medina.³⁰ Lawrence later called Boyle's ships the 'fairy godmothers of the Revolt'.³¹

²⁴ Wilson, *Lawrence of Arabia*, 189.

²⁵ See Jones, *The War in the Air*, 5:166–70.

²⁶ Brigadier Andrew Roe, 'Air Power in Darfur, 1916: The Hunt for Sultan Ali Dinar and the Menace of the Fur Army', *Air Power Review* 20, no. 1 (Spring 2017): 8–25.

²⁷ Sudan Archive Durham (SAD), Wingate Collection, GB-0033-SAD.2013/72, Wingate to Kelly 25th July 16.

²⁸ Warrant Officer Class 2 Paul Barnes, "'Complete Failure': The British and Dominion Aerial Re-Supply 1915-16", *Air Power Review* 20, no. 1 (Spring 2017): 26–43.

²⁹ Jones, 5:219; Charles Rumney Samson, *Fights and Flights* (London: Ernest Benn, 1930), p.314.

³⁰ John Johnson-Allen, *T. E. Lawrence and the Red Sea Patrol: The Royal Navy's Role in Creating the Legend* (Barnsley, South Yorkshire: Pen & Sword Military, 2015), 74.

³¹ Wester Wemyss and Victoria Moria Wemyss, *The Life and Letters of Lord Wester Wemyss, G.C.B., C. M. G., M.V.O., Admiral of the Fleet* (London: Eyre and Spottiswoode, 1935), 359.

'The Enormous Advantage of Aeroplanes'

Lawrence was soon involved from Cairo in the decision to deploy land-based RFC aeroplanes to Rabegh. The British and Arabs realised that Hussein's irregulars could not match the Turks in battle. Hence, Hussein wanted British military support but was concerned Christian troops near Mecca and Medina would reduce his religious authority. In July 1916 Lawrence joined the Arab Bureau, the intelligence group in Cairo co-ordinating British support to Hussein, and where Lawrence's Oxford mentor, the archaeologist David Hogarth, was acting director. One of Lawrence's first tasks was to make recommendations for British military support. Quoting Colonel Charles Wilson, Wingate's liaison officer to Hussein, Lawrence recommended the deployment of a British brigade, complete with artillery and aeroplanes, to Rabegh to block an anticipated Turkish advance from Medina aimed at re-taking Mecca. Lawrence's memorandum also noted the importance of attacking the Hejaz railway to delay or disrupt Turkish communications from Syria.³² Meanwhile, Hussein had asked for British aeroplanes after British signals intelligence indicated the Turks were deploying aircraft to Medina, 'to frighten the Turks'.³³ Hussein's son and local commander, Feisal, also asked for three hundred British soldiers and two aeroplanes for Rabegh.³⁴

Wilson highlighted Hussein's need for the morale effect of British troops and 'the enormous advantage of some aeroplanes' at a conference held by General Sir Archibald Murray, commanding the Egyptian Expeditionary Force (EEF), to decide British support for the Revolt. Murray was firmly against sending a brigade, the minimum viable force. The EEF had only four brigades and the War Office had recently directed he advance into the Sinai and take the port of Aqaba. Murray reminded the conference Britain's main effort was on the Western Front: 'this is a war which covers the whole Empire, more or less. [...] We [the General Staff] have made up our minds that we will concentrate in the West every single man we possibly can.'³⁵ The subsequent decision to deploy C Flight, No 14 Squadron RFC with five B.E.2c aircraft to the Hejaz is significant, therefore, given Murray had only sixteen serviceable RFC aircraft in Egypt and where the newly arrived German Rumpler and Fokker aircraft had control of the air.³⁶ The value of aircraft to the Revolt, however, was increasingly recognised. In September *HMS Anne's* two seaplanes flew repeated sorties over Yanbu and Rabegh 'to impress the Arabs'. Furthermore, the British recognised to reach Medina and the Hejaz railway 100 miles inland required aeroplanes operating from advanced landing grounds, rather than seaplanes.³⁷

³² TNA, FO 882/4. Arab Bureau, Miscellaneous Correspondence, Aug - Sep 16 HRG 16/1 to 16/59, 220.

³³ SAD Wingate Collection 5/39 Amir to High Commissioner 31 July 1916 Requesting Aeroplanes to Frighten Turks.

³⁴ TNA, FO 882/4/3 Arab Bureau, Vol 4, Miscellaneous Correspondence HRG/16/30 Memorandum T. E. Lawrence Arab Bureau undated July 1916.

³⁵ TNA, FO 882/4. Arab Bureau, Miscellaneous Correspondence, Aug - Sep 16 HRG 16/1 to 16/59, Conference held a C-in-C's Residence Ishmailia at 12 noon, Tuesday 12 September 1915 to discuss the Hejaz question, 320.

³⁶ Jones, *War in the Air*, 5:179; TNA, WO 33/905, Telegrams; European War: Egypt. 1916-1917, GHQ to 5th Wing 30 September 1916.

³⁷ TNA, AIR 1/1708/204/123/72 Operation Reports: *HMS Anne* 1916; TNA, AIR 1/1711/204/123/89 Administration and Personnel Establishment HMS Anne and Raven II, 1915, Note by Sqn Cdr L'Estrange Malone 10 October 1916.

The Arabian Detachment Royal Flying Corps

Lawrence witnessed at first-hand the Sharifian desire for aeroplanes during his first visit in October 1916, when he had to explain to Hussein's son Abdullah that the British aeroplanes had been recalled. C Flight had sailed for Rabegh on 14 October 1916, after Colonel A C Parker, Wilson's deputy at Rabegh, reported Boyle's willingness to provide a guard ship,³⁸ and Major Bannatyne, commanding No 14 Squadron, fresh from Darfur, had reconnoitred an airfield and found the locals friendly.³⁹ Wingate recalled the Flight before it went ashore, however, because it had a British infantry escort and he feared this would offend religious sensitivity.⁴⁰ Lawrence told Colonel Gilbert Clayton, the Director of Military Intelligence and the Arab Bureau, he thought the decision was pushing religious sensitivity too far, and then adding flippantly that the enemy aircraft would soon crash, in any case, if flown by Turks.⁴¹ But Feisal continued to press for British troops for Rabegh,⁴² and C Flight set sail again, this time under Major A J Ross DSO RE and RFC, landing at Rabegh on 16 November accompanied by two Egyptian infantry companies, and four British Rolls Royce armoured cars and tenders, under Joyce's command, with orders to 'act as escort to this flight and to guard the aeroplane base', and train and assist the Sharifian force.⁴³

Lawrence also witnessed the Bedouin's fear of aeroplanes during his first visit to Feisal's force. Lawrence reported to Clayton the Bedouin's utility as guerrillas, calling them 'an aggregation of snipers', but with a 'living terror of the unknown' particularly 'artillery and aeroplanes'.⁴⁴ Furthermore, General Sir William Robertson, the Chief of the Imperial General Staff (CIGS), circulated a note from Lawrence to Lloyd George's new War Cabinet that argued if the Arab defences at Rabegh collapsed Mecca would fall before a brigade could be deployed. Far better to send aeroplanes and guns.⁴⁵ The War Cabinet agreed to send a brigade only as a last resort, whereas aeroplanes, it seemed, were expendable.⁴⁶ Clayton, Wilson, Parker and Major Norman Bray had all made similar assessments, but it was Captain Lawrence's report that was put to the Cabinet. Meanwhile, the first RFC attack on the Hejaz railway north of Maan was on 24 November 1916 from Salmond's wing in Egypt, dropping delayed fuse 100-pound bombs into railway culverts from a height of twenty feet.⁴⁷

³⁸ TNA, FO 686/53 Defence of Rabegh, dated 30 September 1916.

