



T.E. Lawrence (Lawrence of Arabia) and his Concept of guerrilla warfare (Asymmetric Warfare)

Dr. S Krishnan

Assistant Professor in Seeding School of Law and Governance, Jaipur National University, Jaipur, Rajasthan, India

Abstract

If there were a hall of fame for modern military theorists, Thomas Edward Lawrence would deserve a place in it. In his dual role of theorist and practitioner of the art of war, Lawrence demonstrated the power of military theory for developing appropriate strategy and tactics in war. In working effectively with the leaders of the Arab Revolt in World War I, he left insights for forging a successful coalition to defeat a common adversary. By embracing the Bedouin Arab way of war, he was able to develop a theory of guerrilla warfare that still holds relevance today. In light of the above achievements, Lawrence should stand as a model for military officers as they prepare intellectually and emotionally to face the challenges of the twenty-first century.

Keywords: military operation, safe haven, guerrilla warfare

1. Introduction

In the course of time, changing historical circumstances often transform an iconic figure's reputation. So, it has been in the case of T. E. Lawrence. At first his astonishing exploits in Arabia and his flamboyant personality won him the laurels of a conquering hero in England and America. He came to symbolize the values of boldness, military ingenuity, and literary skill. These attributes thrilled the British public, most especially at a time of a war-weariness and a yearning for something to cheer.

There have been few leaders in military history that have caught the popular imagination more than T.E. Lawrence, or "Lawrence of Arabia". Books, movies and recollections of this enigmatic figure have served to cloud the reality of the man and surround him with exaggerations and legends. Lawrence, an odd and eccentric figure by any measure, himself did much to add to the air of mystery about his leadership ability and what he actually accomplished during the First World War. These uncertainties aside, what Lawrence did accomplish while serving as British liaison to the Arab forces involved in the Arab Revolt (1916-1918) against the Ottoman Turks was to conduct an effective military campaign that is a dramatic example of asymmetric warfare, one form of which is guerrilla or irregular warfare. He used his cultural understanding of the Arabs and knowledge of the region, along with significant leadership skills, to guide the Arabs in the conduct of an irregular campaign. Although at best a sideshow in the overall conduct in the First World War, the operations that Lawrence led produced effects disproportionate to the number of irregular troops that participated and served as a supporting operation to the ultimate British victory in Palestine. Lawrence's campaign demonstrated the potential effectiveness of irregular forces against conventional troops and the difficulties that conventional armies face in combating these forces.

Lawrence's exact role in the Arab Revolt, it must be noted, remains a subject of much controversy. Lawrence certainly has had his many detractors and skeptics. There is no denying, however, that Lawrence is worthy of

commendation for his service in Arabia. Not only did he see extended combat in one of the harsher environments of the world, the Arabian desert, but he clearly played an important role in a number of significant military operations. For assisting the Arabs in capturing the port of Akaba in July 1917, for example, Lawrence received a promotion to the rank of major from the British Army and the Croix de Guerre avec palme et citation a l'ordre de l'Armée from the French government. The Ottomans, for their part, offered a five-thousand-pound reward on his head.

In addition to his famous deeds, Lawrence wrote extensively after the war and clearly expressed his philosophy of irregular warfare. While Lawrence is not as well-known as some of the great military philosophers, he did leave a written legacy that influenced future military writers and generals. The principles of irregular warfare that he articulated are still relevant today in the ongoing conflicts in Iraq and Afghanistan. Lawrence's successful waging of asymmetric warfare and his views on the requirements for successful asymmetric operations make him worthy of a look as a "Forgotten Master".

Defining guerrilla war

The concept of guerrilla warfare dates back as far as ancient times. Since the earliest days it has been a tactic of war used by every class of man against those defined as invaders and oppressors. Hannibal Barca's early victories against Rome are owed considerably to how he acted unexpectedly by taking an impossible route through the Alps to ambush the Roman armies. His ruses were so constant, his stratagems so subtle that the Romans felt constantly insecure, off-balance, and on edge. Hannibal was stymied by Quintus Fabius Maximus, who turned the Roman army into virtually a guerrilla force. His forces shadowed Hannibal's marches, harassed his foragers, cut off stragglers, nipped off stray patrols, but Maximus never allowed himself to be drawn into a full-scale fight.

History certainly offers countless examples of guerrilla actions, normally of an independent type undertaken in self-

defense by nomads and peasant bands. They usually resulted in little more than temporary embarrassment to the incumbent ruler or organized invader. In 512 B.C, Persian King Darius attacked the Scythians, allegedly penetrating into their land after crossing the Danube. Greek historian, Herodotus, relates that the Scythians succeeded in frustrating the Persian army by letting it traverse through the entire country without an engagement. Herodotus claimed that the numerically inferior and impoverished Scythian army used guerrilla tactics, which included an ancient version of scorched-earth policy. Alexander the Great encountered guerrilla opposition when he campaigned against the Persian General Bessus, the assassin of Darius III, prior to invading India. This two-year campaign in the Persian satrapies of modern-day Afghan Turkestan certainly tested Alexander to his limits ^[1].

