

Book Reviews

Seven Pillars of Wisdom

By T E Lawrence

Reviewed by Wing Commander Greg Hammond

Introduction

TE Lawrence's classic book of the Great War, 'Seven Pillars of Wisdom', is not primarily a book about air power. However, in passing it throws some interesting illumination on the development of air power and its growing utility. After describing many tortuous journeys across the desert by camel, journeys which often took weeks rather than days to accomplish – and which were so graphically illustrated in David Lean's 1962 film 'Lawrence of Arabia' – in July 1917, after the capture of Akaba, Lawrence is taken by air to a meeting with King Hussein, the titular head of the Arab Revolt. In Lawrence's words, "we crossed comfortably at sixty miles an hour the hills learned toilsomely on camel-back." Thereafter, air mobility becomes an accepted part of the war, with Lawrence frequently referring to flights to and from important meetings with his superiors. In addition to air mobility, there are also descriptions of the effects of attack from the air, both by the Ottoman Turks against the Arabs and by the RAF and its forebears against the Turks, while at one point Lawrence witnesses an aerial battle.

Air power, however, is incidental to 'Seven Pillars of Wisdom'. For the military the book's importance is in its exposition of the techniques of irregular warfare. All of its chapters are short and Chapter XXXIII stands alone as a conceptualisation of Lawrence's alternative to the attritional warfare of the Western Front. Rather than attacking Turkish trenches with banners flying, Lawrence considers how the Arab Revolt might be "an influence, an idea, a thing intangible, invulnerable, without front or back, drifting about like a gas? Armies were like plants, immobile, firm-rooted, nourished through long stems to the head... a regular soldier

might be helpless without a target, owning only what he sat on, and subjugating only what, by order, he could poke his rifle at." Lawrence calculated that his nearly 50 000 adherents could pin down a regular Ottoman force of more than ten times that number by attacking their infrastructure, notably the railways.

What influenced Lawrence in developing these views? At no point in the book does he make clear his exact status with the Arabs, or indeed the British. Despite winning a DSO for "splendid leadership and skill"¹ in a specific action which resulted in the capture of 300 prisoners, two field guns and 23 machine guns, and his attaining the addressable rank of Lieutenant Colonel in 1918, Lawrence was not a professional soldier. In a book published in 1969 using newly-released public records evidence, Philip Knightley and Colin Simpson² postulate that Lawrence was the British political officer to the Arab Revolt, rather than military liaison officer, and, despite wearing Army uniform, was working in a predecessor organisation to the Secret Intelligence Service. How else can one explain Lawrence's being created a Companion of the Bath in 1917, a somewhat unusual honour for a Temporary Major, even under the different rules applied to the award of State Honours nearly a century ago? Other theories about Lawrence abound, but it seems that his military knowledge was self-taught, largely at Oxford where he says that he read Napoleon's despatches, Clausewitz, Moltke, Jomini and others, while spending his holidays travelling around France to examine battlefields and medieval fortifications. In Lawrence's case a First Class Honours degree in History was his command and staff training.

Reading between the lines of 'Seven Pillars of Wisdom' and applying other evidence, Knightley and Simpson further postulate that Lawrence started as a member of a clique whose objective was to capture the whole Arab world for the British Empire. Many of his actions can therefore be explained not by the Arab nationalist position overtly expounded by Lawrence in the book but by a need to undermine the 1916 Sykes-Picot Agreement; this was a secret arrangement between the United Kingdom and France in which the Ottoman Empire would be divided between the two countries, with Syria – the scene of much of the action in 'Seven Pillars' – allocated to France. Whether this theory is convincing or not, Lawrence's references to French colleagues in 'Seven Pillars of Wisdom' are almost invariably barbed – far more so than most references to the 'official' (Turkish) enemy. However, in counterpoint, as well as his British Honours Lawrence was also awarded two French decorations in the course of the Arab Revolt³ and it was the Sykes-Picot arrangement which largely emerged – with ultimately unhappy results – from the Treaty of Versailles in 1919.

Many other controversies surround 'Seven Pillars of Wisdom', not only in other aspects of its content but also in the location of much of the original manuscript which Lawrence apparently lost at Reading railway station in late 1919; he had to re-write the missing chapters from scratch having, in the interim, destroyed his field notes. What a find the original would be!

The final, unabridged version of the book, which was only published for sale to the general

public after Lawrence's death in a motorcycle accident in 1935, is well worth reading on several levels. It is a cracking adventure story, written in an engaging style; its descriptions of desert living and travel, and Arab food and customs, are fascinating; it covers important developments in military thinking, in particular in irregular warfare, but also – in passing – it illustrates the emergence of air power; and it covers a remarkable period of history, although the political narrative expressed in the book should be treated with extreme caution. However, for all the extensive historiography⁴ surrounding Lawrence's life and career, what better place to start than with his original work?

Notes

¹ Supplement to the London Gazette, 13 May 1918.

² Philip Knightley and Colin Simpson, *The Secret Lives of Lawrence of Arabia* (London: Thomas Nelson and Sons Limited, 1969).

³ Chevalier of the Legion of Honour (1916) and Croix de Guerre (1918).

⁴ Including well over a dozen full biographies.

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