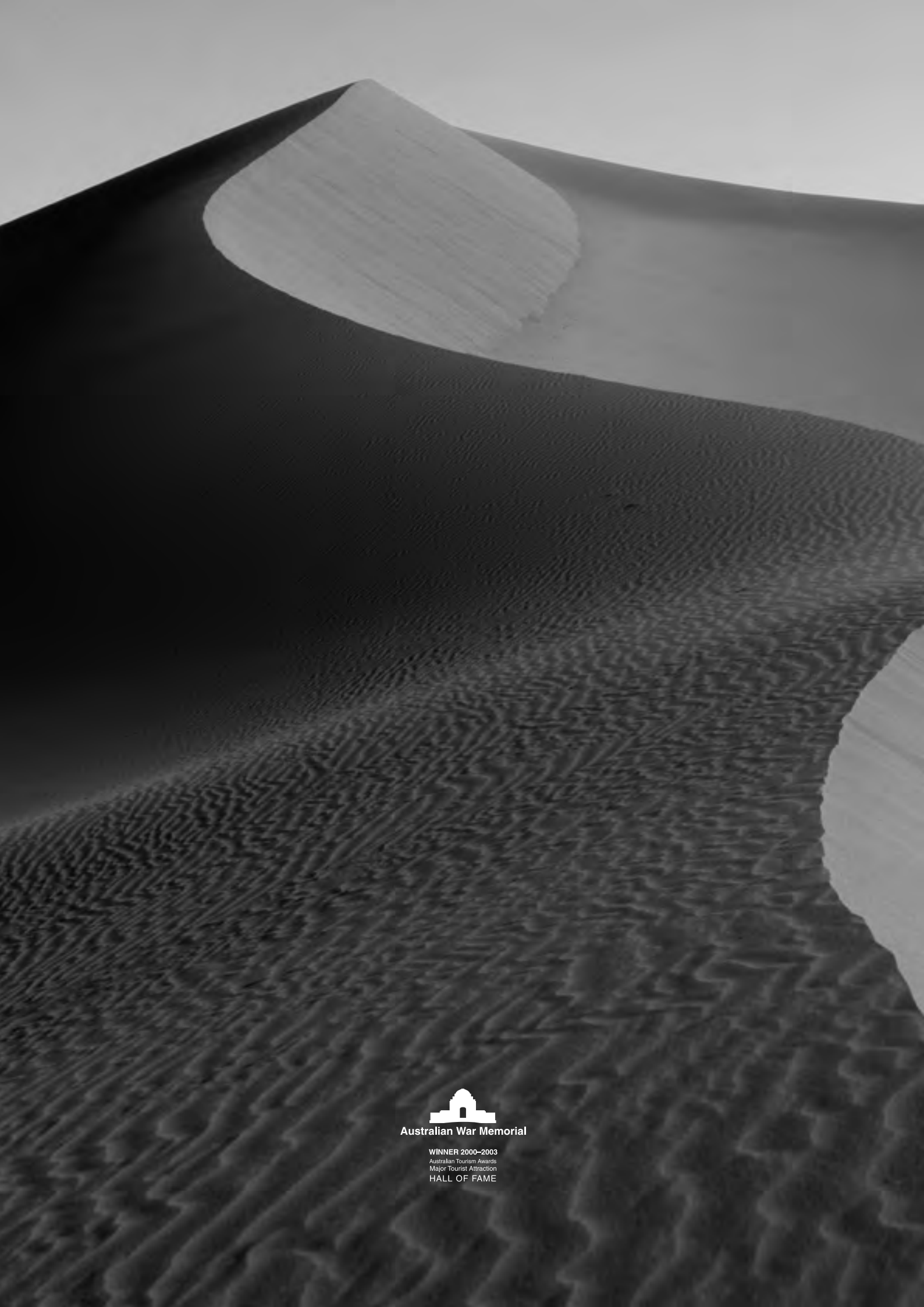


Lawrence of Arabia

AND THE LIGHT HORSE





Australian War Memorial

WINNER 2000–2003
Australian Tourism Awards
Major Tourist Attraction
HALL OF FAME

Lawrence of Arabia
AND THE LIGHT HORSE



George Lambert

Jerusalem from the top of the Dung Gate

(1919, oil with pencil on wood panel,
19.6 x 45.9 cm, ART02855)



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Stuart Reid

***Handley Page reaches rendezvous with
Lawrence of Arabia***

(1918, oil on canvas, 50 x 61 cm, AWM ART14279)

On 23 September 1918 Captain Ross Smith flew No. 1 Squadron's Handley Page O/400 to meet Lawrence at Um es Surab.

DIRECTOR'S FOREWORD

1

The exhibition *Lawrence of Arabia and the Light Horse* is a show that the Memorial is very proud to present. It is based on solid scholarship here and international cooperation. The Imperial War Museum, London, which staged an exhibition on Lawrence of Arabia two years ago, has been of great assistance. Additionally, we are indebted to the generosity of a number of overseas lenders. Developing this exhibition has also provided an opportunity for the Memorial to present some of its important historical treasures, most of them for the first time.

Events in the First World War, a conflict in which Australians played an important part, shaped the modern-day Middle East. Some of the personalities of that time remain well known, while others have faded from memory. Lawrence of Arabia is a name that still holds universal fascination. T.E. Lawrence, the Arab army, and the leaders and men of the Australian Light Horse, all played their part in the liberation of Palestine and Syria from Turkish rule; they came together in dramatic fashion for the final capture of Damascus in 1918.

The Australian Light Horse has a unique place in our history. A mounted force from a young nation, it fought across the world's ancient battlefields, entering Jerusalem and taking part in the capture of Damascus. The earlier charge at Beersheba in 1917 is regarded as one of the last great mounted charges in history. General Sir Harry Chauvel was probably the greatest light horseman of all; he rose to command the famous Desert Mounted Corps.

Important artists and photographers, such as George Lambert, James McBey, Augustus John, and Frank Hurley, together with historians and writers from Ion Idriess and Banjo Paterson to Lowell Thomas and Lawrence himself, have left us a record of this theatre of war and of those who were involved. Lawrence's book, *Seven pillars of wisdom*, is still one of the most read books in the language, and has never

been out of print. In recent years there has been a strong renewal of interest in its contents. Many soldiers too left their own accounts in snapshots, letters, and diaries.

The exhibition presents a range of precious objects, and it also refers to the other ways this campaign in the Middle East has been recalled. In 1940 the film *Forty Thousand Horsemen* was released; it became an Australian classic. In 1962 *Lawrence of Arabia* appeared. It went on to win seven Oscars, including Best Picture. There have also been more recent films and books.

The Memorial is proud to present this tribute to the Australian Light Horse and to explain its place alongside the story of Lawrence of Arabia and in the context of the Middle East campaigns of the First World War. I am indebted to the exhibition's curator, Mal Booth, and to its historian, Nigel Steel. Lawrence's biographer, Jeremy Wilson, also provided support and advice during the development of the exhibition. Finally, my warm thanks and appreciation are extended to our overseas lenders: the Imperial War Museum; the Royal Collection Trust; the National Archives; All Souls College, Oxford; the Fashion Museum; the Tate; Liddell Hart Centre for Military Archives, King's College London; the Royal Society for Asian Affairs; and the National Film and Sound Archives.

Steve Gower AO

Director, Australian War Memorial



“THE GREAT RIDE”: ROMANI TO DAMASCUS

The Turkish Ottoman Empire had once dominated the lands surrounding the Eastern Mediterranean. But by 1914 its power and prestige had been in steady decline for many years. Yet, despite this, the Empire still covered a huge area, reaching from the Sinai desert in the west to the borders of Russia and Persia in the east. It included among its citizens people from a multitude of ethnic backgrounds.

Since 1908 political power within the Ottoman Empire had been in the hands of the revolutionary Young Turks, whose leading figures were Enver Pasha and Talaat Bey. Both favoured closer links with Germany, and on 2 August 1914 they signed a secret treaty with the Germans. A series of inept diplomatic decisions by Great Britain strengthened the hand of Enver and Talaat, with the consequence that, at the end of October 1914, Turkey finally entered the war on the German side.¹

This event had enormous consequences for the Middle East, many of which can still be felt today. British concerns focused on two issues: the security of the Suez Canal in Egypt and of the Anglo-Persian oil pipeline in Persia (modern Iran).

To protect Britain's oil supply, in November 1914 an Indian army division landed in Mesopotamia (modern Iraq) and captured Basra. It advanced along the river Tigris almost to Baghdad before being driven back. In December 1915 it was besieged by the Ottomans in Kut el Amara, where it surrendered in April 1916; 8,000 British and Indian troops were taken prisoner.

In December 1914 the Australian Imperial Force (AIF) arrived in Egypt. Ostensibly the Australians had been diverted there to complete their training prior to being sent to France and Belgium to join the British Expeditionary Force. However, British concerns about the security of the Suez Canal could



George Lambert

***The charge of the Australian Light Horse
at Beersheba***

(1920, oil on canvas, 122.7 x 247.1 cm, AWM ART02811)

A depiction of the famous action of the 4th and 12th Light Horse Regiments on 31 October 1917.

also be allayed by the addition of thousands of fresh, keen soldiers to the garrison strength in Egypt.² Their presence there was soon justified. On 3 February 1915, after crossing the Sinai desert, an Ottoman force of 20,000 men attacked the Suez Canal. But it was confidently thrown back after losing more than 1,500.