Interestingly, as T.E. Lawrence (Lawrence of Arabia) would say during the Arab revolt, “the terrain better suited our tactics and we waited for them...we had every advantage, of time, of terrain, of number, of weather, and could checkmate them easily ^[2]. Lawrence seemed to have maintained that the Ottoman Turks would have needed six hundred thousand men to control Arabia, but as they had only a hundred thousand they were destined to fail. Consequently, in *Seven Pillars of Wisdom*, Lawrence explained that “the death of a Turkish bridge or rail, machine or gun, or high explosive was more profitable than the death of a Turk. Our cue was to destroy, not the Turk’s army, but his minerals ^[3]. But why did the Arab insurrection become so effective under the tutelage of this eloquent British Army intelligence officer educated in Oxford? ^[4]

Lawrence and his irregular campaign

Lawrence was serving as a British military intelligence officer in Cairo in 1916 when he was assigned to the Arab Bureau of the British Foreign Office. The Arab Bureau was tasked with organizing and coordinating the sporadic Arab Revolt against the Turks that had been ongoing for several years. The intent was that the Arab irregular forces would operate in support of General Allenby’s conventional military operations in Egypt and Palestine that focused on defending the Suez Canal and eventually pushing the Turks out of Palestine and capturing Damascus. Lawrence, who had extensive experience in the Middle East, became the British Political Advisor to the overall Arab Field Commander, Feisal, as well as serving as an active commander of the Arab forces himself. His personal relationship with Feisal gave Lawrence significant influence and was the main reason that he was given the freedom to develop and execute the irregular strategy that was to follow ^[5].

Lawrence convinced Feisal that his irregular troops should not engage the Turks in fixed battles as they had been attempting. Feisal thought that, in order to defeat modern armies, he had to fight them in conventional style. Lawrence

immediately perceived the folly of these tactics and the fundamental asymmetric nature of the conflict. He convinced Feisal that the Arab irregular forces should instead conduct hit-and-run attacks and raids using small, independent, mobile groups of fighters. Lawrence realized that this style of warfare was in keeping with the traditional Arab way of fighting: “emphasis on the individual fighter over the unit, loyalty towards family and tribe before army and a disinclination to accept high casualties” – there was no shame in retreating to fight another day ^[6]. Lawrence’s strategic vision of his campaign was to threaten the important Hejaz railway, which ran 800 miles from Damascus into the Arabian Peninsula and was the key Turkish supply route in the region. A credible threat from the Arab irregular forces would force the Turks to extend their flanks through the entire length of the railway in order to provide security and require that their forces to be dispersed thinly to accomplish this. This had the potential to severely reduce the Turkish advantages of massed troops and heavy firepower while maximizing the Arab strength of speed, mobility and expert knowledge of the desert environment ^[7].

Lawrence began his operations in Arabia with a surprise assault on the coastal town of Weijh in January 1917. The lightly defended town was taken with minimal casualties to the Arabs and this success caused the British authorities in Cairo to realize the potential of the Arab irregulars and to send additional arms, supplies and money to keep these operations going. It also gave the Arab assault, consisting of repeated small-unit attacks, on the section of the Hejaz Railway between Medina and Damascus with the intent of neutralizing the Turkish forces garrisoned there. His forces would appear on camel, with no warning, strike and then retire back into the desert where they could not be pursued. They required few supplies and the speed and endurance of their camels gave them the ability to move rapidly without detection, often between fifty and one hundred miles a day. Lawrence did not want to destroy the railway or the Turkish garrisons. His aim was to force the Turks to spend increasingly scarce resources on guarding the track, continually making repairs to destroyed sections of railway, and supplying the large number of troops spread along the route and garrisoned in Medina with food, water, weapons and equipment. These troops would be unable to advance to Mecca or retreat to Damascus. They would be rendered immobile, of little use against the Arab forces, but unable to be unemployed in other areas.

Through his strong leadership abilities and utilizing deep cultural knowledge, Lawrence coordinated the operations of seven different and independent Arab tribes against the Hejaz railway and launched often-simultaneous multiple attacks at different places with little or no warning ^[8]. In response to the Arab attacks, the Turks had to deploy approximately 16, 000 men in Medina, another 6000 along the key link between Medina and Maan, and a further 7000 men to guard Maan itself. These troops were not fighting – they were essentially a wasted force that was an increasing logistical drain to the Turks. The most strategically

¹ Asprey, Robert, *War in the shadows: The Guerrilla in history*, iUniverse, London, 2002, p.4.

² T.E. Lawrence, *The Seven Pillars of Wisdom. A Triumph*, Anchor Books, New York, 1991, pp.170-288

³ Ibid.

⁴ Ibid.

⁵ W.D. Maxwell-Mahon, “Lawrence of Arabia – the Damascus Campaign”, *Military History Journal*, Vol.9, No.2., December 2012. Available at <http://samilitaryhistory.org/vol092mm.html>. Accessed on 24th November, 2017.

⁶ Michael Asher, *Lawrence: The Uncrowned King of Arabia*, Penguin Books, London, 1999, p.182.

⁷ Ibid, p.198.

⁸ James Barr, *Setting the Desert on Fire: T.E. Lawrence and Britain’s Secret War in Arabia, 1916-1918*, Bloomsbury Publishing, London, 2006, pp.115-116.

important operation of Lawrence's campaign was the dramatic surprise capture in July 1917 of the key port of Aqaba. This was also a more conventional type of attack, but good intelligence, the element of surprise, and a small Turkish garrison, allowed the Arab forces to succeed. The seizure of Aqaba allowed direct contact between the Arab forces and the British forces in Suez and enabled more rapid and effective communication and resupply. Aqaba became a base from which the Arab forces could operate in direct support of Allenby and target the stretch of railway lines running north to Damascus. The Arab attacks continued on the Turkish railway lines until the end of the war, tying down large numbers of Turkish troops that would have been more effective if employed elsewhere. Lawrence's mobile troops captured the key town of Deera and then joined General Darrow's British Camel Corps for the conventional final assault on Damascus in October 1918^[9].



