

## T E Lawrence: his service in the Royal Air Force

Item Type	Journal article
Authors	Gray, Peter
Citation	Gray, P. (2020) T E Lawrence: his service in the Royal Air Force. Royal Air Force Historical Society Journal, 74, pp. 7-24.
Publisher	Royal Air Force Historical Society
Journal	Royal Air Force Historical Society Journal
Download date	2025-05-18 11:16:24
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Link to Item	<a href="http://hdl.handle.net/2436/623513">http://hdl.handle.net/2436/623513</a>

## **T. E. Lawrence: His Service in the Royal Air Force**

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T. E. Lawrence, as the 'Uncrowned Prince of Arabia', has been described as the most 'glamorous figure produced by the First World War'.<sup>1</sup> Although such extravagant statements are open to debate, there can be little doubt that Lawrence achieved legendary status during and after the First World War. As Brian Holden Reid has pointed out, public interest was whetted rather than lessened by Lawrence's decision in 1922 to join the Royal Air Force as an airman and not as an officer. In the event, he spent two periods of time in the RAF with an intervening spell in the Royal Tank Corps. This paper will concentrate on Lawrence's service in the RAF.<sup>2</sup> Like the formal presentation delivered to the RAF Historical Society Annual General Meeting, the paper will focus on issues for which there is evidence and leave the conjecture, which is inevitable with Lawrence, to the discussion period. The paper will examine a number of issues including why Lawrence wanted to join the RAF and why he was determined to enlist in the ranks. The paper will also look at the question as to how he got away with such a radical move (if indeed he did so) and finally reflect on what we can learn about the RAF in the inter-war years through the Lawrence lens.

Lawrence gained fame, promotion and formal decorations (CB and DSO) for his service in Arabia and featured in the movie *With Allenby in Palestine and Lawrence*

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<sup>1</sup> Brian Holden Reid, 'T. E. Lawrence and Liddell Hart', *History*, Vol. 70, No. 229 (June 1985), p. 218.

<sup>2</sup> For a detailed description of Lawrence's time at Bovington see H Montgomery Hyde, *Solitary in the Ranks: Lawrence of Arabia as Airman and Private Soldier* (London: Constable, 1977), ch.3.

*in Arabia* in 1919.<sup>3</sup> He gained considerable expertise in Middle Eastern affairs in general and the Arab Revolt in particular and then acted as a Political Adviser to the Colonial Office. Lawrence then set about his literary career with *Seven Pillars of Wisdom* which was later re-issued in a shortened version as *Revolt in the Desert*.<sup>4</sup> His depiction of life in the RAF was eventually published as *The Mint* and will be discussed below.<sup>5</sup> As will also be seen, Lawrence was a prolific correspondent writing frequently to George Bernard Shaw and his wife Charlotte; to the Chief of the Air Staff (CAS) Sir Hugh Trenchard and a number of his staff officers; to Basil Liddell Hart; and other authors such as Thomas Hardy.<sup>6</sup> Part of the enduring conundrum that is Lawrence remains that, in many instances, he has been his own literary and academic source with corroborating evidence in short supply.

The difficulty in sorting source material has not, however, prevented a 'torrent of biographies' from 'simpering hagiography to heartless hatchet job'.<sup>7</sup> The first substantial work was a deliberate sequel by Lowell Thomas and was followed by more substantial work by Lawrence's friends Robert Graves and Basil Liddell Hart.<sup>8</sup> The volume of material that has followed has generated its own bibliographical industry!<sup>9</sup> The Lawrence of Arabia mythology has come to the point where authors in

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<sup>3</sup> Directed by Lowell Thomas.

<sup>4</sup> T. E. Lawrence, *Seven Pillars of Wisdom: A Triumph* (privately printed in 1926 and then London: Jonathan Cape, 1935) and *Revolt in the Desert* (London: Jonathan Cape, 1927).

<sup>5</sup> T. E. Lawrence, *The Mint* (first published as a limited edition by New York: Doubleday, 1936 then London: Jonathan Cape, 1955).

<sup>6</sup> See the introductory text to Malcolm Brown (Ed.), *The Letters of T. E. Lawrence* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1991).

