

Intelligence in Public Media

Behind the Lawrence Legend: The Forgotten Few Who Shaped the Arab Revolt

Philip Walker (Oxford University Press, 2018), 284 pp., illustrations, maps, notes, bibliography, index.

Masters of Mayhem: Lawrence of Arabia and the British Military Mission to The Hejaz

James Stejskal (Casemate, 2018), 304 pp.

Reviewed by J. R. Seeger

The centenary of the end of the Great War has generated a number of excellent books on UK and ANZAC forces in their fight against the Ottoman Army in the Middle East, but the focus on T.E. Lawrence and his role in the Great Arab Revolt has eclipsed the importance of other operations that occurred there between early 1915 and the final defeat of the Ottoman forces in the fall of 1918. This new scholarship, overlaid with existing memoirs and official UK documents, demonstrates the value of special operations to the overall success in what was known as the Egypt and Palestine Campaign.

The two books reviewed here provide an especially useful roadmap for intellectually navigating the complex, irregular warfare campaign managed by British forces. The first, *Behind the Lawrence Legend*, offers a strategic perspective on joint Special Operations efforts and details the roles and responsibilities of dozens of British and ANZAC officers and non-commissioned officers, while the second, *Masters of Mayhem*, delivers a well-written, exciting report on the campaign from the perspective of the various units involved. Together, the books capture the synergistic, interoperable workings of combined Special Operations during World War I and underscore the fact that, while Lawrence's efforts in the Great Arab Revolt were important and certainly heroic, he did not single-handedly bring about the success of the overall campaign.

The Beginning

In January 1915, British officers working for the Egyptian Expeditionary Force Military Intelligence Department (MID) in Cairo deployed intelligence agents far behind enemy lines both in the Sinai Peninsula and along the Levantine coast.^a Their collection efforts focused

a. For more on the role of the British Military Intelligence Depart-

less on military targets, per se, and more ascertaining the morale of Ottoman conscripts and the loyalties of both urban and tribal Arabs. Obsolete coastal trawlers, including captured cargo ships and shallow draft yachts, were used to deliver—and later, to recover—the local British assets and British intelligence officers who were sent to collect military and political intelligence—intelligence that would be used by the military command in Cairo in determining the plans and intentions of Ottoman forces across the Suez Canal.

In his memoir *Hard Lying—Eastern Mediterranean, 1914–1919*^b (H. Jenkins, 1925), intelligence officer L.B. Weldon describes in detail his work along the Sinai Coast, initially in a captured German coastal trawler named the *Anne Rickmers*, and later on a seagoing yacht christened the *HM Yacht Managem*. Weldon had strong Arabic language skills and he debriefed agents either on board or by rowing to shore to hold nighttime meetings. While Weldon was executing these operations, another British officer was leading raids into the Ottoman-occupied Sinai Peninsula to collect intelligence and harass Ottoman forces there. In editing the diaries of Col. Alfred Chevalier Parker (aka “Parker Pasha”), H.V.F. Winstone details raids Parker led into the Sinai with small groups from the Gurkha battalion. Parker had been the senior British officer responsible for the Sinai Peninsula and he used his familiarity with both the terrain and Bedouin and Christian monks of the Sinai to lead these successful raids behind the lines.^c

ment (MID), see James Noone, “Military Intelligence in the Campaign for Palestine, 1917,” *Studies in Intelligence* 62, no. 1 (March 2018): 23–39, <https://www.cia.gov/library/center-for-the-study-of-intelligence/csi-publications/csi-studies/studies/vol-62-no-1/pdfs/modernization-of-intelligence-wwi.pdf>.

b. “Hard lying” service is British Navy terminology that identifies serving on ships with less-than-adequate accommodations.

c. H. V. F. Winstone, ed., *The Diaries of Parker Pasha* (Quartet Books, 1983), 52–82.

All statements of fact, opinion, or analysis expressed in this article are those of the author. Nothing in the article should be construed as asserting or implying US government endorsement of its factual statements and interpretations.

As the British Army focused on the threat to the Suez Canal, Turkish and German commands initiated their own unconventional warfare campaign in the North African desert vis-à-vis a surrogate force of Senussi tribesmen. While the Senussi were nominally under Ottoman control, they were in fact an independent tribe under the command of their religious leader, Sayyid Ahmed al Sharif. In *Masters of Mayhem*, James Stejskal describes the Ottoman plan as follows:

The Turks and the Germans brought advisors, weapons, ammunition, and other supplies needed to fuel the uprising. This external support was an essential ingredient to the uprising—both to insure its launch as well as maintain the movement’s will, training, and logistics. Their plan was to conduct a classic guerrilla warfare campaign. (xxxv)

To counter this uprising, the British command in Cairo used ANZAC cavalry; the Egyptian Army Camel Corps; and a newly established unit, the Light Armored Motor Battery (LAMB). The LAMB was made up of 12 armored Rolls Royce vehicles mounted with machine guns and small artillery pieces; the LAMB also had multiple support vehicles known as “tenders.” These armored cars were used as a shock force in the Libyan Desert in support of other British units and in independent operations—including a raid in March 1915 that rescued Allied prisoners held by the Senussi. By early 1917, the Senussi campaign was over, and the armored cars would be moved to support operations in the Hejaz.