LAWRENCE OF ARABIA

Fig 1

The overall impact of Lawrence's small force of irregulars was significant. During the period of 1917-1918, the Arab forces destroyed 79 railway bridges and hundreds of miles of railway. The Turks had to constantly make repairs while knowing that other attacks would come elsewhere along the line. Although playing only a supporting role to the main British offensive, the 3000-man Arab force compelled the Turks to keep 50,000 troops east of Jordan to protect the Turkish flank. Another 150,000 Turkish troops were deployed in unsuccessful attempts to locate and destroy the Arab forces. When the conventional British forces under Allenby made their final assault on Damascus, only about 50,000 Turkish troops remained to oppose him^[10]. Although Lawrence did not often seek direct combat with the Turkish forces (indeed, he sought to avoid it), the Arab forces killed approximately 35,000 Turks by war's end and captured or wounded a similar number. By war's end, the Arab forces exercised de facto control of over 100,000

square miles of territory^[11]. Although Great Power realpolitik among the victorious allied nations prevented the creation of an Arab state, the dramatically asymmetric results achieved by Lawrence's small and lightly armed force demonstrated the potential strategic effectiveness of an irregular campaign against a conventional army, given the right circumstances and enough time. After the war, Lawrence wrote his philosophy of irregular warfare and explained what factors had contributed to the Arab's success.

Elements of irregular warfare

Lawrence was highly educated and well versed in the principles of Carl von Clausewitz^[12]. The idea of overwhelming force at the decisive point, a battle of annihilation, was well known to him. In the Middle East, however, Lawrence saw that the traditional notions of conventional battle were inadequate. He came to the conclusion that his original belief that irregular warfare was just another form of Clausewitzian warfare was incorrect. Lawrence thought a great deal about the irregular warfare during the war and ultimately developed his own philosophy of this type of warfare. He articulated his own "Trinity", although it was not as thorough and detailed as Clausewitz's version. He postulated that irregular warfare was composed of three "elements" that he labeled "algebraical", "biological" and "psychological"^[13].

Lawrence saw the algebraic element as that part of warfare that was technical and mathematical in nature. It included factors such as space and time, terrain, weapons, lines of communication and fortresses, to name a few. Lawrence applied this element in the Arab Revolt by calculating that the Turks would require more than six times as many troops as they had available to control the Arab territory through which the Hejaz railway ran. The Arabs would utilize the immense space of the desert to maneuver against key targets over a long period of time. Time was seen as a weapon to use against the enemy, wearing down their will and sapping their strength. The Turkish troops would not be able to achieve a decisive battle of annihilation over the Arab forces. Lawrence rightly assumed that he would have the initiative and that the Turks' superior numbers and firepower would be irrelevant given the massive area of ground that they had to attempt to control and their inability to bring the Arabs to battle^[14].

The biological element applied to the human factor in warfare. Lawrence thought that 90 percent of tactics was certain and could be taught; the other "irrational" part was the true test of generals, a view similar to Clausewitz's concept of "genius". Effective leaders had to have an instinct for the right method to use against the best point of attack. The biological element also dealt with relative troop

¹¹ General Rupert Smith, *The Utility of Force*, Vintage Books, New York, 2007, p.168.

¹² Carl von Clausewitz was a Prussian general and military theorist who stressed the "moral" (meaning, in modern terms, psychological) and political aspects of war. His classic guide to military strategy, *On War*, remains essential reading for modern military strategists.

¹³ T.E. Lawrence, "The Evolution of a Revolt", Combat Studies Institute Reprint, Combined Arms Center, U.S. Command and General Staff College, CreateSpace Independent Publishing Platform, February 15, 2014. Available at <http://www-cgsc.army.mil/carl/resources/csi/Lawrence/lawrence.asp>. Accessed on 19th November, 2017.

¹⁴ Ibid.

⁹ W.D. Maxwell-Mahon, "Lawrence of Arabia – the Damascus Campaign", *Military History Journal*, Vol.9, No.2., December 2012. Available at <http://samilitaryhistory.org/vol092mm.html>. Accessed on 24th November, 2017.

¹⁰ John C. Hulsman, "Lawrence of Arabia and the Perils of State Building", *Heritage Lectures*, 6th October, 2005, pp.1-2. Available at <http://www.heritage.org/research/middleeast/Iraq/h1900.cfm>.

strengths. Lawrence saw that the Turks could afford to lose troops, but not equipment along a long supply line; the Arabs, on the other hand, could afford very few losses in men. This confirmed his view that sudden, hit-and-run strikes against supplies and lines of communication were essential, rather than direct battle against superior troop strength. The Arab forces only needed to wear down the Turkish army, not annihilate it. Surprise, based on accurate intelligence to avoid engaging superior forces, was paramount in this type of warfare. Lawrence wanted nothing left to chance and said, about his intelligence efforts, "We took more pains in their service than any other staff I saw [15]."

The third element of irregular warfare was the psychological factor that dealt with the mind and will of both the combatant forces and the civilian population of all countries involved. This is also similar to the "people" part of Clausewitz's trinity of warfare. Lawrence viewed propaganda, or information operations, as essential in irregular warfare. He saw the printing press as a key weapon of warfare and a means of positively affecting friendly morale while attempting to demoralize the enemy. Lawrence felt that the Arab troops had to have the idea that they were fighting to eject a foreign power and to obtain an independent homeland (a goal not shared by the European allies). This belief gave them the ability to endure the losses and privations of the war and provided a psychological advantage over the Turks, who felt increasingly isolated and demoralized, and was a key factor in the success of the irregular campaign.