<sup>7</sup> Justin Marozzi, Review of Neil Faulkner, *Lawrence of Arabia's War: The Arabs, the British and the Remaking of the Middle East in WWI*, in *The Spectator* 16 April 2016. The author is grateful to Group Captain John Alexander for using this reference in his excellent article 'Hot Air, Aeroplanes and Arabs: T E Lawrence and Air Power' *RAF Air Power Review*, Volume 22, Number 1, Spring 2019, p. 88.

<sup>8</sup> See Brian Holden Reid, 'T. E. Lawrence and his Biographers' in Brian Bond (Ed.) *The First World War and British Military History* (Oxford: Oxford Scholarship Online, 2011).

<sup>9</sup> See Jeffreys Meyers, *T. E. Lawrence: A Bibliography* (London: Garland, 1974) and P. M. O'Brien, *T. E. Lawrence, A Bibliography* (Newcastle DE: Oak Knoll, 1988).

many disciplines deploy the name as an instant shorthand for the archetypal hero without necessarily delving further.<sup>10</sup> What is almost invariably missing from this wider literature is Lawrence's time in the ranks. His attitudes towards air power have been examined by John Alexander in the *RAF Air Power Review* and by a special edition Cross and Cockade publication.<sup>11</sup> Although Lawrence in conducting his operations through the Middle East understood intuitively the tenets of guerrilla warfare, the indirect approach and the potential that air power could offer, these factors are not enough to explain his actions in seeking to join the RAF in the ranks.

An absolute account of Lawrence's motivation cannot be reached. But there is broad agreement on a number of factors that will have either directly influenced him or will have been there in the background. The first of these is that Lawrence had experienced a very unusual war with none of form and function of life in the trenches and the very irregularity of dealing with the Arabs against the Turks evidently appealed to his personality. The other side of this coin was his known impatience with the traditional military formalities; as Holden Reid has commented, this did little to endear him to his conventional seniors.<sup>12</sup> A career in the peacetime army therefore seemed unlikely and the known relative informality of the RAF would have suited him. This became the case once he was clear of the Depot at Uxbridge.

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<sup>10</sup> See for example the article on Private Militarized Security Companies in Afghanistan graphically titled 'Drinking Vodka from the 'Butt-Crack: Men Masculinity and Fratriarchy in the Private Militarized Security Company' *International Feminist Journal of Politics* 14.4 December 2012 pp. 450-469. The irony with this article is that *The Mint* would have struck a number of chords with the main theme had the author gone beyond the stereotypical.

<sup>11</sup> See Alexander, 'Hot Air, Aeroplanes and Arabs' and Cross and Cockade International, *Lawrence of Arabia & Middle East air Power* (Compiled by the Society, 2016).

<sup>12</sup> Holden Reid, 'Lawrence and his biographers', p. 3.

Some consideration must be given to Lawrence's mental state, both in the long term and in the immediate aftermath of the First World War. Throughout his life, Lawrence was known as an ascetic with little thought of his own comfort. He did not drink and rarely smoked. His pre-War long-distance walking expeditions through Syria studying Crusader archaeology are well attested and demonstrate his stamina and endurance.<sup>13</sup> Irregular operations are, by their very nature, stressful especially when the enemy has put a price on an individual's head. Furthermore, he had been captured by the Turks, beaten and raped in captivity.<sup>14</sup> Although the conventions of the time precluded active acknowledgment (especially in officers) of Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD), it is probable that Lawrence was suffering from the disorder. A contemporary, Christopher Isherwood, described him as someone who 'suffered in his own person, the neurotic ills of a whole generation'.<sup>15</sup> More recent evaluations describe the main symptoms of PTSD and conclude that Lawrence suffered from 'many, if not most'.<sup>16</sup> The nerves were evident to the Doctors at his pre-entry medical examination.<sup>17</sup>

Having had an active War, the prospect of returning to Oxford as an academic was unlikely to appeal.<sup>18</sup> Similarly, a prolonged period of working as a Colonial Office official were hardly likely to appeal to someone of Lawrence's temperament, especially as the grand strategic level politics of the post-War era were very different

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<sup>13</sup> He walked 1100 miles over 11 weeks – see Andrew Norman, *T. E. Lawrence: Tormented Hero* (London: Fonthill, 2014) p. 21.

