



While one of the most famous people in the world, T. E. Lawrence enlisted under a pseudonym in the RAF. Twice.

Lawrence of Airpower

By Robert S. Dudley



Bedouin forces celebrate the landing of a Handley Page bomber at Deraa, convinced that with the arrival of the huge bomber, their war against the Turks would be won.

By Stuart Field, via the Imperial War Museum



T. E. Lawrence as an Army officer in 1915.

In the epic film “Lawrence of Arabia,” the title character, having left his desert war and gone back to England, is killed in a motorcycle accident. The implication is that T. E. Lawrence died young, soon after the Arab Revolt ended in 1918.

Contrary to the Hollywood tale, the real Thomas Edward Lawrence lived for 17 more years, until 1935. Moreover, the legendary figure known as Lawrence of Arabia passed most of those years as an enlisted man in the Royal Air Force, under assumed names. The world-famous Colonel Lawrence, sick of celebrity, joined the RAF in 1922 under the alias John Hume Ross (A/C2 No. 352087) and again in 1925 as T. E. Shaw (A/C2 No. 338171). There he stayed until the final weeks of his life.

Most of Lawrence’s biographers give limited attention to this period and focus on the earlier exploits of the young, glamorous, Oxford-educated officer as he led Bedouin tribesmen against the Ottoman Empire in 1916-1918. Yet Lawrence’s life after Arabia is remarkable, too. One of recent history’s most charismatic figures, laboring in anonymity, made important contributions to Britain’s airpower and did so from the lowly enlisted ranks.

Lawrence’s involvement in airpower long preceded his RAF tours. The public knows him as an Englishman in flowing white robes and riding a camel, leading sweeping attacks across the desert. Yet



Lawrence in 1917, near Aqaba, the site of his most famous victory.

Lawrence always was bound up with military aviation.

His attraction to airpower first emerged in 1915, when he worked in British army intelligence in Cairo. In his recent book, *Hero*, Michael Korda reports that the young Lawrence pioneered aerial photography for map-making and intelligence. According to Korda, "He devised his own system of laying out aerial photographs in a grid pattern to use them as the basis for a map and taught pilots how to take the pictures he needed." Lawrence served as liaison between Royal Flying Corps photographers and surveying teams. He took part in experiments in early 1915. When his ideas were successfully tested at Gallipoli, aerial surveying soon came into widespread use.

In 1916, Lawrence entered the field as British Army liaison to the army of Sharif Hussein of Mecca. He soon began to make heavy use of aviation. Lawrence focused on ways to incorporate British aircraft (and armored cars) into his tactics. He became an innovator in what military men now refer to as "combined operations." Lawrence swiftly integrated British pilots and their aircraft into his hit-and-run campaigns using horses, camels, and infantry.

Historians assert Lawrence was one of the first military men to use aircraft to support ground assaults directly. He had the backing of then-Brig. Gen. Geoffrey Salmond, RFC commander in the Mideast. Lawrence became a committed airpower proponent. As he later wrote, "The war showed me that a combination of armored cars and aircraft could rule the desert."

Air reconnaissance was one key to the revolt's most famous victory—at Aqaba. Lawrence's official biographer, Jeremy Wilson, says that in 1916, while in Cairo, Lawrence extensively studied air photos of Aqaba, a port town guarded by Turkish naval guns. A year later Lawrence boldly seized the fortress from its landward side, using his detailed knowledge of surrounding terrain.

At Um el Surab, in what is now Jordan, his force built an airstrip for a huge Handley Page bomber. Its arrival caused a "wild-eyed Bedouin" to ride off announcing he had seen "the biggest aeroplane in the world." As Korda notes, "Even the most skeptical tribesmen were now convinced that the Turks were done for."

Hot Air, Aeroplanes, and Arabs

Lawrence, by war's end, was operating his own small air force east of the Jordan River. He controlled "X flight," airplanes devoted to specific missions. These included bombing Turkish rail lines, taking aerial photos, and raiding Turkish positions. Lawrence even learned to fly; he had pilot friends and took the controls while airborne. He claimed he had 2,000 flying hours. He told the war historian, B. H. Liddell Hart, he made only one landing, in which he tore off the aircraft's undercarriage.