³⁹ TNA, FO 686/56 Military Operations, Major Bannatyne Report dated 10 October 1916.

⁴⁰ Jones, *The War in the Air*, 5:220.

⁴¹ Lawrence, *The Letters of T. E. Lawrence*, 88. To Clayton dated 18 October 1916.

⁴² TNA, FO 371/2776, Turkey War Code 218321-End Arab Bureau to Sirdar 30 October 1916. 219304.

⁴³ TNA, WO 158/603, GHQ EEF, Operations to Assist Sharif, 1916 Oct.-Nov. November 2017.

⁴⁴ TNA, FO 882/5 Arab Bulletin Miscellaneous Correspondence Oct - Dec 16 HRG/16/48-64 Pt 1, 56-63, TEL to Arab Bureau Military Notes 3 November 1916, TNA.

⁴⁵ TNA, CAB 22/70, Report from Capt Lawrence Intelligence Staff, 17 November 1916.

⁴⁶ TNA, CAB 23/1/1, War Cabinet, Dated 9 December 1916, 7.

⁴⁷ TNA, WO 158/604, Egypt and Palestine. GHQ, Operations and Military Situation, 1916 Nov-Dec, Salmond to CGS EEF 25 November 1916; TNA, WO 33/905, Telegrams; European War: Egypt. 1916-1917, GOC-in-C to CIGS 24 November 1916.

Lawrence was soon working closely with C Flight. To get the aircraft ashore took a combined effort by sailors from the guard ship, *HMS Minerva*, Joyce's Egyptian soldiers, and the airmen. They built a jetty, a road from the jetty to the aerodrome, assembled aircraft hangers, and moved the aircraft, repair facilities and stores ashore by longboat. The first two aircraft were assembled and flown on a photographic reconnaissance sortie on 24 November and from 28 November four machines were flying local reconnaissance flights to produce hand-drawn maps of the challenging terrain.⁴⁸ As the B.E.2c's limited radius was circa 120 miles, C Flight started searching for advanced landing grounds by camel, car and aeroplane, with Lawrence's assistance, to preposition oil, petrol, wheels and propellers.⁴⁹ On 8 December C Flight started reconnaissance flights at Lawrence's request to detect Turkish troops advancing on Rabegh.

Lawrence soon complained to Clayton that RFC aerial reconnaissance was unsatisfactory, in contrast to the 'yeoman work' of the RNAS seaplanes.⁵⁰ Poor weather at Rabegh had prevented C Flight intervening when the Turks advanced on Yanbu and Rabegh in December. Instead *HMS Raven II's* two seaplanes patrolled inland and on 10 December detected three Turkish brigades advancing from Medina towards Yanbu and that the Sharifian covering force of 1,500 men had disappeared.⁵¹ A British brigade was placed on standby at Port Suez on Lawrence's recommendation and Boyle quickly assembled five ships at Yanbu whose searchlights and guns deterred the Turks, while the *Raven's* seaplanes attacked them with bombs and machine-guns.⁵² Lawrence wanted to fly as an observer on reconnaissance himself and was annoyed when Ross refused. Ross subsequently explained that to land at Yanbu would add 90 minutes to a six-and-a-half-hour sortie as it took a B.E.2c an hour to climb to 7,000 feet.⁵³

Such was the high-level interest in the aeroplanes that Robertson signalled Murray on 9 January 1917: 'Cabinet wanted to know if more use can be made of aeroplanes to bomb Turks'. A well-informed Murray replied that to bomb beyond the aircrafts' 100 miles range required advanced refuelling grounds.⁵⁴ Meanwhile C Flight's first attack was on 6 January when three aircraft led by Ross bombed the Turkish camp at El Hajah.

⁴⁸ Captain T Henderson, *The Hejaz Expedition, 1916-1917. A Narrative of the Work Done by the Arabian Detachment of No 14 Squadron R.F.C. While Attached to the Hejaz Expedition*. (Salisbury: 14 Squadron RAF, 1917).

⁴⁹ LHCMA Joyce1/J/3 Ross to Joyce. Limits of Tactical Reconnaissance; 2/Lt Wilkinson, RE and RFC; Reports on Landing Ground Preparation at Yanbu, dated 5 December 16, 1916.

⁵⁰ Lawrence, *The Letters of T. E. Lawrence*, letter to Director, Arab Bureau 11 December 1916, 94.

⁵¹ TNA, WO 158/604, Egypt and Palestine. GHQ, Operations and Military Situation, 1916 Nov.-Dec, SNO to GOC C-in-C 10 December 1916; TNA, AIR 1/1706/204/123/65 Operation Reports: HMS 'Raven II', 1916.

⁵² TNA, WO 158/604, Egypt and Palestine. GHQ, Operations and Military Situation, 1916 Nov.-Dec, Lawrence to Clayton, 12 December 1916.

⁵³ TNA, WO 158/604, Egypt and Palestine. GHQ, Operations and Military Situation, 1916 Nov.-Dec., Ross to Arbur 13 December 1916.

⁵⁴ TNA, WO 33/905, Telegrams; European War: Egypt. 1916-1917, CIGS to GOC-in-C 9 January 1917 and GOC-in-C to CIGS 10 January 1917.

'Major Ross, who spoke Arabic so adeptly and was so splendid a leader'

Lawrence was often critical of British regular officers; he 'considered them limited in imagination and insufficiently elastic to withstand the shocks of Arab strategy and tactics'.⁵⁵ Lawrence later wrote:

We kindergarten soldiers, we were beginning our war in the atmosphere of the twentieth century, receiving our weapons without prejudice. To the regular officer, with the traditions of forty generations behind him, the antique arms were the most favoured.⁵⁶

Yet most of Lawrence's colleagues were selected by Wingate or his Military Secretary, *Miralai* (Colonel) Robert Rees-Mogg, from regular officers seconded to the Egyptian Army, which, with its generous allowances, could be highly selective. Clayton, Lieutenant Colonel Stewart Newcombe, the Mission's commander and sapper (to attack the railway), Major Charles Vickery, the gunnery advisor, and Major Marshall the medical officer, Joyce and Ross were all Egyptian Army veterans.⁵⁷

Ross was Wingate's first choice as the Mission's commander and sapper but when the Adjutant General's department eventually located him he was already at Rabegh with C Flight, nominally commanding the Mission as he was senior to Joyce.⁵⁸ A Malvern classics scholar, he was second in his Woolwich entry, learnt Arabic on sick leave, and had led an expedition in Sinai in 1914.⁵⁹ Ross was awarded the Order of the Nile and Distinguished Service Order (DSO) for air operations against the Senussi in 1915 as an observer and a second DSO in 1917 for his leadership in the Hejaz.

Lawrence soon changed his mind about Ross, writing in *Seven Pillars*:

The garrison at Rabegh was reassured by the arrival of four British aeroplanes [sic] under Major Ross, who spoke Arabic so adeptly and was so splendid a leader that there could be no two minds as to the wise direction of his help.⁶⁰

⁵⁵ LHCMA Joyce//2/19 BBC TV Script. Similar to Joyce 2/18 on Hejaz Campaign 1916-18; First and other Meetings with Lawrence. Annotated by AW Lawrence and Corrected. Dated 14 July 1941.