A fortnight later, hoping to capture Constantinople (Istanbul) and in so doing to defeat the Ottomans, British ships assaulted the Dardanelles. When the naval assault appeared to have stalled, troops were landed on the Gallipoli peninsula in April 1915 in an attempt to reinvigorate the campaign. But it was to no avail. A further major land assault, undertaken in August, also failed. The failure of both offensives forced an evacuation four months later. In the Dardanelles and Mesopotamia, by the end of 1915 the ailing Ottoman army had shown that it was still more than a match for the British Empire.

The broad expanse of the Ottoman Empire contained many anomalies. One of these was the Islamic holy city of Mecca. Although an integral part of the Empire, the city was traditionally controlled by the Grand Sherif of Mecca. In 1914 this hereditary role was held by Sherif Hussein ibn Ali. The officers serving at the new British Military Intelligence Department in Cairo, which from December 1914 included 2nd Lieutenant T.E. Lawrence, were all greatly interested in the fortunes of the Middle East. They had a particular interest in Arabia and hoped the war would bring the Arabs some degree of independence. They had identified Sherif Hussein as the likeliest figure to be able to unite the Bedouin tribes and lead a revolt against the Turks. Towards the end of 1915, the key players in Egypt reached an understanding with Hussein, and six months later Hussein claimed independence for the Hejaz region of Arabia, in which Mecca was located.³

H. Septimus Power

Damascus incident

(1923, oil on canvas, 158 x 237.5 cm, AWM ART03647)

The 10th Light Horse Regiment entered Damascus on 1 October 1918. They were riding to cut off the Turks' retreat along the Homs Road.



The first phase of the Arab Revolt was fought by Hussein's four sons: Ali, Abdullah, Feisal, and Zeid, each commanding a small force under the Sherif's overall leadership. Initial operations went well, with Mecca and Jidda secured. But the Arabs failed to capture Medina and the British authorities became concerned about momentum stalling. Following a visit in October 1916, Lawrence identified Hussein's third son, Feisal, as the most charismatic and promising leader and it was to him that the British authorities now turned.

In January 1917 Feisal's men, working with a British naval force, captured the important Red Sea port of Wejh. Heavily influenced by Lawrence, now serving as his British liaison officer, Feisal took his next step – the capture of Akaba, another Red Sea base from which he could push north towards Palestine and northeast towards the Hejaz railway.

After an extremely challenging journey through the desert, the Arab force swept down on Akaba and seized it, almost without casualty, on 6 July 1917. Lawrence immediately crossed the Sinai desert to Cairo and gave the news direct to the newly arrived General Sir Edmund Allenby. The two men forged an enduring relationship of trust. Both realised the value of using Arab forces to support Allenby's conventional military campaign in Palestine.

When the AIF had arrived in Egypt, it included three brigades of Australian Light Horse. In May 1915, leaving their horses behind in Egypt, the light horsemen had joined the Australian infantry in the trenches at Gallipoli. After its return to Egypt in 1916, the AIF was reorganised and the infantry sent to France. The light horse brigades, however, remained behind. With the New Zealand Mounted



Rifles Brigade, they were formed into the ANZAC Mounted Division, under the command of Major General Harry Chauvel, who was to emerge from the war as one of Australia's most effective and widely respected generals. His distinguished command of the Australian Light Horse played a pivotal role in the success of the subsequent Middle East campaign.⁴

Following the Turkish attack on the Suez Canal in February 1915, a new Egyptian defensive line had been established to the east in the Sinai desert. In January 1916 a new commander-in-chief took over in Egypt, General Sir Archibald Murray. In April he moved the forward defence of Egypt to positions around Romani and began construction of a railway and a water pipeline. Murray's ultimate goal was to push right across the Sinai beyond El Arish to Palestine.

On 23 April 1916 the Turks attacked the positions around Romani. The British defenders were driven off, but the ANZAC Mounted Division under Chauvel recaptured Romani. Over the following weeks the ANZAC horsemen regularly patrolled the desert, destroying sources of water and searching for signs of Turkish activity. On 18 July the New Zealanders reported around 8,000 Turks moving west from El Arish.

Just after midnight on 4 August, the Turks advanced against Romani's southern flank, which was thinly held by light horsemen. Outnumbered, the Australians fell back throughout the night and morning. But in the afternoon, bolstered by New Zealand and British reinforcements, the battle turned. The Turks began to retire, and early on 5 August Chauvel began to pursue them as they withdrew.

By 13 August the Turks had relinquished control of central Sinai and started to pull back towards El Arish.⁵

After Romani, Murray began a steady advance east across the Sinai desert. Most of the Turkish forces had already been withdrawn to El Arish, but outposts were maintained across the desert. Murray used his most effective and desert-worthy troops, Chauvel's ANZAC Mounted Division, to patrol aggressively across the Sinai and launch heavy raids against these outposts.

By mid-December the ANZACs were at El Arish. They were expecting a stiff fight, but when they reached the town on 21 December they discovered the Turks had already withdrawn towards Rafa and Magdhaba. As the British infantry prepared to occupy El Arish, Chauvel was ordered to move rapidly to capture Magdhaba.

Using both the ANZAC Mounted Division and the Imperial Camel Corps, Chauvel arrived at dawn on 23 December. The Turkish defences were strong and the light horsemen struggled to overcome them. Concerned that the position would not be taken before nightfall, which would mean the horses would have no water to drink, in the early afternoon Chauvel ordered his men to disengage and withdraw. But as he did so the Turkish defences began to crumble. By 4.30 pm the position had been taken.

On 9 January 1917, after a similar sequence of events, Rafa too was taken. Through a combination of persistent effort and audacity, Murray's troops had driven their way out of Egypt into the Holy Land.

Murray's first objective in Palestine was the town of Gaza, around 30 kilometres north-east of Rafa, which he attacked on 26 March 1917. Mounted divisions moved round the town to attack from the north and the east, while infantry pushed up from the

south. Progress was slow. At 6 pm, concerned about water for the horses, a withdrawal was ordered – just at the point of victory. A month later, on 19 April, a second attack met with even less success. A predominantly infantry assault was easily rebuffed by the Turks.

After a lull of several weeks, Murray, who had performed well throughout 1916, was replaced in command by Allenby. Energetic and charismatic, Allenby reinvigorated his force.⁶ He approved a proposal to outflank Gaza by launching an attack further east against Beersheba.

After receiving new troops and successfully deceiving the Turks, Allenby attacked Beersheba on 31 October. Along the south-western flank the infantry encountered strong resistance. By mid-afternoon they were still some way from the town. Dynamic action was needed from the mounted troops under the command of Lieutenant General Chauvel, who had recently been promoted to command the Desert Mounted Corps. He ordered the 4th Light Horse Brigade to make a mounted attack straight at the town. Armed only with their bayonets, around 800 light horsemen moved forward in line. Over the final two kilometres they charged at full speed, smashing into and through the Turkish trenches. Beersheba and its vital wells were captured, and the Turks were sent into retreat.

The very next day the light horse started to push vigorously ahead. At the same time, the British infantry on the coast attacked Gaza. Bypassing the main positions, they successfully advanced, and by 7 November the Turks had withdrawn completely.

As the Turkish troops fell back, they continued to fight well. Both on the coast and to the north of Beersheba, the ANZAC and British troops were held up by determined resistance and counter-attacks. Light horsemen and British yeomanry were involved



The heavily embroidered standard of the Turkish 46th regiment, captured by the Australian Light Horse near Damascus on 2 October 1918.

AWM RELAWM04772

in a number of cavalry charges. Allenby hoped to swing the Desert Mounted Corps north-east to catch the retreating Turks. But, unable to find water easily, they made slow progress, making contact with only the Turkish rearguard.

Despite these difficulties, by mid-November the Turkish forces had been divided. Part fell back to a position north of Jaffa; over 17 days Allenby's troops on the coastal plain advanced almost 100 kilometres. The remaining Turks retired towards Jerusalem. At the beginning of December Allenby moved his right flank against the Holy City. To avoid a frontal attack, he aimed to circle round it, but on 9 December the Turks finally pulled out. Three days later Allenby entered Jerusalem. Since 31 October, in a dogged and dynamic advance, his men had achieved one of the few allied successes of 1917.

After their continuous engagements in 1917, the light horse were taken out of the line over the winter and rested on the Palestine coast. By the beginning of 1918 they had returned to the front astride the Jordan Valley.

Allenby had no intention of mounting a renewed full-scale offensive until the weather settled, despite requests from London to do so. But to maintain pressure on the Turks he decided to move part of the Desert Mounted Corps across the Jordan to strike the major towns of Es Salt and Amman and hit the nearby Hejaz railway. At the same time, further across to the east, he encouraged Feisal's Arabs, under Lawrence's guidance, to thrust northwards out of the Hejaz towards the centre of Syria and raid key positions, such as Maan and Mudawara.