The Great Arab Revolt and The War in Arabia and Syria

The year 1916 saw a stalemate in the Middle East Campaign against the Ottoman Empire. British and Ottoman troops were skirmishing in the Sinai Desert but the trench lines along the Suez Canal were nearly as static as those in Europe’s Western Front. British and ANZAC forces had withdrawn from the Dardanelles. The Gallipoli Campaign was acknowledged to have been a disaster for the Allies and a victory for the Ottoman forces and their German advisors. British civilian and military leaders in Cairo and in London insisted on the creation of a new joint intelligence and propaganda apparatus,

which became known as “The Arab Bureau.”^a Focused on political and cultural intelligence in the Arabian Peninsula and Syria, the Arab Bureau produced intelligence reports from operators in the field and initiated multiple unconventional warfare (UW) programs that coalesced into the Great Arab Revolt during the summer and fall of 1916. Both the MID and the British Indian Army commanders responsible for the Mesopotamian Campaign were hostile toward what they saw as “amateurs” who were gaining some degree of traction in the already-complex bureaucratic battles between the two commands. In addition, the British Indian Army Command was concerned that the Arab Bureau would produce reporting that supported the Hejaz tribal leaders, rather than the candidate for British support they preferred, Ibn Saud, who was based in Riyadh.

The focus of the Arab Bureau was to gain a better understanding of complex tribal structures along the Western edge of the Arabian Peninsula, in an effort to prevent Sherif Hussein, leader of the Hashemite Arabs and “Protector of the two Holy Cities” in the Hejaz, from siding with the Ottoman caliph, who had declared a “jihad” against the Allies in 1915. Hussein had his own reasons to break from the Ottomans and assert his independence, but these reasons were ambiguous at best. Finally, in the summer of 1916, Hussein officially declared his independence from the Ottoman caliph.

The Arab Bureau also designed, produced, and delivered political warfare material designed to exacerbate the wedge between Turkish leaders in the Middle East and their Arab counterparts, especially between the Turkish regional leaders and Syrian military and political leaders in Damascus.

In August of 1916, the British dispatched a diplomatic/intelligence team to Jeddah, led by Col. Cyril Wilson. Wilson and his team—including two intelligence officers and a cipher specialist—were pathfinders for what would become the British combined services’ Special Operations in Arabia. Philip Walker’s book, *Behind the Lawrence*

a. For detailed discussion of the origins, missions, and programmatic intelligence efforts of the Arab Bureau, see Bruce Westrate, *The Arab Bureau: British Policy in the Middle East, 1916–1920* (Pennsylvania State University Press, 2003); Yigal Sheffy, *British Intelligence in the Palestine Campaign, 1914–1918* (Routledge, 1998); and Polly A. Mohs, *Military Intelligence and the Arab Revolt: The First Modern Intelligence War* (Routledge, 2007).

Legend, properly starts with Wilson's arrival in Jeddah. Referring to Wilson, Walker writes,

"The doughty officer's job was to liaise with Hussein on diplomatic and military matters, supply him with what he needed, discreetly persuade him to do what was in British interest, and maximize the impact of the revolt on the Turks." (7)

Wilson was the key to operations for the next two years as his job expanded to include more than managing a diplomatic relationship with a very problematic Arab leader. He conducted intelligence operations using a number of British handlers and local sources, and he managed the logistic support for the entire Arabian operation. Using Wilson's position in Jeddah as the book's central theme, Walker details the efforts of dozens of different British and ANZAC members of what became known as the British Military Mission (BMM).

The best-known of the Special Operations was British support to Arabian Desert tribes engaged in raiding operations against Ottoman troops defending the Hejaz railway. The most famous British officer involved in this program was Thomas Edward Lawrence: one of the first to conduct combat operations with Arabs in the desert, "Lawrence of Arabia" served as an advisor to both Prince Feisal and multiple tribal leaders. But while Lawrence may be the most well-known participant, he was only one of several British and non-commissioned officers working "by, with, and through" Arab tribesmen in the BMM. Walker's book identifies dozens of these men, but he focuses on 15 figures on the British and ANZAC side who played key roles, similar to Lawrence's. Walker's view is that, while there is no doubt Lawrence's actions in Arabia at the time were heroic, there were many other players in the same campaign who were equally crucial to the eventual Allied victory against the Ottomans.