⁵⁶ T. E. Lawrence, *Seven Pillars of Wisdom: A Triumph* (London: J. Cape, 1935), 148.

⁵⁷ LHCMA, Joyce/1/11 To Rees-Mogg. Complaints Dated 21 December 1916; TNA, WO 33/905, Telegrams; European War: Egypt. 1916-1917, Sirdar to CGS dated 11 November 16.

⁵⁸ SAD Wingate Collection 3/17 Wingate to Clayton 3 December 1916; TNA, WO 33/905, Telegrams; European War: Egypt. 1916-1917, Sirdar to CGS 11 November 16.

⁵⁹ Obituary of Maj A J Ross DSO RE and RFC, *Flight*, 16 August 1917, 844.; SAD Wingate Collection 193/3/33-43 Route Report by A.J. Ross on a 5 Day Camel Trek through Sinai 22nd October 1914.

⁶⁰ Lawrence, *Seven Pillars of Wisdom*, 115.

Furthermore, Ross gave Lawrence his Omega RFC watch before handing over C Flight to Major F W Stent, another Arabic speaker, in April 1917.⁶¹ Ross was killed in a flying accident in August 1917. When in 1922 Lawrence first enlisted in the RAF he used the name Ross, though he never explained his choice of name.

The final RNAS seaplane sorties in support of the Revolt were during the capture of the port of Wejh in January 1917. Lawrence, now Feisal's British liaison officer, had convinced him to begin a guerrilla campaign against the Hejaz railway, using Wejh as a base, and so tie down 30,000 Turks.⁶² When Feisal's force missed the rendezvous with Boyle's ships prior to the attack on Wejh, Boyle, realising the utility of aerial reconnaissance, had himself flown over the town in one of *HMS Anne's* seaplanes before deciding to attack without Feisal.⁶³ Boyle's ships landed 400 Arabs and 200 British sailors, who led by Vickery and Bray, captured the town. The only British fatality was a seaplane observer, Lieutenant N C Stewart Royal Scots and RFC, shot from the ground, while spotting for the ships' guns.⁶⁴

Lawrence, as British liaison officer to Feisal, provided liaison between the Arabs and C Flight after it moved to Wejh in March 1917. Ross aborted his first attempt to reconnoitre an advanced landing ground within range of the railway by camel when his Arab escort did not appear,⁶⁵ whereas Air Mechanic George Hynes recalls Lawrence convincing a sheikh to allow C Flight to use his land as an advanced landing ground.⁶⁶ Both the British and Arabs searched for suitable landing grounds, including both Jaafar Askari, the former Ottoman commanding the regular Arab contingent and Newcombe. The terrain and climate were unforgiving, however. Two airmen almost died when their Crossley tender ran out of radiator water reconnoitring a route to a landing ground but fortunately they were found by a lone Bedouin who gave them water and carried them on his camel, refusing to take the gold offered as a reward.

From Wejh, C Flight, reinforced to six aircraft, established a routine of reconnaissance flights of the railway normally from around 4,500 feet and first bombed it on 30 March from around 2,500 feet from a landing ground at Toweira. Sorties were normally launched in the relative

⁶¹ Recorded in *The Gazette* (London Gazette), page 2450, Supplement 29977, 9 March 1917; Recorded in *The Gazette* (London Gazette), Page 8104, Supplement 30222, 7 August 1917; David Dennis, 'Famous Watches: Lawrence of Arabia's Omega Chronograph, Letter from Omega Museum Reference #2885 in Museum Inventory', *Famous Watches*, 7 October 2005, <https://famouswatches.blogspot.com/2005/10/lawrence-of-arabias-omega-chronograph.html> [accessed 1 December 2018].

⁶² John Fisher, 'The Rabegh Crisis, 1916-17: "A Comparatively Trivial Question" or "A Self-Willed Disaster"', *Middle Eastern Studies* 38, no. 3 (1 July 2002): 88.

⁶³ Jones, *The War in the Air*, 5:222–23.

⁶⁴ TNA, AIR 1/1708/204/123/73 Operation Reports: HMS 'Anne', 1916, report for 23rd January 1917.

⁶⁵ TNA, WO 158/605 Egypt and Palestine. GHQ, Operations and Military 1916 Dec.-1917 Apr. Joyce to Arbur via Wilson 1 March 1917.

⁶⁶ James Patrick Hynes, *Lawrence of Arabia's Secret Air Force: Based on the Diary of Flight Sergeant George Hynes* (Barnsley: Pen & Sword Aviation, 2010), 21.



Figure 1: Captain T. E. Lawrence (in uniform, second from the right) and his party, Ford car and RFC Crossley tender during a mission to recover a crashed B.E.2c aircraft at Wadi Hamdh. Photograph taken near Jebel Raal, south east of Wejh, 6 May 1917. © Imperial War Museum (Q 59040).

coolness of dawn. In May, before he left to capture Aqaba, Lawrence accompanied a small party to recover Stent's aeroplane which had crashed when trying to rescue the crew of another aircraft (see Figure 1). The aeroplanes provided communications in the absence of mobile wireless, carrying officers or picking up messages by hook and line, and dropping messages. In early July C Flight bombed the railway and station at El Ula for several successive days from a landing ground at Feisal's headquarters at Gayadah, in preparation for a planned Arab assault. This assault was abandoned when Lieutenant V D Siddons flew in Lawrence from Wejh on 19 July to tell of his capture of Aqaba. This was C Flight's last sortie as on 17 July Stent had declared C Flight's aircraft, already in poor repair, unserviceable after they were hit by a sandstorm at Gayadah. In Siddons' view, C Flight justified its existence despite the logistic effort: the bombing raids were indecisive, but the aerial reconnaissance allowed demolition parties to operate in relative safety, and the aircraft raised Arab morale by keeping Turkish aeroplanes away.⁶⁷

'A holiday, with not an Arab near'

The Arab capture of the port of Aqaba on 17 June 1917 transformed the campaign. Feisal's Northern Arab Army became the right flank of the EEF's advance into Palestine and Syria under the newly arrived General Sir Edmund Allenby. In planning the Aqaba expedition,

⁶⁷ Henderson, *Hejaz Expedition*; Ronald Knight, 'The Reverend Victor Donald Siddons, MBE, DFC, MA and the "Siddons Collection"', *Journal of the T. E. Lawrence Society*, XVII.1 (2007): 7–30 (12–14).

Lawrence had access to intelligence from pre-war surveys, including his own visit in 1914, raids by Boyle's ships, and aerial photographs from *HMS Raven II's* aerial reconnaissance in August 1916.⁶⁸ After Aqaba's capture, Lawrence rode 150 miles by camel to Port Suez to get British support. Allenby's chief of staff reported: 'That wild man Lawrence of the Arab Army, has just arrived back today, and the story of his adventures is one the most extraordinary things I have ever read.'⁶⁹ Wingate recommended Lawrence for a VC, but it could not be granted as there was no British officer witness.⁷⁰ He was promoted to temporary major instead.