<sup>14</sup> See Norman, *Tormented Hero*, p. 46 and Lawrence, *Seven Pillars*, p. 452.

<sup>15</sup> Holden Reid, 'Lawrence and his biographers', p.5.

<sup>16</sup> James J Schneider, 'A Leader's Grief: T. E. Lawrence, Leadership and PTSD', *Military Review* January/February 2012, p. 78.

<sup>17</sup> Montgomery Hyde, *Solitary in the Ranks*, p. 51.

<sup>18</sup> Michael Korda, *Hero: The Life and Legend of Lawrence of Arabia*, (London: Aurum, 2012), p. 492

to how he saw the outcome from Arab Revolt.<sup>19</sup> In the event, he became a civil servant on 18 February 1920 and immediately became involved in planning the agenda for Churchill's upcoming conference in Cairo. Lawrence's advice, as a political adviser specially chosen by Churchill for his expertise in the region was straightforward: 'You must take risks, make a native king in Iraq, and hand over defence to the RAF instead of the Army'.<sup>20</sup> Korda has stated that this stemmed from Lawrence's conviction that air power in the desert could have a disproportionate effect on the tribal forces. In his opinion, 'boots on the ground' would be a waste of time, manpower and money in dealing with a nomadic (or seminomadic) population.<sup>21</sup> The Cairo Conference took place in March 1921 and was attended by Churchill, Trenchard, Sir Percy Cox (British High Commissioner in Baghdad, Gertrude Bell (Oriental Secretary to the Commission) and Field Marshal Allenby (High Commissioner of Egypt). The move to air policing was hotly debated and Lawrence's quiet intervention in support of the CAS that 'Sir Hugh is right and the rest of you are wrong' was decisive.<sup>22</sup> It was in the margins of this Conference that Lawrence first mooted his desire to switch for the Colonial Office to the ranks of the RAF. Trenchard promptly agreed, but as an officer or nothing.<sup>23</sup> There can be little doubt that Trenchard was deeply indebted to Lawrence for this vital support for the fledgling RAF.

Lawrence returned to the charge in January 1922 writing to CAS reminding him of his desire to join the ranks. He admitted that he would need senior support as at 33,

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<sup>19</sup> See, for example, Korda, *Hero*: p. 512.

<sup>20</sup> Korda, *Hero*, p. 514.

<sup>21</sup> Korda, *Hero*, p. 541

<sup>22</sup> Montgomery Hyde, *Solitary in the Ranks*, p. 43.

<sup>23</sup> *Ibid*, p. 44.

he was too old and furthermore, was unlikely to pass the medical.<sup>24</sup> Trenchard effectively agreed to Lawrence joining the RAF subject to the CAS mentioning it to Churchill and clearing it with his own Secretary of State (Captain F. E. Guest).<sup>25</sup> Churchill eventually agreed to release Lawrence in July 1922 and, having asked to meet the CAS, was invited to spend the night at Trenchard's home – hardly a typical start for an airman recruit!<sup>26</sup> Lawrence met Trenchard again in the Air Ministry on 14 August where he was told that the arrangements for his enlistment would be in the hands of the Air Member for Personnel, AVM Sir Oliver Swann. The AMP was less than happy being *ordered* [emphasis in original] to get him into the RAF with 'its secrecy and subterfuge'.<sup>27</sup> Lawrence was duly told to report to the London Recruiting Office on Henrietta Street in possession of two references and was given the name of the officer responsible for admitting him (Flight Lieutenant Dexter).

When John Hume Ross reported to Henrietta Street, Dexter was not there and Serjeant-Major Gee showed him through to the Chief Interviewing Officer – Captain W. E. Johns. They concluded that they had a potential criminal on their hands who had none of the requisite paperwork. Lawrence was then sent off to acquire the necessary documentation while they consulted a selection of photographs of those wanted by the police.<sup>28</sup> Johns (author of *Biggles*) also checked the Register of Births at Somerset House and failed to find Ross listed. Lawrence returned with the references which, presumably, he had written himself. Not surprisingly, he was

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<sup>24</sup> RAF Museum MFC76/1/134, Letter Lawrence to CAS dated January 1922. Brown *The Letters of T. E. Lawrence* p. 192.

