

THE ARAB REVOLT 1916–18

Lawrence sets Arabia ablaze



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THE OUTBREAK OF THE ARAB REVOLT, JUNE 1916

At first light on the morning of 10 June 1916, the call for prayer rang out from the minaret of the mosque in Mecca. This moment had been chosen by the Hashemite leader, Sharif Hussein ibn Ali, as the starting point for the revolt against Ottoman power in the Hejaz. As the call came to its end, he took a rifle and walked to the window of his house and fired a single shot. This was the signal for his supporters, who had come into the city in twos and threes the previous night, to go into action. A Hashemite flag fluttered to the flagpole above Sharif Hussein's house. The Arab Revolt had begun.

Despite the fact that the Ottoman high command in Damascus was expecting trouble and had even begun moving reinforcements into the region, the outbreak of the revolt seems to have taken the local commanders by surprise. In Mecca, the garrison was divided between the Jirwal Barracks on the Jiddah Road and also in the imposing Jiyad fortress. There was also a small garrison in the offices of the Ottoman governor. In total there were only 1,500 or so troops in Mecca as the majority of the garrison had been moved to Ta'if for the hot season.

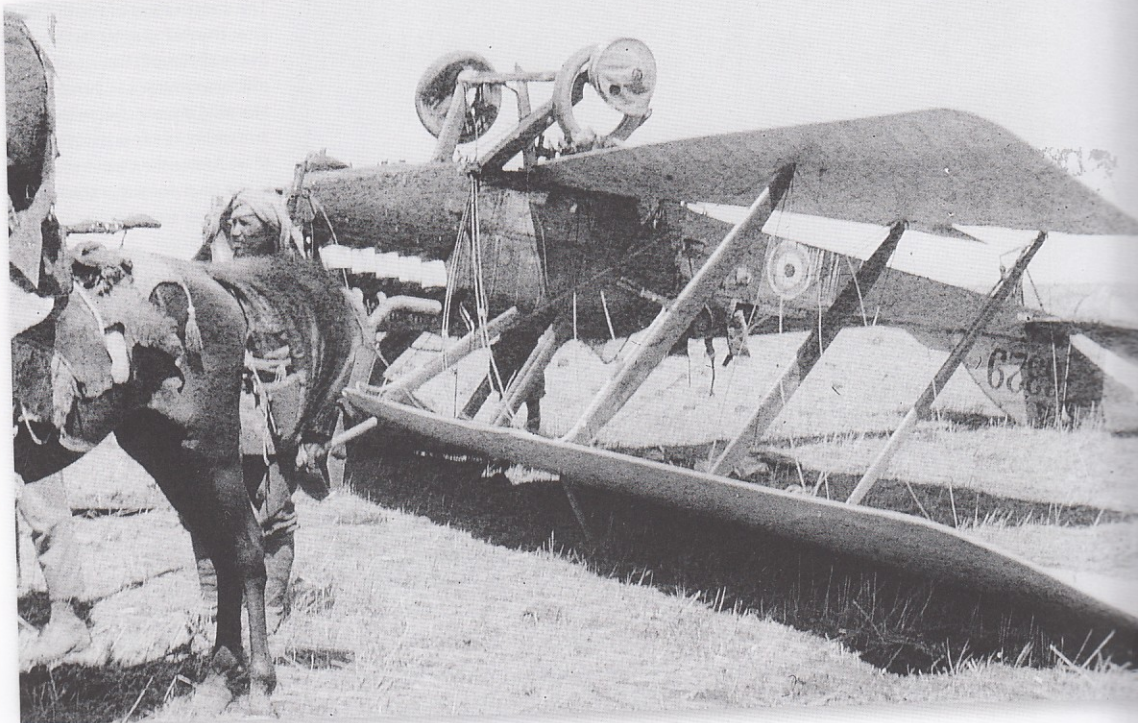


et scene taken in Jiddah
5. (IWM Q58710)



HQ of the French mission at
L. (Bailloud collection, SHD,
ennes)





The crashed BE2 of Lieutenant Junor, which was forced down while supporting a raid on Yarmuk in September 1918. On being shot down, Junor then attached himself to Lawrence's force and helped crew an armoured car. (IWM Q60019)

Despite these improvements this was not a positive time for the Arab Revolt. On taking power in Russia, the Bolsheviks had leaked the full details of the Sykes-Picot Agreement. The negative fallout from this was exacerbated when details of Arthur Balfour's support of a Jewish homeland in Palestine became known. Balfour, who was then the Foreign Secretary of the British Government, had written to Lord Rothschild in early November 1917 stating that the Government supported Jewish claims for a homeland in Palestine.

This letter was published in *The Times* on 7 November. It could not have come at a worse time for the Arab Revolt. Already filled with doubts about their alliance with the British, the Arab leaders now looked to the future with some scepticism. The Ottoman leaders in turn wasted no time and C. Pasha (commander of Fourth Army and Governor of Syria) made conciliatory speeches in Damascus and made contact with the Arab leaders, announcing amnesty for past transgressions. Furthermore, in November a train was ambushed north of al 'Ula and was found to be carrying over £24,000 in cash. It seems certain that this money was to be used to try to buy back the Arab Revolt.

The Arab Revolt had reached yet another critical juncture. Owing to the considerable diplomatic skills of Lawrence and other officers, the Arab leaders were kept on side. The Allied cause was much helped by the capture of Jerusalem on 9 December 1917. To even the most sceptical of the Arab leaders, it was obvious that the Ottoman star was in the descendant. The Arabs also felt that they had a powerful ally in America. In his famous 'Fourteen Points' speech, delivered in a joint session meeting on 8 January 1918, President Woodrow Wilson declared that the 'other nationalities' now under Turkish rule should be assured an undoubted security and an absolutely unmolested opportunity of autonomous development. Perhaps the conditions of the final settlement of the former Ottoman territories could be re-negotiated at the end of the war.

Arab advance on Damascus and Aleppo, 16 September to 28 October 1918



21 he was invited to join the Colonial Office as an adviser on Arab affairs and he took part in the Cairo Conference of the same year. It is now obvious that he became increasingly disillusioned with the post-war plans for Arabia. He could not convert his popular image into political pressure and he ultimately resigned from all offices and, it could be argued, turned his back on the world that he had known. In 1922, Lawrence could probably have chosen to follow a political, military or academic career, but instead chose to join the RAF as an enlisted man, assuming the name 'J. H. Ross'. Hounded from the RAF by press exposure, he enlisted in the Tank Corps in 1923, this time as 'T. E. Shaw'. He would later return to the RAF in 1925 and remain there, as an enlisted man, until his retirement in February 1935.

This enigmatic behaviour has fed public and scholarly interest ever since. Lawrence's biographers have included academics, former soldiers and also psychologists. Numerous reasons have been put forwards for the way he



Lt-Col. T.E. Lawrence, CB, DSO.
James McBey painted this portrait in one sitting in Damascus in October 1918, just after the city fell to Arab and Allied forces. While Lawrence later sat for several other portraits there is a certain immediacy to McBey's portrait and it captures an exhausted Lawrence at the end of the desert campaign (see the photograph on page 76). McBey later recorded that several Arab chieftains came to bid farewell to Lawrence as he sat for this portrait. (Imperial War Museum, London. Art collection 2473)