



Tassili des Ajjers – Author, Septfontaine, Wikimedia

***Most wars were wars of contact. Ours should be a war of detachment.
We were to contain the enemy by the silent threat of a vast unknown desert.
— T. E. Lawrence, Seven Pillars of Wisdom***

Yvonne

My bodyguard of fifty Arab tribesmen. . . are more splendid than a tulip garden.

— T. E. Lawrence, *Seven Pillars of Wisdom*

We walked hand in hand through the *allée* of trees admiring the glistening reflections of the canal, a mirror image of the sky, grey and silver clouds swiftly moving in shifting shadowy light.

“We didn’t leave a note,” Giovanni said, “When Céline comes back, she won’t know where we are.”

“Our blanket and basket are there. She’ll wait.”

“The canal must be over a kilometer long,” Giovanni said. “It’s like Versailles.”

“It’s like Versailles because Château de Vaux-le-Vicomte, Fontainebleau, St. Cloud, Champs Elysées, and Sceaux were all designed by the same landscape architect, André Le Nôtre.”

Hand in hand we walked along an *allée* of tall poplars along the canal and then down another narrow *allée* of trees and then down another. There are endless corridors of trees at Sceaux.



Parc de Sceaux, allée of poplar trees. Market.jz, Shutterstock

“The pathways through the trees are like tunnels,” Giovanni said. “They make me feel like going running. What’s that?” he said pointing to a meadow beyond. “Is that sheep and goats? Some have big horns.”

“That’s a *bouc*.”

“A *bouc*?”

“A *bouc* is a male goat. A *chèvre* is a female.

“I haven’t seen any goats since I left Viterbo. I’m feeling homesick for goats.”

“Let’s go see them,” I laughed.



Boucs, male goats – Ouest-France

“They have fabulous coats,” Giovanni observed, “shaggy hair and curved horns one-half meter long. I’ll bet the males butt heads competing for the females during the mating season. With their long white beards, *boucs* look like wise old men.”

“A day with a threatening sky,” I said, “is the perfect time to Sceaux. There’s hardly anyone around. The sun and the clouds are at war.”



Veronique Meflah, Shutterstock

“I like,” he said, “the sculpture of the god pursuing the naked nymph.”

“That’s Daphne fleeing from Apollo. I think its by Bernini.”

“I remember the nymph Daphne. Her father transformed her into a Laurel tree to save her from an obsessed Apollo.”

“Come, I want to show you the garden house, the Pavillion de l’Aurore. Let’s run.”

I raced Giovanni and beat him to the pavillion.

“Superb!” he said out of breath. It’s a miniature version of a chateau. I love the stone fountain in stone. The face of the satyr is so real. He could come alive any minute.”

“The Pavillion de l’Aurore,” I said, “was where Anne the Duchess of Maine held her salons in the 17th century. The original chateau, built for Louis XIV’s finance minister Jean-Baptiste Colbert, was destroyed during the Revolution. Thank goodness, the pavillion survived the Revolution which destroyed so many historic buildings. Designed in the classical style of Palladio, the pavillion has four wings like a Maltese cross with a magnificent dome centered over the intersection of the wings.



Parc de Sceaux, Pavillion de l’Aurore - Author, Picssr

“The intellectuals and artists of France came to Anne’s salons to debate politics, art, philosophy, and enjoy opera-ballets, *les Grandes Nuits de Sceaux* — music festivals where great musicians performed. When Voltaire was a young man, he often came to Anne’s salons to debate ideas with the best minds of France. If the pavillion weren’t closed today, you could see the magnificent *fresque* on the domed ceiling painted by Le Brun.”

“Le Brun?”

“Le Brun was the chief decorator of Versailles and court painter of Louis XIV. Colbert requested Le Brun to paint *Aurore*, the goddess of the dawn, as a metaphor for Louis XIV who was *le Roi-Soleil* — the sun king.



Pavillon de l’Aurore, fresque by Le Brun – VisitParisRegion.com

“It’s the same word in Italian,” Giovanni said. “*Aurora* — the coming of the sun. The pavillion looks bigger than it really is because of its height and massive stairs. Look at the odd patterns and colors of the Pavers — surprising for a formal building — gives it a whimsical air. L’Aurore is a miniature chateau awaiting the arrival of Beauty and the Beast.”

A few drops of rain fell on my face. Giovanni kissed my damp nose. “Beauty and the Beast have arrived.” He kissed my neck and my cheeks and then my mouth. We kissed and kissed until at last, we grew weary of kissing.”

On our way back, a man fishing in the Grand Canal called, “Would you like a fish? I’ve caught more than I need.” Around 80 years old, lean and lanky with sinewy muscles, the fisherman’s flowing white beard reminded me of George Bernard Shaw. From the shadow of his hooded jacket, the man’s eyes fixed on me — startling eyes, one eye brown, and the other one amber. Fascinated by the musical quality of his baritone voice, I selected from his metal can a silvery trout about half a meter long.

When I offered to pay, the fisherman said, “For lovers, the fish is free,” and wrapped the trout neatly in the *Le Monde* newspaper and tied it with fishing line.

Giovanni gave the fisherman a card with a scribbled note, a pass to the club.

“We’ll have a feast tonight,” I said. “Céline loves trout.”

A dark cloud passed over blotting out fragments of sun, turning the water darkly reflective like Atget’s photographs of Sceaux in the 1920s.



Parc de Sceaux by Eugène Atget, public domain

“As beautifully as Sceaux has been restored, I loved it most as it looked in Atget’s photographs when the garden was in ruins.”

“What was it like?”

“It had been neglected forever, pools filled with leaves and debris, sculpture suffocated by vines. After the death of the duc de Trévisse who built the current chateau in the style of Louis XIII, his daughter was planning to sell Sceaux to real estate developers, but the mayor of the town saved it by turning it into a park for the people. Atget photographed Sceaux in winter with the trees bare of leaves and wrecked by storms — a morose landscape reflected in pools of stagnant water. I love the melancholy of Atget’s chiaroscuro images of Sceaux — classical statues of eroded stone stand abandoned in corridors of trees and brambles, somber sentinels overgrown with vines, a somnolent land of shadows and mystery.”

“I would’ve liked to have seen Sceaux in the 1920s. I’m going to compose a tune, ‘Afternoon at Sceaux.’ Let’s go to the cascades and the Fountain of the Octagon. What kind of fruit trees are those?”

“*Cerisiers du Japon*, cherry trees. They’ll be blooming in a few weeks.”

“Let’s make a date to come for a picnic in April. I see the cascades now. Le Nôtre must have gotten the idea from the Renaissance gardens of Italy.



Parc de Sceaux cherry blossoms – Amateurs de bassins

“As a kid, I loved to visit Villa Lante at Bagnaia near my home in Viterbo. Barozzi da Vignola designed cascades of water, *catena d'acqua*, a chain of water flowing from basin to basin tumbling down the hill to the pool. When I was twelve, the Americans mistakenly bombed the garden of Villa Lante during the fall of Rome and it had to be rebuilt. After our next gig, I'm going to take you to Italy to see the gardens of Villa Farnese and Villa d'Este.”

Giovanni started to run up the side of the cascade and I called out, “Careful Giovanni, the wind is blowing in that direction, you'll get drenched.”

“Don't worry,” he cried, “it isn't blowing now.”



Cascades of Parc de Sceaux – Wikimedia

Just then a gust of wind hit the geyser spraying water over him — a direct hit.

He ran back down the stairs, “When I'm going to start listening to you,” he groaned. “I didn't bring any extra clothes.”

“Don't fret,” I laughed, “Well at least your pants didn't get drenched. I've brought two blankets. I'll dry you off.”

When we got back, I put the trout on ice in the chest, hung his shirt on a bush to dry and dried him off with my cashmere blanket. When I got him quite dry again, he began rubbing his hands with massage lotion.

“I’m going to warm up your lymph nodes,” he said, putting his palms flat on the sides of my face in front of my ears and sliding them slowly down my face and my neck to the collar bone. After repeating this fluid motion several times, he placed his fingers on either side of my forehead, then slid them outward pressing against my temples, gliding gently down my neck passing the lymph line to my collar bone. He put his palms on my cheeks and pressed firmly upward and then across my forehead repeating his caresses.

“Now for an eye massage,” he said, placing his middle fingers at the outer corner of my eyes, drawing them under my eye to the inner corners then up across my brow. After several passes, he began at the inner corner of my eyes and passed to the outer corner and up across my brow in one motion finishing on my temples, then passing down my neck over the lymph nodes.

“This one is for a beautiful smile,” he said, placing his fingers below my lips then moved slowly upward applying pressure around the corners of my mouth and ending beneath my nose, putting pressure on my gums. After a number of passes, his fingers moved up to either side of my nostrils gently massaging my nose wings then pushing up the arch of my nose rubbing down and up, then across to my temples, finishing each time at the base of my neck.

“This is good for your nasolabial folds,” he said, placing his fingers on the center of my chin pushing gently to either side of my mouth up to my nose to the inside corner of my eyes, pressing for a few seconds. Pushing the heels of his hands, he pressed my skin of my cheeks firmly, drawing them to the side and ending at the base of my neck, repeating several times.

“This will push your fat upward and tighten the skin over your cheeks,” he said pressing the soft lower part of his thumb upward over my cheeks, pressing firmly on either side of my nose for a few seconds then drawing back to my temples before stroking down my neck as he’d done each time.

“This will improve your circulation, your skin tone and radiance.”

“You’re spoiling me. I’ll expect this every day from now on.”

“If you tell good stories my Scheherazade, you’ll have me for the rest of your life. He snuggled up to me, “Now,” Giovanni said rubbing his hands with massage oil, “I want to hear how Lawrence got into the battle.”

“Lawrence’s chance came,” I began, “when Wingate was appointed High Commissioner in Egypt. A master of Arabic from his experience fighting the Muslim Dervishes in the Sudan, Wingate had written *Mahdism and the Egyptian Sudan*. Upon taking over in Cairo, Wingate ordered Clayton to send a liaison officer to Faisal’s base in the mountains. Clayton didn’t want to send Lawrence for he intended to use Lawrence’s literary skills and fluency in Arabic to head up the Arab Bureau’s new propaganda operation in Cairo. While the most obvious choice would’ve been Lawrence’s former boss, Stewart Newcombe, he was currently on a mission in France. Wingate asked Clayton to send Lawrence to Yenbo. Wingate said it was absolutely necessary to have an officer of his exceptional knowledge of Arabs to be with Faisal. Clayton had no choice but to send Lawrence to Yenbo.”



Yenbo, Hejaz – Yasser Alghofily, Wikimedia

“It was about time,” Giovanni said, “for Lawrence to put his ideas to work. Ever since his childhood Lawrence had dreamed of the chivalric deeds of medieval knights. In the deserts of Arabia, a man of ideas with no military training, transformed himself into a man of war. How did it go in Yenbo?”

“Not good. Hussein’s sons had decided to take Wejh, a small Turkish port two hundred miles north of Yenbo which would allow them a base to attack the Hejaz railway, cutting it off completely to force the Turks to surrender Medina. Hussein’s sons would coordinate their armies. While Abdullah attacked the Hejaz

railway, cutting it off completely to force the Turks to surrender Medina. Hussein's sons would coordinate their armies. While Abdullah attacked the Hejaz railway to stop pro-Turkish tribes from supplying Medina, Ali would move north to Wadi Safra and simultaneously, Feisal would move from Wadi Safra to Kheif Hussein. Sherif Nasir would attack with a force of two thousand while the youngest son Sidi Zeid would halt the Turk's advance from Medina toward Yenbo or Wejh."

"My God," Giovanni cried, "that's a complex scheme. How could they coordinate such an intricate plan without radio communications and airplanes?"

"They couldn't. It was a fiasco. When Lawrence rode inland expecting to find Feisal at Kheif Hussein, he was astounded to find him camped on a date plantation near Yenbo. The youngest son Sidi Zeid's troops had failed to protect a strategic road and Turkish infantry had entered Wadi Safra. When Zeid's men heard of the enemy in their rear, they fled to protect their families in the villages. Zeid ran back to Yenbo and the Turks occupied Bir Said leaving no Arab forces to stop a Turkish advance on Yenbo. Of Feisal's five thousand warriors, only two thousand remained, too few to hold Yenbo. Arab morale was destroyed. Abandoned by the hill tribes and with his army disintegrating, Feisal was sure the whole Arab revolution was going to collapse."



Howeitat chieftain with his brothers – Marist Special Collections, public domain

“Lawrence understood the problem was creating a cohesive force out of tribes who were normally enemies. Unlike the British military, Emir Feisal didn’t issue orders to other tribes. His mission was to build a coalition of Arab tribes who didn’t see themselves a nation. Tribal chiefs fervently guarded their independence. Lacking unity of command, Feisal was a consensus builder, a diplomat who listened to and counseled the tribes and managed a delicate balance of the Arab coalition. While a leader who was a diplomat was essential, Feisal was not a natural warrior who lusted for combat, but rather a man who abhorred violence and avoided it personally.”

“What was Lawrence’s assessment of Feisal’s army?”

“Despite their defeat, Feisal’s men were in good spirits, most of them young, lean and hardy, dark skinned, some Negroid, as quick as hawks in wild spirits, able to travel through inhospitable terrain hour after hour. But the tribes came and went, serving only in their districts and under their tribal sheikhs, men taking off to see their families, entire clans dropping out to rest before they returned. Feisal had worked hard to reconcile inter-tribal feuds. Tribes that hated each other agreed to suspend their blood feuds for the duration of the war, fighting side by side with their former blood enemies, but refusing to obey orders from a man belonging to another tribe. The Arabs were mobile, quick as hawks, running great distances to get into range for an accurate shot. Feisal allotted them fifty cartridges to ensure frugality with ammunition. Since tribal wars were normally brief, Feisal’s ability to keep an army together for months at a time was unprecedented.”

“With that kind of individualist spirit and lack of training, it must have been very hard to enforce discipline.”

“Lawrence believed it would be impossible to make an organized force out of them. Their knowledge of the country and mobility made them unsurpassed in guerilla warfare. Feisal gave rewards for capturing Turkish rifles, mules, camels, and Turks. In the beginning, their greatest weakness was their terror of the unknown — especially airplanes and artillery. They had little fear of bullets, but the shrieking of incoming shells sent them to cover. Lawrence believed that once they got used to it, their terror would pass.”

“What a moment for Lawrence to begin combat,” Giovanni said, “in the middle of a catastrophic loss.”

“Catastrophic it was. Support for Feisal among the hill tribes disintegrated. The defeat of the Emir’s army had been so disastrous that it looked like the end of Lawrence’s dreams for the Arab Revolt. He turned his camel around and raced back to Yenbo riding with only three hours sleep over three nights to tell Major

Garland to prepare trench defenses around the perimeter to defend Yenbo from Turkish attack. Abdullah's army east of Medina was too far away to reach Yenbo in time. Lawrence wired Cairo for armored cars with machine guns, but none were available. Realizing Feisal's demoralized troops couldn't hold off a Turkish attack, Lawrence sent a message to the Commander of the Red Sea Patrol, who miraculously was able to assemble air reconnaissance and a five-ship fleet for a coastal bombardment. Yenbo lay on a plain and naval shelling would be devastating to Turkish troops trying to cross several miles of sand."

"Trench warfare and artillery bombardment of the Western Front," Giovanni said, "had come to Arabia."

"Actually, it didn't. The Royal Navy saved Yenbo. When the Turks were fifteen miles distant, seaplanes began bombing the advancing soldiers. Expecting an attack in the night, the British warships turned on their powerful searchlights, a ghostly incandescence raking across the naked sand. Intimidated by the ships' eerie lights sweeping over the barren plain, the Turks lost heart and turned back.