At the end of March, Chauvel's force crossed the Jordan and attacked Amman. Es Salt was taken and the railway attacked, but Amman itself could not be reached. A difficult withdrawal back across the Jordan was undertaken in rain and piercing cold,

complicated by refugees from Es Salt fearing reprisals on the return of the Turks. A month later the Desert Mounted Corps again moved against Es Salt and Amman. Es Salt was retaken, but when promised Arab cooperation from the Beni Sakhr tribe failed to arrive, the Turkish forces were able to repel all assaults and by 4 May the battle was over. These were the first setbacks for Allenby's forces since the second battle of Gaza.⁷

By July 1918 Allenby's force had been reorganised. After losing 60,000 troops to France (to combat the German offensive earlier in the year), Allenby was reinforced and two Indian cavalry divisions were added to Chauvel's Desert Mounted Corps.

Allenby's plan was to attack north along the coast, before swinging inland in a giant left hook onto the southern heights of Syria. To achieve maximum surprise it was developed in great secrecy. Chauvel's men, who were to play a leading role in the breakout, were kept on the opposite flank in the Jordan Valley, where they had to contend with oppressive heat, flies, snakes, scorpions, dust, and sickness. When they did move west, they did so at night, leaving their tents standing and dummy horses in their old lines. Only the ANZAC Mounted Division remained on the Jordan. The Arabs too added to the deception, boldly blowing up the railway north and south of Deraa just before the offensive began.

At 4.30 am on 19 September the attack began. Chauvel's cavalry burst through the infantry and rapidly drove all before them. The Turkish defences were quickly shattered and towns like Nazareth, Meggido, and Nablus were taken. To the east the ANZAC Mounted Division finally took Amman. The battle was a brilliant success and represents one of the few episodes in the First World War where an infantry breach of the enemy's line was successfully exploited by a cavalry breakthrough.

On 25 September Allenby announced that, led again by the cavalry, he would advance north beyond Damascus.⁸ Two separate thrusts would converge on the city, one along the coast and the other inland. On this front Chauvel's men would move side by side with the Arabs. The overall aim was to cut off the retreating Turks and smash their armies as they withdrew.

By the end of 30 September, the Australian Mounted Division had reached the outskirts of Damascus, overlooking the Barada Gorge. The 5th Indian Cavalry Division and Lawrence's Arabs were positioned further south.

At first light on 1 October the 10th Light Horse Regiment became the first troops formally to enter Damascus. They had been ordered to move round the city and let the Arabs enter first. But the countryside made this impossible. Instead the light horsemen rode into the city, brushed aside its formal surrender, and moved on to secure the Homs road, as ordered. Soon afterwards Lawrence arrived. It was essential that Feisal should be able to claim he had liberated Damascus. Lawrence moved quickly to establish control and later stated that 4,000 Arabs from Feisal's army had already entered the city during the night.

Feisal arrived on 3 October and, feeling his work completed, Lawrence left for Britain the following day. Allenby's advance continued and by 26 October the Desert Mounted Corps had reached Aleppo. But the Turks were rapidly disintegrating, and on 31 October the war in the Near East came to an end when Turkey signed an armistice.

Nigel Steel



General Sir Edmund Allenby commanded the Egyptian Expeditionary Force from June 1917 until the war's end.

Imperial War Museum Q82969



This hand-drawn map of the area around Beersheba shows the situation of the battle at 4.30 pm, shortly before the historic light horse charge.

AWM G7501 S65 G2



A light horseman camped on a hillside in the hot and inhospitable Jordan Valley during July 1918.

AWM J05984

¹ This complex series of events is succinctly summarised in the relevant sections of M.E. Yapp, *The making of the modern Middle East 1792–1923* (Harlow: Longman, 1987).

² See Denis Winter, *25 April 1915* (St Lucia: Queensland University Press, 1994), pp. 4–5.

³ The events of this key episode of the war in the Middle East and the personalities involved, particularly at GHQ in Cairo, are fully laid out in the initial chapters of Section II, Jeremy Wilson, *Lawrence of Arabia: the authorized biography of T.E. Lawrence* (New York: Atheneum, 1990).

⁴ The most detailed account of Chauvel's achievements during the war is given in Alec Hill, *Chauvel of the Light Horse* (Carlton: University of Melbourne Press, 1978).

⁵ Comprehensive accounts of the actions of the Australian Light Horse appear in H.S. Gullett, *The Australian Imperial Force in Sinai and Palestine 1914–1918* (Sydney: Angus and Robertson, 1923). Outline summaries are given by C.E.W. Bean, *ANZAC to Amiens* (Canberra: Australian War Memorial, 1946).

⁶ Allenby's conduct of the war, as well as many of the key strategic issues relating to the final part of the war against the Ottoman Empire, is discussed by Matthew Hughes, *Allenby and British strategy in the Middle East 1917–1919* (London: Frank Cass, 1999).

⁷ There remains some division of opinion over the purpose of the attacks on Amman and Es Salt, which are often characterised simply as "raids". Hill, *Chauvel of the Light Horse*, is particularly interesting in his accounts of the operations.

⁸ Gullett, *AIF in Sinai and Palestine*, (p. 728), also describes a meeting between Allenby and Chauvel three days earlier. After discussing the success of the Desert Mounted Corps since 19 September, Allenby abruptly asked, "What about Damascus?" Chauvel, who never wasted his words, replied: "Rather".

THE AUSTRALIAN LIGHT HORSE



he Australian Light Horse has a unique place within the wider ANZAC legend.

The mounted regiments of the Australian Imperial Force (AIF) in the First World War became renowned for their hard-riding and courage in battle. Many considered them the military embodiment of the best characteristics of the Australian bushmen. But the light horse had existed for more than a decade before that. Regiments had been created following Federation, and most of these had their roots in the colonial part-time mounted units, with colourful names like New South Wales Lancers, Queensland Mounted Infantry, Victorian Mounted Rifles, or Western Australian Mounted Infantry, that had fought in the Boer War.

Australians saw their light horsemen as an elite. Even in drab wartime dress there was an air of dash and glamour about them. In stereotype at least, they combined the qualities of the rural pioneer with those of the natural soldier. There was perhaps some substance to this romantic view. Drawn heavily from the country towns and properties, where ownership of a horse and the ability to ride demonstrated that a man was both fit and solvent, light horsemen were considered to possess hardiness, independence, and initiative.

The slouch hat adorned with emu plumes became the symbol of the light horse. Most regiments wore it that way. One trooper later wrote in Egypt in 1918: "On leave the Light Horseman is smartly dressed; but even in Cairo he has a wonderful love of his trusty hat, which never looks new, and is never by any chance turned up at the side."¹ In other respects the uniform was not much different from what the infantry wore. What made them distinctive, beyond the emu feathers, was their spurs, polished leather leggings, belts, and accoutrements, including a bandolier.

The light horse was not meant to fight from horseback with sword or lance as cavalry did. The light horseman's mount gave him mobility, but in action he would dismount to fight on foot; in battle one man in four was usually required to be a horseholder. A light horse regiment was not nearly as strong as a battalion of infantry, and a troop had nothing like the firepower of a platoon. On the other hand, it was a highly mobile and flexible force, could travel distances, and also do some of the work traditionally given to cavalry, including patrolling, reconnaissance, and screening the main force.

By war's end the light horse had grown to a formidable force. In 1914 Australia had offered troops to assist Britain. This included a division of infantry and one brigade of light horse, all specially raised from volunteers. Within weeks it was announced that the contribution would be expanded and a further mounted brigade was formed as well as a third one by October. Eventually there were five AIF light horse brigades forming the larger part of two mounted divisions; the infantry meanwhile was expanded to five divisions.

Colonel Harry Chauvel was given command of the original 1st Light Horse Brigade. He would soon become the most famous light horseman of all. Chauvel had a long association with the bush and the military. As a young man he was an officer in a part-time mounted unit raised by his father at Tabulam, New South Wales. Later, when the family moved to Queensland, he took up a commission in the Queensland Mounted Infantry. In 1896 he transferred to the permanent forces. A few years later he went with the first troops of the Queensland Mounted Infantry to the Boer War, and in 1902 he commanded a battalion of the Australian Commonwealth Horse.



A photograph of a light horse charge was for many years believed to show the action at Beersheba on 31 October 1917. Modern research suggests that it is a re-enactment at Belah, Palestine, a few months later.

AWM P05380.001



Troops of the 5th Light Horse Regiment holding the bridgehead at Ghoraniye, Palestine, in April 1918.

AWM B00010



The emu-plumed slouch hat came to proudly symbolise the light horse, although not every regiment adopted the feathers.

AWM REL/07732



Henry Woollcott

Typical light horse

(1919, oil on canvas on cardboard, 53.5 x 42.8 cm,
AWM ART03580)

An unidentified Australian wearing the slouch hat with
emu plumes, the symbol of the light horsemen.



Chauvel was small and wiry, and possessed strong powers of command. He was also without vanity or any flamboyance. In contrast, some of the other leaders of the light horse brigades were noted for their colour and unorthodoxy. Their nicknames reveal something of the characters of men like Charles Cox (“Fighting Charlie”), Granville Ryrie (“Bull”) and the popular South African, Jack Royston (“Galloping Jack”). These were not text-book generals, and they left a lot of work to their staff and regimental leaders. But mostly they combined good horsemanship, with courage under fire, dash, and leadership. Some became heroes to their men.