These three elements of warfare shaped Lawrence's view of asymmetric strategy. He realized that his troops were incapable of defending positions against larger conventional forces or of attacking heavily defended Turk positions. The strategy that Lawrence developed and articulated was to wage a protracted irregular war that would ultimately wear down and exhaust the Turks. Killing Turk troops was not his main aim. Instead, he saw the destruction of railways, weapons and supplies as more important. These material targets were the enemy's center of gravity, although Lawrence did not use that term [16]. After the war, in his major works "Seven Pillars of Wisdom and Anatomy of a Revolt", Lawrence discussed the main principles of his strategy in what he referred to as his "thesis" of irregular warfare. The principles are outlined essentially identically in each work and give a picture of the depth of thought that Lawrence applied in his search for a winning irregular strategy. Although Lawrence was well versed in Clausewitzian theory and the Arab Revolt could be seen as a "people's war", his asymmetric strategy is more akin to Sun Tzu's indirect approach to warfare.

T.E. Lawrence and military thought

According to J. A. English's 1987 essay Lawrence big ideas in the realm of war, war was not only an affair of flesh and blood, but one of ideas. Lawrence's Seven Pillars of Wisdom is more than epic history and an egotistical look at the Arab Revolt from Lawrence's perspective. Its pages hide the profound ideas of military thought that remain relevant

today. Lawrence's military leadership has been compared with that of Napoleon and Marlborough. He is hailed as the progenitor and master of modern guerrilla warfare, from which Lord Wavell and General Orde Wingate drew lessons of strategy and tactics. According to Sir Basil Liddell Hart, the widespread use of guerrilla warfare from World War II onwards can be indirectly attributed in some way to Lawrence [17].

In a truly professional military sense, Lawrence's military wit was due directly to the depth of his personal learning. At age fifteen he began reading what he subsequently described as "the usual school boy stuff," including Creasy's *Fifteen Decisive Battles of the World*; Napier's *History of the War in the Peninsula*; Coxe's *Marlborough*; Mahan's *Influence of Sea-Power Upon History*; and Henderson's *Stonewall Jackson*. Lawrence began reading many treatises by scholars of antiquity such as the Roman Vegetius and the Byzantine Procopius, military secretary to Belisarius, who practiced the avoidance of pitched battles. He studied the tactics of Henry of Navarre and increasingly the Crusades became the subject of considerable interest, ultimately prompting his 1909 four month tour of Syria to study Crusader castles for which he wrote his thesis on "The Military Architecture of the Crusades" [18].

His intellect eventually took him past the tactical campaigns of the past, such as Hannibal, Belisarius, and Napoleon to Clausewitz, to reflecting on Moltke the Elder, Jomini and Willisen. Lawrence began discovering broader principles in Guibert, Bourcet and 18th century thinkers. Carl von Clausewitz, however, proved to be "intellectually so much the master of them and his book so logical and fascinating," that Lawrence "unconsciously accepted his finality" [19]. Thus it was that he came to be "obsessed by the dictum of Foch" that the aim in absolute war was to seek "the destruction of the organized forces of the enemy by the one process – battle" [20]. Lawrence not only read these works but pondered them, and likely argued with the authors in his mind, shaping new ideas of his own.

At this point, his concerns centered mainly on the abstract, "the theory and philosophy of warfare from the metaphysical side" [21]. He would soon find himself advisor to Emir Faisal, son of Sharif Hussein ibn Ali of Mecca, who was compelled suddenly to action to find an immediate link between book reading and tactical movement. The Arab Revolt began initially with abortive attacks by novice Arab tribesmen on Turkish garrisons in Medina and Mecca. Not surprisingly, Lawrence began to accept that it was possible to follow the direction of Marshal Maurice de Saxe and attain victory without battle [22].

Moreover, Lawrence postulated that because Arab irregulars constituted no organized force, a "Turkish Foch" could not really have an aim. It appeared to him that the Fochian idea represented what is described as a highly "exterminative" variety of war, "no more absolute than another" [23]. This

¹⁷ J.A. English, "Kindergarten soldier: The military thought of Lawrence of Arabia", *Military Affairs*, Jan 1987, p.7.

¹⁸ Ibid.

¹⁹ Ibid.

²⁰ Ibid.

²¹ T.E. Lawrence, "The Evolution of a Revolt", Combat Studies Institute Reprint, Combined Arms Center, U.S. Command and General Staff College, CreateSpace Independent Publishing Platform, February 15, 2014.

²² J.A. English, "Kindergarten soldier: The military thought of Lawrence of Arabia", *Military Affairs*, Jan 1987, p.8.

²³ Ibid.

¹⁵ Ibid.

¹⁶ James J. Schneider, "T.E. Lawrence and the Mind of An Insurgent", *Army*, July, 2005. Available at <http://www3.ousa.org/webint/DeptArmyMagazine.nsf/byid/KCAT-6DSP6Y>. Accessed on 18th November, 2017.

meant it was futile for the Arabs to engage in head on confrontation with regular Ottoman forces, or to do what they excelled at, which was harass and retreat style tactics. It reminded him that Clausewitz enumerated all sorts of war, from personal wars, joint-proxy duels for dynastic reasons, and commercial wars. Lawrence ventured that the Arab aim was “geographical, to extrude the Turks from all Arab-speaking lands”^[24]. This geographic element determined the course of the Arab Revolt. Lawrence proceeded to juxtapose “the whole house of war in its structural aspect, which was strategy, in its arrangements, which were tactics, and in the sentiment of its inhabitants, which was psychology”^[25].