HMS Jupiter, Red Sea fleet – The Navy and Army Illustrated, 1897, public domain, Wikimedia



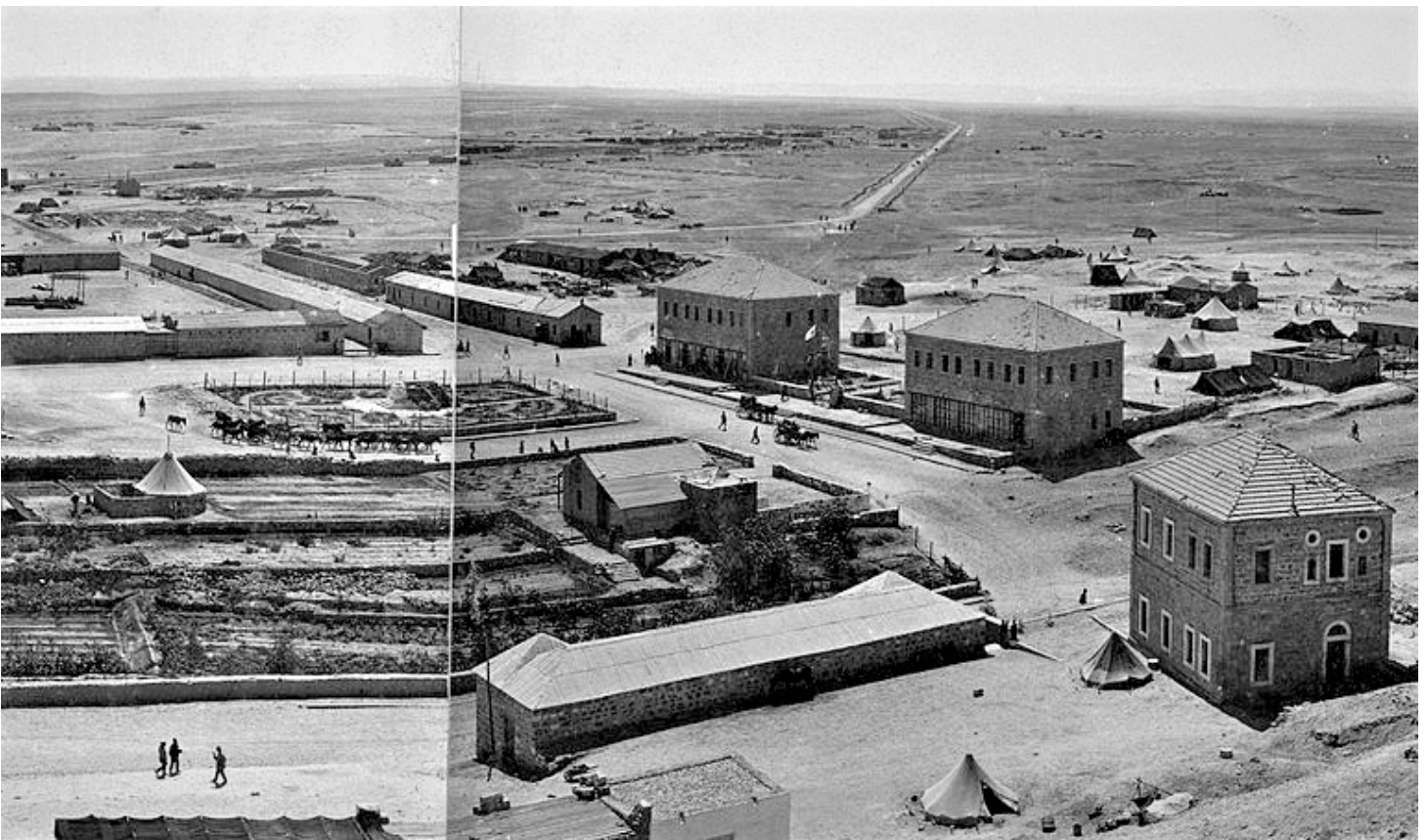
Ottoman field artillery advancing on the Suez Canal – 1915 – Imperial War Museum, Wikimedia



Ottoman military band and infantry preparing to attack the Suez Canal, 1914 – U.S. Library of Congress, public domain, Wikimedia



Suez Canal, Egypt , Lantern slide, c. 1900s – Brooklyn Museum, Wikipedia



Hafir el Aujah, principal Ottoman desert base, 1916 – Author, American Colony Photo Department, Jerusalem, public domain, Wikimedia



General Kress von Kressenstein, German commander of the Ottoman Eight Army during the Suez offensive – Author, John David Whiting, Lewis Larsson, Eric Matson, U.S. Library of Congress, public domain, Wikimedia



Turkish machine gun corps, Tell el Sheria Gaza Line, 1917 – American Colony Jerusalem, U.S. Library of Congress, public domain, Wikimedia

“No one in their right mind wanted to commit suicide by crossing several miles of sand exposed to the heavy guns of five ships. Yenbo was saved, but the Arab reputation for making war was in ruins. Despite the failure of the Arab army, Lawrence said when the Turks failed to take Yenbo, they lost the war.”

“But how could Feisal possibly continue after the mass desertion of the hill tribes?”

“Upon Feisal’s retreat to Yenbo, Lawrence’s optimism about the Arab army took a dive. It was the second time that Feisal’s ambitions exceeded his ability. The complicated plan of coordinating four armies was a replay of the earlier disaster at Medina. Feisal’s work over six months to unite the tribes was lost. Although Lawrence labored to put a positive spin on it in his Cairo reports, he knew it was the nadir of the Arab cause.”

“What was the opinion of the British command after the defeat?”

“Wingate concluded that the Arabs would never be able to withstand Turkish infantry. The only hope was to send British troops. In opposition to Wingate’s and Brémont’s opinion, Colonel Wilson and Lawrence declared that the day Christian troops entered the Hejaz, Emir Hussein and his son’s influence would be destroyed. Once a reconnaissance seaplane discovered that the Turks had withdrawn from Yenbo, it gave Feisal the time to reorganize and move inland. Lawrence told Colonel Wilson that Feisal’s two worn out German 15 pounders with no telescopic sights, range finders, and elevating equipment, deployed with defective fuses and ammunition were totally ineffective against Turkish troops armed with new German artillery. Lawrence told Cairo that the inferior performance of the Arabs was due to inferior weapons. Knowing that they had no way of meeting Turkish artillery head on, he requested a battery of British field guns, 18 pounders guns with telescopic sights. His request was denied by the high command. All modern artillery was in demand on the Western Front.”

“How could Feisal regain his momentum?”

“As I mentioned before, the Achilles heel of the Turks was their 800-mile-long supply line to Medina. Lawrence calculated that camel-mounted Arab raiding parties had an effective radius of 100 miles carrying their food and taking water from a system of wells. Lawrence recommended that instead of mounting a major attack, they should focus on disrupting the Hejaz railway. Move 200 miles up the coast, establish a base at Wejh and mount an intense offensive against the Hejaz railway. Feisal was worried that the plan would leave the enemy between them and the British base at Yenbo. Lawrence reassured Feisal. Have Abdullah’s army,

which was doing nothing, move his base into Wadi Ais, a natural fortress not far from Media. Wadi Ais ran west directly to the coast, a valley with plentiful water and food, a perfect base from which they would harass Turkish lines of communication. With Abdullah at Wadi Ais and Feisal at Wejh, they could dominate 200 miles of railway. During the march north, they'd have to be supplied by sea by British ships by stages for there weren't enough transport camels to carry the necessary ammunition and food. The plan was to put 500 fighters on a British warship and land them to the north of Wejh and trap the Turks in a vice when Feisal attacked with Sherif Nasir's force from the south."

"The beginning of the 200-mile march was 'splendid and barbaric,' Lawrence said in *Seven Pillars*. Feisal was in the center wearing white, Sherif on his right in a henna-dyed tunic and Lawrence in flowing robes of white and red, ten thousand Arab warriors carrying banners in purple and golden silk, their robes in every variety of color, camels dressed with trappings in a rainbow of hues, a quarter-of-a-mile river of camels streaming through the gorge, drummers playing a rolling cadence as thousands of men sang songs praising Feisal, a barbarous chorus resonating from the canyon walls of Wadi Ais."

"That must have been a stirring sight for Lawrence."

"The march on Wejh was a turning point for the revolt. A young sheik of the Beidawi tribe told Lawrence, 'We are no longer Arabs but a People.'



Army of Faisal bin Hussein and Sherif Nasir march toward Wejh – ilmfeed, public domain

“It was the first time in centuries that an Arab army with transport of arms and food had left its tribal areas without a motivation of blood feud or plunder and marched 200 miles into another territory.”

“Was Lawrence allowed by Cairo to go with Feisal on the march?”

“Unfortunately, Clayton ordered him to remain in Yenbo to meet Colonel Stewart Newcombe who was replacing him as originally planned.”

“Lawrence must’ve taken that hard. How did the attack on Wejh turn out?”

“Not as originally planned. Feisal’s army didn’t arrive at the agreed upon time, forcing the British Admiral to land 500 Arabs and British troops, covering them with cannon fire while they advanced on Wejh and overwhelmed the outnumbered Turkish garrison and looted the Egyptian residents, sacking every house in the search for gold.”

“And Lawrence was sent back to Cairo?”

“Feisal wanted Lawrence to stay. He knew the march on Wejh was made possible by Lawrence’s suggestion that Abdullah’s army move to Wadi Ais. Feisal sent a cable to the Arab Bureau, asking that ‘Lawrence not return to Cairo as he has given such very great assistance.’ Coming from Feisal, Clayton had no choice but to agree. Lawrence knew that to succeed in the Arab Revolt, it depended on developing a friendship with Feisal that was based on absolute trust.”



Emir Feisal and Lt. Col. T. E. Lawrence in Damascus – The Online Museum of Syrian History, public domain, Wikimedia

“Lawrence made,” Giovanni said, “a bond with Feisal that lasted until the end.”

“They clicked right from the first, even in their sense of humor. Although coming from different cultures, there was a synergy in their relationship — Lawrence mastery of the British hierarchy in Cairo and Feisal’s persuasive power with the Arabs. They shared a romantic vision of shaping history. If they succeeded in defeating the Ottomans, it would be the most important Arab achievement since Saladin’s defeat of the Christian Crusade.”

“Returning briefly to the Arab Bureau in Cairo to prepare for permanent deployment to the Hejaz, Lawrence met Aaron Aaronsohn, a Jewish émigré from Romania, an agronomist who’d founded the experimental Jewish Agricultural Station at Athlit. A Zionist who dreamed of transforming Palestine into a fertile garden, Aaronsohn and his sister, Sarah had established a Jewish spy ring in Palestine, the Hili, a Hebrew acronym from the Book of Samuel meaning ‘Eternal Israel which doesn’t lie or relent’ supplying the British with invaluable military intelligence. In his diary, Aaronsohn said of his future adversary, ‘Lieutenant Lawrence, an archaeologist, was well informed on Palestine but rather conceited.’



Aaron Aaronsohn, founder of Nili, a Jewish espionage group supporting the British against the Ottomans. Unknown author, public domain, Wikimedia. Information gathered by Nili helped General Edmund Allenby avoid the strong Turkish defenses in Gaza and capture Beersheba in a surprise attack.

“In Cairo, Lawrence discovered that Colonel Brémont was still hell bent on convincing the British that an Allied landing at Akaba was necessary to prevent an Arab nationalist rebellion from spreading into Syria, France’s sphere of influence. Brémont believed that if the Allies took Akaba, it would stop Feisal from moving north and keep the Arab rebellion contained inside the Hejaz. Lawrence was pleased when he returned to Wejh to find that Feisal was opposed to the French colonel’s scheme of an Allied invasion. Burdened with the knowledge that Feisal had no knowledge of the Sykes-Picot agreement which divided up spheres of influence in Arabia between the British and the French, he was faced with a moral dilemma — should he betray a state secret and tell Feisal about the secret deal.



Sykes-Picot Agreement Map, an enclosure from French diplomat Paul Cambon’s letter to British Foreign Secretary Sir Edward Grey, 1916 – United Kingdom National Archives, public domain, Wikimedia. The agreement gave Britain the coast between the Mediterranean and the River Jordan, and southern Iraq. France gained control of southeastern Turkey, northern Iraq, Syria, and Lebanon. Russia was to be awarded Istanbul, the Dardanelles Strait, and Armenia.

“If the Sykes-Pict Agreement was secret, how could he know that it nullified Britain’s promise to Emir Hussein for Arab independence?”

“Lawrence had read the Sykes-Picot agreement when it passed through British intelligence in Cairo.”

“Christ!” Giovanni exclaimed. “Lawrence believed heart and soul in Arab independence while his government was concealing a lie from Feisal.”

“Lawrence was caught in a perilous conundrum. If he gave false promises to Feisal he would be betraying his principles. But if he revealed the secret treaty, it would be an act of treason against his country. For the revolt to succeed, he had to maintain Feisal’s trust. If he lied about Britain’s intentions in Arabia, the truth would one day come out and Feisal would feel betrayed.”

“What did he do?”

“He told Feisal the truth. It was a crime to encourage the Arabs to fight and die based on a false promise of independence. His personal honor eclipsed his loyalty to Britain. He revealed to Feisal that the McMahon-Hussein correspondence which appeared to grant Arab independence in Syria was not a sure thing because of the secret treaty that guaranteed French rule over Syria. To stop France’s imperialism the Arabs must capture the four cities named in the Sykes-Picot agreement — Damascus, Homs, Hama, and Aleppo. Lawrence’s childhood passion for liberating an oppressed people made him tell the truth. Lawrence convinced Feisal that if the Arabs were to establish their own state, they had to take Damascus before the end of the war.



The Three Musketeers by Alexandre Dumas – Illustration by Maurice Leloir, engraving by Jules Huyot, public domain, Wikimedia

“I see you as Cyrano de Bergerac,” I said kissing his cheek. “Proust said, ‘There are no days of our childhood we’ve lived so completely as those we’ve spent with a favorite book.’”

“Like Garibaldi, T. E. Lawrence inspired me. A boy needs heroes. Papa bequeathed his heroes to me. After dinner, Papa would read “*The Seven Pillars* in a booming voice remarkable for a small man. You could hear from the far hillside his rich baritone singing *Napoli*. As a kid, I struggled to understand the meaning of Lawrence’s words. It was like catching a butterfly with your hands.”

“To answer your question on how the Arabs could regain their momentum, it depended upon Feisal’s ability to woo the tribes before moving north to Palestine and Syria. A continuous stream of chiefs arrived at Feisal’s camp to listen, including the Sherarat tribe which would be critical in the taking of Maan. As the sheiks came to support the war, Feisal had them swear on the Koran to ‘wait when he waited, march when he marched.’ They swore to show no mercy to the Turks but must show mercy on all Arabs whether from Baghdad, Aleppo, or Damascus, swearing peace with their tribal enemies for the duration of the war. The attacks on the railway between El Ula and Abu el Naam were dependent on the support of the nomad tribes, Billi, Moahib, Fukara, Fejr, Juheina, the Eastern Howeitat and further north, the tribes owing obedience to Nuri Shalaan, the Emir of the Ruwalla, who after the Sherif of Mecca, Ibn Saud, and Ibn Rashid was the fourth great power in Arabia. Lawrence challenge was not to speed them up, but to slow them down, for any premature action would bring Turkish reinforcements to the region and repeat the chaos of supply and communication that had brought on their previous disasters. Feisal decided not to use the tribes who held land because they would be subject to Turkish reprisals, including the Hebron and Nablus townspeople, sending letters telling them to remain quiet until called upon. Since the Hejaz railroad to Medina had to be cut, Feisal gave permission to the demolition experts, Garland and Newcombe to accompany raiding parties, the first time that any British officer other than Lawrence had been allowed to go inland. At one point Newcombe destroyed a mile and half of line.”