The first-raised light horse regiments had expected to be sent to Europe but got no further than Egypt. They did not accompany the infantry to take part in the famous Gallipoli landing on 25 April 1915. For

a while they thought they had been side-lined. They were soon needed, however, so they went without their horses to serve in the trenches. When, after the Gallipoli campaign the infantry went off to the Western Front, it seemed once again that the light horse had been left behind. But in the forthcoming Middle East operations across desert, mountains, and plains, endurance and mobility became essential. The light horse soon proved invaluable in the Sinai and in the later advance into Palestine and Syria.

In 1916 the three light horse brigades (each of three regiments) were placed with the brigade of New Zealand Mounted Rifles to form the ANZAC Mounted Division and put under Chauvel. Next year a further division, the Imperial Mounted Division, was formed by taking the 3rd Brigade and adding the re-formed 4th Brigade. In June it was renamed



A former light horseman, Captain Ross Smith, a leading pilot with No.1 Squadron, AFC, with his observer and their Bristol Fighter, at Mejdal near Jaffa in February 1918. The Australian squadron worked closely with the Desert Mounted Corps and Lawrence's Arabs.

AWM P03631.013

the Australian Mounted Division. When the 5th Brigade was created in 1918, largely from Australians from the former Imperial Camel Corps, it too was included.

While the Gallipoli veterans among them could well call themselves “ANZACs”, the light horse generally did not use the more popular Australian soldiers’ description of “digger” – that belonged to the troops fighting in the trenches on the Western Front. Instead they often called each other by the everyman’s sobriquet, “billjim”. Unlike the other names, this did not survive long into peacetime.

The Australians fought their first big mounted action at Romani; then they advanced beyond the desert of the Sinai. By mid-1917 the British Prime

Minister, Lloyd George, was anxious for success in Palestine. He appointed General Sir Edmund “Bull” Allenby to take over from General Murray, who had suffered two reverses at Gaza. Allenby, a cavalryman, had earlier worked with some of the Australians in the Boer War. Shifting reluctantly to the Middle East, from June 1917 he took over the Egyptian Expeditionary Force and quickly stamped his authority on it.

The Australian balladist Banjo Paterson was with the light horse as an officer in the remount service. Formed of older men like himself, Paterson’s unit was “better known as ‘Methusaliers’, the ‘horsehold Cavalry’, and the ‘Horse-dung Hussars’”. Paterson, who had met Allenby in South Africa, described the general’s impact:

Things began to move from the moment that the Bull started to push against them. The Shepherd's Hotel generals in Cairo were dispersed with scant ceremony. Then began the weeding out process. He tried general after general as a man would try hat after hat in a hat shop before he bought one. He tried out his personnel in little expeditions and raids, giving every commander a chance, but only one chance.²

One who seized his chance was Chauvel who had been knighted and, since April, was leading the Desert Column. Allenby appointed him to lead the newly named Desert Mounted Corps and thus confirmed him as the first Australian in permanent command of a corps with the rank of lieutenant general. Meanwhile, more men, guns, and equipment were sent to the Middle East; Lloyd George made it clear that he wanted the capture of Jerusalem by Christmas. But Gaza still stood in the way.

For the third attempt on Gaza, Allenby undertook to make an attack at Beersheba. This provided the light horse with its own chance – the chance to create a legend. On 31 October 1917 the British assault began. There was hard fighting through the day, but progress was slow and time was running out. It was vital that the horses get water. Finally, Chauvel gave the order: “Put Grant straight at it.”

Brigadier General William Grant was a university-educated Queensland pastoralist. Now he would lead a brigade in what has come to be regarded as one of the last cavalry-style charges in history. At 4.30 pm squadrons of the 4th and 12th Regiments – about 800 horsemen – set off at the trot. They were armed with bayonets instead of cavalry swords. Over the last few kilometres they charged at full pace. Some men fell under rifle, machine-gun, and shrapnel fire, but they were an unstoppable force. Beersheba and its wells were taken, and Gaza was abandoned by the Turks after some more fighting on 6 November.

The British advanced and the Turks withdrew from Jerusalem on 9 December. Lloyd George got his Christmas present.

Beersheba is notable in the history of the light horse as an outstanding and remarkable action. It remains their best remembered battle, but tends to over-shadow other operations that were more gruelling, more brutal, and more costly. The ill-fated advances across the Jordan River, for example, made heavy demands on the men and their horses. After suffering reverses the British could do little more throughout the summer. The light horse was stuck in the malarial Jordan Valley contending with heat, flies, lice, scorpions, dust, and sickness. The official war historian, Charles Bean, called it their “hardest service in the war”.³

From time to time there was talk of sending the light horse to the Western Front, but the Australians were spared this fate. There were some changes, though, and in 1918 the Australian Mounted Division was issued with swords, allowing them to fight from horse-back in the manner of cavalry. Finally, the Australians cemented their reputation by their part in the climactic capture of Damascus.

The war historian Henry Gullett observed the light horsemen around Damascus; they were true veterans, he thought:

They rode, very dusty and unshaved, their big hats battered and drooping, through the tumultuous populace of the oldest city in the world, with the same easy, casual bearing, and the same self-confidence that are their distinctive characteristics on their country tracks at home. And their long-tailed horses, at home now, like their owners, on any road in any country, saw nothing in the shouting mob or banging rifles, or the narrow ways and many colours of the bazaars, to cause them once to start, shy, or even cock an ear.⁴



George Lambert

Brigadier General William Grant

(1918, pencil on paper, 35.4 x 24.6 cm, AWM ART02770)

Grant commanded the 4th Light Horse Brigade in the famous charge at Beersheba on 31 October 1918.



George Lambert

Lieutenant General Sir Harry Chauvel

(1918, pencil on paper, 35.4 x 24.9 cm, AWM ART02734)

The most famous light horseman of all, Chauvel commanded the Desert Mounted Corps during 1917–18.



George Lambert

Light horseman, mounted

(1920, pencil on paper, 38.8 x 37.1 cm, AWM ART11387)

One of Australia's mounted soldiers,
with rifle slung, resting in the saddle.

Throughout the war the light horse were at the centre of the British army's achievements in the Sinai and Palestine. They were there from the initial advance from the Suez Canal until the defeat of the Turkish forces. An army from a nation not 20 years old had fought across the world's oldest battlefields. They had made the famous cavalry charge at Beersheba, entered Jerusalem, and been in the capture of Damascus. One of their number had commanded the Desert Mounted Corps.

The light horsemen were spared some of the horrors that faced their countrymen on the Western Front. But they had fought long and hard campaigns over great distances, often in extremes of temperature and weather, and sometimes across terrible country. Their sacrifice and achievements, and those of their beloved horses which they had to leave behind,⁵ became an outstanding part of Australia's military history. In these operations about 1,500 men were killed in action or died of wounds or from other causes; sickness and disease took a particularly heavy toll.

The Australian Light Horse existed for less than 50 years, through peace and war. Industrialisation and mechanisation soon made mounted warfare outmoded. The Boer War, in which horses could provide mobility, gave a brief reprieve for the exponents of cavalry, while the Palestine campaign was the heyday of the light horse. Regiments existed after the war, taking the numbers and inheriting the battle-honours from the AIF units. These were mobilised in the Second World War, but, overtaken by technology, they were soon disbanded. The titles of a few are still retained within the Royal Australian Armoured Corps.

Peter Burness

¹ "Surcingle", "The light horseman", in *The Kia Ora Coo-ee*, No. 4 June 1918, facsimile ed., (Sydney: Cornstalk Publishing, 1981), p. 15.

² A.B. "Banjo" Paterson, "Happy Dispatches", in *Song of the pen (1901-1941)* (Sydney: Landsdowne Press, 1983), p. 667.

³ C.E.W. Bean, *ANZAC to Amiens* (Canberra: Australian War Memorial, 1983), p. 502.

⁴ H.S. Gullett, "Fighting for Palestine", in H.S. Gullett and Charles Barrett (eds.) *Australia in Palestine* (Sydney: Angus & Robertson, 1919), p. 50.

⁵ This was primarily an issue of quarantine, but also one of cost. In later years whenever light horsemen spoke of the war the talk quickly turned to their beloved horses, and the tragedy of leaving them behind. At the end of the war those horses that were unfit for transfer to the British or Indian armies, or that could not be sold, were shot. Many troopers preferred the latter option rather than the idea of their horse being put to hard and cruel work. In their view, the light horseman's "chief duty was to keep his horse fit and well under trying conditions. Between an original and his horses there is a bond that even death cannot break." ("Surcingle", in *The Kia Ora Coo-ee*, June 1918, p. 15).



n Book I of *Seven pillars of wisdom*, T.E. Lawrence describes his first meeting with Emir Feisal at Wadi Safra in October 1916.

Despite some initial success, the Arab Revolt was going badly. Turkish forces were advancing along the Pilgrim Road from their railhead base at Medina. Feisal's small, ill-equipped army of tribesmen was all that stood between the Turks and the wells at Rabegh on the Red Sea coast. Once at Rabegh, the Turks would easily recapture Mecca.

Yet the first exchange with Feisal recorded in *Seven pillars* is not about the Arab weakness or the imminent threat from the advancing Turks. Feisal asks Lawrence, "How do you like our place here in Wadi Safra?" Lawrence replies, "Well; but it is far from Damascus."¹

Some have speculated that Lawrence invented this dialogue, as a way to signal at the beginning of the book that its triumphant end would be the capture of Damascus. It seems to me more probable that Lawrence did indeed say "it is far from Damascus" – or words to that effect. He had good reason to do so.

