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LAWRENCE – SEVEN PILLARS OF WISDOM

A book first published 80 years ago is now a best-seller among American officers in Iraq. British army officers already know it because they study it at the Royal Military Academy Sandhurst.

TE Lawrence – “Lawrence of Arabia” –is helping the coalition forces in Iraq understand the problems of guerrilla war in the Middle East. His Seven Pillars of Wisdom is one of the best books on World War I – and still full of handy hints on how to wage a guerrilla war.

Military officers say that this is a good book to be warned just how messy guerrilla warfare can be. It is also a study of how to harness tribal peoples to get them to work together for a common cause. Arab politics has not changed much since Lawrence’s day.

Lawrence also warned on the need to pay attention to Arab sensitivities. You cannot be heavy-handed with them. Their pride has to be respected. Some Americans in Iraq have been slow to learn this lesson and so have clumsily angered local people. Lawrence warned about the need to win hearts and minds,

Lawrence’s military operations showed how a small group of determined warriors can disrupt a mighty military machine. This is still the same in Iraq today.

The story of his book is a saga in itself. It is an autobiography written as a history of the war against the Turks (Ottomans) who then controlled the Middle East.

Lawrence studied at Oxford University and in 1909 made his first research trip in Syria, Palestine and parts of Turkey. Before World War I in 1914 he was often in the Arab world doing archaeological digs.

In 1913 he started work on a study of the seven major cities in the classical Middle East. The book was never published but he liked the title: “The Seven Pillars of Wisdom”.

Turkey sided with Germany in World War I. Lawrence, now recruited as a junior British army officer suggested that the Arabs could be mobilized to fight a guerrilla war against the Turkish.



Lawrence was one of the creators of modern guerrilla warfare.

His British superiors initially disliked the idea. They saw the Arabs as unreliable allies, only interested in their own tribal issues. With trench warfare on the western front, British military thinking was dominated by large fighting formations, large mechanized forces, with large armies fighting each other.

But Lawrence persisted. They eventually agreed and gave him some gold to finance the operation. This was the cheapest military campaign ever fought by the British Government.

Lawrence knew the Arabs and their different ways. They would not fight for a British king but they would fight for their own independence. He managed to unite the different, feuding tribal leaders.

During 1916-18 he led the Arab Revolt. He nibbled away at Turkish control of the territory by such acts as wrecking railway and telegraph lines. Turkish control was slowly bleeding to death.

He helped create opportunities for the main Allied military force in the Middle East (which included some Australians). He himself regarded the campaign as simply a sideshow to a sideshow (with the real battles being fought on the western and eastern fronts).

But he was a colourful, exotic figure at a time of depressing mass slaughter (two of his brothers were killed in France in 1915). It was a story of individual bravery in a harsh terrain.

American journalist Lowell Thomas covered some of his military work. Thomas' reports made Lawrence a national British hero and an international celebrity.

Lawrence was a military genius. He saw how a small group of determined people could take on a huge empire and slowly wear away at its control.

But he was betrayed at the political level by the British Government. The Government made three contradictory deals. Through Lawrence, it promised independence for the Arabs. But it also promised to support the creation of a "Jewish homeland". And it did a secret deal with the French to divide up the Turkish Empire between Britain and France after the war so that they would gain control over the Middle East.

Lawrence finished the war as both a national hero and a very depressed person. He had encouraged the Arabs to fight for their independence and now they were not going to get it.

Lawrence's last major role in the Middle East was in 1921-2, as an advisor to Winston Churchill, who was the British minister for colonial affairs. He helped Churchill create the boundaries of modern Middle East and so he can be called a father of Iraq.

Lawrence was a tragic genius. The remaining 13 years of life were spent trying to find a new role for him. If there were better mental health treatment in those days, he may have led a better life.

He was one of the most famous people in Britain – and one of the unhappiest. He knew most of the VIPs of his day. He had unlimited opportunities.

But he could not find a new niche. He served (under assumed names) in the junior ranks of the army and RAF.

Books lifted some of his depression. Lawrence loved books. He loved both reading them and collecting the finely printed and bound editions.

In 1919 he started writing his memoirs of the Arab Revolt. At the end of that year his briefcase was lost or stolen at Reading Railway Station, west of London. National newspapers alerted the British public to the loss of the "hero's manuscript" but it has never been located.

If it were located, then it would be worth a small fortune. A copy of the 1922 edition of the memoirs was sold in May 2001 for almost a US\$1 million. The original 1919 manuscript would sell for well over that amount.

In 1920 Lawrence wrote a fresh version from memory. He produced a more polished version in 1922. This was privately printed by him and sent only to a small number of people. His friend the prime minister Stanley Baldwin called it a "masterpiece".

He produced another version in 1926. This was also privately printed but in slightly larger numbers (and each now sells at about US100,000).

Ironically Lawrence lost money on the books because they were privately printed in luxury versions as a labour of love. Also, he instructed that all proceeds were to go to charity – and so he paid the cost of printing and got none of the revenue. He was not seeking to cash in on the "Lawrence of Arabia" industry that was making Lowell Thomas a very rich journalist and entertainer.

On May 13 1935 Lawrence was involved in a motor cycle accident near his home in Dorset, southern England. The King offered his surgeon to be part of the medical team to save his life.

But Lawrence died. He died a very poor person, having refused to cash in the "Lawrence of Arabia" industry.



Lawrence said that he did not want a fresh edition of the book published in his lifetime. With his death, the trustees who owned the copyright allowed cheaper productions to be made available to the general public. It has never been out of print since 1935. It is now widely read by military forces around the world – including in Iraq.

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