“Who was Garland?”

“Major Garland had a genius for blowing things up. He had an enormous influence on Lawrence at Yenbo, teaching him how to use explosives and blow up railways. A colorful Scotchman, a chemist before the war, Garland was a self-taught expert in blowing things sky high. Garland taught the Arabs to dig trenches and to operate machine guns and repaired their rifles. In *Seven Pillars*, Lawrence tells us that Garland had invented

his own methods for mining trains and blowing up bridges. His knowledge of Arabic and unorthodox theories enabled him to quickly show inexperienced Bedouin the art of demolition — up until then, a major weakness of the revolt. The Arabs were laboriously tearing up stretches of the railway by pick and shovel which left the rails intact for easy repair. Feisal had even returned explosives because no one had any idea how to use them. Once Major Garland arrived in Yenbo, he taught the Bedouins how to place a charge beneath the rail to mangle it so that it couldn't be straightened and reused. He was designing land mines which could be triggered automatically from a distance, but they needed an expert to be deployed, and in the beginning, Garland wasn't allowed to go on raids with the Arabs because Emir Hussein forbid Christian officers to work alongside Muslims.

“Once Feisal gave permission for Garland and Newcombe to join raids inland, Garland threw a handful of detonators and fuses in his pockets, cheerfully jumped on a camel and went off to blow up a train, succeeding after numerous attempts in blowing an engine off the track and down an embankment.



Major Herbert Garland, British metallurgist, developed the Garland mine and trained T. E. Lawrence and the Arabs in the use of explosives to destroy the Ottoman Hejaz Railway, 1917 – Self-portrait by Herbert Garland, public domain, Wikimedia



Ottoman locomotive, Hejaz Railway – Unknown author, public domain, Wikimedia



Hejaz Railway station in Haifa, Palestine – Unknown author public domain, ilmfeed.com



Baghdad Railway wooden Bridge crossing the Euphrates River, circa 1900-1910 – U.S. Library of Congress, public domain, Wikimedia



Turkish cavalry south of Jerusalem, 1917 – German Federal Archives, Wikimedia



Hejaz Railway. Pilgrims boil water for tea on the back of a passenger carriage – ilmfeed.com



Passengers on board a Hejaz Railway train – Unknown author, public domain, ilmfeed.com



Destroyed Hejaz Railway locomotive – Author, Richard Desomme-Panoramio

“The Turks had only 40 locomotives and less than 1,000 rolling stock to not only supply Medina, but also Sinai, Palestine and Damascus. To run one train on each line each day would take 20 engines and many needed repairs. A locomotive put out of action seriously limited the Ottoman’s ability to transport troops and supplies. When Garland returned to Cairo because of health, Lawrence told them that Garland was indispensable. Later, Lawrence revised his opinion when he realized that despite his efficiency with the Arabs, Garland held Arabs in low esteem because he was unable to command them, complaining that he could only make suggestions and hope that they did as he wished. Garland hated their insolence and looting, and their singing within hearing distance of the enemy. Lawrence believed that this kind of elite British attitudes would weaken their efforts and later recommended for Garland’s return to Cairo.”

“Lawrence himself,” Giovanni said, “became good at blowing things up.”

“At the Carchemish excavation, Lawrence had learned how to dynamite massive Roman foundations. Garland perfected that skill. Lawrence got a kick of using larger amounts of explosives than necessary to bring

down the railway bridges. His big explosions annoyed the British sappers who thought it wasteful since they'd carried the explosives by camel back over hundreds of kilometers. Lawrence would laugh like a maniac when the Garland mines blew the bridges sky high."

"You've talked about the superiority complexes of British officers."

"Lawrence understood it was a problem he had to overcome. British officers didn't understand that Feisal wasn't only a wartime leader, but a Hejazi chieftain who held his fractious tribes together with continuous diplomacy, a consensus builder who listened, debated, and listened some more, feasting, playing music and kissing cheeks, persuading the sheiks in the tradition of the Hejazi Bedouin. Indelibly molded by Royal military tradition, the British officers had a hard time comprehending how to communicate with Arabs, a struggle which Lawrence endured throughout the war. The Arabic-speaking officers posted to the Arab Revolt had spent their entire military careers in colonial service in Egypt, India, or the Sudan where they were colonial masters to be obeyed. But in Arabia, they were advisers, not masters. Accustomed to giving commands, British officers failed to make friends with the sheikhs who expected gracious respect. At Carchemish, Lawrence had mixed with the Arabs and built relationships based on mutual esteem. He'd discovered that while the tribesmen would ignore direct orders, they worked astonishingly well when encouraged rather than commanded. 'It's an Arab war,' Lawrence said. The Arabs have the right to run things as they please. 'We are only guests.'"

"Did all of the British have such a poor relationship with the Arabs?"

"The mindset of the officers was one of Lawrence's greatest challenges. The regular army education at the Royal Military Academy was not the best training for working alongside Bedouin tribesman. Several of the British officers in the Hejaz filed reports to Cairo condemning Arab leaders as not being interested in overthrowing the Turks. The Bedouins were simply opportunists — welfare deadbeats riding with Feisal for the food, clothing, blankets, and Lee-Enfield or Turkish Mauser rifles only to flee when the Turks advanced. To the contrary, Lawrence's reports recognized their limitations and suggested ways to use them to their best advantage."

"It must have been a struggle," Giovanni said, "to attempt to change the habits of British officers who'd spent their whole life in believing in their superiority in waging war."

“Like French intellectuals who become entranced with a foreign culture, there’s a kind of British intellectual who goes native. While working on the Carchemish digs, Lawrence had put on Arab dress and discovered that they were more comfortable in the heat because they breathed. It was hell wearing a tight British uniform, sweating in the boiling sun while riding a camel. In the emir’s camp, Feisal asked Lawrence if he’d wear the clothes of an Arab. The only soldiers the Howeitats had seen wearing khaki were Turkish officers. If Lawrence wore Arab dress, he’d be able to slip into Feisal’s tent at night without being noticed. Cairo had promoted Lawrence to Staff Captain, although he was never in British uniform, only in the costume of the Bedouin. ‘Nobody cares a straw what rank I have,’ he said. The only thing that counted to Lawrence was that he was the right hand of Feisal.”



Lieutenant-Colonel Thomas Edward Lawrence, December 1918 – Author Lowell Thomas, public domain, Wikimedia



General Fakhri en din Pasha, commander of the Hejaz Expeditionary Force and governor of Medina during World War I, 1918 – Author, Yuotka, Wikimedia

“What was the next step?”

“There was a great increase of attacks on the Hejaz railway, many different bands striking at multiple points while Lawrence was establishing Feisal’s base at Wejh, unloading two armored cars sent by General Murray, setting up a system to expedite supplies arriving by sea and installing a critically important new wireless station. Suddenly, there was a reversal of plans coming from Cairo which overturned Lawrence’s plans. General Murray was advancing on Gaza-Beersheba line with no reserves because many of his troops had been transferred to the desperate fight against the Germans on the Western Front. British intelligence had learned that the Turks were abandoning Medina to establish a more defensible base at Maan garrisoned by thousands of crack Turkish troops under General Fakhri en din Pasha, renowned for his ruthlessness. Short of troops at Gaza, Murray asked Feisal to stop Fakhri’s army from withdrawing to Maan.”

“Lawrence had convinced Feisal,” Giovanni broke in, “that the only way to stop France’s seizure of Syria was to move north towards Palestine. Now, the British were asking Feisal to remain in the South to stop the Turkish withdrawal. That was the exact opposite of what Feisal and Lawrence wanted — to head for Syria. Feisal believed that the Hejaz could never be sustained as an independent country due to its barren soil. Only combined with Syria could the Hejaz be a successful nation. With Feisal’s heart set on capturing Damascus, Lawrence had to persuade him to make a great sacrifice. How could he do that?”

“He soothed Feisal’s disillusionment by telling him that the march on Syria would require British guns and ammo. Murray had supplied them with armaments and supplies to Yenbo and Wejh, now it was Murray’s time to ask for assistance. The campaign on Syria could not succeed without General Murray’s continued support. If Feisal could keep the Turks from leaving Medina, Murray would have a strong obligation to Feisal.”

“Was Lawrence able to convince Feisal?”

“Very reluctantly.”

“Feisal had a great trust in Lawrence’s honesty.”

“Without Feisal’s trust in Lawrence,” I said, “the Arab Revolt might have failed. The problem at that point was that Abdullah’s force wasn’t doing much except playing at war. With no British liaison officer assigned to Abdullah, Lawrence decided that he had to go at once to Wadi Ais to put a fire under Abdullah to attack the railway. Grabbing a bunch of Garland’s experimental bombs, he set off with a small group of various Bedouin tribes and Moroccans for Wadi Ais with the intention of blowing up the train station at Hedia which was the only water supply for 125 miles. It was the first time that Lawrence, with no experience as an officer in the field, took an active role in combat.”

“Is that when Lawrence had to execute a man?”

“It was a brutal trip. Lawrence came down with dysentery and boils on his back, barely able to stay in the saddle, nearly fainting twice. When they camped for the night at Wadi Kitan, a quarrel broke out and Hamed, a Moroccan shot Salem, an Ageyl tribesman, killing him at close range with a bullet through the temple. In a brief trial, Hamed confessed, and Salem’s tribe demanded blood for blood. Lawrence had watched Feisal’s skill as a peacemaker in the tribal feuds, searching for resolutions to heal blood vendettas. The emir’s system worked because of the Bedouins’ faith in the fairness of the mediator who passed judgment.

“There were many Moroccans fighting under Feisal. The Ageyl demand for Hamed’s death was the law of the desert. If an Ageyl executed Hamid, it might solve the feud for a moment, but when word of it spread in the rebel army, it was certain to start a blood vendetta between the Ageyl and the Moroccans who’d joined the revolt. The only resolution was an execution but who would do it? If an Ageyl killed a Moroccan, it would damage the unity of the whole. If a Bedouin tribesman executed Hamed, the Moroccans would be honor bound to avenge his death. The only solution was an execution by an impartial party. That could only be Lawrence. ‘I told Hamed, he must die,’ Lawrence said. ‘At least no revenge could lie against my followers, for I was a stranger and kinless.’”

“What a horror. He’s so sick with boils and dysentery that he can hardly travel and he had to execute a man in cold blood.”

“Lawrence was so feverish he could hardly hold his gun.”

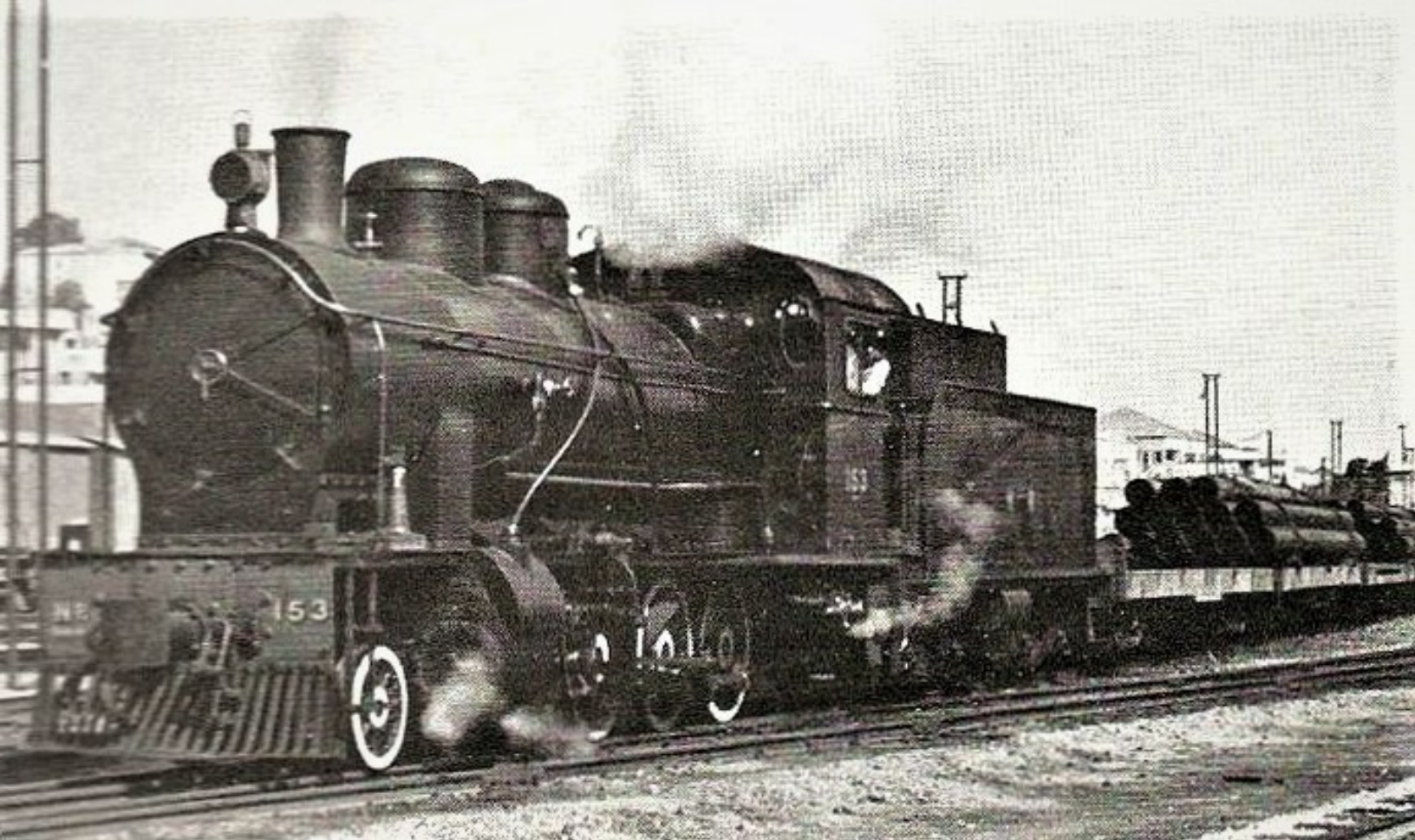
“I remember the scene from *Seven Pillars*,” Giovanni said. “He took Hamed into a ravine and for a time let him cry on the ground, then stood him up and shot him, but his hand was so unsteady from his fever that he only wounded Hamed who fell to the ground shrieking and convulsing, blood spurting from his wound. Lawrence fired again and only hit his wrist. The third time, he shot Hamed in the neck, and he lay still on the sand. Lawrence had never killed a man before. The execution of Hamed would haunt him the rest of his life. He awakened at dawn from a fitful sleep so weak, he had to be hoisted into the saddle. The journey to Abdullah’s camp was one of the worst of his life, his fever so debilitating that he could hardly write his notes. Reaching Abdullah’s camp, he collapsed from dysentery and came down with malaria. In World War One dysentery killed nearly as many men as bullets. While recovering from dysentery at Wadi Ais, Lawrence rethought his plans of moving toward Damascus. With General Murray asking them to keep as many Turks as possible away from the Palestinian front, and with no longer a reason to attack Medina, the more attacks they could mount against the 500 miles between Maan and Medina, it would tie down thousands of Turkish troops defending the line. The Turk was harmless in Medina, Lawrence said. Despite their inexperience in organized warfare, he began to have faith in the revolt for they were beginning to be equipped with better weapons. It renewed his faith that Arab guerillas could win the war. The corollary to this idea was to extend the revolt as widely as possible. Simultaneous action in Syria was necessary if the Arabs wished to get to Damascus before the French or British. The highest priority at that moment was to organize as many attacks as possible against the railway. Knowing that whenever he left Feisal, the emir tended to to waiver when he listened to other’s



Hejaz Railway station at Dhat al-Hajj, 1916 – Author, J. H. Halladjian, Imperial War Museum, public domain, Wikimedia. Windmills pumped water from wells to above ground water tanks.

advice, he sent a message to the British liaison officer, asking him to beg Feisal to not stay in Wejh but attack the railroad at once.