<sup>25</sup> Andrew Boyle, *Trenchard* (London: Collins, 1962) p. 429.

<sup>26</sup> *Ibid*, p. 429.

<sup>27</sup> Montgomery Hyde, *Solitary in the Ranks*, p. 49.

<sup>28</sup> *Ibid*, p. 50. See also W E Johns, 'How Lawrence joined the RAF', *Sunday Times*, 8 April 1951.

peremptorily dismissed, only to return some short while later with an Air Ministry Messenger carrying a 'minute signed by a very high authority ordering his immediate enlistment'.<sup>29</sup>

Lawrence still had to pass his medical examination; the medical officers immediately noted his nerves and the evidence of a flogging along with malnutrition. Despite being told by the Air Ministry with whom they were dealing, the doctors refused to pass Lawrence as fit. Eventually, a civilian doctor was brought who did sign. Johns subsequently chatted to Lawrence who knew that his fragile alias had been blown. Johns subsequently warned his opposite number at RAF Uxbridge and according to Montgomery Hyde, the presence of Lawrence of Arabia was common knowledge in the Officers' Mess.<sup>30</sup>

Lawrence spent just over two months at the RAF Depot among what he described as 'a fair microcosm of the unemployed England'.<sup>31</sup> His fellows included ex-servicemen from all ranks along with men from all backgrounds. His letters were mainly on the publishing and editing process for *Seven Pillars* and at various times he worked on the proofs – again hardly usual activity for an airman recruit. In a similar vein he wrote to the AMP addressing him as 'Dear Swann' and excusing himself along the lines that he could hardly ask the hut corporal how an aircraft hand should address an air vice-marshal!<sup>32</sup> Lawrence expressed himself as being delighted to have made the move that he did even though it was evident that he found Uxbridge tough going.

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<sup>29</sup> Ibid.

<sup>30</sup> Ibid.

<sup>31</sup> Lawrence, *The Mint*, p. 46.

<sup>32</sup> RAFM MFC76/1/134: Letter Lawrence to AVM Swann dated 1 September 1922. Brown, *The Letters of T. E. Lawrence*.



Whether this was despite knowledge of his true identity, or because of it is just not known.

During his time at the Depot, Lawrence started making notes for *The Mint*.

Montgomery Hyde has described it as 'disjointed but brutally frank'.<sup>33</sup> Lawrence used the language of the barrack room in a totally unrestrained manner, especially when describing the sexual appetites of his hut mates. He was also particularly harsh in his treatment of the Commandant of the Depot, Wing Commander (later Air Commodore) Bonham-Carter. Lawrence does not give his name but when *The Mint* was published, there was considerable resentment towards him and in defence of Bonham-Carter from former colleagues. Where *The Mint* does strike a real chord is in the universal approval with which the recruits viewed Trenchard. Lawrence described him as the 'pole-star of knowledge' who 'steers through all the ingenuity and cleverness and hesitations of the little men who help or hinder him'.<sup>34</sup>

To the disgust of his instructors, Lawrence was posted early, and without finishing his recruit training, to the School of Photography at Farnborough. Lawrence duly wrote to AMP thanking him for getting him away from the Depot and genuinely looking forward to his training as a photographer, which he modestly admitted to already being very good at. He asked that his regards be passed on to the CAS informing him that his fellow recruits had all been 'devout worshippers' of him.<sup>35</sup>

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<sup>33</sup> Montgomery Hyde, *Solitary in the Ranks*, p. 57

<sup>34</sup> Ibid, p. 64. See Sholto Douglas, *Years of Command* (London: Collins 1966) pp. 144-145. Douglas called *The Mint* 'mean enough in spirit' but described Lawrence's depiction of the Commandant as being viciously unfair. He also decried Lawrence's propensity for writing to the AMP and CAS from the ranks.