Lawrence was much impressed by an RAF attack on Sept. 21, 1918. The Turkish 7th Army was caught fleeing east toward the Jordan. "For four hours," said Lawrence, "our aeroplanes replaced one another in series above the doomed columns: Nine tons of small bombs or grenades and 50,000 rounds [of small-arms ammunition] were rained upon them."

He went on, "When the smoke had 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. ... The RAF lost four killed. The Turks lost a corps."

Lawrence used his knowledge of airpower in the immediate postwar years, when he served in the Colonial Office as a Mideast expert. He did so most openly in connection with the newly created kingdom of Iraq, a British protectorate.

In 1921, Lawrence advised his minister—Winston Churchill—to "hand over defense [of Iraq] to the RAF instead of the Army." His wartime experience proved to him that a handful of aircraft could control tribal forces, allowing London to avoid bloody ground-force operations. Air Chief Marshal Hugh Trenchard, the RAF chief, supported him on this.

According to Lawrence biographer H. Montgomery Hyde, "The new policy [was] somewhat contemptuously described by Sir Henry Wilson, the chief of the Imperial General Staff, as one of 'hot air, aeroplanes, and Arabs.'" Despite this boots-on-the-ground view, Churchill accepted the "air policing" plan.

"From its creation in 1921 to ... World War II, Iraq was a proving ground for Lawrence's visionary ideas about airpower," Korda writes. "For several decades the principal RAF base at Habbaniya, outside Baghdad, was one of the largest military airfields in the world."

In 1922, Lawrence's life took a strange turn. He moved decisively to abandon fame, fortune, and career, become a humble RAF aircraftman, and simply vanish.

In January 1922, Lawrence opened secret negotiations to enlist under an assumed name. In July, a reluctant Churchill approved Lawrence's plan. Trenchard, by that time a friend of Lawrence's, insisted that he enter as an officer, but Lawrence refused. To Lawrence, a colonel in the Army, it was the enlisted ranks or nothing. Trenchard finally gave in. On Aug. 30, 1922, Lawrence, using the alias John Hume Ross, presented himself at the RAF recruiting office, Covent Garden.

He failed the medical exam, had no birth certificate, and aroused great suspicion.

There was never a doubt he would get in, though. A top Air Ministry official (who was in on the secret) told the recruiting officer to get "Ross" into the RAF "or you'll get your bowler hat"—RAF-speak for "you will be discharged." Within hours, Lawrence/Ross was officially sworn into the RAF.

Why did Col. T. E. Lawrence, World War I's greatest hero, chuck it all and become Aircraftman 2nd Class Ross? Lawrence gave various explanations. He told Trenchard he wanted to write a book about the RAF. When another officer asked why he joined, Lawrence said, "I think I had a mental breakdown, sir." At other times, he said he liked the camaraderie or that he simply didn't know. Others had psychological explanations. The author Robert Graves, Lawrence's friend and biographer, said the hero had come to regard his part in the Arab revolt as dishonorable, and he wished to avoid further publicity and praise.

"There was a tendency among Lawrence's contemporaries to see his decision to shed his rank and join the RAF as a form of penance, but he always denied that," notes Korda. "His service in the RAF, once he was past recruit training, would prove to be the happiest time of his [adult] life."

Lawrence of Arabia, now known as A/C2 Ross, was posted to an air training depot at RAF Uxbridge, near London. "Ross"—33 years old, five feet and five inches tall, with highborn speech and manners—was an odd recruit. He had contempt for parade drill, endless inspections, and physical training.

For all that, Lawrence survived basic and was posted in November 1922 to the service school of photography at RAF Farnborough. He tapped friends in high places to gain early entry to the basic course but otherwise was a model student. Later, a base officer recalled, "Nothing about him suggested that here was the most amazing aircraftman ever to join the RAF."

A Desolate Abomination

The "Ross" fiction, however, was soon exposed. On Dec. 27, 1922, the *Daily Express* splashed the story on the front page. The headline read, "Lawrence of Arabia," after which came, "Famous War Hero Becomes a Private." Soon, Farnborough was besieged by reporters and photographers, generating an unprecedented media feeding frenzy.

"By 1923," Korda wrote, "Lawrence was Britain's most famous war hero and a media celebrity on a scale that until then had been unimagined. It was as if Princess Diana had vanished from her home and had been discovered by the press enlisted in the ranks of the RAF as Aircraftwoman Spencer, doing drill, washing her own undies, living in a hut with a dozen or more other airwomen."