“Lawrence found Abdullah’s army of 3,000 to be made up of untrained Bedouins with only two machine guns out of five working because of a lack of armorers and spare parts. The Bedouin fighters were two months behind in pay even though Abdullah had the necessary gold. Abdullah spent his time reading Arabic newspapers, feasting, sleeping, and listening to poetry and songs. Lawrence found it interesting that Abdullah followed the war in France, knew the family relationships of the royal houses of Europe and their ministers, but seemed to take little interest in the war in the Hejaz. It wasn’t wise to send such a report while in Abdullah’s camp but hinted to it by referring to Nero and the burning of Rome. Despite his criticism of Abdullah’s lack of ability as a military commander, he knew that he was the one who’d first encouraged his father King Hussein to declare war on the Turks. The French Colonel Brémont, Lawrence discovered, was trying to drive a wedge between the British and the Arabs by sending messages to Abdullah warning him that the British were surrounding Arabia on all sides.”



Hejaz railway locomotive manufactured in Switzerland, 1912 – Author, Palestine Railways, Khoury House. Haifa, Palestine, public domain, Wikimedia

“Did he attack the water supply after he’d recovered from dysentery and malaria?”

“The water supply at Hedea was too strongly guarded for him to attack with untrained Bedouins. The next station was too heavily defended too, so he waited until a train pulled into the station then let loose with a mountain gun and howitzer. The water tank and the well house collapsed, a rail car burst into flames spreading to other cars, the flammable materials burning fiercely. The unscathed locomotive took off towards Medina, rolled over a Garland mine, the explosion blowing it off the track. The attack was so effective that the Turks evacuated every blockhouse on the line to concentrate their troops at major stations leaving the Hejaz line exposed to Arab demolition teams. Lawrence told the sappers to not waste precious explosives by laying large demolitions. Removing only five rails every night would keep them busy and allow just enough transport to keep the troops in Medina barely supplied and yet be such a threat that the General Fakhri couldn’t safely transport his army to Maan.”

“The attacks on the railway,” Giovanni said, “was the original plan when he was chained to his desk in Cairo. The success of his first raid must have been exhilarating. He was finally fighting instead of dreaming.”



Ottoman locomotive destroyed by T. E. Lawrence and Feisal's Arab Army – ilmfeed.com, public domain

“When he returned from the raid, there was a message from Feisal, dismayed that Lawrence had stayed away so long, pleading with him to return. There was good reason for Feisal’s alarm, for Colonel Brémont had arrived at Wejh to offer French Muslim troops. When Feisal asked for 75mm mountain guns, Brémont promised them knowing that crews loyal to France would keep him informed if Feisal moved on Syria. Feisal’s discussions with the French colonel convinced him, that whatever the cost, he must march on the Syrian cities. But, General Clayton wrote to Feisal forbidding an attack on Akaba; ‘There were no seaplanes or ships available.’ First the Arabs had to attack the railway. Lawrence understood the subtext of Clayton’s message — Britain didn’t want the Arabs in control of Akaba.”

“But Lawrence,” Giovanni said, “was secretly making another plan.”

“It was necessary for his plan to be clandestine. If General Clayton or Colonel Brémont got word of it, he knew that he’d be ordered to abandon it.”

“While Clayton had forbidden an attack by sea,” Giovanni observed, “he hadn’t forbidden an attack by land.”



Repairing the railway track near Maan, 1918 – Author, T. E. Lawrence, Imperial War Museums, public domain, Wikimedia



After the assaults of Faisal's army, the Ottomans abandoned the smaller forts – A. Jausen and R. Savignac, public domain, Wikimedia

“You’d make a terrific lawyer,” I laughed. “There was another reason that Feisal wanted Lawrence back. Feisal had long tried to coax the great leader of the Howeitat, Auda Abu Tayi to abandon his support of the Turks and join the revolt—without success. The Ottomans had been paying Auda well to remain loyal, but with the recent advances of Feisal’s troops, it began to look like the Arabs had a chance of throwing the Ottomans out of the Hejaz. Lawrence was eager to meet the Howeitat sheik, whose intimate knowledge of Wadi Itm made him able to judge if Lawrence’s plan of taking Akaba by land was possible. Without Auda’s support, the attack on Akaba would be a failure. Lawrence felt that none of Emir Hussein’s sons had the right psychology and strength to lead the Bedouins into battle. While Feisal was a great diplomat who’d earned the respect of the tribes, Lawrence was looking for a fiercer man — a warrior with a tiger in his loins. When Auda strolled into Feisal’s tent at Wejh, for Lawrence, he knew at once — Auda abu Tayi was the one who could persuade the northern tribes to join the revolt. If you saw a photo, you’d understand. If you were a film director searching for an actor to play the role of Auda, the man himself would be perfect casting.”

“Who was this chieftain?”

“A man of fifty, tall and straight, spare and powerful with the energy of a much younger man. His Bedouin face, Lawrence said, was magnificently furrowed with large eloquent brown-green eyes and hooked nose, his black beard tinged with white, trimmed to a point, his lower jaw shaven clean in the Howeitat fashion. At one time, the Howeitat had been farmers and camel herders, but under Auda, the tribe had become the most effective fighting force in western Arabia, acquiring great tribal wealth by raiding tribes as far away as Wejh, Aleppo, and Basra. A legend among the Arabs for his ferocity, the Howeitat leader had married twenty-eight times, his hospitality inspiring him to give to others much of his wealth from hundreds of raids, a man of great power and simple desires.

“In Auda, Lawrence had found the man he was looking for — a born warrior whose fierce reputation would persuade the tribes from Maan to join the attack on the Turkish stronghold at Akaba. Wounded thirteen times, Auda had slain seventy-five Arabs by his own hand — a man who Lawrence found could be as realistic as he was volatile, receiving criticism or advice with a charming smile, mischievous and simple as a child. Lawrence described Auda in *Seven Pillars* as ‘direct, honest, kind-hearted, affectionate, beloved by everyone,’ with a strict sense of morality, never following a course in which he disapproved, possessing a romantic view of life, his stories resounding with ‘poems of ancient raids and epic tales of battle.’



Howeitai chieftain Auda abu Tayi, a leader of the Arab Revolt and friend of T. E. Lawrence – Author, Eric Matson, hand colored photograph, public domain, Wikimedia. In director David Lean's 1962 film, *Lawrence of Arabia*, Auda abu Tayi was played by Anthony Quinn.

“But Feisal,” Giovanni broke in, “had just received an order forbidding an attack on Akaba. Lawrence would be disobeying his superior officer.”

“As you perceived, London only forbid an attack by sea. When Lawrence believed that something must be done, he usually found a way to do it. Lawrence and Auda decided that instead of waiting until the Arabs captured the towns in the North one by one, a small force of Arab fighters would make a number of diversionary attacks on the railway above Wejh to conceal their true objective, then move quickly north across the mountains into Al-Nefud, the pitiless sand desert of Northern Arabia, make a great loop further inland north into the Sherarat tribal area, then turn southwest to Maan and enter the Wadi Itm chasm from the north attacking Akaba by land while the Turks had all of their guns pointing to sea, a ride on camelback of 600 miles to capture a fort that was within gunfire of British ships on the Gulf of Akaba.”

“That’s a hell of a long way on camelback,” Giovanni said.” Why didn’t the British High Command think of attacking by land?”

“Impossible to do. Remember, I said that the Egyptian Expeditionary Force didn’t have the resources and manpower to invade by land. It was the same time as the Battle of the Somme where tens of thousands of British soldiers were losing their lives. The British didn’t have enough men. The military style of the British generals would have meant blasting the hell out of the Akaba fort from gunboats on the sea and landing on a beach raked by artillery shells. You’ll remember how well that worked out at Gallipoli.”

“It sounds like a point of no return for Lawrence,” Giovanni said thoughtfully.

“He didn’t take the decision lightly to defy the orders of his superior officer. Lawrence calculated that when Murray attacked Gaza, if the Turks were still in control of Akaba, it would threaten the right flank of the Egyptian Expeditionary Force. If they captured Akaba there’d be no more threat. Furthermore, by taking Akaba, the British War Office would realize the value of the Arab fighters. Recognition by Britain would gain them the gold and the guns to march on Syria. The path to Palestine and Syria lay from Akaba through Wadi Itm. Lawrence’s greatest concern was that if the Arabs didn’t get to Damascus before the war’s end, Syria would be lost to the Arabs forever. After considering the possibility of being court-martialed, he said, ‘I decided to go my own way, with or without orders’”

“A daring move,” Giovanni said.”

“A brazen move. Since he wanted the credit for taking Akaba to be solely due to the Arab Army, he



Emir Faisal bin Hussein's army moving north – Unknown author, Imperial War Museums, public domain, Wikimedia

took no British equipment. The raid was strictly an Arab affair. Faisal supplied the gold, camels, food, and dynamite. If it failed, the blame would fall solely on Lawrence. Knowing Bedouins' reputation for loot and the opportunities for plundering Maan, Lawrence knew he had to keep them focused on the goal. Faisal appointed Sherif Nasir as chief of the expedition for Nasir recognized how much the Arabs depended on Lawrence and British arms. Another reason for Lawrence going on the raid was that Akaba must be supplied quickly by ships to bring in supplies for the march into Palestine. Since Akaba to Wejh by camel was several days, Lawrence realized that the quickest way to inform Cairo headquarters would be by traveling directly across the Sinai Peninsula to the Suez Canal.

“Lawrence was taken a big risk of being busted,” Giovanni Said. “If he failed, it would end his service to the Arabs.”

“The Akaba party left Wejh with Sherif Nasir, Auda, and fifty Arabs, 20,000 Sovereigns for recruits, 45 pounds of flour in each man's saddlebags and enough dynamite to blow up the Ponte Neuf Bridge. In fact, one of the best ways of recruiting Arabs was having them watch the spectacle of blowing up a bridge with dynamite. Like kids, they loved it.



Northern desert of the Arabian Peninsula – ABO Photography, Shutterstock, 376345009

“When the war party left Akaba, it would be the last Cairo would hear of them for two months. They just disappeared into the desert. Plagued once again with boils and fever, Lawrence reached the Hejaz Railway near Deraa, blew up a section of line and continued north into the al Nefud Desert, a trackless expanse larger than Iceland known for its sudden violent winds. Al Nefud, the desert extending north of the Rub’ al Khali, the Empty Quarter, which is the largest sand sea in the world covering an area greater than France. Traveling on the edge of al Houf, called *The Terror* by the Bedouins, Lawrence described al Nefud as riven by an incessant wind, a burning furnace growing more scalding as the sun rose in a sky of haze, colored by the blowing dust of the great sand desert of Northern Arabia, the wind blowing at half-gale searing his skin and lips, drying his throat so painful that for days he couldn’t swallow the rough bread. While crossing an immensity without end, the only sounds he heard other than the wind was the hollow clicks of the camel’s feet on patches of rock or the susurrus of sand as it surged forward forming crescent reefs of sand dunes sculpted by a fiery and ceaseless wind.”

“I remember,” Giovanni broke in, “that their camels began to break down.”

“The camels were stricken with an epidemic of mange. With no butter fat to treat it, camels began to go lame. Two camels fell off an escarpment to their death, making the leader Nasir concerned that his fighters would be stranded in al Nefud.”



Jessie Eastland, English Wikipedia

“Wasn’t al Nefud,” Giovanni said, “where he made the risky decision to go back for a man?”

“You remember the story. It haunted him for the rest of his life. While they were crossing dried mud flats, Lawrence noticed a camel with an empty saddle. It was Gassim’s camel, a native Syrian who he’d brought along to make contact with Syrian nationalists in Maan. Gassim had fallen off. He wouldn’t have a chance to catch up on foot for the hardened ground left no tracks to follow. The Howeitat and Ageyl tribesman wouldn’t risk their lives to save a Syrian. If Lawrence didn’t go back, Gassim would die. Without telling anyone and trusting the accuracy of his compass readings, he turned back. With no tracks to follow and desert mirages forming hallucinations on the horizon, there was little chance of finding the Syrian, but after a number of hours he found him wandering delirious under the burning sun.”

“After saving Gassim,” Giovanni said, “The band arrived in the valley of snakes.”

“Lawrence had a loathing for snakes,” I said. After the searing heat of al Nefud, to arrive in the oasis of Wadi Sirhan should’ve been a relief, but snakes had taken over the oasis. Vipers and cobras were under every stone and bush. Several men were bitten and died.

“But as bad as the snakes were, Lawrence dreaded even more, the necessity of attending endless banquets held for Nuri Shalaan, chief of the southern tribes of Syria. While Auda and Nasir feasted with the incoming sheiks, Lawrence finally got sick of the constant devouring of mutton and accompanied by a small squad of Bedouins, made a secret journey into enemy territory to refresh his old memories of Syria and to deliver a message to the northern tribes — do not to rise up until the signal is given. After the failure at Medina and Yenbo in which the Arabs were saved only by the intervention of the Red Sea fleet, it would be a disaster if the Syrian Arabs rose up against the Turks without sufficient funds and arms. Conventional wisdom would say to take such a dangerous reconnoiter without a superior officer’s knowledge was a foolish decision.”

“He’d never had done anything like that,” Giovanni said, “riding into enemy territory where capture meant a certain and painful death.”

“The Turks had put a price on his head and he was traveling with tribesman whose loyalty to Feisal was not certain. He could be turned in for gold at any time. Traveling quickly fifty miles north of Damascus, he dynamited a plate girder bridge, then hurried back to Damascus to warn the underground Arab nationalists not to rise until all was ready, then conferred with the leaders of the Druse, and finally going to the oasis of Azrak, east of Amman to meet Nuri Shalaan. The northern chief of the large Rualla tribe was wavering between supporting the Turks or Feisal, but his support would be necessary when Feisal marched on Damascus. Everywhere Lawrence went from Damascus to Azrak, the Arabs viewed him as an official representative of the British Government, holding his feet to the fire, questioning him over and over if Britain’s promises to the Arabs were to be believed. Before he’d left Wejh, his meeting with Mark Sykes, the co-author of the Picot-Sykes agreement, convinced him that Britain’s promises to the Arabs were dead — a thought that continued to torment him. ‘We are calling them to fight for us on a lie, and I can’t stand it.’ During his 300 miles trek into Syria where he was constantly questioned about Britain’s sincerity, it strengthened his resolve to lead the Arabs to Syria to claim independence and deny the French their imperial designs.”

“Not only,” Giovanni said, “did Lawrence have to defeat the Turks on the battlefield, but also the Allied powers in London and Paris.”

“Trying to balance his loyalty to the Arab cause and his loyalty to his country, tortured him throughout the war. When he returned from Syria, they had become a notable force with Nasir recruiting tribesmen west of Maan to rebuild the wells at Bair which the Turks had dynamited to deprive the guerillas of water. To throw the Turks off of their intent to attack Akaba, Lawrence took a demolitions party north to blow up a bridge then

rode to Ziza to meet with Fawaz el Faiz, the leader of the Beni Sakhr tribe who greeted him with sumptuous hospitality. During the night he was awakened by Fawaz's brother, Nawaf warning him that Fawaz had betrayed him to the Ottomans."