Lawrence, who had worked in the Intelligence department at Cairo, already knew the terms of the secret Sykes–Picot agreement between Britain, France, and Russia. This foresaw direct colonial rule in parts of the Middle East. It therefore ran counter to Arab hopes for self-government and also, arguably, to British promises made to the Arabs during the run-up to the revolt.

The agreement did, nevertheless, contain important concessions to Arab nationalism. Notably, so far as Lawrence was concerned, it stipulated that direct French colonial rule in Syria would be limited to the coastal region (essentially, what is now Lebanon). Inland, there was to be an Arab government with French advisers.

These concessions to Arab hopes were deeply unpopular with both the French Government and the British Government of India. France had long-standing imperial ambitions in the Middle East. Likewise, the Government of India hoped to colonise the whole of Mesopotamia (Iraq), where a similar arrangement was envisaged.

Augustus John

T.E. Lawrence

(1919, oil on canvas, 99.7 x 79.5 cm, Tate, presented by the Duke of Westminster, 1920)

Augustus John painted this portrait – possibly the most famous image of Lawrence – in Paris, in 1919, when Lawrence was part of the British delegation at the Paris conference that drew up the peace treaty to end the war.





For this reason, Britain and France had attached conditions to the agreement. The Arabs would only get self-government if their revolt against the Turks made a significant contribution to victory. Thus, in a subsequent exchange of letters, the Foreign Office confirmed that “the acceptance of the whole project would entail the abdication of considerable British interests, but provided that the co-operation of the Arabs is secured, and that the Arabs fulfil the conditions and obtain the towns of Homs, Hama, Damascus and Aleppo, the British Government would not object to the arrangement.”² Of the four cities named, Damascus was by far the most important.

This, then, is the context for Lawrence’s remark. Feisal, ignorant of Sykes–Picot and the Anglo-French conditions, might have assumed that a revolt in the Hejaz would be rewarded by self-government – not only in the Hejaz but in Syria and Mesopotamia as well. Lawrence knew that there was no hope of Arab independence in Syria and Mesopotamia unless the revolt extended 1,300 kilometres northwards. In October 1916, Feisal was in every sense “far from Damascus”.

Though he did not know it at this first meeting, Lawrence was to serve as British liaison officer with Feisal for the next two years. During that time he was constantly driven by his knowledge of the secret agreement. He did everything in his power to ensure that the revolt spread northward, making a tangible contribution to the success of the Egyptian Expeditionary Force (EEF).

The first step was to neutralise the Turkish presence in the Hejaz. This was achieved by moving Feisal’s army up the Red Sea coast to Wejh. From there, raiding parties could easily attack the Hejaz railway. Its tracks, running for hundreds of kilometres through empty desert, were extremely vulnerable. It

was the only line of communication for the Turkish garrison at Medina, thereafter permanently on the defensive.

With the Hejaz securely on the allies’ side, there was little hope that the Turkish call for a *jihad* would gain ground. This in itself was an immeasurable benefit to both Britain and France, whose empires contained millions of Muslim subjects.

Feisal was joined at Wejh by the British Military Mission, a team of advisers who began planning Arab operations to cut the Hejaz line permanently at El Ula, well to the north of Medina. Lawrence, however, was intent on spreading the revolt much further north than that. To gain Feisal’s cooperation he told him about the terms of the Sykes–Picot agreement.

Moving north beyond Wejh would not be easy. Some people thought that it was simply a matter of shipping Feisal’s army up to Akaba, the most northerly point in Western Arabia that could be reached by sea. Lawrence knew better. It might be simple to land a force at Akaba, but his real objective was the route inland, leading from Akaba north-eastwards up to the Maan plateau. If the Arabs could capture and hold that route, they would have a supply line to the desert beyond. Then, using camels for transport, they could raid Turkish communications as far north as Damascus. They could harass the supply lines not just to the Turks in Medina but also to the Turkish army in Palestine, served by railways to the north and west of Deraa.

Lawrence had studied Akaba previously, during his work in the Intelligence department – at one time there had been a scheme to send British troops there. He knew that the Turks had almost impregnable defences in the Wadi Ithm, the narrow valley leading inland on the way to Maan. At the first sign of an impending attack, they would send reinforcements

from Maan to defend the route. He therefore proposed an alternative. Instead of landing at Akaba, why not make a wide circle inland to Maan, then capture the route to Akaba from its undefended end? Wadi Ithm's defences had been designed to repel an attack from the sea, not from the land. Moreover, with reinforcements blocked, the defences would be lightly held and thus easily overcome.

In May 1917 a small Arab force left Wejh, accompanied by Lawrence. Two months later, after raising a much larger force from local tribes, it rode triumphantly into Akaba.

For Lawrence personally, the move north provoked a crisis. Information from Cairo and a recent visit to Wejh by Sir Mark Sykes had convinced him that Britain's promises to the Arabs were paper-thin. He realised that, from now on, his role in the deceit would be much greater. He had won the Arabs' confidence. They were much more willing to trust someone they knew than a distant foreign government. Taking his assurances at face value, they would fight. Many of them would be killed or wounded. He would try to limit casualties, but their sacrifice would be forever on his conscience.

The full horror of his position came home to him during the journey to Akaba. Notes in his wartime diary show his deepening distress. On 13 May he wrote: "Near Abu Raga in a valley with Themail. The weight is bearing me down now. Auda last night, and pain and agony today." Two days later: "At Abu Raga, waiting for Sharaf. If only I could get out." Finally, on 5 June: "Can't stand another day here. Will ride N and chuck it."³ A message he left behind reads simply: "I've decided to go off alone to Damascus, hoping to get killed on the way: for all sakes try and clear this show up before it goes further. We are calling them to fight for us on a lie, and I can't stand it."⁴

He returned from his northern reconnaissance alive, but from then on showed an unswerving personal commitment to the cause of Arab freedom. The journey deep behind enemy lines had been so courageous that General Sir Reginald Wingate, who was responsible for British operations in the Hejaz, recommended him for a Victoria Cross. (On a technicality, the award could not be considered: the exploit had not been witnessed by another officer).

At GHQ the political advisers to General Allenby, the recently appointed British Commander-in-Chief,



Emir Feisal gave Lawrence a British .303-inch SMLE rifle, which he had earlier received as a gift from the Turks. It had been captured from a British soldier on Gallipoli. Lawrence used it for the rest of the war. After the war he gave the rifle, and a note explaining its history, to King George V.

On loan from Her Majesty the Queen FIR8255



Lawrence on the balcony of the Victoria Hotel in Damascus. Just half an hour earlier he had resigned as adviser to Feisal. He was exhausted and sought Allenby's permission to return to London.

Imperial War Museum Q73534

Given to Lawrence by Feisal, these silk robes consist of an under-robe (*thob*) and an outer ceremonial robe (*zebun*). Lawrence's robes were invariably of high quality and set him apart as a member of the respected Sherifian class.

Bath and North East Somerset Council – Fashion Museum

Lawrence wore the dagger, discreetly acquired in Mecca in 1917, during the war; it also appears in the famous Augustus John portrait. He had it made small because a full-size one would have been too cumbersome.

All Souls College, Oxford



were well aware of Sykes–Picot and its implications. They also recognised the growing military value of Arab attacks on the railway and its irreplaceable rolling stock. Routine cutting of telegraph wires was forcing the Turkish command to communicate by radio, handing priceless information to EEF intelligence. Because of the revolt, thousands of Turkish troops had been diverted to defending the railway, instead of fighting the EEF in Palestine. In the last stages of the campaign it was the Arabs, not the EEF, who sealed the fate of these troops. There was every reason to treat Feisal honourably.

As the EEF and Arab armies moved north towards Damascus, Allenby feared that Feisal might occupy the city prematurely. That might not be difficult, but if things went wrong the EEF would be too far off to give support. A strong Turkish counter-attack might knock out Feisal's army when Allenby needed it most. He therefore ordered the Arabs to

stay out. Damascus would be taken when the EEF was ready, not before.

For Lawrence, the situation must have seemed critical. The secret rider to the Sykes–Picot agreement required the Arabs to “obtain the towns of Homs, Hama, Damascus and Aleppo”. Unless Feisal's army took the city, France could claim that the concession to Arab self-government was void. French officials with the EEF left no one in any doubt that they would seize control of inland Syria if allowed.

Allenby did his best to ensure, within the framework of his operations, that the Arabs had their chance. On 25 September he sent a message to Feisal: “There is no objection to Your Highness entering Damascus as soon as you consider that you can do so with safety. I am sending troops to Damascus and I hope that they will arrive there in four or five days from today.”⁵ However, the situation on the ground

Originally purchased in Aleppo in 1912, Lawrence gave the head-cloth and *agal* to his mother the following year. He recovered it to wear during the war because good quality examples were by then hard to obtain.

All Souls College, Oxford



¹ T.E. Lawrence, *Seven pillars of wisdom* (London: Jonathan Cape, 1935), p. 91.

² Minute of a meeting held on 4 February 1916, The National Archives, FO 371/2767.