Allenby re-organised the EEF for modern industrial warfare and immediately recognised the value of Lawrence, Feisal's Arabs and air power. Ordered by Lloyd George to capture Jerusalem before Christmas 1917, to divert public attention from the attrition of the Western Front and secure Britain's post-war position in the Middle East, Allenby asked for modern fighters to gain control of the air and also a dedicated flight for the Arabs, just days after meeting Lawrence for the first time.⁷¹ After three Bristol Fighters arrived, Allenby took evident delight in telling Robertson they had 'bagged two enemy aircraft in the first week'.⁷²

Stent and his men were sent to Aqaba from Wejh to form X Flight RFC. On 11 September 1917, Joyce, now at Aqaba with his Egyptian infantry and armoured cars, signalled: 'send machines at once please. Aerodrome ready and Stent, Aqaba detachment here. EA [enemy aircraft] very active. Advisable to send 3 machines, include one scout [fighter] if possible.' X Flight arrived with two B.E.2e and two B.E.12 reconnaissance aircraft and a DH.2 scout, all becoming increasingly obsolete. A landing ground was soon established at Feisal's advanced base at El Guerra on the plain north of Wadi Itm and on 29 September four X Flight aircraft bombed the railway at Maan in a raid planned with Lawrence.⁷³ Such sorties were to continue until Allenby's offensive at Megiddo in September 1918, typically leaving Aqaba at first light, refuelling at El Gueirra or another landing ground, bombing the railway and reconnoitring on return.⁷⁴ Figure 2 is Siddon's sketch map of a Turkish camp to the north of Gueirra drawn during one such sortie. Aircraft from Brigadier General A E (Biffy) Borton's Palestine Brigade, RFC also raided the railway at Lawrence's instigation. At Aqaba the guard ship *HMS Humber* provided X Flight with distilled water, wireless telegraphy, a bakery and workshop, and aircrew accommodation.

⁶⁸ Johnson-Allen, *Red Sea Patrol*, 57; TNA, AIR 1/2284/209/75/8 Operations in Gulf of Akaba, Red Sea HMS 'Raven' II Jul - Aug 16.

⁶⁹ TNA, WO 106/718 Communications between General Staff, War Office and Egypt. Outline of Operations Palestine, 1918, CGS EEF to DMO dated 11 July 1917.

⁷⁰ SAD Wingate Collection SAD 165/1/157-162, Wingate to Wilson 15 July 1917.

⁷¹ TNA, WO 158/611 Appreciation of the Situation in Palestine, 1 July 1917, Allenby to CIGS, Appreciation dated 11 July 1918.

⁷² TNA, WO 33/935 Telegrams, European War: Egypt. 1917, Telegrams 8231, 8422, 8442.

⁷³ TNA, WO 158/635 Arab Forces: Arab Co-Operation in Hejaz and Syria Aircraft Operations 1917 Aug 1918 Mar.

⁷⁴ LMCHA Joyce 1/K/2 Report on Bomb Attack by Detached Flight No 14 Squadron, Akaba by Siddons. Maan, dated 2nd October 1917.

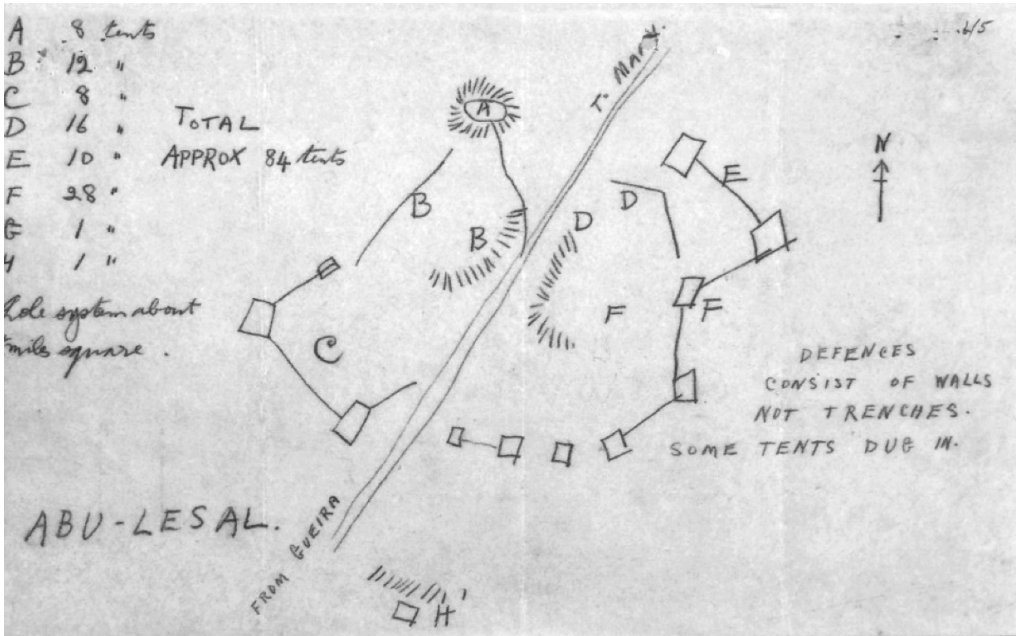


Figure 2: LHCMA Joyce 1/K/2 Report on bomb attack by Detached Flight No 14 Squadron, Akaba by Siddons. Maan, dated 15 Oct 17 © LHCMA

Increasingly the Arab regulars (former prisoners of war) and the British Military Mission's armoured cars and aircraft were at the forefront of Northern Arab Army operations. In January 1918 the Arab regular and irregular forces, advised by Lawrence, won a notable set-piece battle when the Turks attacked the Arab village of Tafileh. In the same month the British finished a road through Wadi Itm and Joyce used his airfield defence armoured cars to raid the railway at Muddawara supported by lorry mounted artillery and X Flight.⁷⁵ In April the Arabs and British planned an integrated air/land operation to capture Maan, a railway town garrisoned by several thousand Turks. The attack was at the insistence of Jaafar Askari but planned by Lieutenant Colonel Alan Dawnay, the British Hejaz Operations HQ senior staff officer, who Lawrence called 'Allenby's greatest gift' to the Arabs. Dawnay led two, five-day motorised reconnaissance patrols to check the going for the same ex-RNAS armoured cars that had captured Jaafar Askari when he led the Senussi. X Flight RAF, as it now was, supported the attack on Maan on 14 April by Arab regulars, the Egyptian Camel Corps and around 200 Arab camel men brought by Lawrence. The aircraft were directed by Popham panel ground-to-air signals. When the attack failed, despite the bravery of the Arab regulars,⁷⁶ the British raided

⁷⁵ LHCMA Joyce/2/6, Akaba to Dawnay. Report on armoured car reconnaissance of railway line to draw troops from Maan to help Arabs at Abu Lissal, dated 6 January 1918; H. St J. B. Armitage and J J Pascoe, 'The 10 Pounder Motor Section R.F.A. Hedjaz Operations', *Journal of T E Lawrence Society* X, no. 1 (Autumn 2000): 16–17.

⁷⁶ TNA, WO 95/4415 Headquarters Hejaz Operation - EEF War Diary Hejaz Armoured Car Section, 1917; Jones, *The War in the Air*, 6:193.