"That was the risk," Giovanni said. "An avaricious sheik would turn him in for gold."

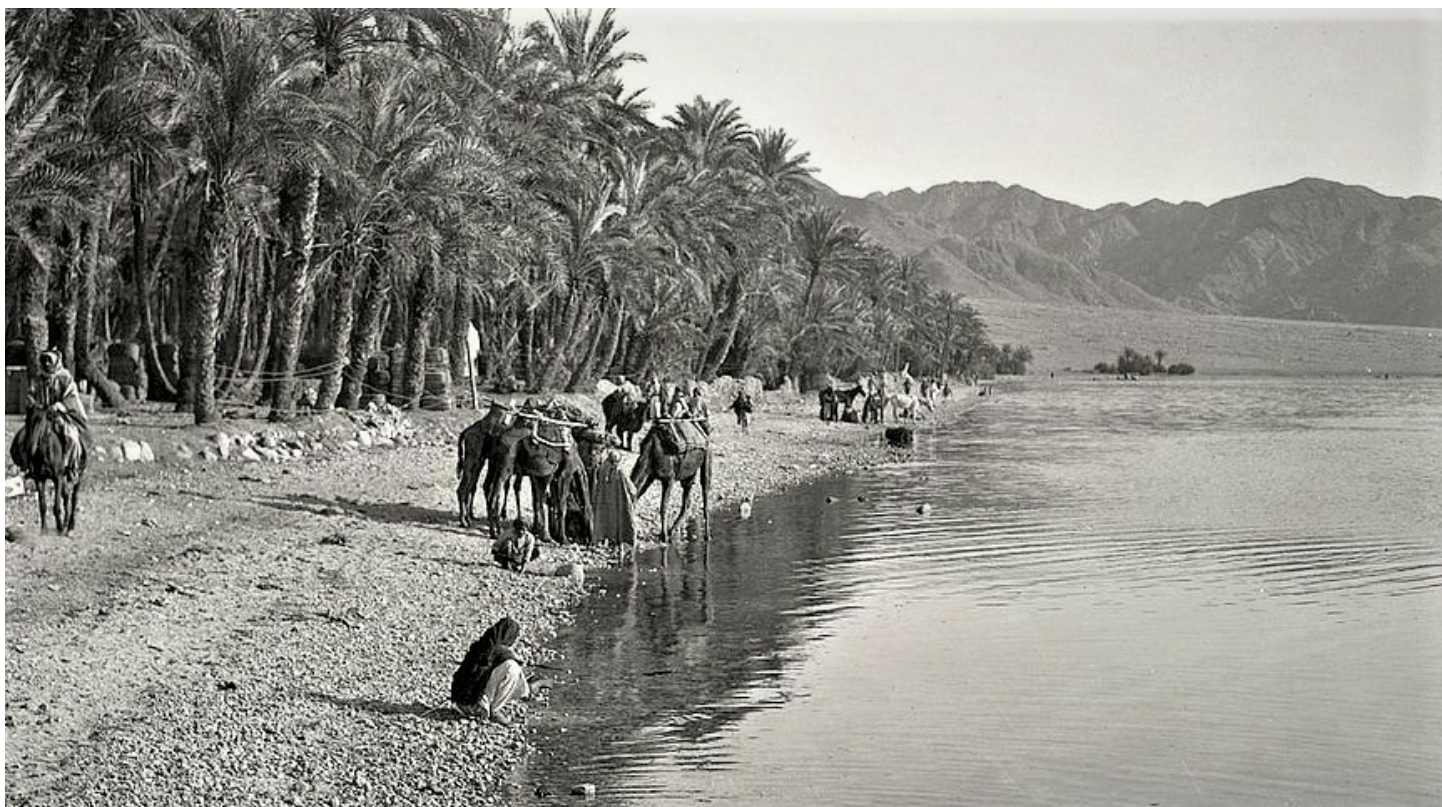
"Lawrence leaped on his camel and rode out of camp before the Turkish troops could arrive. A few days later, he learned that the man who'd warned him, Nawaf had been slain. By interrogating captured prisoners upon his return, he learned that Maan was lightly defended. A cry went up among the Bedouins to take Maan, a rich target for plunder but Lawrence had to avoid an assault on Maan for it would squander critical time from the attack on Akaba. With Sheik Auda abu Tayi's help, Lawrence succeeded in persuading the Bedouins from taking Maan and the next day they entered the gorge of Wadi Itm. In the beginning the Arab force was only a few hundred, but as they moved south, local tribes joined them until they were six hundred when they entered the pass of Wadi Itm to find that the Turkish emplacements were unoccupied, not one defensive trench facing inland manned with troops, allowing the warriors to sweep through the canyon and overcome the Turkish garrison in a two-day siege, capturing Akaba by land while all guns faced out to sea.



Led by Howeitat chieftan Auda abu Tayi and T. E. Lawrence, the Arabs capture Akaba, July 6, 1917 – Imperial War Museum, Wikimedia



Aqaba – Marist Special Collections B&W glass plate 1265.29, public domain



Aqaba beach, 1918 - Marist Special Collections B&W glass plate 1263.20, public domain



Arab forces and T.E. Lawrence in Wadi Itm discussing terms of the Turkish surrender of Aqaba – Author, T.E. Lawrence, Imperial War Museums, public domain, Wikimedia

With not enough food on hand to feed six hundred Arabs fighters and six hundred Turkish prisoners, and an imminent threat of a Turkish force coming to retake Akaba, Lawrence set off the following day for Egypt accompanied by eight men crossing 160 miles of Sinai desert in 49 hours to alert the British in Suez and order a ship to take supplies to Akaba.”

“It is astounding,” Giovanni said, “how Lawrence could hold up without sleep. The taking of Akaba must have struck Cairo by lightning.”



Sinai Peninsula – Cirodite, Wikimedia

“Indeed it did. On all fronts in 1917, Britain and France had been losing the war. In the First Battle of the Somme, 420,000 British soldiers had died, wiping out many of their most experienced troops. After firing five million shells against Ludendorff’s strong defenses in April, the French offensive on Chemin des Dames Ridge in the region of Aisne had been a total disaster as thousands of troops were slaughtered by German machine guns setting off mutinies of dispirited French troops and thousands of men stationed in the rear refusing to move to the front. General Murray’s army had been defeated the second time at Gaza with heavy losses, prompting his replacement by General Sir Edmund Allenby. In the Hejaz, British advisors, Newcombe,



View from Mount Sinai – Author, Mohammed Moussa, Wikimedia

Garland, and Hornby were filing reports about poor discipline in the tribal forces, accusing them of working only for money then disappearing when the going got rough, which made Cairo headquarters doubt whether the Arabs were capable of achieving anything at all.”

“This must have been the point,” Giovanni said, “that Lawrence presented his plans for the invasion of Syria.”

“London recognized that Lawrence was having success while everything else was ending in failure. General Clayton told London that ‘no European personnel is advisable other than Lawrence who is essential and unique. Feisal is the leader and if he’s successful, ‘It is Feisal with whom the French must deal.’ Colonel Wilson who’d once called Lawrence, a ‘bumptious young ass, cabled Wingate, saying that Lawrence’s success against trained troops was ‘due to his personality, gallantry, and grit.’



View from an orbiting satellite of the Gulf of Suez, Sinai Peninsula, and Gulf of Akaba, the Ottoman stronghold of Akaba lying at the end of the Gulf of Akaba – Author, NASA, public domain, Wikimedia

“While the British command was exhilarated over the conquest of Akaba which moved the revolt 250 miles closer to Palestine, they were even more thrilled by Lawrence’s clandestine journey into enemy territory to gather intelligence and influence the tribes. What impressed them most was that he accomplished it even though the Ottomans had put a price on his head, prompting Sir Reginald Wingate, High Commissioner of Egypt to recommend Lawrence for the Victoria Cross.”

“What is the Victoria Cross?”

“Britain’s highest military decoration. It takes precedence over the Order of the Garter.”

“That’s quite a plume for a man with no military training. The Victoria Cross was awarded for the taking of Akaba?”

“It wasn’t for Akaba. It was for his 300-mile mission behind enemy lines. The VC is for ‘conspicuous bravery or some daring or pre-eminent act of valor or self-sacrifice, or extreme devotion to duty in the presence of the enemy.’ Queen Victoria introduced the Victoria Cross during the Crimea War to honor acts of courage. It’s presented by the king or queen at a ceremony at Buckingham Palace.”

“Wow.”

“The Turks also gave him a reward.”

“What was that?”

“£5,000 for his capture.”

“They thought a hungry Arab would turn him in.”

“Well, the head of the Beni Sakhr tribe did turn him in. Lawrence courted danger at every turn, an impulse that got stronger as the war wore on. Wingate informed Lawrence, ‘the Chief of the Imperial Staff has asked me to convey his congratulations on your recent exploit.’ However, a technicality forbade the award because the VC must be witnessed by another British officer. Instead, he was appointed a Companion of the Order of Bath and promoted to major. The French awarded him the *Croix de Guerre*. The War Office couldn’t announce the exact reason for the award. It was top secret — they didn’t want the Turks to know.”

“The Ottoman army,” Giovanni said, “was trained by the Germans and equipped with state-of-the-art German artillery and machine guns. How could the Arabs succeed against that?”

“It appeared like an implausible idea for in the beginning, the Hashemite forces of Feisal were poorly equipped, but as they became increasingly successful in their raids, British ships on the Red Sea furnished Feisal’s army with modern rifles, machine guns, and mobile artillery. The French sent a detachment commanded by Captain Pisani with two mountain guns, four machine guns, and a dozen automatic rifles. His first task was to move Feisal’s headquarters to Akaba and prepare the defenses through Wadi Itm, which is where the Ottomans would attack and the path by which the Arab raiding parties would be supplied through Akaba by sea. Lawrence suggested to Feisal to construct another ladder of tribes like they’d erected from Wejh to Akaba only this time to the north, connecting the tribes and settled people of Syria one by one, a stretch from Akaba over 300 miles without roads or railways. In his report, Lawrence said they’d cultivate desert power over the desolate wilderness of Arabia, operating much like naval warfare in terms of independence, self-containment, and fluidity. Lawrence’s military mentor was the 18th century Austrian

military theorist, Maurice de Saxe, who Lawrence believed was 'the greatest master of this kind of war.' De Saxe's dictum was, 'a war might be won without fighting battles.'"

"I wonder," Giovanni said, "whether Lawrence had read Sun Tzu who said, 'the supreme art of war is to subdue the enemy without fighting?' When I was studying judo, I read Sun Tzu's *The Art of War* more than once. Lawrence method of making war is much like judo — using the strength and movement of your opponent to your advantage. Sun Tzu said that when attacking, a general will succeed if his opponent doesn't know what to defend. When defending, he will succeed if his opponent doesn't know what to attack."



Sun Tzu statue in Yirhama, Totori, Japan – 663highland, Wikimedia. A military strategist, Taoist philosopher, and author of *The Art of War*, Sun Tzu influenced Mao Zedong's writings on guerilla warfare and the communist leader's 1949 victory over Chiang Kai-shek and the Kuomintang. Vietnamese leader Ho Chi Minh translated *The Art of War* for his officers to study. Vo Nguyen Giap, the communist strategist of the Viet Minh that defeated the French Army at Dien Bien Phu and thwarted the American forces in Vietnam followed the asymmetrical warfare principles of Sun Tzu. T. E. Lawrence observed Sun Tzu's advice, "If your enemy is secure at all points, be prepared for him. If he is in superior strength, evade him. If your opponent is temperamental, seek to irritate him. Pretend to be weak, that he may grow arrogant. If he is taking his ease, give him no rest. If his forces are united, separate them. Attack him where he is unprepared, appear where you are not expected."

“That’s a good description of his strategy. ‘Our tactics,’ Lawrence said ‘were always to tip and run, not pushes, but strokes.’ The Bedouins should only engage under the most favorable conditions, something he constantly had to impress upon the Arabs when they became overconfident. That’s why they failed at Medina. De Saxe had advocated, ‘Avoid seeking the enemy’s strength in battle.’ Lawrence’s principle was to use ‘the smallest force, in the quickest time, at the farthest place.’”

“Lawrence would’ve agreed with Sun Tzu,” Giovanni said — ‘He will win who knows when to fight and when not to fight. Be extremely subtle, even to the point of formlessness. Be extremely mysterious, even to the point of soundlessness.’”

“That pretty well sums up Lawrence’s philosophy,” I agreed. “Dressed in white silk skirts and a head-cloth with golden bound head rope and emaciated from traveling 1,000 miles by camel in 30 days, Lawrence met with General Allenby in Cairo to recommend that Akaba be set up as the base of supply for the Arabs making demolition raids on the railway between Deraa and Maan and in the Yarmouk valley between the sea of Tiberias in Palestine and Deraa in Syria. Lawrence submitted sketches of his scheme for Feisal’s operations, blowing up bridges and harassing the Ottoman railways between Ras Baalbek, Lebanon, Damascus, and Aleppo.



Hejaz Railway stone viaduct – *Jordan Times*, public domain, Wikimedia

“As they moved north, Lawrence planned to encourage local tribes to rise up against the Turks while Allenby’s troops attacked Palestine and eventually Damascus. Thin as a rail in his Bedouin costume, Lawrence hit it off with General Allenby who seized upon the advantages of Lawrence’s plans to support the right flank of the Egyptian Expeditionary Force during the attack on Jerusalem. When Lawrence asked for money and arms, Allenby said, ‘I’ll do for you what I can.’ Allenby immediately cabled General William Robertson, Chief of the British Imperial Staff, saying, ‘As proposed by Major Lawrence, Arab co-operation could lead to a collapse of the Turks in the Hejaz and Syria. His scheme is so promising that ‘no effort should be spared to reap the maximum benefit.’”

“Extraordinary,” Giovanni said snapping his fingers with a grin, “in a couple of months Lawrence was transformed from bumptious ass into a respected military strategist.”



General Edmund Allenby, 1917 – Sketch published in the journal *The War*, public domain, Wikimedia

“From that time on, Allenby and Lawrence formed a partnership which would bind them together during the march on Damascus. The capture of Akaba supercharged the war in the Middle East and the War Office signed off on Lawrence’s Syrian proposals. Allenby urgently requested the War Office to supply another division, heavy artillery, and airplanes as quickly as possible. Lawrence wrote to Emir Hussein to urge the transfer of the Arab Army to Allenby’s command. Lawrence told Allenby that most of the Arabs were from camel-breeding tribes who migrate eastwards after the October rains to graze in the central Syrian Desert, therefore speed was of the essence. Operations must begin in September.”

“I would think,” Giovanni said, “that the Sherif of Mecca wouldn’t permit Feisal’s army to be commanded by a British general.”

“That was a challenge Lawrence had to overcome. He took a ship down to Jeddah and with Colonel Wilson met the Sherif for the first time to work out an agreement that appointed Feisal, Supreme Commander of Arab forces who would ‘co-operate with the army of Great Britain.’ The arrangement maintained the diplomatic illusion that the Arab forces were operating under their own command. Despite Lawrence’s brashness with the British, he was a master of diplomacy with the Arabs. Lawrence had a great gift for persuasion, a golden tongue.”

“Sun Tzu believed,” Giovanni said, “that a great commander must be a Taoist master skilled in diplomacy, benevolent in his judgment and unconcerned with fame.”

“And be constantly vigilant of one’s allies,” I added. “While Lawrence was in Jeddah conferring with Hussein, Clayton informed him that Auda abu Tayi, whose Howeitat forces at Guweira was given the responsibility to stop the Turks from attacking Akaba through Wadi Itm, hadn’t been paid for two months. Because of nonpayment, it was heard that Auda was negotiating with the Turks for more money. Lawrence dashed to Guweira to promise Auda that he’d soon be paid by Feisal. Every day brought a new crisis. To maintain the cohesion of the Bedouin tribes required persistent persuasion and diplomacy.”