³ Diary entry for 5 June 1917, British Library, Add. MS 45,983.

⁴ War notebook, British Library, Add. MS 45,915, folio 55v.

⁵ Transmitted in L.J. Bols to T.E. Lawrence, 25 September 1918, The National Archives, WO 157/738.

⁶ "Special Instructions" issued by General Staff Australian Mounted Division 29 September 1918, The National Archives, WO 95/4551.

was developing rapidly and Lawrence's whereabouts were often uncertain. It seems that the message did not reach him for some days.

At a meeting with corps commanders on 26 September – the last before Damascus fell – Allenby asked non-Arab forces to keep out. A written instruction to Australian forces read:

*While operating against the enemy about Damascus care will be taken to avoid entering the town if possible . . . Unless forced to do so for tactical reasons, no troops are to enter Damascus. Brigadiers will arrange a picquet on all roads from their areas in to the town to ensure this order being carried out.*⁶

In the event, however, an Australian unit passed through and the light horse would claim the trophy of Damascus. Lawrence's feelings when he learned what had happened can be imagined. His disappointment doubtless coloured his relationship with General Chauvel, the Australian commander. When they met, both men were exhausted by the rigours of the advance. By all accounts, Chauvel was the kind of commander Lawrence should have liked, but at Damascus there was no time to develop a rapport.

Worse was to come. At the 1919 Peace Conference, France and the British Government of India worked in unison to undermine the Sykes–Picot provisions for Arab self-rule. To Lawrence's dismay, the agreement was replaced by sweeping mandates from the League of Nations. In the spring of 1920, while he was working on the Oxford text of *Seven pillars*, French forces entered Damascus and abolished the Arab Government that Lawrence had helped to establish in October 1918. Feisal was ignominiously expelled.

Jeremy Wilson



T.E. Lawrence in Arab dress, a portrait by the famous American photographer Harry Chase in 1919. Imperial War Museum Q46904



Complex, enigmatic, driven – T.E. Lawrence was all of these, and more. Romantic exaggeration swirls around him, as it has since his story was first taken up by the American journalist Lowell Thomas. David Lean's much later film, *Lawrence of Arabia*, written by Robert Bolt, added to the legend that already surrounded him.

Anyone who has seen the film will recall how it begins, with Lawrence thrown from his motorcycle while riding home to his cottage at Clouds Hill, Dorset, in May 1935. After lingering in a coma for a week, he died of his injuries. His death, no less than his life, merely heightened the aura of mystery around the man. But despite all the attention he has garnered, few have ever really come to grips with who Lawrence really was.

Lawrence's reputation was such that even in Australia he became a figure who inspired public fascination and admiration, despite the controversy surrounding his claims about the Arab forces having entered Damascus before the Australian Light Horse.¹ An Australian obituary in the *Sun-Herald* quoted Harry Hammond, who had met Lawrence in Damascus while serving as a captain in the 3rd Light Horse Brigade:

[W]hen there were raids or bombing to be done the quiet, unassuming little man, whose chief interest had formerly been in archaeology, and who hated the military staff, became like chain lightning. Without Lawrence, the Arabs were practically useless to us, but under Lawrence they were invaluable.

Another Australian, Lieutenant Stanislaus Nunan, an AFC pilot who worked with Lawrence in 1918, once described Lawrence in terms that reflect the way many saw him during the war:

There is a wonderful Englishman here ... He is Major Lawrence ... He is only about 27 and not very big, but is a real life superman of the variety novelists like to invent ... One day he will be around with his red tabs as Staff Major and the next in Bedouin dress – bare feet, flowing robes and headdress ... Goes out with a few of his dusky cutthroats and a few camels loaded with gun cotton and blows up trains and the line to Mecca. The Arabs stop him in the street to kiss his robes.²

In this essay, I will examine seven aspects of Lawrence and his war.

I. "A wonderful Englishman"

After war broke out in 1914, Lawrence was commissioned in the British army, although he did not receive the formal military training that would normally have been provided to a regular officer. The role he came to play in the Arab Revolt was anything but regular, and it could be argued that, had he followed a more traditional military career, he may have been far less creative – and less successful – in his approach to operations with the Arab irregular forces.

On the surface Lawrence was a conventional Edwardian. He grew up in England and was educated in the classics at Oxford. He began a life-long pursuit of both mental and physical fitness during his summer vacations of 1908 and 1909 in France and Syria, where he covered thousands of kilometres by bicycle and on foot. In late 1910 and early 1911 he again visited Syria to study Arabic and spent much of the next three years on archaeological digs at Carchemish in northern Syria. There he worked with influential mentors like D.G. Hogarth and Leonard Woolley and learnt how to manage and work with local Arab workers.



T.E. Lawrence and Leonard Woolley at Carchemish. Between March 1912 and June 1914 Woolley and Lawrence oversaw five seasons of archaeological digs at Carchemish.

Imperial War Museum Q73536

Early in 1914 Woolley and Lawrence accompanied Captain Stewart Newcombe of the Royal Engineers, on a survey of the eastern Sinai. This was Lawrence's first experience of this area; it was here that he gained his first-hand knowledge of the port of Akaba on the Red Sea. Later that year Lawrence and Hogarth reported their findings in the *The wilderness of Zin*. He would enter the war with a deep understanding of the desert environment as well as of the Arabs, their history, culture, and language.

In late 1914 Lawrence was sent to Cairo, where it was thought his skills and knowledge might prove

useful. There he worked in the Military Intelligence Department, helping to improve operational maps and contributing to the production of the *Handbook of the Turkish army* (1915), a manual that required regular updating with the latest intelligence reports.

Lawrence's first real operational experience came in March 1916 at Kut el Amara, Mesopotamia (now Iraq), although he was not a combatant. Already decorated for his intelligence and mapping work in Cairo, Lawrence had been sent to Kut to assist in what turned out to be a disastrous attempt by the British high command to buy off the Turkish forces besieging General Townshend's Indian Army

Expeditionary Force. He was also told to investigate the possibility of promoting a rebellion of the Mesopotamian Arabs against the Turks. This was opposed by the British Indian army officers in Kut, who did not want the Arabs as their allies. Lawrence was appalled by the officers' imperialistic attitude. The experience only strengthened his desire to assist in the Arab cause of Arab self-determination.

In June 1916 Sherif Hussein ibn Ali, guardian of the Islamic holy city of Mecca, declared a revolt against Turkish rule in the Hejaz region of Arabia. Lawrence was initially sent to Jidda to report on the situation in the Hejaz for the Arab Bureau in Cairo. Shortly afterwards, to assist the revolt, he was attached to Hussein's son Emir Feisal. For the next two years Lawrence served as Feisal's British liaison officer.

II. "The dreamer of the day"

In the Middle East Lawrence showed himself to be a true visionary. By late 1916 he was beginning to work more and more independently. He was open to new techniques and keenly pursued the early attempts to improve operational maps created from aerial photos. But it was in the Arab Revolt that Lawrence saw the greatest possibilities, both to assist the British against the Turks and to advance the Arab cause. As he later wrote: "All men dream: but not equally. Those who dream by night in the dusty recesses of their minds wake in the day to find that it was vanity: but the dreamers of the day are dangerous men, for they may act their dream with open eyes, to make it possible."³ From late 1916, Lawrence was to spend the next two years living and fighting in the field with Emir Feisal as one of the de facto leaders and strategists of the revolt.

It is probable that it was Lawrence who persuaded Feisal's forces to attack Akaba from the desert in

July 1917 – although some Arab historians have questioned this. Under his influence and guidance the Arabs were gradually transformed into a guerrilla force capable of striking quickly without warning against Turkish outposts and the Hejaz railway. Lawrence advised the Arabs to avoid pitched battles, and they rarely defended ground. This built on Bedouin strengths, avoided heavy losses, and minimised the impact of weaknesses such as the need for motivational bribes. Although other British officers became involved and provided support to the Arab forces, the basic strategic initiative was Lawrence's. Under his influence the Arabs, with their constant but stealthy attacks, successfully distracted Turkish forces along the 1,300-kilometre Hejaz railway. These tactics gave the Arab forces a military significance far greater than their numbers might suggest.

III. "Calling them to fight on a lie"

Lawrence's first loyalty was to king and country, although he also developed a great respect for his Commander-in-Chief, General Allenby.

Lawrence's main problem, however, was his divided loyalty. He desperately wanted Britain to win the war. The loss of two brothers, Frank and Will, on active service in France in 1915 may have inspired him to strive more fervently towards that goal. Frustrated with what he regarded as his peaceful existence in Cairo, Lawrence sought a more active role. Beginning with his mission as an intelligence officer to the Hejaz in 1916, he increasingly acquired a more crucial role as the intermediary between the British and the Arabs. Without him, the Arab Revolt probably would not have advanced beyond the Hejaz and it would likely have contributed little to the Egyptian Expeditionary Force's (EEF) advance into Palestine.