Tel El Shahim, Ramleh and Muddawara stations, destroying around 20 miles of railway in armoured cars, tenders and lorry mounted artillery, supported by X Flight's ground attack. Lawrence called it 'a holiday, with not an Arab near' and raiding in armoured cars 'fighting de luxe'.⁷⁷ Whereas previously Lawrence would have co-ordinated with the Arab irregulars by camel, he now used the Rolls Royce tenders 'Blast' or 'Blue Mist' or a Ford car, and aeroplanes to visit Allenby's HQ in Palestine.⁷⁸

As well as respecting the RFC/RAF flight commanders, Lawrence was comfortable in the company of air mechanics and armoured car crews. Salmond had hand-picked Stent, Ross' replacement:

They had experience of forced landing on desert surfaces and could pick out an unknown destination across unmapped hills: Stent spoke Arabic perfectly. The flight had to be air-contained, but its commander was full of resource and display.⁷⁹

Air Mechanic Hynes refers to a cohesive 'desert spirit' amongst the Flight, such as when Lawrence encouraged his colleague Captain Lord Winterton MP to make the air mechanics breakfast: 'Yes! What about you Winterton making breakfast this morning? These men have had a rough time getting here! Winterton did so though burnt the bacon.'⁸⁰ At Christmas 1917 each man got fresh potatoes and a bottle of beer, flown from Egypt by Stent's replacement, Captain Furness-Williams. Driver S C Rolls describes Lawrence's ease with the car drivers and his efforts to help fix Blast's broken rear axle.⁸¹ Hynes modified a Lewis Mk II aircraft machine gun for Lawrence to carry on his camel.⁸² When Lawrence, now a General Staff Officer Grade 2, had a forced landing in Sinai in June 1918 when being flown by Borton, the RAF Brigade commander, he was rescued by Furness-Williams and Hynes.⁸³ Graves later wrote 'it was these friendly outings with the Armoured Car and Air Force fellows that persuaded him, even then, that his best future, if he survived the war, was to enlist.'⁸⁴

'The RAF lost four killed. The Turks lost a corps'

The climax of Lawrence's involvement with air power during the War was Allenby's great victory at the Battle of Megiddo, 19-23 September 1918. The Northern Arab Army was to both

⁷⁷ T. E. Lawrence, *Seven Pillars of Wisdom: A Triumph* (London: J. Cape, 1935), 521–42.

⁷⁸ S. C. Rolls, *Steel Chariots in the Desert: The First World War Experiences of a Rolls Royce Armoured Car Driver with the Duke of Westminster in Libya and in Arabia with T. E. Lawrence*, (Place of publication not identified: Lenour, 2005), 144–45, 136.

⁷⁹ Lawrence, *Seven Pillars of Wisdom*, 341–42.

⁸⁰ Hynes, *Lawrence of Arabia's Secret Air Force*, 22.

⁸¹ Rolls, *Steel Chariots in the Desert*, 232–35.

⁸² Hynes, *Lawrence of Arabia's Secret Air Force*, 75.

⁸³ James Patrick Hynes, *Lawrence of Arabia's Secret Air Force: Based on the Diary of Flight Sergeant George Hynes* (Barnsley: Pen & Sword Aviation, 2010), 65–66.

⁸⁴ Robert Graves, *Lawrence and the Arabs*, Concise edition (London: J. Cape, 1927), p.203.

cover Allenby's right flank and provide a feint by threatening Deraa. Lawrence accompanied to Azrak a 1,000-strong task force of Arab regular, Egyptian and Gurkha camel corps, Arab and French artillery, machine guns, three British armoured cars and a Bristol Fighter and obsolete B.E.12 from X Flight, now commanded by Siddons.⁸⁵ The Arab feint on 16-17 September, covered by 144 Squadron's DH.9s bombing Deraa, worked so well that German aircraft were redeployed to Deraa, away from facing Allenby's army in Palestine, and the only sorties flown by German aircraft during the battle were against the Arabs.

When X Flight's sole Bristol Fighter was damaged and sent to Palestine for repair, nine enemy aircraft attacked the Arab force. The remaining B.E.12 from Azrak engaged them but it overturned on landing after running out of fuel and was destroyed by an enemy bomb (see Figure 3 below). The pilot, Lieutenant Junor, joined the Arab force, fitting his Lewis gun to a Ford car.⁸⁶ Lawrence in his final report to the Arab Bureau called the situation 'air helplessness', noting 'armoured car work is fighting de luxe, but they give a sitting shot to a well-handled plane.'⁸⁷ Lawrence, now a temporary Lieutenant Colonel, hitched a lift to the EEF HQ at Ramleh in an aircraft delivering messages and met Allenby to request air support for the Arabs.

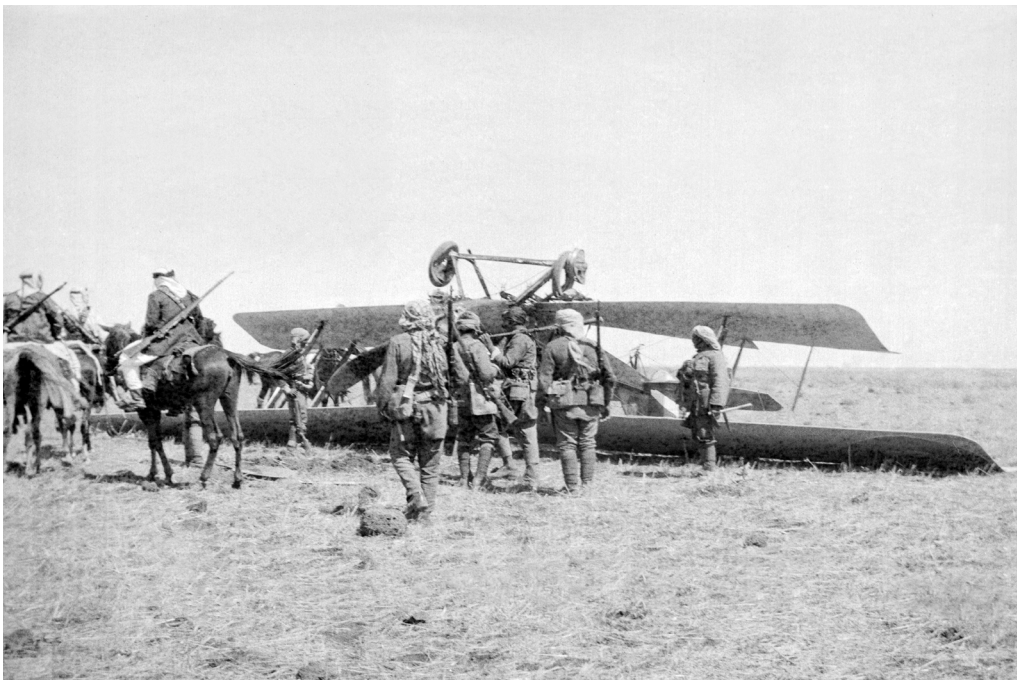


Figure 3: Lieutenant Junor's B.E.12 after making a forced landing © Imperial War Museum Q 58703

⁸⁵ Knight, 'Siddons', 19; Lawrence, *Pillars of Wisdom*, 590.; Jones, *The War in the Air*, 6:204–5.

⁸⁶ Jones, *The War in the Air*, 6:213–14; Lawrence, *Seven Pillars of Wisdom*, 596.

⁸⁷ T. E. Lawrence, "The Destruction of the Fourth Army" Arab Bulletin No. 106, 22 October 1918.