<sup>35</sup> RAFM MFC76/1/134: Letter Lawrence to Swann dated 9 November 1922.

Lawrence also asked AMP to intervene on his behalf to start training earlier than Farnborough intended. When the telephone call from the Air Ministry duly arrived the Commanding Officer wanted to be told who Ross really was. He went to inspect for himself and recognised him as Lawrence of Arabia.<sup>36</sup> Word of his 'deception' slowly percolated out from Farnborough, culminating in headlines in the *Daily Express* and a large contingent of press in evidence outside the station gates.<sup>37</sup> Eventually, the fuss grew out of proportion to the benefit of keeping Lawrence in the Service and he was discharged.

As Montgomery Hyde makes clear, Lawrence effectively transferred back to the British Army making full use of old contacts from the desert war.<sup>38</sup> It is beyond the scope of this paper to discuss this period of Lawrence's career, but it should be noted that he never gave up on the prospect of a return to the ranks of the RAF. In 1924, Trenchard invited Lawrence to settle down as the 'chosen historian' to write the official history of the Royal Flying Corps; the CAS was 'dispirited by the promptness with which Lawrence looked this gift horse in the mouth'.<sup>39</sup> He later admitted to his old Oxford mentor that he had only thought about it for a single night before declining.<sup>40</sup> In the meantime, he continued with his annual letters to Trenchard asking, even begging, to be let back into the RAF.<sup>41</sup> Whether genuinely, or as a publicity tactic, Lawrence started to threaten suicide. Trenchard brushed this aside during a visit to his home by telling Lawrence he had better go into the garden so as not to make a mess of his carpets.<sup>42</sup> Others, however, took the threats more

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<sup>36</sup> Montgomery Hyde, *Solitary in the Ranks*, p. 71.

<sup>37</sup> *Ibid*, p. 73.

<sup>38</sup> *Ibid*, p. 80.

<sup>39</sup> Boyle, *Trenchard*, p. 515.

<sup>40</sup> Letter Lawrence to Hogarth dated 9 May 1924: Brown, *The Letters of T. E. Lawrence*, p. 266.

<sup>41</sup> February was traditionally referred to as 'supplication month' See RAFM MFC76/1/134: Letter Lawrence to Trenchard dated 1 March 1924 and 6 February 1925 as examples.

<sup>42</sup> Boyle, *Trenchard*, p. 516.

seriously and George Bernhard Shaw and John Buchan, with whom Lawrence was in regular correspondence and took up his case with Prime Minister Stanley Baldwin.<sup>43</sup> At the heart of the matter was the senior politicians' desire to avoid a further round of publicity around Lawrence. The prospect of suicide seemed to be a more damaging prospect.<sup>44</sup> Even Sir Samuel Hoare's opposition eventually crumbled and it was agreed that he could re-join the Service.<sup>45</sup>

Lawrence, this time in the guise of Aircraftsman T. E. Shaw, re-entered the RAF, again through Uxbridge and was posted to the RAF College at Cranwell in Lincolnshire. He settled in well to the routine of preparing training aircraft and became very well respected for his work ethic, sense of humour and willingness to take on routine duties. Lawrence was quickly recognised by the Commandant Air Commodore A. E. Borton whom he had known in the desert war. Borton was furious with Trenchard for not having warned him that Lawrence was going to appear as one of his airmen.<sup>46</sup> Borton entertained Lawrence on many occasions although always discreetly.<sup>47</sup> Towards the end of 1926, *Seven Pillars* was printed and ready for distribution; as previously noted, it was privately printed and various copies were distributed or sold. The College library was given a copy which it still has and where Lawrence did a lot of useful work on a voluntary basis. He also sent Copy Number 1 to Trenchard with the salutation 'Sir Hugh Trenchard from a contented admiring and,

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<sup>43</sup> Ibid and letter Lawrence to Buchan dated 19 May 1925: Brown: *The Letters of T. E. Lawrence*, p. 280.

<sup>44</sup> Boyle, *Trenchard*, p. 516.