James McBey

Lieutenant General Harry Chauvel, Homs, 1918

(1918, oil on canvas, 69 x 54 cm,
Imperial War Museum ART 2471)



James McBey

Lieutenant Colonel T.E. Lawrence CB DSO, 1918

(1918, oil on canvas, 69 x 54 cm,
Imperial War Museum ART 2473)

Lawrence dangled the goal of self-government before the Arabs, realising that he himself lent credibility to this mirage. He knew from a very early stage, however, that Britain's suggestion of self-determination was unlikely to be carried through. Yet the EEF really needed the Arabs' help in order to win the campaign. To one of his fellow officers he wrote, "We are calling them to fight for us on a lie, and I can't stand it."⁴ Early in 1917 Lawrence decided to reveal to Feisal the secret Sykes–Picot provision that France would rule the interior of Syria unless the Arabs captured the four key cities of Damascus, Homs, Hama, and Aleppo. But Lawrence knew that, even should the Arabs succeed in taking these cities,

there was still no real guarantee of Arab self-rule in Syria. Eventually, after the war, this situation would lead him to commit all his energies to getting the best deal he could for the Arabs. Lawrence describes his predicament in *Seven pillars of wisdom*, his classic account of the Arab Revolt and his role in it:

I was one of Allenby's officers, and in his confidence: in return, he expected me to do the best I could for him. I was Feisal's adviser, and Feisal relied upon the honesty and competence of my advice so far as often to take it without argument. Yet I could not explain to Allenby the whole Arab situation, nor disclose the full British plan to Feisal.⁵



The German Kaiser placed this bronze wreath on the tomb of the great Saracen leader Saladin during a state visit in 1898. Lawrence removed it on 1 October 1918, later donating it to the Imperial War Museum, stating, "Saladin no longer required it".

Imperial War Museum EPH4338

IV. "Founded on fraud"

On 23 January 1918 Lawrence and an Arab force engaged in a conventional battle with the Turks to defend the obscure, strategically unimportant village of Tafleeh, which the Arabs had seized a week earlier. It was Lawrence's first set-piece battle and resulted in up to 1,000 Turkish deaths. Lawrence later experienced a strong sense of guilt about Tafleeh. By staging a pitched battle he had broken his own principles of guerrilla warfare. As a result, Arabs he could ill afford to lose were killed and wounded. Lawrence's guilt was compounded by his knowledge that the Arabs were fighting for a false promise; this

weighed on his conscience and he felt responsible for every Arab death.

Lawrence had begun the war hoping to have become a general and to have won a knighthood before he was 30. If he could only survive, both might be within his grasp. But in August 1918, on his 30th birthday, he was troubled by what he saw as his lack of honour.

Here were the Arabs believing me, Allenby and Clayton trusting me, my bodyguard dying for me: and I began to wonder if all established reputations were founded, like mine, on fraud.⁶

In late September 1918 Lawrence accompanied an Arab force that was advancing towards Damascus. The Arab forces, largely local Arab tribesmen, massacred a Turkish column at Tafas, as a form of summary justice, to avenge atrocities committed by the Turks and Germans against the inhabitants of Tafas and Turaa. The incident was given major prominence in the film *Lawrence of Arabia*, which may explain the continuing public fascination with the massacre. Lawrence, however, wasn't responsible for the Arab action and would not have been able to stop it even had he tried. The film's suggestion that he felt degraded by the incident is also misleading, as is obvious from his published report on the action.⁷

V. "Like boys on holiday"

Movies based on real historical events often compress many figures into one character, and even misrepresent them. David Lean's film is no exception: a number of very competent British army officers who worked with and supported Lawrence are represented by the character Colonel Harry Brighton, played by Anthony Quayle. Even the actor is said to have regarded this character as an idiot.

But the truth is quite different. As early as the first chapter of *Seven pillars*, Lawrence acknowledged the contribution made by these officers, and throughout the book he consistently and generously describes their role in his story, often modestly playing down his own contribution. Several of his colleagues stand out, although it is clear that none of them possessed Lawrence's peculiar mix of talents: a strategic view, credibility, influence with both Allenby and Feisal, ability to work effectively with Arab irregulars, sound Arabic language skills, a good appreciation of Arab culture and the nomadic lifestyle.

Lieutenant Colonel Stewart Newcombe was initially sent to the Hejaz in early 1917 as chief of the

British military mission. He had previously worked as Lawrence's Director in the Military Intelligence Department in GHQ, Cairo.

*Newcombe had constant difficulties owing to excess of zeal, and his habit of doing four times more than any other Englishman would do: ten times what the Arabs thought needful or wise.*⁸

He knew enough Arabic to give orders to the Bedouin but not enough to persuade them to act, and his excessive zeal did not sit well with them. Lawrence had the greatest respect for Newcombe, dating back to his first meeting during the "Wilderness of Zin" survey in early 1914, so in *Seven pillars* he presents Newcombe's inability to exact the best from the Arabs in a very favourable light.

Another officer in Allenby's headquarters was Lieutenant Colonel Alan Dawnay, who had served with distinction as a professional officer on the Western Front before joining Allenby's staff with exclusive responsibility for liaison with Feisal's Arab forces in early 1918. Knowing no Arabic, he could not take direct command of the operations. But Dawnay quickly came to appreciate the scope for both irregular and regular operations by Arab forces and he masterminded the restructuring of the British military mission to the Hejaz in June 1918. Lawrence admired Dawnay's abilities and respected his previous war experience, calling him "Allenby's greatest gift to us – greater than thousands of baggage camels".⁹

Lieutenant Colonel Pierce Joyce had played a major part in the Wejh operation of March 1917. When Akaba was taken, he was sent there as the senior officer and base commander with responsibility to advise and control the Arab regular forces. This arrangement suited Lawrence well, as he knew Joyce would support but not interfere with his own work with the Arab irregulars. During Lawrence's long



On 1 October 1918 Lawrence entered Damascus in his Rolls-Royce "Blue Mist" with Lieutenant Colonel Walter Stirling.

The Rolls-Royce Heritage Trust

absences while on raids or making plans, Joyce took over as the military adviser to Feisal's headquarters. On such occasions, Lawrence passed intelligence back to him.

By 1918 Lawrence's role with Arab tribesmen had become so critical that an understudy had to be found in case he was wounded or killed. Lawrence suggested Hubert Young, a regular officer who had stayed with him briefly at Carchemish in 1913 and whom he had met again in Kut in April 1916. Young's army training and impatient temperament, however, meant that he was not well suited to operations with Arab irregulars. He lacked Lawrence's understanding of such operations and did not appreciate the political nature of the role Lawrence played. By mid-1918 relations between them had become somewhat strained, and Young ended up focusing on solving the supply problems that faced the Arab regular forces, for which

he earned Lawrence's praise.¹⁰

Major Robert "Robin" Buxton commanded a 300-strong Imperial Camel Corps raiding party that operated behind Turkish lines and succeeded in taking Mudawara station in August 1918. Buxton, a well-read officer who had served in Sudan and spoke Arabic, understood nomadic ways. He was also patient, good-humoured, and sympathetic; his having studied history at Oxford no doubt also commended him to Lawrence. For his part, Buxton was impressed by Lawrence's influence not just with the Arabs but also with his brother officers and his superiors: "one has the feeling that things can not go wrong while he is there".¹¹ The admiration was mutual: Lawrence enjoyed working with Buxton's Camel Corps party: "They behaved like boys on holiday, and the easy mixing of officers and men made the atmosphere delightful."¹²



Lawrence was a talented photographer; he took this dawn photo of Emir Feisal's camp, Nakhl Mubarak, near Yenbo, in December 1916.

Imperial War Museum Q58838

Lawrence captured this remarkable action shot of the attack on Akaba using his small camera. Its lasting influence resonates through the award-winning cinematography in the film *Lawrence of Arabia*.

Imperial War Museum Q59193

VI. "The greatest weapon"

Lawrence was fascinated by the power of the written word and came to see clearly its importance in modern warfare: "The printing press is the greatest weapon in the armoury of the modern commander." *Seven pillars of wisdom*, Lawrence's account of the Arab Revolt, stands as one of the major English-language literary works of the last century. The book reflects Lawrence's compelling need to tell stories. It is an account, however, in which he mostly left out detailed information that would have been to his own credit. In 1922 he circulated a draft for comment to some close friends and several of his wartime colleagues. The finished work, first released to a small group of subscribers in 1926, records (for the most part accurately) an extraordinary story. Of the Damascus chapter, however, Lawrence himself confessed, "I was on thin ice when I wrote the Damascus chapter . . . S.P. [*Seven pillars*] is full of half-truth: here."¹³

In August 1917 Lawrence wrote a series of guidelines for working with the Bedouin tribes people, entitled "Twenty-seven articles".¹⁴ An insightful work, it was published in the *Arab Bulletin* in Cairo that same month and remains highly regarded by Western military commanders operating in the region.

The reports Lawrence wrote in the field were also striking. Take, for example, the report of September 1917 that Lawrence sent back to Brigadier General Clayton in Cairo concerning an attack on a Turkish train near Mudawara station.¹⁵ In this very detailed account, Lawrence explains how, not being able to raise an Arab force sufficient to attack the Mudawara station, he took his party of only 116 men to a nearby point on the railway and mined a train, using an electronic detonator for the first time in this campaign. He fully describes the results of this raid,

makes his failings plain, and suggests improvements for future railway mining. He also reveals how a Turkish counter-attack almost succeeded when his Arab covering force left their post to join in the plundering of the train's baggage. Apparently, once the Arabs had their booty they went straight home with it.