“And a lot of gold.”

“The Bedouin’s had to leave their homes and flocks. They deserved to be paid like British troops were paid. Payment remained a problem throughout the war for there was a lack of accountability. Failure to pay the troops was a constant drag on Lawrence and led to many of his plans being aborted. Lawrence was worn down by his forced role as tribal mediator — every fifth man is a sheik, and the head sheik has no authority over the

others. He spent hours adjudicating cases of assault with weapons, theft of camels, marriage settlements, blood feuds, and bewitchments.”

“I wonder how he settled the bewitchments,” Giovanni said. “That would be a challenge. Between constant traveling over long distances on camel back, recruiting tribes, mediating tribal feuds, advising Feisal, managing the gold, writing reports for Cairo, and blowing up trains, I wonder what he did in his spare time.”

“He suffered several breakdowns and fits of depression,” I said. “Walking through the wreckage of trains and seeing civilians with their heads blown off, he endured moments of remorse when he doubted what he was doing. After the Turks had cut the throats of all the women and children in a Howeitat village, blind with rage, the Arabs overran the Turkish fort at Fuweila and slaughtered every single soldier. I’ll say more about his moments of depression in a minute — traits which made him such a unique being. In Cairo, he was briefed on the planned autumn offensive to capture Jaffa and Jerusalem with Britain’s hope that it would make Turkey withdraw from the war. The defeat of the Ottomans in Arabia would allow the British Expeditionary Force to be moved to the Western Front to overwhelm the Germans.”

“But what would happen to the Palestinian Arabs if Allenby failed to take Palestine?”

“Terrible things. If the Arabs took the rail junction at Deraa, and then the Turks took it back, the townsfolk, villagers, and peasantry who’d supported Feisal’s forces, couldn’t fade back into the desert like the Bedouins. Lawrence said that they would suffer ‘horrible massacres by a barbarous enemy.’ While waiting for Allenby’s EEF to advance, Lawrence proposed to go with a Bedouin raiding party to destroy the steel plate girder bridge at Wadi Khalid, the largest one in Yarmouk gorge where the railway from Palestine climbed to Hauran on its way to Damascus. The depth of the precipitous gorge of the River Yarmouk had made the railway difficult to build due to the necessity of maintaining the right angle of elevation gain in a serpentine course crossing and re-crossing the river by means of a series of steel girder bridges. Allenby approved Lawrence’s proposal. If the bridge could be brought down, it would isolate the Turkish army in Palestine. Lawrence knew he was taking a terrible risk because the Ottomans had brought up a large garrison to Maan. Riding camels from Akaba by way of Azrak to Yarmouk, it was four hundred and twenty miles, traveling not through a sparsely populated desert, but through settled villages deep within enemy lines.”

“Once more,” Giovanni said, “Lawrence was taking an enormous risk.

“Clayton understood the risk. Blowing the Yarmouk Bridge in Turkish territory was an awfully



Tell el Shehab Bridge in Yarmouk Valley – esyria.sy/sites

dangerous job — if they lost Lawrence, the Arab advance would founder. Clayton said, ‘He’s taken on a colossal job which is weighing him down. He has a lion’s heart, but the strain must be great.’ Major Joyce agreed. The great weakness of the Arab campaign was that it depends so much on Lawrence personally for only he has ‘the intimate knowledge of the tribes that we must depend upon.’ If they lost him what would they do? Clayton said, ‘We must pull him out of combat soon, but at this critical moment he’s so desperately needed.’”

“Bringing down a giant bridge in the gorge,” Giovanni said, “would make it impossible for the Turks to bring in reserve forces to crush Allenby in Palestine.”

“Exactly,” I said, “and prevent the Turks from retreating from a British advance. If Lawrence succeeded in blowing up the bridge and Allenby broke into Palestine, Lawrence was prepared to send out messengers calling for a rebellion north of Damascus and west to the sea. Then they’d ride north to Palmyra and capture Aleppo. Emir Abd el Kader el Jezairi arrived in Akaba and offered the support of his followers, Algerian exiles who’d settled north of the Yarmouk Valley. Because the support of the local Algerians was so crucial, it was decided that Abd el Kader, grandson of the renowned defender of Algiers against the French, would join the

bridge demolition party despite being an Islamic fanatic. In October 1917, Lawrence took the leader of the Harith tribe, a squad of Indian machine-gunners, and Lieutenant Wood, a British explosive specialist, to destroy the steel girder bridge in the gorge of Yarmouk. The expedition ran into trouble when the Howeitat tribesman at Jefer refused to join the party because blowing up a bridge didn't offer any loot. Joining with some Beni Sakhr tribesman, Lawrence picked up Serahim tribesman in Azrak, only to discover that Abd el Kader had switched sides to the Turks. The crazy Algerian knew the location of the bridge they were going to bring down, which meant that the Turks would be prepared. With no longer an advantage of surprise, the attack on the bridge in Wadi Khalid, wasn't possible. He decided to bring down the bridge at Tell el Shehab, but that was risky because it was surrounded by villages which supported the Turks."

"Was it possible to carry enough explosives by camelback to blow up a steel plate girder bridge?"

"It was a challenge. The art of using a limited number of explosives was a precise operation requiring a woven necklace of blasting gelignite fired electrically, especially difficult if done under fire. As the Bedouins were hauling the gelignite under the Tell el Shehab Bridge in darkness, a Bedouin dropped his rifle on the rocks, the sound echoing throughout the gorge, drawing fire from the sentry. The Turkish guards spilled out of their tents laying down a hail of bullets which panicked the Serahin tribesmen. Knowing that the explosives could blow up if struck by bullets, the Bedouins threw all their gelignite into the chasm to Lawrence's great chagrin. Sick to heart at the failure to blow the bridge and not having enough food to feed them, he had to send the Indian machine gun squad back to Azrak. Still determined to blow up a train with the remaining explosives, he chose Minifir between Deraa and Amman. It was a dangerous decision for most of the electric detonation cable had been lost at Yarmouk which meant Lawrence would have to set off the blast at only 150 feet — a suicidal mission. Lawrence felt he had to take the chance because he wasn't willing to return with absolutely nothing to show for their prodigious trek. He placed the explosive on the crown of the arch of a masonry bridge over a dry wash, buried the cable in the ditch and brushed the ground with a bush, scattering leaves and grass to conceal the trail from Turkish patrols.

"Forty men waited hours in the rain for a train to appear, huddled against their steaming camels for warmth. High on the promontory, the sentinels waved their cloaks to signal an oncoming train, its wood fired locomotive straining to make the gradient, pulling eighteen flat beds packed with artillery and troops and three coaches of officers. Lawrence pumped the electric detonator and nothing happened. He pumped it up and down and still nothing happened.



Hejaz Railway masonry viaduct– esyria.sy/sites

“It was a miracle that it failed because the train was carrying hundreds of Ottoman troops who would’ve wiped out his band of forty. As the troop train crawled past, Lawrence was exposed, kneeling on the bank. Impossible to move or he’d be shot. All he could do was sit quietly and hope the Turks would think he was only a lone Bedouin. The overloaded train crawled past, the engine straining so hard he thought it was going to burst. Curious officers stepped out on the rear platforms, pointing and staring at Lawrence.”

“Jesus. What did he do?”

“He waved back. When the train rounded the curve, he leaped up and ran like a rabbit to the crest. From the ridge, he saw the train stop after a few hundred yards and an officers’ patrol dismount and come back to check the ground, but failed to find the buried wires. Once the train went on, Lawrence opened the detonator box with his dagger, reconnected the electrical connectors and went back down while his band waited on the crest. Resetting the detonator he waited for another train which never came. They spent the night, cold, and miserable, too wet to make a cooking fire, raw camel meat their only possible food which tempted no one. Lawrence spent the night by the detonator listening to the singing telegraph wires. At dawn, he climbed the crest



Hejaz Railway, circa 1910 – G G. Eric and Edith Matson Photograph Collection, U.S. Library of Congress, public domain, Wikimedia

to avoid the morning railway patrol. Just as they'd slaughtered and cooked their weakest camel and had begun to eat, a watchman signaled an approaching train. Lawrence raced down the hill to the detonator as the train came around the bend, two locomotives and twelve passenger coaches travelling at top speed. He pumped the detonator and ignited a massive explosion under the wheels of the first locomotive, the enormous blast sending Lawrence flying. The detonator which a moment before had been between his legs, was crushed under a sheet of iron, the smoking upper torso of a man lay beside him. The boiler of the engine was blown off which threw both engines over the embankment, the first three cars smashed to pieces, the rest derailed in a twisted zigzag beside the track. Dazed, bloody, and barely able to walk, Lawrence was caught between his squad and the Ottoman troops. The Beni Sakhrs ran down to save him and several died by Turkish fire. The tribesmen under withering torrents of fire, dragged him to the top of the hill, loaded him on a camel and rode at top speed into the desert for a full hour."

"Lawrence led a charmed life," Giovanni said. "Time after time he escaped death."

"It was a close call. He had five wounds from bullets which broke the skin. His crushed foot made it painful to walk. Despite that they'd destroyed two locomotives and killed a lot of Turks, Lawrence was despondent. The Ottoman railway through Yarmouk Gorge between Palestine and Damascus remained untouched. For him, the expedition was a failure, but Cairo was delighted because intelligence showed that Ottoman troops, perhaps a full

division which would've reinforced the army opposing Allenby, were tied up defending Maan, Deraa, and the railway. The demolished train was taking troops to Palestine to stop Allenby from taking Jerusalem, the commanding officer of the Turkish 8th Army with 400 Ottoman troops on board, the commander's motor-car riding on the last car. Senior officers perished in the wreck which provoked the Turks to increase the price on Lawrence's head to £20,000 alive or £10,000 dead."

"With that much money offered," Giovanni said, "and many Arabs remaining loyal to the Turks, he was crazy to operate behind enemy lines."

"Monomaniacal, is the word. He'd go through a wall of pain to defeat the Turks. After they were out of danger, they stopped to treat the wounded, sprayed their wounds with their piss as an antiseptic, slaying a mangle-stricken camel for the first meal they'd eaten in three days and Lawrence compensating the relatives of the dead tribesmen and passing out rewards for the 60 or 70 rifles they'd taken. Returning to the oasis of Azraq, the only source of pure water within 5,000 square miles of desert, Lawrence decided that the Qasr al-Azraq fortress would be a good place for evangelization the Arab cause. They pitched in to make livable for winter, constructing new roofs of palm fronds over the giant stone rafters, building a ramp so the camels could come into the courtyard at night. On the upper towers, they mounted machine guns to command all of the approaches, the surrounding land just right for constructing an airfield, making the Azraq fortress a perfect base for the march on Damascus."

"A fortress in the middle of the desert?"

"It had been there for nearly 1,600 years, the original fortress built by the Romans in the 4th century and reconstructed in the 13th century of black basalt during the Ayyubid civilization, a dynasty founded by Saladin, a Sunni Muslim of Kurdish origin. By the 12th century, Saladin's Ayyubid Sultanate controlled, not only Syria, but Egypt, Mesopotamia, Hejaz, Yemen, and the North African coast of Libya and Tunisia."

"Lawrence must have fallen in love with the Muslim fortress."

"It was love at first sight. On stormy nights, the Bedouins brought in brushwood and dung and lit a great fire, laid out the carpets and sheepskins and told stories of old battles, a servant fanning smoke with his cloak through the loopholes in the massive basalt walls, rain drops dripping from the stone-beamed roof hissing in the



Fortress of Qasr al-Azraq, Jordan – Steffen Sledz photo, Wikimedia

fire. Lawrence wrote in *Seven Pillars*, ‘Azrak’s unfathomable silence was steeped in the knowledge of wandering poets, lost kingdoms, all the crime and chivalry and lost magnificence of Hira and Ghassan. Past and future flowed over us like an unedding river as we dreamed ourselves into the spirit of the fortress — sieges and feasting, raids, murders, and love-singing in the night.’”

“I’ll bet Lawrence was deeply discouraged after failing to blow the bridge.”

“His discouragement only drove him on. After only a few days of recovery, despite unhealed wounds and a severely damaged foot, Lawrence set out to reconnoiter the area around Deraa with Talal, sheik of Tafas, a famous outlaw who the Turks had levied a handsome price on his head. A dashing fighter with a sheepskin coat of the softest Angora, silk robes, high boots, silver saddle, sword and dagger of Damascus steel, and a German Gewehr 98 rifle, Talal was invaluable to Lawrence because the Tafas tribe lived near Damascus. It was critical to reconnoiter Deraa because it was the critical junction where the Palestinian railway rose out of the Yarmouk gorge and joined the Damascus to Medina railway. If they could cut Deraa off by destroying the railway on three sides, they could take the last major garrison before Damascus. He decided it was necessary to go into town to study the Ottoman defenses. Since Talal would be recognized in Deraa, he parted from the sheik, left his camel with Halim, and with two peasant friends walked several miles into Deraa on the railroad tracks painfully hobbling along on the foot which he’d broken when he blew up Djemal Pasha’s train.”



Hejaz Railway station – Halladiyan Ryal Geographic Society, public domain, British Museum

“Deraa . . .” Giovanni said thoughtfully, “that’s where he was captured and tortured by the Turks. I wonder if he had a masochistic inclination to risk being captured.”

“I’ll say more about his risk taking in a minute. While he was walking along the fence around the complex rail yard and defensive emplacements, he was grabbed by a sergeant, ‘The Bey wants you.’ Interrogated by an officer in the guard room, Lawrence told them he was a Circassian from Kuneitra.”

“Couldn’t they recognize him as an Englishman?”

“Circassians are fair skinned and Lawrence spoke Arabic with a Syrian accent and he was disheveled, his clothes ripped and soggy from the rain. In *Seven Pillars*, he said that in the guard house, they made him strip and wash before dressing in a fresh gown, before taking him across the rail yard to the bedroom of Najim Muhittin, Governor of Deraa. After carefully looking him over, the Bey grabbed him and pulled him onto the bed. Despite his wounds and broken foot, Lawrence threw him off. The Bey began obsequiously praising him saying how white and fresh he was, how fine his hands and feet were, offering to make him his orderly if he would make love to him. The governor grabbed him again and Lawrence shoved him away. When Najim ordered the sentry to strip him naked, he was shocked to see unhealed bullet wounds. Once more, the Bey came close and Lawrence kicked him in the groin, sending him howling in pain back onto the bed. The sentry and a soldier pinioned Lawrence while the Bey spit into his face, bit into his neck until the blood ran, kissed him, drawing his knife and twisting the point into his flesh.

“Once again Lawrence refused Hajim’s demand for sex and the Bey ordered his aides to take him away and beat him. Dragged down the stairs to the first floor, he was beaten, his wrists twisted until they cracked, then whipped with a Circassian whip until his back was a mass of welts and blood. Lawrence counted the blows until he lost count overcome by unbearable pain, a cracking apart of his whole being as each of the men took his turn, lashing into Lawrence’s groin as he screamed, vomited, and pleaded for mercy in Arabic. At last the torturers stopped beating him, splashed water on his face and took him back to the Bey who spurned him for being ‘too torn and bloody for his bed.’”

“It’s astonishing that the Bey didn’t recognize his most fearsome enemy with a £20,000 reward on his head?”

“The Ottomans had no photo of Lawrence, no idea what he looked like. If they’d known, he would’ve been interrogated and executed.”

“In his condition, how could he possibly escape?”