The RAF decided the publicity was bad for discipline. Ross was summarily discharged. Lawrence quickly enlisted in the Royal Tank Corps, hoping he could parlay this into a quick transfer back to the RAF. He took a new name, 7875698 Private T. E. Shaw, arriving at RTC Depot, Bovington, on March 23, 1923.

Lawrence loathed each of his 29 months in khaki. "The Army," he said, "is muck, stink, a desolate abomination." In 1924 and 1925, he pressed high-level friends, including Trenchard, to get him back in the RAF. As of mid-1925, he had had no luck. Wilson, the official biographer, reports "Lawrence's mental state was now deteriorating rapidly and he had begun to think that ... re-entry into the RAF would be the only future worth living for."

In June 1925, a despondent Lawrence sent a letter that its recipient interpreted as a suicide threat. Fearing a huge scandal if Britain's great war hero were to kill himself, Prime Minister Stanley Baldwin intervened.

In August 1925, Army Private T. E. Shaw joined (or rejoined?) the RAF as 338171 AC/2 Shaw.

The next 10 years featured long stretches of quiet, punctuated by massive bursts of "Colonel Lawrence" publicity. Lawrence was posted to RAF Cranwell, home of RAF Cadet College, where officer candidates trained. He was in B flight, an aircraft hand on six aircraft used for training. Virtually everyone knew Aircraftman Shaw's identity, but no one made a big deal of it. In late 1926, the Cranwell posting drew to an end, partly because of a fresh wave of publicity and partly because the RAF required an airman to serve overseas, in India, Egypt, or Iraq.

Lawrence drew India. On Jan. 7, 1927, he arrived at the RAF's depot in Karachi (now part of Pakistan, created in the 1947 partition of British India). For the next 17 months, he served quietly as a clerk in the Engine Repair Section. Then, in March 1927, Lawrence's memoir, *Revolt in the Desert*, was published, creating new press stories about the missing hero. His commanding officer found out the truth and suspected Lawrence was spying on him. Lawrence acquired a transfer elsewhere.

That place was RAF Miranshah, a remote base on the border with Afghanistan. Miranshah was home to one squadron, five officers, 25 airmen, and 700 Indian scouts. Lawrence arrived in late May 1928 and was given simple clerical duties. His peace and



Aircraftman T. E. Shaw (Lawrence) at RAF Miranshah, India.

quiet didn't last long. By September, the British press was printing fictional reports about the mysterious Colonel Lawrence, claiming that he was spying in Afghanistan.

In late 1928, the top blew off. The spark was an uprising of Afghanistan's Shinwari tribe against King Amanullah in Kabul. At this tense moment, the sensationalist *Empire News* "revealed" that Lawrence had crossed the border, met the king, and disappeared into "the wild hills of Afghanistan" disguised as "a holy man," attempting to raise a pro-Amanullah army. It was total fiction, but the tales of covert action stirred fierce anti-British sentiment. An alarmed foreign secretary, Austen Chamberlain, found Lawrence's presence in India to be, as he described it, "very inconvenient."

"Great Mystery of Colonel Lawrence: Simple Aircraftman, or What?" was the question posed by a London newspaper. Lawrence had become radioactive. The RAF pulled him out of India on Jan. 8, 1929, and sent him home. Air Ministry leaders considered sacking Lawrence again, as in 1923. They finally decided to assign their troublesome airman, in March 1929, to RAF Cattewater, a seaplane base near Plymouth on the English Channel. At Cattewater (soon renamed RAF Mount Batten), Lawrence began working with seaplanes, launches, and speedboats. He embarked on a new career in the design, construction, and operation of the RAF's high-speed rescue sea craft.



Shaw (Lawrence) in the uniform of an enlisted RAF aircraftman.

He was self-taught. Lawrence, respected now for his marine knowledge, was invited to write the official handbook for the RAF ST 200-class speedboats. Korda writes, "The handbook remains today perhaps the most concise and most instructive technical manual ever published." It was in use until after World War II.