According to Liddell Hart, Lawrence “was more deeply steeped in knowledge of war than any other general of the [Great] war”^[26]. He was also, according to British Brigadier General Shelford Bidwell, able to say “as much in one paragraph as Clausewitz says in a chapter.”¹⁹ But if Lawrence’s highly intellectual approach enabled him to master strategy, his tactical skills were founded upon practical experience and an uncanny ability to appreciate a situation rationally. To Lawrence, strategy was “eternal, and the same and true,” but tactics were “the ever-changing languages through which it speaks”^[27].

In 1936, a Western observer noted that General Lu Cheng-Ts’ao, commander of the Central Hopei Communist guerrillas, had a copy of *Seven Pillars of Wisdom*. The Chinese commander stated at the time that he and other guerrilla leaders considered it to be “one of the standard reference books on strategy”^[28]. There is also reason to believe that, even more than Sun Tzu, Lawrence has for many years been discreetly plagiarized by Mao Zedong and his associates^[29].

What Lawrence really did was not devise a prescription for modern guerrilla warfare; his method was essentially antithetic to the compartmentalization of war. Instead, he looked at the whole of warfare to confirm the strategic and tactical courses of action adapting them to the Arabian scene. To Lawrence, war was “antinomian”, subject to rules, perhaps, but certainly not laws and, in accord with de Saxe’s conception of war, as “obscure and imperfect”^[30]. From Clausewitz he also knew that “two wars seemed seldom alike,” and that often “the parties did not know their aim and blundered till the march of events took control”^[31]. He thus mobilized his intellect to compensate for inferior military strength. He was creative rather than methodical in his approach, and he gainfully adopted the tactics of the weak^[32].

The science of guerrilla tactics: lawrence’s account

According to Lawrence, tactics should be based on “tip and run: not pushes, but strokes. We should never try to improve

our advantage. We should use the smallest force in the quickest time at the farthest place. Sure of an unhindered retreat into their desert-climate which the Turks could not explore”^[33].

In Lawrence’s account in *The Evolution of a Revolt*, the first confusion he suspected was a false antithesis between strategy and tactics. To Lawrence, these were “only points of view from which to ponder the elements of war”^[34]. He stated there were three elements, the Algebraical element of things (hecatists), the Biological element of lives (bionomics), and the Psychological element of ideas (diathetics). The first element, or hecatists as Lawrence termed it, appeared to be purely scientific, subject to the laws of mathematics, devoid of humanity, and essentially formidably dealing with known invariables, fixed conditions, space and time, inorganic things like hills and climates and railways^[35].

In the Arab case, this aspect meant focusing on how the Turks would defend the areas to be liberated. In Lawrence’s view, it would take the form of “a trench line across the bottom if we came like an army with banners.” But, he reasoned, “Suppose we were an influence (as we might be), an idea, a thing invulnerable, intangible, without front or back, drifting about like a gas? Armies were like plants, immobile as a whole, firm-rooted, and nourished through long stems to the head, we might be a vapor, blowing where we listed. Our kingdoms lay in each man’s mind, as we wanted nothing material to live on, so perhaps we offered nothing material to the killing. It seemed a regular soldier might be helpless without a target. He would own the ground he sat on, and what he could poke his rifle at”^[36].

In Liddell Hart’s excerpt on Guerrilla warfare, an essay titled “Science of guerrilla warfare” was taken from Lawrence’s account in the desert. The Arab Revolt, according to Lawrence, began in June 1916, with an attack by the “half-armed and inexperienced tribesmen upon the Turkish garrisons in Medina and about Mecca.” They met with little to no success, and after some effort withdrew out of range and started a blockade. This method forced the early Turkish surrender of Mecca and at this point the campaign remained stagnant for several weeks. The Turks prepared to send an expeditionary force to Mecca, to crush the revolt at its source, and accordingly moved an army corps to Medina by rail^[37].

The Turks began to advance down from Medina to Mecca, a distance of about 250 miles. They came to a belt of hills twenty miles wide, in which were Feisal’s Arab tribesmen standing on the defensive, “next a level stretch, for 70 miles along the coastal plain to Rabegh, rather more than half-way”^[38]. Rabegh is a port on the Red Sea, with good anchorage for ships, and because of its placement was regarded as the key to Mecca. Here lay Sharif Ali, Feisal’s

²⁴ Ibid.

²⁵ Ibid.

²⁶ Encyclopedia Britannica, 14th ed. 1929. The entry for ‘Guerilla’ contains, ‘Science of Guerilla Warfare’, signed ‘T. E. La’ (pp. 950-953). The text of this article was edited by B. H. Liddell Hart from T. E. Lawrence’s writings on the subject (see T. E. Lawrence to his biographer Liddell Hart, pp. 1-4).

²⁷ Ibid.

²⁸ Ibid.

²⁹ Ibid.

³⁰ T.E. Lawrence, “The Evolution of a Revolt”, Combat Studies Institute Reprint, Combined Arms Center, U.S. Command and General Staff College, CreateSpace Independent Publishing Platform, February 15, 2014.