“It’s a mystery why they let him escape. An Armenian orderly washed and bandaged his bloody back, and before leaving him for the night, a sympathetic guard whispered in a Druse accent that the door was unlocked. After regaining consciousness with the light of dawn appearing through the cracks of the shed, he struggled to his feet, numb with cold, his head throbbing and discovered old clothes in the next room, a robe, red fez, and slippers, crawled out the window and in his Turkish disguise begged a ride from a merchant on a camel headed in the direction of his companions who awaited him at the agreed upon rendezvous point. On his way out of town, he found a road through a little valley. Despite the torture, his mission was a success. The valley was the perfect path to attack Deraa.”

“After the horror,” Giovanni said, “he found what he had been looking for . . . but at what a price.”

“In spite of his wounds and inflamed muscles from the beating at Deraa, he pushed on to Azrak, their camels slithering and falling in the mud, halting when the muck became unassailable and spent the night sleeping in the mud. The following day, accosted by Bedouin bandits, Lawrence stunned the robbers by insulting them, then rode slowly off, leaving them so confounded they didn’t fire their guns until they were well under way, their camels breaking into a gallop.”

“Lawrence was like Gary Cooper in a Hollywood Western,” Giovanni said clapping his hands with a laugh. “Whether it may or may not be true, he was one hell of a storyteller.”



British Holt tractor towing a 8-inch Howitzer Mk V, 1916 – Author, U.K. government, public domain, Wikimedia

“When he reached Akaba, he was flown over to Suez and driven out to Allenby’s headquarters beyond Gaza where he learned of the general’s recent victories — heartening news after the disaster in Yarmouk gorge.

“What,” Giovanni asked, “did Allenby accomplish while Lawrence was failing to blow up the bridge?”

“Allenby was more involved in combat than General Murray. He moved his general headquarters from Cairo to Rafah closer to the Gaza front lines and won the respect of his troops by making frequent trips to the front. On the Gaza-Beersheba line, Allenby’s Egyptian Expeditionary Force was supplied by Caterpillar and Holt tractors pulling wagons of ammunition across the Sinai from Cairo. Allenby was facing an Ottoman army commanded by German General Erich von Falkenhayn, former Prussian Minister of War who’d been reinforced by troops from Galicia, Romania, and Thrace after the collapse of Russia in the revolution. During the time that Lawrence was traveling from the Yarmouk gorge to Azrak to Akaba, Allenby deceived the Turkish command at Gaza by sending a courageous intelligence officer, Colonel Richard Meinertzhagen close to the Turkish front lines where he dropped a bag smeared with horse blood with fake plans for the attack on Gaza.



German troops in Ottoman occupied Jerusalem, 1917 – Unknown author, German Federal Archives, Wikimedia



Australian Light Horse mountain gun battery with BL 2.75 guns at Beit Ur el Tahta, Judean Hills, Palestine, November 1917 – Unknown author, Australian War Memorial, public domain, Wikimedia



General Sir Edmund Allenby entering Jerusalem on foot to show respect for the holy city – Author, Underwood and Underwood, U.S. Library of Congress, Frank and Frances Carpenter Collection, public domain, Wikimedia

“Allenby’s artillery divisions of 200 guns began shelling the Turks to convince them that a frontal attack was coming at Gaza. It was the heaviest artillery barrage of the war outside of the Western Front, yard per yard as many guns as in the Battle of the Somme. But instead of attacking at Gaza, Allenby mounted a surprise attack at dawn on Beersheba and a crucial water supply that was strongly fortified by a line of trenches and forts constructed on high points surrounded by rows of barbed wire.

“Leading a detachment of the Imperial Camel Corps behind enemy lines, Lawrence’s old chief from the Sinai ‘biblical archeological survey’ of 1913, Stewart Newcombe was captured while attempting to cut the Hebron road. While the Anzac Mounted Division cut off the road to Jerusalem to prevent an Ottoman retreat, the Desert Mounted Corps captured the Beersheba water wells, a necessity to water the troops and horses. The surprise capture of Beersheba forced von Falkenhayn to retreat, abandoning Jerusalem without a fight.”

“Seven hundred years,” Giovanni said, “Jerusalem been under Islamic rule.”

“The Palestinians,” I said, “celebrate the defeat of the Crusaders at the Battle of Hattin by Saladin, which forced the Christian rulers to surrender Jerusalem in 1187, ending the First Kingdom of Jerusalem. In the Third Crusade, King Richard the Lionheart captured Acre forcing Saladin to negotiate with Richard for the release of the captured Muslim garrison, including women and children. When the negotiations failed, Richard ordered 3,000 Muslim prisoners beheaded. Saladin responded by killing all of his Christian prisoners. After his defeat at Jaffa, Saladin signed a treaty with Richard giving Christians control of coastal cities and Muslims control over Jerusalem with Christian pilgrims assured the right to visit the Holy City. Since the origin of Jerusalem in the 4th millennium before Christ, the city has been captured and recaptured 40 times.”

“Jerusalem,” Giovanni said, “has been fought over more times than all the capitals of Europe.”

“When Lawrence arrived at staff headquarters, they pieced together various parts of uniform for him, and he stepped out of his Bedouin robes into the uniform of a proper British major to walk with Allenby into Jerusalem. Allenby entered Jerusalem on foot, a marked contrast to Kaiser Wilhelm II’s entry in 1898 who rode a prancing German stallion through the Jaffa Gate dressed in an emperor’s full-dress regalia with a flowing cape and golden helmet embellished with the Imperial eagle, a Napoleonic rooster encrusted with plumes, ribbons, and medals.”

“What was the Kaiser doing in Jerusalem?”



Portrait of Kaiser Wilhelm II, 1905 – Reichard & Lindner, public domain, Wikimedia

“In 1898, Germany was developing an alliance with the Ottoman Empire to counter the allied interests of Russia, France, and Britain. You’ll remember that German engineers were the builders of the Turkish railway a monumental engineering feat from Constantinople to Aleppo, Damascus, and Medina, the lifeline that Lawrence was determined to sever. A devout Lutheran, Wilhelm saw himself as the reincarnation of Roman Emperor Constantine who’d built the first churches in Jerusalem in the 4th century. He arrived in the Holy City to endow three churches, the Church of the Redeemer in Jerusalem, the Church of the Nativity in Bethlehem, and the Church of the Ascension on the Mount of Olives.

“Walls and buildings were demolished to receive the German Emperor and the Citadel’s moat filled in to provide passage of the carriages and horses of Wilhelm’s entourage through the Jaffa Gate. Beggars and dogs were rounded up and exiled to distant villages and three ceremonial gates erected for Wilhelm’s entry, the most impressive being the Jewish Gate emblazoned with welcoming signs in German and Hebrew and covered with silk curtains embroidered with silver and gold Torah finials loaned by the Sephardic and Ashkenazi synagogues. The chief rabbis and leaders of the Jewish community assembled to greet the Kaiser with a twenty-one-gun salute from a cannon mounted in the courtyard of the Tower of David while the Ottoman military band played the German national anthem.



Kaiser Wilhelm II of Germany, state visit to Ottoman ruled Jerusalem, 1898 – American Colony of Jerusalem, public domain, Library of Congress, Wikimedia

“Theodore Herzl arrived in Jerusalem with four leading Zionists to once again ask for the Kaiser’s support for a Jewish settlement in Palestine. In their earlier meetings, Wilhelm had held out a glimmer of support for a Jewish state, but when Herzl met with the Kaiser in his sumptuous tent furnished with the furniture and carpets loaned by the Palestinian and Jewish upper class, Herzl received a coolly non-committal response making him realize that the German Emperor had forsaken his support for Jewish settlement in Palestine.”

“Considering the rabid anti-Semitism in Germany,” Giovanni said, “I’m surprised that Wilhelm was royally received by the Jews of Jerusalem.”



General Edmund Allenby and Indian troops at Jaffa Gate, 11 December 1917
- Author, American Colony, Jerusalem, Eric and Edith Matson Photograph Collection, U.S. Library of Congress, public domain, Wikimedia

“While it seems strange to us now, but at the turn of the century, Muslims, Christians, and Jews in Palestine were looking for international recognition. For a world power to come providing respect and money to Palestine was a big deal. I would guess that the financial and self-esteem aspects of the Kaiser’s visit overshadowed anti-Semitism in Germany. The Jews who were prominent in the Berlin press and leftist circles, Wilhelm held responsible for opposing his rule. Before his death in 1941, Wilhelm developed a relationship with Hitler, declaring, “Let no German ever forget this, nor rest until these parasites have been destroyed and exterminated from German soil!”

“By entering on foot,” Giovanni said, “Allenby prevented Britain from looking like a colonial power.”

“If Allenby had put on a big show,” I said, “it would have had severely damaged Arab-British relations. The Turks had declared a jihad, painting the English as Christian Crusaders. Britain was invading the Islamic Holy Land. Allenby didn’t fall into a trap and sent his Indian Muslim soldiers to guard Islamic religious sites and banned the display of the Union Jack.”

“But why would Muslims welcome a Christian emperor to Jerusalem?”

“They had little choice. The Arabs were under Ottoman occupation. To avoid persecution, the people had to survive by submitting to the will of their rulers. The Ottoman Empire was cementing an alliance with a European power to resist other European powers. If you wanted to stay healthy and alive, you welcomed the German emperor to Jerusalem.”

“What was Allenby’s and Lawrence’s next move after Jerusalem?”

“While Allenby was waiting for supplies before moving on Jericho, Lawrence suggested that the Arabs take control of the area between the Dead Sea and the railway making it possible for the British to supply the Arabs directly through Palestine. If Allenby could provide transport for Feisal’s fifty tons of daily supplies and ammunition to Jericho, then the 3,000 Arab regulars could abandon the Akaba base and relocate to the Jordan Valley where they could stop the Ottomans from attacking Allenby from the rear. While in Cairo, he learned that Emir Hussein had passed on to Wingate, the text of a letter that Djemal Pasha, one of the three military dictators ruling the Ottoman Empire, had sent to Feisal offering to open negotiations for a peace settlement with the Arabs.”

“That must have stunned him,” Giovanni said. “A peace settlement without independence would undermine everything Lawrence had worked for. I’m surprised the Ottomans would make such an offer knowing how important it was for them to possess the holy cities of Islam, Mecca, and Medina. What was their thinking?”

“Djemal’s intention,” I said, “was to use the Sykes-Picot agreement to drive a wedge between the Arabs and the British.”

“If it was a carefully kept secret,” Giovanni asked, “How could Djemal Pasha know about the Sykes-Picot agreement?”

“It was no longer secret. Tsar Nicolas II was overthrown in the Russian Revolution and in the following October Revolution, Lenin’s and Trotsky’s Bolsheviks overthrew the provisional government of Alexander

Kerensky. On the same day that the Ottoman army was retreating from Gaza, the Bolsheviks issued a Decree on Peace, withdrawing from the war which allowed the Ottomans to transfer their troops to Palestine, a blow to General Allenby. While ransacking the archives of the Tsar, the Bolsheviks uncovered the secret Sykes-Picot document which included a detailed map of the division of colonial suzerainty, exposing it to the entire world by publishing the document in *Pravda* in Moscow and the *Guardian* in London, stunning Britain, France, and Emir Hussein.”

“Lord,” Giovanni said, “it was a good thing that Lawrence committed treason and told Feisal about the secret agreement, otherwise Feisal would’ve felt betrayed and their alliance would’ve come to an end.”

RUSSIA AND SECRET TREATIES.

TERMS PUBLISHED.

PETROGRAD, SATURDAY.

The Telegraph Agency, acting under the direction of the Maximalists, issues the following:—

M. Trotsky, Commissioner for Foreign Affairs, has published a series of secret telegrams and documents, dating partly from the year 1915 and partly from the time of the Ministerial Coalitions. In those relating to Constantinople and the Straits, M. Sazonoff, then Minister for Foreign Affairs, expresses Russia's claims to Constantinople, the west coast of the Bosphorus, the Sea of Marmora and the Dardanelles, Southern Thrace up to the Enos-Midia line, the Asiatic coast and the islands of the Sea of Marmora, and the islands of Imbros and Tenedos.

The Allies put forward a series of claims, to which the Russian Government consented. According to these demands Constantinople was to become a free port for goods neither going to nor coming from Russia. The Allies further demanded the recognition of their rights over Asiatic Turkey, as well as the preservation of the sacred places in Arabia under Mussulman sovereignty, and the inclusion of the neutral zone in Persia within the sphere of British activity.

Secret Sykes-Picot Agreement revealed by Trotsky, Commissioner of Foreign Affairs – *The Manchester Guardian*, November 26, 1917, Wikimedia

“It was definitely a bombshell. Djemal told the Arabs that the only way their revolt could be justified was if it established Arab independence. The Sykes-Picot Agreement made it clear that Palestine would become an international protectorate, Syria would be ruled by the French and Mesopotamia by the British. ‘You’re being betrayed by the British imperialists,’ Djemal argued, but it’s not too late for us to announce an amnesty for the Arab Revolt and open negotiations to solve our differences in a way that will honor Islam.”

“The Sykes-Picot Agreement,” Giovanni said. “was an absolute disaster. The Arabs had the opportunity of making peace with the Ottomans and getting a better deal than with Britain and France. The Bolshevik revelation of the secret treaty threatened to turn everything upside down.”

“On top of the secret agreement being exposed, around the same time, the Balfour Declaration was released providing for a Jewish national home in Palestine. Britain’s program to use the Arabs to defeat the Ottomans was dealt a double lethal blow. From Cairo to Baghdad to Damascus, the Arabs were outraged to see Palestine promised to the Jews.”

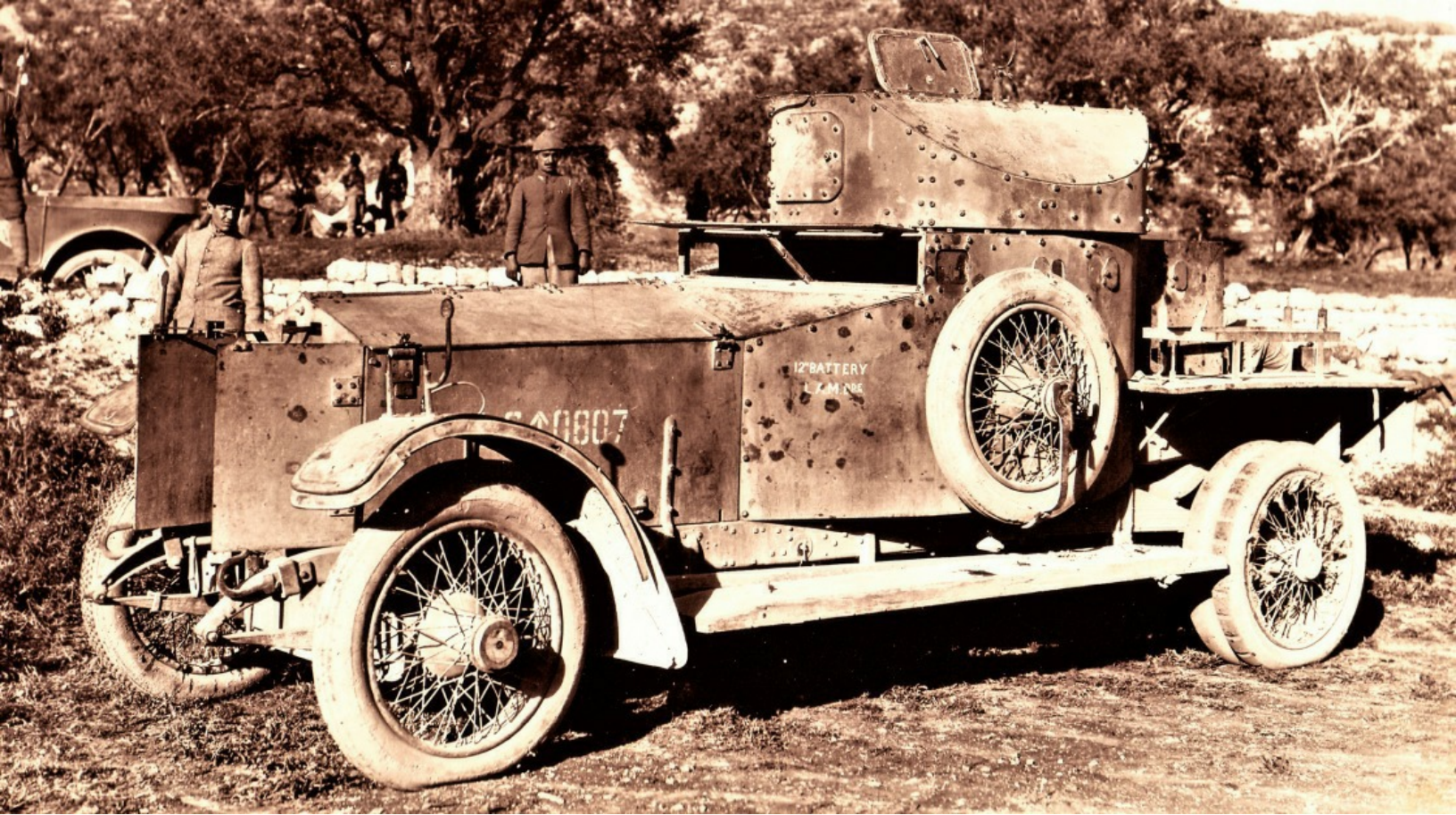
“What a dilemma. What could Lawrence do?”