Lawrence describes what happened next in *Seven Pillars*, largely drafted before he enlisted. Allenby 'pressed a bell and in a few minutes Salmond (now commanding the RAF in the Middle East) and Borton were conferring with us':

Salmond and Borton were men of avid novelty. They worked our loads for DH.9 and Handley-Page, while Allenby sat by, listening and smiling, sure it would be done. The co-operation of the air with his [General Allenby's] unfolding scheme had been so ready and elastic, the liaison so complete and informed and quick. It was the RAF which had converted the Turkish retreat into rout, which had abolished their telephone and telegraph connections, had blocked their lorry columns, scattered their infantry units.⁸⁸

Lawrence adds a further, graphic section, on the RAF's pursuit of the Turkish Seventh Army in *Revolt of the Desert*, the abridged *Seven Pillars*, published when Lawrence was an airman in India and Salmond was his Air Officer Commanding:

But the climax of the air attack, and the holocaust of the miserable Turks, fell in the valley by which Esdraelon drained to the Jordan by Beisan. [...] For four hours our aeroplanes replaced one another in series above the doomed columns: nine tons of small bombs and grenades and fifty thousand rounds of S.A.A were rained upon them. When the smoke cleared it was seen that the organization of the enemy had melted away. They were a dispersed horde of trembling individuals, hiding for their lives in every fold of the vast hills. Nor did their commanders ever rally them again. When our cavalry entered the silent valley next day they could count ninety guns, fifty lorries, nearly a thousand carts abandoned with all their belongings. The RAF lost four killed. The Turks lost a corps.⁸⁹

As a result of Lawrence's request, Borton ordered No 1 Squadron Australian Flying Corps to send on 'a special mission to Azrak' on 22 September 1918 three Bristol Fighters and the theatre's sole Handley Page O/400, which Borton himself had flown out from England.⁹⁰ Borton and Captain Ross Smith flew the Handley Page loaded with a ton of petrol, armoured car spares, mechanics and bombs.⁹¹ Before breakfast the Bristol Fighters had downed four enemy aircraft. The official military historian called the mission 'brilliant and unceasing support of Lawrence's Arabs, who would have been well-nigh helpless without it for the bolder enterprise in which they were to engage'.⁹² The Australian aircraft continued to reconnoitre

⁸⁸ Lawrence, *Seven Pillars of Wisdom*, 615–17.

⁸⁹ T. E. Lawrence, *Revolt in the Desert* (London: Cape, 1927), 92. SAA is small arms ammunition.

⁹⁰ AIR 1/2329/226/1/16 War Diary Palestine Brigade, Op Order of 22 September 1918 to 40th Wing RAF: 4 machines will be sent on a special mission to Azrak; Peter Dye, 'Biffy Borton's Bomber', *Cross and Cockade International* 34, no. 2 (Summer 2003): 71–78.

⁹¹ Jones, *The War in the Air*, 6:229–30.

⁹² Cyril Falls, *Armageddon: 1918*, Great Battles of History. (London: Weidenfeld and Nicolson, 1964), 32.

for the Arab Army in their advance to Damascus. After the fall of Damascus Lawrence returned to Egypt via Akaba, travelling with X Flight.

Air Control

'Armoured Cars and Aeroplanes could rule the desert, but they must be under non-army control'

Perhaps Lawrence's greatest air power achievement was after the First World War in shaping the decision to give the RAF military control of Britain's new Middle Eastern Mandates, a policy known as air control, which also helped secure the RAF's future. In his early post-war writing Lawrence hardly mentioned the role of air power in the Revolt. His first three letters to *The Times* in November 1918 focused on the beginnings of the Revolt, the Arabs and the Royal Navy's critical role. His first detailed account, in the first volume of *Army Quarterly*, noted the utility of armoured cars supported by aircraft.⁹³ Yet Lawrence told Liddell Hart he had originated the policy of air control:

As for the effect of the bombing, the war showed me that a combination of armoured cars and aircraft could rule the desert: but that they must be under non-army control, and without infantry support. You rightly trace the origin of the RAF control in Irak [sic], Aden and Palestine to this experience. As soon as I was able to have my own way in the Middle East I approached Trenchard on the point, converted Winston easily, persuaded the Cabinet swiftly into approving, (against the wiles of Henry Wilson) and it has worked very well. The system is not capable of universal application.⁹⁴

Lawrence exaggerates his role as he joined the Colonial Office as Churchill's Middle Eastern advisor in December 1920, after the operations against the Mad Mullah in Somaliland in January 1920, commonly cited as the first demonstration of air control.⁹⁵ Yet the utility of air power for colonial control had long been recognised, the very first aerial bombing was by Italy in Libya 1911, Wingate proposed air control in the Sudan in 1916, and a single raid on Kabul in May 1919 had been instrumental in ending the Third Afghan War. Furthermore, when Lloyd George's War Cabinet had directed in August 1919 'that the British Empire will not be engaged in any great war during the next ten-years', in what became known as the ten-year rule, it also directed 'Army and Air Forces' to police the Empire 'making the utmost use of mechanical contrivances', a term frequently used by Churchill.⁹⁶

⁹³ From a Correspondent, 'The Arab Campaign. Land and Sea Operations', *The Times*, 26 November 1918, 5; From a Correspondent, 'The Arab Epic. Feisal's Battles in the Desert. On the Threshold of Syria', *The Times*, 27 November 1918, 7; 'The Arab Epic. Doom of Turk Power in Syria. Wrecking the Hejaz Railway', *The Times*, 28 November 1918; T. E. Lawrence, 'Evolution of a Revolt', 55–69.

⁹⁴ Lawrence, Graves and Liddell Hart, *T. E. Lawrence to His Biographers*, 112.

⁹⁵ Brigadier Andrew Roe, 'Air Power in British Somaliland, 1920: The Arrival of Gordon's Birdmen, Independent Operations and Unearthly Retributions', *Air Power Review* 21, no. 1 (Spring 2018): 74–93.

⁹⁶ TNA, CAB 23/15, WC 616A Naval, War and Air Estimates Dated 15 August 1919.

Churchill, as Secretary of State for War and Air, first proposed 'the great value of the Air Force as factor in the control of vast areas like Mesopotamia' to the Cabinet Finance Committee on 4 January 1920, and in February Biffy Borton told the Royal United Services Institute of air power's proven effectiveness in the Middle East and potential in small wars.⁹⁷ Churchill asked Trenchard if he would be prepared to take on Mesopotamia on 19 February. Lawrence must have heard of the scheme as in March he arranged to discuss it with Trenchard on 21 April, suggesting Air Vice-Marshal Sir John Salmond (Geoffrey's younger brother) should be both military commander and High Commissioner, with a political deputy.⁹⁸ The following day Lawrence told Winterton 'I think he [Trenchard] is right on all points [...] and I feel inclined to back his scheme.[...] Trenchard sounded to me clean and honest. [...] He thinks as little of the worth of bombing as we did!'⁹⁹ In his 22 August 1920 letter to *The Sunday Times* criticizing the British colonial administration for causing the great Iraq revolt of 1920, bloodily suppressed in part by air power, Lawrence referred to the cost of the Army garrison and the RAF's offer to do it for 'one fourth the price.'¹⁰⁰

'Sir Hugh is right and the rest of you are wrong'

Lawrence's key intervention came when the policy was considered at Churchill's Cairo Conference in March 1921 where the first agenda item was military control of Iraq and the second a king for Iraq. Lawrence joined Churchill, Trenchard and John Salmond on 11 March 1921 in the Ship Inn in Westminster to agree the line to take at the Conference.¹⁰¹ Lawrence is hardly mentioned in the Conference minutes and the only account is Trenchard's authorised biography; which D C Watt famously called the 'Air Force View of History'.¹⁰² At the Conference, held in the Semiramis Hotel, Trenchard, socially ostracised by the generals, dined with Lawrence and Gertrude Bell. When the Conference discussed military control, Sir Percy Cox, British High Commissioner in Bagdad, echoed the waspish CIGS Sir Henry Wilson's description of the RAF 'coming from God knows where, dropping its bombs on God knows what, and going off God knows where'. Whereas Gertrude Bell, the British Oriental Secretary in Bagdad, and who had visited Lawrence at Carchemish in 1911, supported air control as long as it was used with 'civilized restraint'. Lawrence 'who had seen something of the RAF's power and mobility in action, went further', contradicting Cox, declaring that 'air control would help Britain as much as the Arabs, a small force keeping out of sight until a cause for intervention arose', concluding 'Sir Hugh is right and the rest of you are wrong'.¹⁰³ The Conference and Cabinet decided the RAF should assume responsibility in October 1922 with eight flying squadrons, two RAF armoured cars companies, and nine battalions of infantry to replace over

⁹⁷ TNA, CAB 27/71/FC 31(2). Finance Committee Minutes, 1920.