By March 1933, however, Lawrence had been returned to regular airman duties at Mount Batten. This bored him, and on March 6, he requested a discharge. When the story leaked, a strange furor ensued. Everyone, including senior government officials, assumed Lawrence had been fired. Very high-level inquiries came down on an uncomfortable RAF. Did Lawrence, they asked, have any complaint about his treatment? Lawrence reported he had no complaint and would stay if given something worthwhile to do. Within days, he was posted to the RAF Marine Aircraft Experimental Establishment at RAF Felixstowe. By April 28, he was happily on the job.

For Lawrence, the years 1933 and 1934 were the busiest of his service life. He spent little time at Felixstowe, traveling often to RAF-affiliated boatyards, inspecting equipment. In November 1934, he moved to RAF Bridlington, on the North Sea—his final posting. He supervised the winter overhaul of 10 boats, a great deal of

work for the time allotted, but he did it.

On Feb. 25, 1935, Lawrence presented himself to Pilot Officer F. J. Manning, his commander, for an exit interview. They chatted, Manning signed the discharge form, and Lawrence left the RAF.

He did so with considerable regret, as Lawrence wrote to Air Chief Marshal Edward Ellington, the RAF head. His letter said, in part: "I've been at home in the ranks and well and happy. ... If you still keep that old file about me, will you please close it with this note which says how sadly I am going? The RAF has been more than my profession." Barely two months later, Lawrence suffered massive injuries in a motorcycle crash. He never came out of a coma and died on May 19—not as a hero

who perished tragically young but as a middle-aged "ranker" whose final years were amazingly productive.

A Separate Debt

The list of his achievements in those years is an impressive one.

- Lawrence completed the book on the RAF, first mentioned in 1922; *The Mint* memorialized his training days at Uxbridge (it was not published until 1955.) *Seven Pillars of Wisdom*, his classic account of the Arab Revolt, came out in 1926. *Revolt in the Desert*, an abridgement, hit the next year. He completed an acclaimed translation of Homer's *Odyssey*. All this he did while serving in the ranks.

- Even while doing an airman's work, Lawrence socialized and corresponded with an astounding number of notable political and artistic figures, including George Bernard Shaw, Robert Graves, Nancy Astor, Thomas Hardy, Noel Coward, E. M. Forster, Siegfried Sassoon, William Butler Yeats, John Buchan, and of course, Trenchard, Churchill, and Liddell Hart.

- Acting behind the scenes, he wrote detailed letters to Trenchard, pushing needed reforms. These caused the abandonment of petty requirements such as polished bayonets, spurs, swagger sticks, and puttees. His actions reduced kit inspections to one a month and ended

the demand for airmen to button the top two buttons of a coat. In India, he went bareheaded, proving there was no need for pith helmets. These changes delighted airmen.

- He was instrumental in persuading Parliament to abolish use of the death penalty for cowardice in battle.

- He set up the "Seven Pillars Trust," assigning to it the copyright and substantial income from *Revolt in the Desert*. The trust paid thousands of pounds into funds to educate the children of fallen RAF officers. After his death the trust was renamed the Lawrence of Arabia Educational Fund. It still exists.

- Lawrence, the world's most experienced practitioner of irregular warfare, wrote extensively to Trenchard with advice on how to deal with tribal-warrior incursions and attacks in Jordan and Iraq. This was at least in part responsible for Britain's relative success against insurgencies.

- He used powerful contacts to expose the cause of the crash of an RAF Iris III seaplane, with multiple deaths. The senior officer on board was unqualified to fly the airplane but regulations gave him the right to take the controls, which he did. Lawrence provided facts for the newspapers and testified at an inquiry. As a result, the RAF ruled that a pilot would be in complete command of an aircraft, and no higher-ranking officer could take over.

- He helped construct what became the RAF's Air Sea Rescue Service. He worked on revolutionary designs for RAF rescue boats which, as Lawrence noted, "have three times the speed of their predecessors, less weight, less cost, more room, more safety, more seaworthiness." They were put to great use in 1940, rescuing RAF pilots downed over the English Channel during the Battle of Britain.

Lawrence never escaped his own glamorous past, but his life in the ranks drew this 1936 tribute from Churchill: "He saw as clearly as anyone the vision of airpower and all that it would mean in traffic and war. ... He felt that in living the life of a private in the Royal Air Force he would dignify that honorable calling and help to attract all that is keenest in our youthful manhood to the sphere where it is most urgently needed. For this service and example, ... we owe him a separate debt. It was in itself a princely gift." ■

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