³¹ Ibid.

³² Ibid.

³³ T.E. Lawrence, *The Seven Pillars of Wisdom*, Anchor Books, New York, 1991, p.337

³⁴ T.E. Lawrence, “The Evolution of a Revolt”, *The Army Quarterly*, Vol.1, October 1920, pp.55-69.

³⁵ Ibid, pp.60-69.

³⁶ T.E. Lawrence, *The Seven Pillars of Wisdom*, Anchor Books, New York, 1991, p.192.

³⁷ Encyclopedia Britannica, 14th ed. 1929. The entry for ‘Guerilla’ contains, ‘Science of Guerilla Warfare’, signed ‘T. E. La’ (pp. 950-953). The text of this article was edited by B. H. Liddell Hart from T. E. Lawrence’s writings on the subject (see T. E. Lawrence to his biographer Liddell Hart, pp. 1-4).

³⁸ Ibid.

eldest brother, with more tribal forces, and “the beginning of an Arab regular army, formed from officers and men of Arab blood who had served in the Turkish Army”^[39]. Lawrence describes “as was almost inevitable in view of the general course of military thinking since Napoleon, the soldiers of all countries looked only to the regulars to win the war. Military opinion was obsessed by the dictum of Foch that the ethic of modern war is to seek for the enemy’s army, his centre of power, and destroy it in battle. Irregulars would not attack positions and so they were regarded as incapable of forcing a decision”^[40].

While these Arab regulars were still being trained, the Ottoman Turks suddenly began their advance on Mecca. They broke through the hills in 24 hours, and “so proved the second theorem of irregular war, namely, that irregular troops are as unable to defend a point or line as they are to attack it”^[41]. To Lawrence, the Turkish army was “an accident, not a target. Our true strategic aim was to seek its weakest link, and bear only on that until time made the mass of it fall.” Lawrence explained that the “Arab army must impose the longest possible passive defense on the Turks (this being the most materially expensive form of war) by extending its own front to the maximum. Tactically, it must develop a highly mobile, equipped type of force, of the smallest size, and use it successively at distributed points of the Turkish line, to make the Turks reinforce their occupying posts beyond the economic minimum. The power of this striking force would not be reckoned simply by its strength. The ratio between number and area determined the character of the war, and by having five times the mobility of the Turks the Arabs could be on terms with them with one-fifth their number”^[42].

Lawrence correlated the desert fighting style of guerrilla warfare to naval warfare. “In character these operations were like naval warfare, in their mobility, their ubiquity, their independence of bases and communications, in their ignoring of ground features, of strategic areas, of fixed directions, of fixed points”^[43]. Lawrence went on saying that “he who commands the sea is at great liberty, and may take as much or as little of the war as he will and he who commands the desert is equally fortunate”^[44]. Camel raiding-parties are like self-contained like ships. They could cruise securely along the enemy’s land-frontier, just out of sight of his posts along the edge of cultivation, and tap or raid into his lines where it seemed easiest and benefiting, with a sure retreat always behind them into an element which the Turks could not enter.

Lawrence concludes in the excerpt that “rebellion must have an unassailable base, something guarded not merely from attack, but from the fear of it: such a base as the Arab revolt had in the Red Sea ports, the desert, or in the minds of men converted to its creed.” It must compose of a sophisticated alien enemy, in the form of “a disciplined army of occupation too small to fulfill the doctrine of acreage: too few to adjust number to space, in order to dominate the whole area effectively from fortified posts.” It must have a “friendly population, not actively friendly, but sympathetic to the point of not betraying rebel movements to the enemy.

Rebellions can be made by 2% active in a striking force, and 98% passively sympathetic.” The active rebels must have the qualities of “speed and endurance, ubiquity and independence of arteries of supply. They must have the technical equipment to destroy or paralyze the enemy’s organized communications, for irregular war is fairly Willisen’s definition of strategy, ‘the study of communication’, in its extreme degree, of attack where the enemy is not”^[45].

Lawrence ends his thesis summarizing rebel warfare as “granted mobility, security (in the form of denying targets to the enemy), time, and doctrine (the idea to convert every subject to friendliness), victory will rest with the insurgents, for the algebraical factors are in the end decisive, and against them perfections of means and spirit struggle quite in vain”^[46]. The common dispositions in Lawrence’s work seem to list the following requirements for a successful guerilla campaign: an unassailable physical or emotional base; a relatively friendly local population; mobility, flexibility and endurance; the ability to inflict damage on the enemy’s ability of communication; and, lastly, an enemy too few in number to successfully occupy the territory of concern.

The legacy of the desert campaign in military theory

According to historian Lawrence James, Lawrence did not invent the concept of the Arab guerrilla war, although after the war he provided it with an elaborate intellectual justification in terms of military theory. The idea of utilizing Arab irregulars as guerrillas was originated before the start of the revolt. Major Bray, an Indian officer who had served in Hejaz, Sir William Robertson, the chief of the Imperial General Staff, and Austen Chamberlain, Secretary of State for India, discussed the idea in November 1916. Robertson opened the exchange stating, “I hear you are one of those fellows who think the Arab is no damn good at all?” “No sir, I think that you cannot expect them, in their present state of organization, to hold trenches against disciplined troops, but as guerrilla fighters they will be splendid”^[47].