<sup>45</sup> Letter Lawrence to Charlotte Shaw dated 4 July 1925: Brown: *The Letters of T. E. Lawrence*, p. 284. See also Viscount Templewood (Sir Samuel Hoare), *Empire of the Air: The Advent of the Air Age 1922-1929* (London: Collins, 1957) pp.255-258.

<sup>46</sup> Montgomery Hyde, *Solitary in the Ranks*, p. 111.

<sup>47</sup> Ibid.

whenever possible obedient servant'. This apparently gratified and amused the CAS as coming from 'the most disobedient mortal I have ever met'.<sup>48</sup> Coincident with this, Lawrence was posted to India, a move with which he was content as it would remove him from potential press interest which would have been inevitable with the publication of his book.<sup>49</sup>

Lawrence sailed to India on 7 December 1926 and inevitably continued to write letters to his various correspondents and some work intended as a tailpiece to *The Mint* describing the overcrowded conditions on the troopship. John Buchan later remarked that Lawrence's ability to depict squalor was 'uncanny'.<sup>50</sup> Although Lawrence's attitudes to his own comfort have been mentioned, there remains a degree of ambivalence over just how much discomfort he could tolerate. He was clearly content with life in RAF huts, but did not adapt well to shipboard life. His promotion to Colonel was effectively 'engineered by Allenby to enable Lawrence to enjoy a better standard of accommodation on his return journey to the UK at the end of the First World War'.<sup>51</sup>

While in India, *Seven Pillars* received many positive reviews which meant that the abridged version *Revolt in the Desert* sold very well when published in March 1927.<sup>52</sup> From the royalties, Lawrence was able to establish a £20,000 trust for the RAF Memorial Fund (later the Benevolent Fund). It was known as the Anonymous Education Fund intended to produce an income for the families of deceased or

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<sup>48</sup> Ibid, p. 127.

<sup>49</sup> RAFM MFC76/1/134: Letter Lawrence to Trenchard dated 20 November 1926.

<sup>50</sup> Montgomery Hyde, *Solitary in the Ranks*, p. 133.

<sup>51</sup> Korda, *Hero*, p. 440.

<sup>52</sup> Montgomery Hyde, *Solitary in the Ranks*, p. 136. The reviews included a very positive thank you note from Trenchard.

disabled officers. Montgomery Hyde has postulated that in making the distinction between officers and airmen, Lawrence acknowledged the reality that the bulk of the flying, and therefore the fighting, was done by the officers.<sup>53</sup> Again he seems to have kept his head down, volunteering for unpopular duties and writing on every possible occasion. This gave rise to some concerns that he was a 'headquarters spy'. As his identity became better known his penchant for the pen was largely overlooked.

In March 1928, Lawrence completed the final draft of *The Mint* and sent back to England for safe keeping to Charlotte Shaw and then for onward transmission to his publishers.<sup>54</sup> He also felt that he had to inform the CAS of his actions.<sup>55</sup> Trenchard's response was characteristically measured; he acknowledged the veracity of the conditions that Lawrence had described, the language used and the calibre of the men. But he lamented the consequences should the press ever get hold of the work and the effect that their criticism would have on such a young Service.<sup>56</sup> Lawrence promptly replied to Trenchard emphasising that the copyright remained with him and that he had absolutely no intention to publish the work.<sup>57</sup> Lawrence was relieved that the incident had not caused his dismissal and that Trenchard did not 'hate him'. At first sight, it is tempting to question why Lawrence proceeded laboriously to type up the draft and to send it home when he no reason, or pressure to so. It is possible that it was a cathartic process and once clear of the work he could turn his thoughts to

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<sup>53</sup> Ibid 139.

<sup>54</sup> Letter Lawrence to Edward Garnett dated 16 February 1928: Brown: *The Letters of T. E. Lawrence*, p. 366-367.

<sup>55</sup> RAFM MFC76/1/134: Letter Lawrence to Trenchard dated 17 March 1928: Brown: *The Letters of T. E. Lawrence*, p368 -370.

<sup>56</sup> Montgomery Hyde, *Solitary in the Ranks*, p. 159.

