

Book Reviews

Lawrence of Arabia's Secret Air Force: Based on the Diary of Flight Sergeant George Hynes

By James Patrick Hynes

Reviewed by Group Captain John Alexander

Introduction

Pare away the myth and enigma of T.E. Lawrence and one finds a proponent of air power. Air power, orchestrated by Lawrence, provided critical support to the Arab Revolt, 1916-1918, as his Seven Pillars of Wisdom notes in several passages, including this:

*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.*¹

Lawrence of Arabia's Secret Air Force increases our understanding of the role of air power in the Arab Revolt by recounting the memoirs of a technician, George Hynes, who served in the flight of 14 Squadron attached to the Arab Army.

Hynes, a 19-year old maritime engineer, joined the RFC in 1914, and 14 Squadron when it formed in February 1915, sailing with it to Egypt in November. He deployed with Major Ross's C Flight to the Hejaz, some 700 miles east of the Squadron's base in Egypt, in November 1916 to support the nascent Revolt. Whereas Sharif Hussein did not want Christian troops close to Mecca he felt able to allow the Flight's six aircraft, air and ground crews, and Egyptian infantry force protection. X Flight was subsequently formed from C Flight after the capture of Aqaba in July 1917, under Captain Stent's command.²

Hynes was responsible for keeping the flights' mix of aircraft airworthy on isolated landing grounds in extreme weather conditions. The Germans and Turks had numerous and often better aircraft but according to Hynes they could not match the British serviceability rate. Though the Flight lost only one machine and that to enemy action, Hynes often had to recover aircraft. On one occasion he drove into the Sinai desert to find and repair a downed aircraft carrying Lawrence. The Arab Army's advance into Syria and the short range of the aircraft meant continual moves of landing ground, culminating in supporting Allenby's great victory at Megiddo in September 1918, prior to the occupation of Damascus and the Turkish surrender in October. X Flight was soon disbanded but not before Lawrence gave the men a guided tour of Aqaba's antiquities.

The book is a fascinating and very readable account, although the editing, by Hynes's nephew, is a curate's egg. The preface and introduction provide good context of both Hynes's service and the Arab Revolt, but elsewhere the editor's additions from other references (such as the Flight's War Diaries) sometimes confuse. For example, when describing events of late 1916, the editor inserts a *Seven Pillars* passage, albeit another excellent example of air land integration, from August 1917:

We could also prick the Turks into discomfort by asking General Salmond for his promised long distance air-raid on Maan. As it was difficult Salmond had chosen Stent, with other tried pilots of Rabegh or Wejh [X Flight], and told them to do their best. 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.³

Thus, Hynes's descriptions resonate with current operations. The flight commanders, Ross and Stent, were both Arabic-speaking and independently-minded, presumably specially selected, reflecting the mission's importance. Furthermore the flights' cohesive 'desert spirit', enhanced by Lawrence's leadership and witnessed by him, is frequently referred to; such as when Lord Winterton (later a cabinet minister) cooks Lawrence and some riggers a rare breakfast of bacon. And despite the harsh conditions – poor rations, accommodation and no air-conditioning - at Christmas 1917 each man got fresh potatoes and a bottle of beer flown in from Egypt by the flight commander.

As Group Captain Blount's recent article in this journal highlighted, T. E. Lawrence, though now a fashionable totem for population-centric counter-insurgency, also has much for the modern airman.⁴ Like any memoirs written long after the event these should be read with caution – Hynes wrote his in the 1960s in response to Richard Aldington's 1955 biography which portrayed Lawrence as a boastful charlatan.⁵ Nevertheless *Lawrence's Secret Air Force* is further evidence of Lawrence's advocacy of air power and its employment in the Revolt, so evident in *Seven Pillars* but less so some recent work.⁶ Furthermore Hynes's account describes Lawrence's seminal experience of the RAF. Was it this experience which caused him to decide

in 1918 that he would enlist in the RAF, after 'settling the Arab affair',⁷ and to use the name Ross when he did so?

Notes

¹ T. E Lawrence, *Seven Pillars of Wisdom: A Triumph* (London: Cape, 1973), 636.

² For a history of C Flight see Peter Wright and Roger Bragger, 'Lawrence's Air Force', *Cross and Cockade International*. 34 (2003), 104-118 and Vincent Orange *Winged Promises: A History of No. 14 Squadron, RAF, 1915-1945* (Fairford: RAF Benevolent Fund, 1996) for the squadron history.

³ *Seven Pillars*, p. 349.

⁴ Clive, Group Captain Blount, 'Modern Air Power, Counter-Insurgency and Lawrence of Arabia', *Air Power Review*, 13 (2010), 21-32.

⁵ Richard Aldington, *Lawrence of Arabia: A Biographical Enquiry*. (London: Collins, 1955).

⁶ For example air support is rarely mentioned in James Barr, *Setting the Desert on Fire: T.E. Lawrence and Britain's Secret War in Arabia, 1916-18* (London: Bloomsbury, 2006).

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), p.73.

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