⁹⁸ Wilson, *Lawrence of Arabia*, 632.

⁹⁹ T. E. Lawrence, *The Letters of T. E. Lawrence* (London: World Books/Reprint Society London, 1941), 100–101.

¹⁰⁰ Wilson, *Lawrence of Arabia*, 634.

¹⁰¹ Richard Aldington, *Lawrence of Arabia: A Biographical Enquiry* (London: Collins, 1955), 522.

¹⁰² D. C. Watt, 'The Air Force View of History', *Quarterly Review* 300, no. 4 (1962): 488–525.

¹⁰³ Andrew Boyle, *Trenchard* (London: Collins, 1962), 382–4.

fifty battalions, much to the General Staff's disgust.¹⁰⁴ Of note, Trenchard offered Lawrence a commission as an RAF armoured car officer in Palestine when dismissing him as an airman in 1922.¹⁰⁵

Air control was and remains controversial. One post-colonial historian recently called it 'a new form of imperial rule, invisible, barely existing on paper, designed for an increasingly anti-imperial post-war world, both at home and abroad'. The crime was 'empire' and air control 'was merely its most technologically advanced instrument'.¹⁰⁶ At the time Wilson called it a plan based on 'Hot Air, Aeroplanes and Arabs'.¹⁰⁷ Yet for the Air Ministry pacification from the air was less destructive than a punitive ground expedition and avoided costly and vulnerable lines of communication. Churchill claimed in 1929 'that the change has proved an immense success'.¹⁰⁸

Lawrence's own view was typically inconsistent depending on who he was telling and when. In 1927 he told Robert Graves he thought 'it has worked very well'.¹⁰⁹ Graves wrote:

Lawrence, who advocated the change with all his might, believed that such early responsibility would be the making of the young service; but this policy would only be practicable if it were joined with a liberal measure of Arab self-government controlled by a treaty between Irak [sic] and Great Britain.¹¹⁰

Yet Lawrence told Colonel Archibald Wavell in 1923 that 'bombing tribes is ineffective. I fancy air power may be effective against elaborate armies but against irregulars it has no more than moral value. [...] Guerrilla tactics are a complete muffing of air-force [sic]'.¹¹¹ Whereas he told Liddell Hart the Arab reaction was complex, but the policy was more merciful than military action:

I think they feel our own intense irritation and vain rage at an attack to which there can be no response. There is something odd, chilling, impersonally fateful about air bombing. It is not punishment, but a misfortune from heaven striking the community. [...] The RAF recognises this, and bombs only after 24 hours notice is given. So the damage falls only on immovables. [...] It is of course infinitely more merciful than police or military action, as hardly anyone is ever killed - and the killed are as likely to be negligible women and

¹⁰⁴ David E Omissi, *Air Power and Colonial Control: The Royal Air Force 1919-1939* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1990), 18–29.

¹⁰⁵ T. E. Lawrence, *The Letters of T.E. Lawrence* (London: J. Cape, 1938), 222–23. Letter to H W Bailey.

¹⁰⁶ Priya Satia, *Spies in Arabia: The Great War and the Cultural Foundations of Britain's Covert Empire in the Middle East* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2008), 7, 11.

¹⁰⁷ Sir C. E. Callwell (Charles Edward), *Field-Marshal Sir Henry Wilson: His Life and Diaries.*, vol. 2 (London: Cassell, 1927), 316.

¹⁰⁸ Winston Churchill, *The World Crisis, The Aftermath* (London: Thornton Butterworth, 1929), 464.

¹⁰⁹ Lawrence, Graves, and Liddell Hart, *T. E. Lawrence to His Biographers*, 112.

¹¹⁰ *Ibid.*, 111.

¹¹¹ T. E. Lawrence, *The Letters of T. E. Lawrence*, ed. Malcolm Brown (London: Dent, 1988), 238.

children. [...] Only this is too oriental a mood for us to feel very clearly. An Arab would rather offer up his wife than himself, to expiate a civil offence.¹¹²

Lawrence as an Airman

Lawrence's surviving correspondence as an airman, and briefly soldier, predominantly concerns his literary work and most concerning the RAF is focused on his attempts to re-enlist after his dismissal. Lawrence corresponded with, visited, and often captivated, many leading writers, poets, artists, publishers, and politicians, as well as his war-time colleagues. It is clear from his correspondence and the second part of *The Mint*, written after he re-joined, that he venerated the RAF and Trenchard. Yet despite Lawrence, in his aircraftman's uniform, often calling on Churchill, who was in awe of him,¹¹³ routinely corresponding with Trenchard, and Geoffrey Salmond, who visited him at Clouds Hill on Lawrence's 36th birthday, little survives of any discussions about air power that they presumably had.¹¹⁴

Lawrence made much of his dislike of serving in the Army, in contrast to the RAF. He presumably chose to enlist in Tank Corps in March 1923, after his dismissal from the RAF, because of his wartime comradeship, 'fighting de luxe', with the armoured car crews, and because he was helped by General Sir Philip Chetwode, one of Allenby's corps commanders and now Adjutant General. Lawrence did well pistol shooting and technically, claiming to get ninety-three per cent in his Rolls Royce course, the highest ever.¹¹⁵ But in one of many similar letters he told Liddell Hart:

I did not like the Army much, but the RAF is as different from the Army as the air is from the earth. In the Army the person is at a discount: the combined movement, the body of men, is the ideal.¹¹⁶

He told Trenchard the RAF had twice the vitality of the Army.¹¹⁷

'I took thought for a night and then declined'

Lawrence declined an opportunity to influence British air power when he refused Trenchard's offer in 1924 to write the official history of the British air services in the war, *The War in the Air*, and replace his Oxford mentor Hogarth, who was giving up through ill-health. Hogarth had briefly taken over when the author of the first volume, Oxford professor of English literature, Sir Walter Raleigh, had died of cholera in 1922, contracted while researching the RAF in Iraq.¹¹⁸

¹¹² Lawrence, Graves, and Liddell Hart, T. E. Lawrence to His Biographers, 41.

¹¹³ Lawrence was one of Churchill's 'Great Contemporaries'.

¹¹⁴ Harry Broughton, *Lawrence of Arabia and Dorset* (Wareham (Dorset): Pictorial Museum, 1966), 'GBS' section.

¹¹⁵ Lawrence, *The Letters of T. E. Lawrence*, p.276. Sir Hugh Trenchard dated 6 February 1925.