<sup>57</sup> Ibid. Letter Lawrence to Trenchard dated 1 May 1928 RAFM MFC 76/1/230. Letter Lawrence to Trenchard dated 3 May 1928 RAFM MFC76/1/230.

other things. The cynic, however, may have argued that *The Mint* was a possible insurance policy against a possible dismissal; but there is no evidence in any of voluminous correspondence to support this and it very much contrary to the nature of his close relationship with the CAS.

The interchange of correspondence also allowed Lawrence to comment on the state of the RAF. It is significant that his relationship with the CAS was sufficiently mature for him to be able to do so. For one thing it shows that Lawrence wore the insignia of an airman, but in no way entertained any distinction between himself and the upper officer corps. It also showed his utter self-belief, notwithstanding his protestations of relief that he had not been sacked. Lawrence commented that he had been enlisted in the Army twice, the RAF twice and had seen inside the Turkish and Arab armies. He considered that the RAF was

‘streets finer, in morale and brains and eagerness. Agreed it is not perfect. It never will be. We grumble – over trifles, mainly customs of dress which you’ve inherited from the older services.’<sup>58</sup>

As Trenchard’s ‘most experienced A/C’, Lawrence went on this letter to describe the RAF as ‘finest individual effort in British history’ and that this achievement was down to the CAS himself.<sup>59</sup>

In the meantime, Lawrence had applied for a posting up country because he was concerned that as his identity became ever more widely known, he could be exploited or bullied and that his disciplinary record could be tarnished.<sup>60</sup> He was sent

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<sup>58</sup> Ibid.

<sup>59</sup> Ibid.

<sup>60</sup> Montgomery Hyde, *Solitary in the Ranks*, p. 163.

up to Fort Miranshah in Waziristan. During his time there Trenchard informed him that his request for an extension of service had been granted.<sup>61</sup> On the negative side, the press had got hold of the fact that Lawrence was close to the border and, in parallel with Soviet propaganda, he was blamed for instigating a local uprising. Despite initial reluctance from Salmond, there was no alternative but to send him home.<sup>62</sup> He set sail home, in less discomfort than on the way out, in January 1929.

When Lawrence got back to England, he was met by just the sort of press scrum that he, his military overlords and political masters loathed. At the base of the reporting was total disbelief that there was no more to the story than that he was a straightforward airman and not on some secret mission. The situation was compounded at the political level by Labour interest in his false name and possible espionage roles. Lawrence ended up going to Westminster to explain in person his personal background (including his illegitimacy) and that he was trying to avoid embarrassment to his mother.<sup>63</sup> Not for the first time, Lawrence made matters worse by accepting invitations from the great and the good, appropriate to his background, but not what would be expected of an airman of those days – in this case dining with Sir Philip Sassoon. The watch phrase ‘backing gracefully into the limelight’ certainly rang true.

Lawrence then entered what was probably one of the most productive periods on his service. He was posted to Cattewater (Plymouth – later renamed Mount Batten) where Wing Commander and Mrs Sydney Smith were in command; Lawrence was

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<sup>61</sup> RAFM MFC76/1/135 Telegram Trenchard to AVM [Sir Geoffrey] Salmond HQ RAF India dated 29 November 1928. Ibid. p. 170.

<sup>62</sup> Montgomery Hyde, *Solitary in the Ranks*, p. 179.

<sup>63</sup> Ibid, p. 184.

already well known to them and became a firm family friend.<sup>64</sup> He continued to correspond with Trenchard giving a 'worm's eye view' of simple changes that would make life easier from the viewpoint of the airman. These varied from the abolition of bayonets at church parades to no longer having to carry sticks. His problem with not avoiding the limelight cropped up a number of times varying from being photographed with Lady Astor to hobnobbing with ministers during the Schneider Trophy races. Lawrence also displayed his capacity for action when an Iris III flying boat crashed into the sound diving into the water in an attempt to rescue some of the crew. In the event nine of the twelve were killed.<sup>65</sup> The subsequent Coroner's Inquest again propelled Lawrence into the limelight, but his, and Lady Astor's, attempts to keep the CO out of trouble worked well. The process also highlighted the urgent need for reform of the air-sea rescue system and its equipment.<sup>66</sup> Lawrence threw himself into this work becoming an expert in launch design, equipment procurement and the trials and testing business. This work took him first to Felixstowe and the to Bridlington where his responsibility and status were well beyond what could be expected for his rank. That said he turned his hand to whatever needed doing without presumption.