If Clausewitz’s formulation is a classic expression of guerrilla tactics as part of modern warfare, T.E Lawrence is often credited with the first theoretical contribution to understanding guerrilla warfare as a political movement furthered through unconventional tactics rather than as a military tactic supplementary to conventional warfare. According to Lt Col Frederick Wilkins, Lawrence “almost converted the tactics of guerrilla warfare into a science and claimed that no enemy could occupy a country employing guerrilla warfare unless every acre of land could be occupied with troops.” He elaborates, “in Seven Pillars of Wisdom, Lawrence explained the plan that eventually defeated the Turks in Arabia. In the Turkish Army, materiel was scarce and precious, men more plentiful than equipment...the aim should be to destroy not the army but the materiel. Eventually, 35,000 Turkish casualties resulted from the new change in methods, but they were incidental to the attack on enemy material. The plan was to convince the Turks they could not stay, rather than to drive them out. The

³⁹ Ibid.

⁴⁰ Ibid.

⁴¹ Ibid.

⁴² Ibid.

⁴³ Ibid.

⁴⁴ Ibid.

⁴⁵ T.E. Lawrence, *The Seven Pillars of Wisdom*, Anchor Books, New York, 1991, p.192.

⁴⁶ T.E Lawrence, “The Evolution of a Revolt”, *The Army Quarterly*, Vol.1, October 1920, pp.55-69.

⁴⁷ Lawrence James, *The Golden Warrior: The Life And Legend Of Lawrence Of Arabia*, Skyhorse, New York, 2008, p.139.

Turkish position gradually became impossible in Arabia. Garrisons withered and the effectiveness of the Turkish field force was largely on paper as the necessity for feeding the scattered units placed a heavy drain on the already burdened enemy supply system”^[48].

Of all who understood this was Cuban revolutionary, Che Guevara, who, like Lawrence, understood that the most important immediate impact of guerrillas need not be military. Rather, by maintaining systematic pressure on isolated enemy posts as well as supply convoys and communications by striking from any point of the compass, at any time, “the guerrilla eroded the strength and morale of the enemy forces”^[49]. Similarly in Arabia, the energetic political work among the local populace developed invaluable military intelligence networks and sources of material support and personnel while winning over popular support for the insurgent cause. Thus, guerrilla warfare provided an ideal instrument for revolutionary political struggle when confronted against superior armed military forces^[50].

Legacy and significance

Lawrence is not as well-known as many of the great military leaders or philosophers. His Arabian exploits, while popular with the public, did not receive the same attention of historians as the great battles on the European mainland. Lawrence was neither the first nor the last to develop and implement a theory of irregular warfare. He did not write volumes about military strategy and is not well-known as the greats like Sun Tzu, Jomini, or Clausewitz. He did, however, have an impact on both the public imagination and the study and practice of asymmetric warfare that continues to the present day.

Lawrence’s experiences and writings have influenced several commanders and military theorists in the last 80 years. In a 1946 interview, Vo Nguyen Giap, the Vietnamese general who orchestrated the insurgency that led to the military defeat of both the French and the Americans, stated, “My fighting gospel is T.E. Lawrence’s Seven Pillars of Wisdom. I am never without it”^[51]. The eminent British military writer, Basil Liddell Hart, advocate of maneuver warfare and armoured forces, was Lawrence’s biographer and friend and considered him a military genius. He saw Lawrence’s irregular strategy as a validation of his own notion of the “indirect approach” to warfare and an indictment of the attritional methods used on the Western Front during the First World War^[52]. The prominent American counter-insurgency writer, John Nagl, was heavily influenced by Lawrence’s writings and titles his book after Lawrence’s statement in Seven Pillars of Wisdom that for conventional armies, making “war on rebellion was messy and slow, like eating soup with a knife”

^[53]. Nagl also wrote the forward to the new U.S. counter-insurgency manual and Lawrence’s influence is apparent throughout that document. Lawrence’s significance is that he both conducted and wrote about successful irregular warfare and developed and articulated clear principles that can be applied to other asymmetric conflicts. His philosophy on irregular warfare complements the writings of many others, such as Sun Tzu, and is simple to comprehend and emulate.

Lawrence’s primary legacy is the vivid demonstration of the potential effectiveness of irregular troops in a protracted struggle against a conventional force. It is true that Lawrence’s exploits took place in a sideshow to a small campaign that was part of a much larger war in Europe. The Middle East was never the point of main effort for any of the great powers engaged in that war. Lawrence showed, however, that small mobile forces deploying from and returning to safe havens, attacking when and where they like, could have a significant impact against larger better-equipped armies that relied on conventional weapons and tactics and were denied the chance for a decisive battle. The longer the struggle persisted, the more effective the irregular forces became. The Vietnamese, Communist Chinese and other successful insurgencies since the Arab Revolt have replicated and validated Lawrence’s example of asymmetric warfare.

Conclusion

The legend of T.E. Lawrence, or “Lawrence of Arabia”, was a creation of both his real exploits and extensive media exposure, much of dubious accuracy. Lawrence’s eccentric personality and behavior added to the mystery about what really happened in the desert from 1916-1918. The reality is that Lawrence, assisting the Arab forces facing the Turks, conceived and executed a two-year irregular warfare military campaign that is a dramatic example of asymmetric warfare. His cultural and personal qualities gave him influence and motivated the Arab fighters to follow an outsider. In a difficult and harsh operational environment, he seized and maintained the initiative, capitalizing on his advantages of speed and mobility. He caused the Turks to expend huge amounts of resources and allocate numbers of troops to guard fixed outposts and lines of communication out of all proportions to the personnel that Lawrence employed. More importantly, he prevented those forces from being used elsewhere in a more effective manner. The irregular Arab forces were essentially pinning down the Turks through an asymmetric strategy. Although his operations were only a small supporting piece in the overall conduct of the First World War, Lawrence’s campaign demonstrated the potential effectiveness of irregular forces against conventional troops and the difficulties that conventional armies face in combating these forces.