It was the quality of reports like this that made Lawrence's views increasingly influential at Allenby's headquarters. Unlike most of his British colleagues attached to the Arab forces, Lawrence possessed a more strategic view and a deeper appreciation of the role of the Arab Revolt in the campaign to defeat the Turks.

From an early age Lawrence had sought literary fame. The range of his publications is impressive. He even undertook a translation of Homer's *Odyssey*, under the name of T.E. Shaw, the name under which he had enlisted in the Royal Tank Corps in 1923. He was also a great letter-writer.

VII. "A thief of opportunity"

Lawrence was never a military commander in the conventional sense. He says of himself in *Seven pillars*:

*I was unlike a soldier: hated soldiering. Of course, I had read the usual books . . . at Oxford; but I had never thought myself into the mind of a real commander compelled to fight a campaign of his own.*¹⁶

Lawrence had to lead through influence, an influence that extended over both the Arabs and the British. In the Arab Revolt his role was in part to enable others to fulfil their potential. In *Seven pillars* he observed that no man could lead the Arabs unless he lived as they did and yet appeared better in himself. His biographer John E. Mack notes Lawrence's extraordinary capacity for empathy, something mentioned over and over again by Lawrence's family

members and friends.¹⁷ During the war he seems uniquely to have been able to work with and inspire Arab regulars and irregulars, while simultaneously able to gain and retain the confidence of his own superiors in Allenby's headquarters.

Writing to an old Oxford friend in mid-1918, Lawrence summed up his wartime role:

*I have been so violently uprooted and plunged so deeply into a job too big for me that everything feels unreal. I have dropped all I ever did, and live only as a thief of opportunity, snatching chances of the moment where and when I see them.*¹⁸

And yet, Lawrence's influence continues today, through his literary legacy no less than his legend. He seems to have entranced most who encountered him. The novelist John Buchan once said of Lawrence:

*I am not a very tractable person or much of a hero-worshipper, but I would have followed Lawrence over the edge of the world ... he was the only man of genius I have ever known.*¹⁹

Mal Booth

Exhibition Curator



Emir Feisal at the Paris Peace Conference.
Imperial War Museum Q105615

Designed for Sherif Hussein, this flag was used during the Arab revolt by one of Feisal's senior cavalry commanders, Maulud el Mukhlus. In 1919 Maulud, a brave man from Mesopotamia who had served as Feisal's aide-de-camp, gave the flag to Brigadier General George Macarthur Onslow, who had commanded the 5th Light Horse Brigade.

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Sketch map of the advance to capture Akaba, drawn by Lawrence, with placenames given by Auda Abu Tayi. The map shows Sherif Nasir's route to Akaba through the desert known as El HouL ("The Terror"). Nasir, Feisal's cousin and his most competent military leader, was in command of the expedition. Royal Society for Asian Affairs RSAA/M/230

Lieutenant Colonel Stewart Newcombe met Lawrence on the "Wilderness of Zin" expedition. For a while in 1915 Newcombe commanded an Australian engineer company on Gallipoli. Later he was in charge of a British Military Mission assisting the Arabs, and in 1917 led raids against the Hejaz railway. He was captured by the Turks near Beersheba in November 1917. He was a pallbearer at Lawrence's funeral in 1935.

Imperial War Museum Q58908

Lieutenant Colonel Lawrence with Commander David Hogarth (centre), an associate since before the war and head of the Arab Bureau, and Lieutenant Colonel Alan Dawnay (right) in Cairo, 1918.

Imperial War Museum Q59595



¹ T.E. Lawrence, *Revolt in the desert* (London: Jonathan Cape, 1927).

² S. Nunan, Letter to his family, dated 12 January 1918 from Akaba (incorrect year used in original correspondence), 3DRL6511(A); P05860.001.

³ T.E. Lawrence, *Seven pillars of wisdom* (London: Jonathan Cape, 1935), Introductory Chapter.

⁴ Note to Colonel Gilbert Clayton, c. 5 June 1917, war notebook, British Library, Add. MS 45,915 folio 55v.

⁵ Lawrence, *Seven pillars*, Chapter LXIX.

⁶ Lawrence, *Seven pillars*, Chapter CIII.

⁷ T.E. Lawrence, "The destruction of the 4th Army", *Arab Bulletin* (Cairo) No. 106, 22 October 1918.

⁸ Lawrence, *Seven pillars*, Chapter XLI.

⁹ Lawrence, *Seven pillars*, Chapter XCII.

¹⁰ Lawrence, *Seven pillars*, Chapter XCV.

¹¹ Quoted in Jeremy Wilson, *Lawrence of Arabia: the authorized biography of T.E. Lawrence* (London: William Heinemann Ltd, 1989), p. 534.

¹² Lawrence, *Seven pillars*, Chapter CIV.

¹³ T.E. Lawrence to Robert Graves, 3 August 1927, quoted in *T.E. Lawrence to his biographers: Robert Graves and Liddell Hart* (Doubleday & Company: New York, 1963), p. 104.

¹⁴ T.E. Lawrence, "Twenty-seven articles" original manuscript, The National Archives, London, F0882/7 XC/A 023077, folios 93–97.

¹⁵ T.E. Lawrence, original manuscript, The National Archives, London, FO 882/4 XC/A 023379, folios 70–74.

¹⁶ Lawrence, *Seven pillars*, Chapter XVII.

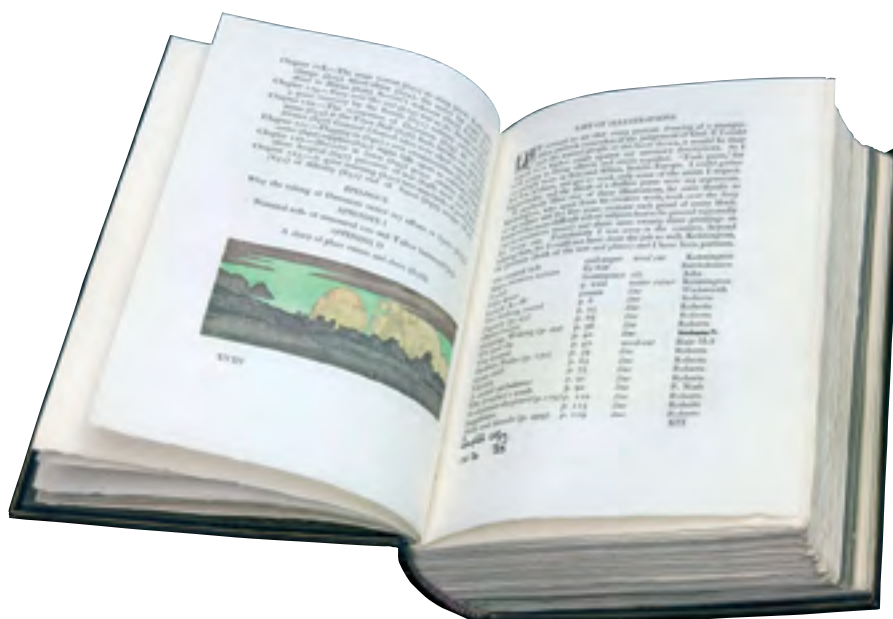
¹⁷ John E. Mack, *A prince of our disorder: the life of T.E. Lawrence* (Boston: Little Brown and Company, 1976), p. 445.

¹⁸ Malcolm Brown (ed.), *Lawrence of Arabia: the selected letters* (London: Little Books Ltd, 2005).

¹⁹ John Buchan, *Memory hold-the-door* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1940), p. 229.

A copy of the extremely rare 1926 subscribers' edition of Lawrence's *Seven pillars of wisdom* was purchased for the Australian War Memorial in 1935 by the Australian Light Horse Association.

AWM MON01397





The Australian War Memorial has a very rare edition of Lawrence's memoir of the Arab Revolt. Only a very limited, albeit lavish, subscribers' edition was produced while Lawrence was still alive. An abridged version, titled *The revolt in the desert*, came out in 1927, but the full trade edition was not published until after his death in 1935.

The 1926 subscribers' edition was purchased by the Memorial soon after Lawrence's death in 1935, using funds donated by the Australian Light Horse Association (raised through the sale of the book *Australia in Palestine*) to acquire records relating to military operations in Palestine. At the time this edition was the only version of Lawrence's fuller account that was available. After much consultation, the Memorial's Board of Trustees offered to purchase the book, as it was seen as an important addition to the collection. It is one of only 170 full copies ever produced.

The subscribers' edition reflects Lawrence's love of exquisitely produced books. Each copy had its own individual binding. The Memorial's copy has a gold-tooled, Oxford blue morocco leather binding with raised cords. The index page to the illustrations is hand-annotated by Lawrence "Complete Copy" and initialled "T.E.S." (He had adopted the pseudonym "T.E. Shaw" in February 1923, when he joined the Royal Tank Corps as a private.) Each chapter begins with a decorative first letter. The text was printed on high-quality paper and laid out with much consideration given to balance on the page. Respected contemporary artists were commissioned, and their works, which include landscapes and portraits of the main Arab and British participants, give the book a modernist feel.

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George Lambert

Arab mare, Es Salt (the famous mare of Es Salt)

(1918, oil with pencil on wood panel, 18.6 x 24.2 cm,
AWM ART02682)

Lambert visited Palestine at the beginning of 1918:
"The Bedouin is too beautiful and too lousy for words."