Lawrence was finally discharged on 26 February 1935 and was killed in a motorcycle accident soon after.

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<sup>64</sup> Ibid, p. 187.

<sup>65</sup> Ibid, p. 205. The author is indebted to Wing Commander Jeff Fefford for correcting this figure and providing details as follows. Wg Cdr C E Tucker, Sgt E W H Wilson and LACs W H Stark, C G Davies, L C Oates, H C Ongley, W S Rutledge and W G Stevens. The seriously injured Fg Off F K Wood was rescued, but died later that day. Flt Lts M H Ely and C Ryley were injured and Cpl W M Barry escaped unharmed. Lawrence (and Sydney Smith) picked up two of those who survived the impact, the other two were rescued by two other men who had been sailing nearby.

<sup>66</sup> Ibid, p. 207



## Assessment

As was clear from the insatiable press appetite for Lawrence stories, no-one at the time could comprehend why such a romantic and legendary figure should want to hide in the lowest ranks of the RAF for so long. In the quite extensive correspondence between Trenchard and Sir Geoffrey Salmond over his return from India, the latter expressed the view that Lawrence had 'taken refuge' in the RAF. To some extent, the question remains unanswered. Part of the issue may have been his mental state and the possibility of PTSD; over the stability offered by [relative] anonymity in the ranks may have first a cathartic benefit and subsequently a real healing effect. As the years passed his hopes, if indeed he really did aspire to anonymity of remaining in the shadows receded. As was clear from his earliest contacts with Trenchard and his AMP, Lawrence never really attempted to do more than act the masquerade: he never really internalised the persona of an airman even though he adequately performed the tasks. This is evident from some of his 'supplication' letters which Lawrence signed as 'T E Shaw ex TEL TER'.<sup>67</sup> In other correspondence with Trenchard he used 'T E Lawrence' and 'TE?'.<sup>68</sup> His remarkable habit of attracting attention by 'backing into the limelight' is ample evidence of his avoidance of anonymity as was his never ending stream of correspondence; it was improbable that he would be lost from sight ever.

Sir Samuel Hoare as Secretary of State for Air could not work out the Lawrence enigma going to the point of inviting him alone to dinner to see if he would accept a more senior appointment. Lawrence refused and left stating that as he had no

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<sup>67</sup> RAFM MFC76/1/134: Letter Lawrence to Trenchard dated 6 February 1925.

<sup>68</sup> RAFM MFC76/1/134: Letter Lawrence to Trenchard dated 28 March 1923 and undated letter from Bovington.

money, he would spend the night on a seat on Embankment. Hoare has admitted that he did not know whether or not Lawrence did so, but very shrewdly concluded that 'he wished to appear, the man of mystery whose mind was not to be explained by ordinary standards, and who delighted in shocking the Philistines by the unexpectedness of his actions'.<sup>69</sup> Others were more dismissive; Sholto Douglas commented that he little more than nuisance.<sup>70</sup> Trenchard would not have agreed, fully realising the debt he and his fledgling service, owed to Lawrence for preparatory work on Churchill before Cairo and his interventions during the Conference. It was for these reasons primarily that Churchill some time after Lawrence's death when a memorial stone was unveiled at his old school stated that

King George the Fifth wrote to Lawrence's brother "His name will live in history." Can we doubt that that is true? It will live in English letters; it will live in the traditions of the Royal Air Force; it will live in the annals of war and in the legends of Arabia.<sup>71</sup>

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<sup>69</sup> Templewood, *Empire of the Air*, p. 258.

<sup>70</sup> Douglas, *Years of Command*, p. 145.

<sup>71</sup> Winston Churchill's speech at the Unveiling of the Plaque to Lawrence of Arabia, *The Times*, 5 October 1936.