In addition to his military accomplishments, Lawrence wrote extensively after the war and clearly expressed his philosophy of irregular warfare. While Lawrence is not as well-known as some of the great military philosophers, he did leave a written legacy that included simple and insightful principles of irregular warfare, principles that irregular forces around the world are applying today. His

⁴⁸ Che Guevara., B. Loveman & T. Davies, *Guerrilla Warfare*, University of Nebraska Press, Nebraska, 1985, pp.3-4.

⁴⁹ Ibid.

⁵⁰ Ibid.

⁵¹ James J. Schneider, “T.E. Lawrence and the Mind of An Insurgent”, *Army*, July, 2005. Available at <http://www3.ousa.org/webint/DeptArmyMagazine.nsf/byid/KCAT-6DSP6Y>. Accessed on 18th November, 2017.

⁵² John Shy and Thomas W. Collier, “Revolutionary War”, in Peter Paret. Ed., *Makers of Modern Strategy from Machiavelli to the Nuclear Age*, Princeton University Press, Princeton, New Jersey, 1986, p.832.

⁵³ Peter Maas, “Professor Nagl’s War”, *New York Times*, 11th January, 2004. Available at <http://query.nytimes.com/gst/fullpage.htm>. Accessed on 2nd December, 2017.

writings influenced future military writers and generals and the principles of irregular warfare that he outlined are still relevant for insurgent and counter-insurgent alike in the ongoing asymmetric conflicts such as those in Iraq and Afghanistan. Although not as well-known as some, except for some inaccurate movie portrayals, Lawrence's successful waging of asymmetric warfare and his principles for successful asymmetric operations make him a "Forgotten Master" whose relevance will continue to be significant for the small scale conflicts that are currently part of this world and appear to remain so in the near and medium term.

References

1. Asprey, Robert, *War in the shadows: The Guerrilla in history*, iUniverse, London, 2002, p.4.
2. Lawrence TE. *The Seven Pillars of Wisdom. A Triumph*, Anchor Books, New York, 1991, 170-288.
3. WD. Maxwell-Mahon, "Lawrence of Arabia – the Damascus Campaign", *Military History Journal*, Vol.9, No.2., 2012. Available at <http://samilitaryhistory.org/vol092mm.html>. Accessed on 24th November, 2017.
4. Michael Asher, *Lawrence: The Uncrowned King of Arabia*, Penguin Books, London, 1999, 182.
5. James Barr. *Setting the Desert on Fire: T.E. Lawrence and Britain's Secret War in Arabia, 1916-1918*, Bloomsbury Publishing, London, 2006, 115-116.
6. Maxwell-Mahon WD. *Lawrence of Arabia – the Damascus Campaign*, *Military History Journal*, Vol.9, 2012. Available at <http://samilitaryhistory.org/vol092mm.html>. Accessed on 24th November, 2017.
7. John Hulsman C. *Lawrence of Arabia and the Perils of State Building*", *Heritage Lectures*, 6th October, 2005, pp.1-2. Available at <http://www.heritage.org/research/middleeast/Iraq/hl900.cfm>.
8. General Rupert Smith, *The Utility of Force*, Vintage Books, New York, 2007, p.168.
9. Lawrence TE. "The Evolution of a Revolt", *Combat Studies Institute Reprint*, Combined Arms Center, U.S. Command and General Staff College, CreateSpace Independent Publishing Platform, February 15, 2014. Available at <http://www-cgsc.army.mil/carl/resources/csi/Lawrence/lawrence.asp>. Accessed on 19th November, 2017.
10. James Schneider JTE. *Lawrence and the Mind of An Insurgent*", *Army*, 2005. Available at <http://www3.USA.org/webint/DeptArmyMagazine.nsf/byid/KCAT6DSP6Y>. Accessed on 18th November, 2017.
11. English JA. *Kindergarten soldier: The military thought of Lawrence of Arabia*", *Military Affairs*, Jan 1987, p.7.
12. *Encyclopedia Britannica*, 14th ed. 1929.
13. Lawrence TE. *The Evolution of a Revolt*", *The Army Quarterly*. 1920; 1:55-69.
14. Lawrence James. *The Golden Warrior: The Life and Legend of Lawrence of Arabia*, Skyhorse, New York, 2008, 139.
15. Che Guevara B, Loveman T. Davies, *Guerrilla Warfare*, University of Nebraska Press, Nebraska, 1985, pp.3-4.
16. James Schneider J. "T.E. Lawrence and the Mind of An Insurgent", *Army*, July, 2005. Available at <http://www3.USA.org/webint/DeptArmyMagazine.nsf/byid/KCAT-6DSP6Y>. Accessed on 18th November, 2017.
17. John Shy, Thomas Collier W. "Revolutionary War", in

Peter Paret. Ed., *Makers of Modern Strategy from Machiavelli to the Nuclear Age*, Princeton University Press, Princeton, New Jersey, 1986, p.832.

18. Peter Maas. *Professor Nagl's War*", *New York Times*, 2004. Available at <http://query.nytimes.com/gst/fullpage.htm>. Accessed on 2nd December, 2017.