¹¹⁶ T. E. Lawrence and Basil Henry Liddell Hart, *T. E. Lawrence to His Biographer, Liddell Hart: Information about Himself, in the Form of Letters, Notes, Answers to Questions and Conversations*. (London: Faber and Faber, 1938), 123.

¹¹⁷ Lawrence, *The Letters of T. E. Lawrence*, 258. Sir Hugh Trenchard 1 March 1924.

¹¹⁸ Jones, *The War in the Air*, 2: Preface.

Trenchard had asked his former personal staff officer and 'English merchant', the poet Maurice Baring, but Baring was publishing his own history of the RFC in France. Lawrence told Hogarth, 'I took thought for a night and then declined', thinking it impossible to balance the technical history the Committee for Imperial Defence required and the literary history Trenchard wanted.¹¹⁹ The six volumes of *The War in the Air* were completed by Raleigh's assistant, H A Jones MC, a former No 47 Squadron observer, in 1937. Ironically, the only air power history in Lawrence's 600 book library at Clouds Hill at his death were two editions of Baring's book, and an RFC ace's photo diary.¹²⁰



Figure 4: Members of 27 Squadron RAF prepare a DH.9A at Miranshaw in 1929 © AHB

Lawrence's correspondence with Liddell Hart mainly focused on Lawrence's wartime experience, in support of Liddell Hart's own concept of the 'indirect approach'. For Liddell Hart, Lawrence was 'at once his authority and his subject'.¹²¹ Lawrence told Liddell Hart 'What the Arabs did yesterday the Air Forces could do tomorrow. And in the same way yet more swiftly.'¹²² Lawrence also advocated air power's potential to his wartime colleague, the politician Lord Winterton: 'get the [Secretary of State for] Air for yourself. Good job, as big as the holder, the only one with growth unlimited.'¹²³ When Britain started to rearm against

¹¹⁹ Boyle, *Trenchard*, 515.

¹²⁰ Maurice Baring, *R. F. C. H. Q., 1914-1918* (London: G Bell and sons, 1920); Maurice Baring, *Flying Corps Headquarters, 1914-1918* (London: W Heinemann Ltd, 1930); Leigh, *Lawrence*, 137-54; Wesley David Archer, *Death in the Air; the War Diary and Photographs of a Flying Corps Pilot* (London: W Heinemann Ltd, 1933).

¹²¹ Alex Danchev, *Alchemist of War: The Life of Basil Liddell Hart* (London: Weidenfeld & Nicolson, 1998), 178.

¹²² Basil Liddell Hart, *T. E. Lawrence in Arabia and After* (London: Cape, 1934), 438.

¹²³ T. E. Lawrence, *The Letters of T. E. Lawrence*, ed. by Malcolm Brown (London: Dent, 1988), TEL to Winterton 5 November 1923 Bovington, p.248.

the German air threat Lawrence properly recognised Britain needed a means of detecting enemy bombers and remote controlled aircraft, whereas his desire for more floatplanes seems anachronistic.¹²⁴ Yet Lawrence's published correspondence from RAF Miranshah makes no mention of air operations despite it being a forward operating base for RAF squadrons just ten-miles from the Afghan border and protected by 600 Tochi Scouts.

Lawrence's achievements in the RAF should not be forgotten either, though outside the scope of this article. He advocated to Trenchard and then John Salmond relaxing dress regulations for airmen, getting rid of puttees and walking out canes. He gave the substantial profits from *Revolt in the Desert* to the RAF Benevolent Fund to educate the sons of officers killed on duty. Most notably he helped transform the RAF's rescue launches after witnessing six flying boat aircrew drown in accident at RAF Mountbatten in 1929, when the Admiralty pattern barges in use were too slow to rescue them. Lawrence, as an aircraftman, was instrumental in ensuring by 1935 RAF rescue launches had speedboat hulls.

Conclusions

The article demonstrates the British and Arabs, with Lawrence in a central role, were quick to identify the utility of air power in supporting Sharif Hussein's Arab Revolt. British aircraft provided critical intelligence, surveillance and reconnaissance over a vast unpopulated and unmapped area, in challenging climate and terrain. They provided control of the air and reassuring presence to an Arab force 'frightened of the unknown' and, when in 1916 and 1917, the German Air Service supporting the Turks had superior aircraft. British aircraft attacked the Hejaz railway and supported ground attacks on it, increasingly so as the Northern Arab Army became Allenby's right flank. Lawrence increasingly used aircraft to move between headquarters and the front line, and for delivering messages, or scribbles as Lawrence called them. Another finding is the British archival sources verify Lawrence's own, often questioned, accounts in *Seven Pillars*, its abridgement and his letters.

Significantly, the article shows the British, from the Cabinet, through long-serving generals like Wingate and Murray, to the regular naval and army officers in the Hejaz, and Lawrence himself, immediately recognised the utility of air power as a means of supporting Hussein and limiting Christian 'boots on the ground'. Hence, the British deployed a significant proportion of the few aircraft available in the theatre in 1916 under hand-picked flight commanders. Furthermore, notwithstanding Lawrence's Romantic conception of war and his heroic fame, he and the British Military Mission were quick to use the same technology that had transformed warfare on the Western Front and under Allenby in Palestine, creating the three-dimensional modern system of battle recognisable today.¹²⁵ As a close reading of *Seven Pillars* shows, in the empty spaces of Arabia air power suited Lawrence's concept

¹²⁴ T. E. Lawrence, *The Letters of T. E. Lawrence*, p.482. To Lionel Curtis, 19 March 1934.

¹²⁵ J. B. A Bailey, *The First World War and the Birth of the Modern Style of Warfare*, Occasional Paper (Strategic and Combat Studies Institute); 22.

of warfare, using machines rather than men, and firepower, speed, mobility and depth, in a strikingly modern looking proxy war.

For the same reasons Lawrence supported the use of air power for colonial control in the Middle East, arguably his most important contribution to the RAF. It seems highly likely this belief in the utility of air power, coupled with the opportunity for comradeship and interesting technical work, influenced Lawrence's choice of the RAF for enlistment. Presumably he joined the Tank Corps when dismissed from the RAF for similar reasons, though he subsequently made of much the differences between the two services. Airman and proponent of air power should therefore be included in any list of Lawrence's personae. As King George V told his brother Arnold on Lawrence's death: his name 'will live in English letters; *it will live in the traditions of the Royal Air Force*; it will live in the annals of war and in the legends of Arabia.'¹²⁶

The author wishes to thank the Liddell Hart Centre for Military Archives and the Sudan Archive Durham for their kind permission to quote from material in their possession or copyright.

¹²⁶ Winston Churchill 1874-1965., *Great Contemporaries*, Rev. (London: Thornton Butterworth Ltd., 1937), 167.

This article has been republished online with Open Access.

Ministry of Defence © Crown Copyright 2023. The full printed text of this article is licensed under the Open Government Licence v3.0. To view this licence, visit <https://www.nationalarchives.gov.uk/doc/open-government-licence/>. Where we have identified any third-party copyright information or otherwise reserved rights, you will need to obtain permission from the copyright holders concerned. For all other imagery and graphics in this article, or for any other enquires regarding this publication, please contact: Director of Defence Studies (RAF), Cormorant Building (Room 119), Shrivenham, Swindon, Wiltshire SN6 8LA.

 **ROYAL
AIR FORCE**
**Centre for Air and
Space Power Studies**

OGL