Walker's exceptional research—using archival material, memoirs, and diaries—offers intricate detail on the political and social infrastructure that created and supported the 1916–1918 Great Arab Revolt. Perhaps the two most important lessons of Walker's book have to do with behind-the-scenes "political" operations carried out by agents-of-influence in Jeddah and in multiple forward-operating bases on the Red Sea Coast, and the importance of logistics throughout the entire theatre. Walker makes it very clear throughout the book that, without the stalwart Col. Cyril Wilson and his small team of officers working

in Jeddah and along the Red Sea Coast, the entire British effort to support the Arabs would have collapsed under the weight of internal tensions among the local leaders of the revolt.

Logistics in warfare can mean the difference between operational success and failure, but in a desert campaign, logistics can mean the difference between life and death for fighters before, during, and after combat. As the Arab tribesmen and their British counterparts moved further and further north, their operations were sustained by a progressively longer and more complex supply chain managed by a small cadre of British officers. It was the work of a British Army veterinarian, Capt. Thomas Goodchild, who conducted his own special "covert action" to find and acquire healthy camels that would otherwise have been available to the Ottoman Army, and then to ship the camels to the Arab forces. Regarding supplies, the integration of deliveries by the Royal Navy Red Sea Patrol^a (under the command of Capt. William Boyle), management of the warehouses in Aqaba (by Maj. Robert Scott), and, ultimately, delivery to Arab forces using camel trains remains a model of logistics support in unconventional warfare.

Unconventional warfare was only one aspect of the British Special Operations campaign in the Middle East during the war's final two years. As the Arab Revolt expanded and moved north toward Damascus, joint land, sea, and air raids provided support to indigenous fighters. In 1917, General Allenby assigned the armored squadron from North Africa to the Hejaz. The newly named Hejaz Armored Car Section would serve both as an independent mobile force focused on raids deep inside Ottoman lines and also as a mechanized support element to Lawrence and his Arab raiders. This support significantly enhanced the capability of the Arab fighters at a time when they were building sufficient military capability to transition from raiding and attacking the Hejaz railway to formal, planned direct assaults on Ottoman fixed positions. The Royal Navy Red Sea Patrol conducted operations along the coast, delivering and recovering British and ANZAC raiding forces as well as providing supplies to irregular Arab forces. Finally, Allenby also authorized an air squadron from the Royal Flying Corps to provide close air support to the British-guided Arab unconventional forces operating behind Ottoman lines, where they collected

a. For more on the role of the Red Sea Patrol, see John Johnson-Allen, *T. E. Lawrence and the Red Sea Patrol* (Pen and Sword, 2015).

intelligence and worked to recover British agents. This strategy gave General Allenby greater situational awareness of the full battlefield and allowed him to communicate with the unconventional forces in a manner that was superior to the basic wireless communications capabilities of the time. Stejskal's personal experience in Special Forces and his participation in the Great Arab Revolt Project (2006–2014)^a may account for his unique ability to capture this nuanced web of operations, drawing the reader in to the intricacies of desert warfare a century ago.

Conclusion

Authors Philip Walker and James Stejskal provide excellent, authoritative source material that is as useful for intelligence and Special Operations practitioners as it

a. The Great Arab Revolt Project (GARP) was an eight-year project begun at the University of Bristol to investigate World War I archaeology in Jordan, where, unlike Europe's Western Front which had been extensively explored, no systematic investigation had been undertaken. The project ended in 2014, and since then two books on it have been written: Neil Faulkner's *Lawrence of Arabia's War* (Yale University Press, 2016) and Nicholas J. Saunders's *Desert Insurgency: Archaeology, T. E. Lawrence, and the Arab Revolt* (Oxford University Press, forthcoming (2019)). See <http://www.jordan1914-18archaeology.org>.

is for historians of the Great Arab Revolt. The books identify some of the ways Special Operations practices in the WWI Middle East theatre would reappear in World War II—and continue in use long afterward: intelligence cells to collect and deliver tactical and cultural intelligence for the command; propaganda materials to be delivered by agents behind the adversary's lines; intelligence operations conducted deep inside enemy lines, using periodic infiltration and exfiltration by sea and air; jointly managed raids from the sea, focused on both direct action and capturing enemy troops for intelligence purposes; and direct action raids, reconnaissance, selective bombing operations, and enduring methods of agent delivery and recovery.

In addition to making these many parallels visible, the two books add significant depth and breadth to the complex story of the Great Arab Revolt, which has often been told through a narrower, usually Lawrence-centric lens. The books bring to life over 100 new, interesting characters—British and ANZAC—who were essential to the overall success of the campaign, and reveal not only the role the Special Operations campaign played within the larger effort to defeat Ottoman forces in Palestine and Arabia during World War I, but also the many ways in which operations begun then would reshape the way modern warfare is conducted.



The reviewer: J. R. Seeger is a retired CIA operations officer. He is a frequent contributor of reviews.