“He hurried back to Akaba to encourage Feisal to respond to Djemal. Lawrence knew that the British were secretly negotiating with the Turks and that Djemal’s Islamism wasn’t shared by the anti-German faction of the General Staff under Mustapha Kemal, the hero of Gallipoli. Lawrence urged Feisal to suggest to the nationalist leaders of Turkey that by giving the Arabs independence, it would allow the government to rid herself of the dead weight of administrating the factious Arab provinces. Mustapha Kemal would be free to create the nationalist rebirth of Turkey within the heart of Turkestan.”

“Did Cairo know what Lawrence was doing?”

“Not quite. He feared that Britain would mistrust Feisal if they knew of his negotiations. Lawrence’s determination to see independence for the Arabs outweighed all other considerations. Back in Akaba, he found that Allenby had delivered the Hejaz Armored Car Battery, five-ton vehicles constructed on Rolls-Royce Silver Ghost chassis with a rotating turret armed with water cooled Vickers machine guns, the first mechanized weapons provided to the Arabs.

“Lawrence had always been entranced with speed.” Giovanni added, “He loved motorcycles. The armored trucks were so heavy that they had to be fitted with double tires. I can imagine him gleefully flying over the desert in the Rolls-Royce armored cars.”



Rolls-Royce *Silver Ghost* chassis armored car – Sherjaca, Imperial War Museums

“I’d guess,” I said, “that the double tires were in case one was punctured by gun fire, it could keep going on the second tire. Later, in World War One, a lot of these lighter armored vehicles were built on half-tracks, instead of tires, which gave better traction in both sand and mud. To get the armored cars up to the Guweira plain, engineer crews using 50 Egyptian soldiers and great ingenuity, built a motor road from Akaba through the Wadi Itm gorge. When the cars were brought up to the plateau, Major Joyce and Lawrence took a Rolls out for several days to reconnoiter their next attack, roaring across the mud-flats of Mudowwara at 65 miles per hour, lurching over obstacles that one would think would smash their springs, but the Rolls were indestructible, at one point racing a gazelle over the mud-flats. It was a rare moment of happiness for Lawrence to be sitting around a camp fire with an all British crew for there wasn’t a single Arab around to whom he had to swear that Britain was going to bring independence to the Arabs.”

“That constantly tortured him.”

“I wonder if his guilt about Britain’s and France’s double dealing, may have been one of the reasons that he never returned to Arabia after the war. But while in Arabia he buried his psychic burden in the fury of the war. In addition to the Rolls, the Hejaz Armored Car Battery had heavy Talbot armored cars armed with



T. E. Lawrence with his Bedouin bodyguard – Imperial War Museum, public domain, Wikimedia

two ten-pounder mountain guns which he put to use immediately, the beastly warthogs blasting a Turkish station while men safely encased behind steel plate didn't suffer a scratch. It was like trying to bring down 'a rhinoceros with bird-shot.' Convinced that with armored cars they could close down the railway at will, Lawrence said, 'A Rolls in the desert was above rubies. Great was Rolls, and great was Royce! They were worth hundreds of men to us in these deserts.'"

"Fortunately," Giovanni said, "the Turks weren't equipped with bazookas."

"Nor armor-piercing bullets," I added. "Since the Turks were offering a reward of £100 for a British officer, dead or alive and £20,000 for him, he began assembling a bodyguard of sixty lawless Bedouins, hard riders, and hard fighters with no family, outcasts who'd answer only to Lawrence. Their blood feuds stopped them from forming alliances with the other bodyguards. The various tribes to which they belonged, would give him access to hundreds of informants between Akaba and Damascus, Beersheba and Bagdad. In *Seven Pillars*, he said, 'they were blood enemies of thirty tribes, and only for my hand over them, would have committed murder each day.' The officers at Akaba called them 'cut-throats,' but they cut throats only to their master's order. Lawrence paid them £6 a month, standard wage for a man and camel, but Lawrence mounted them on his camels, the fastest and strongest camels to be found, chosen for speed and made each man responsible for the health of his camel. Many of them were Ageyls, skilled trainers of camels, proud to be chosen for Lawrence's bodyguard, flamboyantly dressed like a 'bed of tulips in every color but white,' for that was Lawrence's color. In half an hour they were ready for a ride of six weeks, the limit of time for which food could be carried, able to travel all day and night if ordered, never complaining of fatigue. 'Pain was a solvent, a

cathartic, almost a decoration, to be fairly worn while they survived it,' he said. Many of the young ones were full of 'carnal passion . . . fascinated by their suffering.'”

“It reminds me,” Giovanni said, “of the self-abnegation of the samurai.”

“That’s a good description — self-abnegation. Lawrence became as hard and reckless as his troop of warriors. Since adolescence, Lawrence had practiced eating a great deal, fatten himself up a bit, then going two or three days without food. He was efficient in the desert, never allowing himself to be distracted by thinking about food. Sleep was the richest pleasure in the world, but he could go without sleep night after night, an ability that came from years of self-control, a mastery of endurance. ‘The practice of our revolt,’ he said, ‘fortified the nihilist attitude in me.’ Like Lawrence, his Bedouins pushed themselves to an extreme of endurance without breaking down. “They were disembodied,’ he said, ‘unconscious of flesh or feeling.’ While protecting Lawrence, sixty of his bodyguard died.

“While preparing for their move into the Jordan Valley, Lawrence wrote a report entitled *Syrian Cross-Currents* which critiqued the groups who opposed Hussein, the Sherif of Mecca, charging the Christian nationalists of being a facade for European dominance. The Muslim intelligentsia in exile who wore European clothes and spoke European languages formed committees from Beirut to Berlin, Paris, London, and New York to spin dreams, a privileged elite who held a ‘pathetic belief in the altruism of Britain and France.’ They had no understanding of ordinary Syrians. While Lawrence granted that some of the Syrians opposed Hussein because of his religious orthodoxy, but when compared to the Wahhabism of Ibn Saud, the ruler of the Nejd, Hussein was less fanatic for he softened the *Sharia*. In the Nejd, for a first offence the right hand is cut off, for the second the tongue is torn out, for the third, the offender is banished to the desert without food or water. In Mecca, Hussein’s harshest punish was imprisonment. For the complex demographics of Syria, Feisal was more flexible than his father. Thousands of Syrians were enlisting in Feisal’s armies, each advance sustained by the local people. ‘Feisal accepts any volunteer, allows him to preach what he pleases and pray as he pleases as long as he will fight against the Turks.’”

“His report on the Syrians,” Giovanni said, “must have put the French in a state of apoplexy.”

“The French didn’t have a chance to read his report. It was published in a private circulation rather than in the Arab Bulletin. In January, he set out with his bodyguard for Jurf which the Arabs had overwhelmed taking 200 Turks prisoner, the loot making the Bedouins suddenly rich, capturing twenty-five mules, weapons, and seven rail cars loaded with hors d’œuvres intended for the officers in Medina, tobacco, tinned meats, olives

sesame paste, dried apricots, and pickled delicacies of Syria. It snowed for three days, the fierce winds blowing from the Caucasus making it miserable for the soldiers at four thousand feet elevation. The army supply staff hadn't sent enough tents, boots, and blankets for surviving in an Alpine blizzard. If they didn't desert or die, the soldiers suffered an aching misery.

Sherif Nasir moved on Tafilah, marching with the highlanders of Petra through the snowdrifts, the ice breaking down the animals and men before reaching at dawn the brim of the ravine overlooking Tafilah. Nasir demanded the village to surrender under pain of bombardment, which was a fraudulent threat because the artillery had returned to Guweira. When the villagers fired back, Auda rode out in plain sight, declaring, 'Dogs, do you not know Auda?' Hearing that it was the indomitable warrior Auda Abi Tayi, the frightened villagers and hundreds of Armenians who'd survived the Young Turk genocide, surrendered. But the villagers had the time to drive their asses and mules to safety and hide their wheat and barley leaving the soldiers with little to eat. To make matters worse, the Turks sent 900 infantrymen, 100 cavalry, two mountain howitzers, and 27 machine guns by rail to Kerak, then marched up the gorge of Wadi Hesa to retake Tafilah, astounding Lawrence who thought it foolish for the Turks to risk losing so many men to retake an inconsequential village."



Turkish artillery, German 105 mm howitzer, 1917 – Unknown Author, public domain, Wikimedia

“Up unto this time,” Giovanni said, “his theory of guerilla warfare had been to never directly oppose a strong force of Turks.”

“Lawrence changed his mind in Tafileh because they held the advantage of terrain and weather. For the first time, he decided to give them ‘a pitched battle like they wanted. Kill them all.’ Lawrence rounded up his bodyguard and ordered them to bring up their Hotchkiss automatic and the other men to the top of the gorge, then with a definite plan in mind, climbed the cliff barefoot to a ridge overlooking the plateau. The Turks were pouring the fire of twenty machine guns on the ridge and Lawrence quickly retreated to another ridge about forty feet higher, counting his paces as he ran to determine the range of his howitzer counter fire once the Turks occupied the bare ridge he’d just abandoned. As the Turks scrambled up to occupy the ridge, Lawrence assembled his main body, twenty infantrymen on mules, thirty Motalga horsemen, two hundred villagers, five automatic rifles, four machine-guns, and the mountain gun. While eighty riders circled the eastern ridge to envelop the enemy’s left wing, one hundred Aima tribesmen were sent out with three automatic guns to outflank the Turk’s western wing. Knowing the exact range by the number of paces he’d counted, they elevated the Vickers guns, thankful for their old-fashioned but accurate sights, then just as his men were prepared to attack the left and right wings of the Turks, his center opened up with the big guns showering the Turks with shrapnel, slaughtering them like sitting ducks on the barren ground. Unseen by the Turks until they were in position, the Arabs overwhelmed the Turkish left wing and the Aima tribesmen who knew every square foot of their own land, crept unseen within three hundred yards of the enemy before laying down a sudden burst of fire wiping out the Turkish machine guns. As the sun set over the mountains casting a reddish glow upon the snow, all of the Arabs in the center charged down the ridge to slaughter the Turks fleeing down Wadi Hesa, Armenians armed only with their knives coming from behind, screaming in Turkish as they wreaked their revenge on the Turks who’d driven them from their homes. After it was over, it began to snow harder, the Arabs bringing in their wounded and leaving hundreds of wounded Turks lying out in the snowstorm. By the next morning they were all dead.

“It was the first time that a force advised by Lawrence had fought a conventional battle. Even though they’d captured two Skoda mountain howitzers, twenty-seven machine guns, two hundred horses and mules, Lawrence regretted the massacre of Wadi Hesa. By making the decision to fight, they’d killed 1,000 Turks and lost forty of his men in a senseless battle that wouldn’t hasten a victory in the war. In *Seven Pillars*, he wrote, ‘This evening there was no glory left, but the terror of the broken flesh.’”



Dead Sea from the fortress of Masada, Israel – Author, Grauesel, Wikimedia

“I’ve not read *Seven Pillars* in many years,” Giovanni mused. “On my next tour, I’m going to read it again. There’s death and poetry in that book.”

“Before the battle of Tafileh,” I said, “Lawrence had ordered an attack on the Turkish dhows that carried produce and grain on the Dead Sea to Jericho. When he had no news of the outcome, he rode down from Tafileh to persuade Abdullah el Fair to attack the harbor of El Mezraa on the southern end of the Dead Sea. After they sank the Turkish dhows and captured sixty prisoners, he returned to Tafileh figuring that Zeid would need £30,000 to continue their advance.”

“£30,000, that’s a lot of gold.”

“More than you think,” I said. “It’s several million pounds in today’s currency.”

“I remember the scene at Tafileh,” Giovanni said, “when he was cooped up with his bodyguards in two tiny rooms reeking of the sour sweat of twenty-eight men, water dripping from the roof, fleas singing in praise of their sumptuous feast. Tensions rose among the men in the miserable space, setting off quarrels and flashing



Aerial view of the River Jordan, 1938 – Author, W. Robert Moore, *National Geographic Magazine*, Dec. 1938, public domain, Wikimedia

daggers. The offenders were punished by lashings which didn't do much for morale. Suffering from a bullet wound in his hip, Lawrence screened out the pain by reading the book he carried in his saddle bags, *Morte d'Arthur*. Their camels being unsuited to the slippery ground and unable to graze in the snow, had to be driven down the mountain 5,000 feet below, leaving them with no camels and they'd spent the last of their gold. Lawrence liked to recruit local men, for they fought best when defending their homes, but without gold, he couldn't pay the new men."

"Getting enough money," Giovanni continued, "to pay the Bedouin warriors was a constant stress on Lawrence. I remember Papa reading to us about Lawrence going down the mountain in bitter weather to Aba el Lissan, making barely two miles an hour against the icy blasts of wind, their camels stumbling on hard ground slick with ice. Unable to make progress, his little band took shelter behind an outcropping of rock and herded the camels together with their tails to the wind so they'd not die of the cold during the night. The low desert Bedouins were filled with despair. Unaccustomed to the cold, they curled up into balls against their camels too miserable to move."

"It sounds like Lawrence of Siberia," I said.

"Lawrence possessed a great talent for description," Giovanni said. "I remember words from *Seven Pillars of Wisdom*, 'The ground was vivid with new grass; and the sunlight, which slanted across us, pale like straw mellowed the fluttering wind.' Their poor camels were too flagged to carry them through a sea of muddy clay. Clinging to each other to keep from falling down, they were forced to continue on foot against a whirling wind numbing every part of their bodies. By the time they got to Aba el Lissan, their feet were torn and bruised, 'filthy and miserable, stringy like shaven cats.' The sad thing was that all of their camels except Lawrence's died. Thousands of camels died in the revolt and millions of horses were slaughtered by machine guns and artillery on the Western Front. The cruelty to animals in World War One was as brutal as the cruelty to man."

"Pushing camels until they floundered," I said, "caused many camel deaths. When there was nothing else to eat, camels were food. The brisket, ribs, and loin are the best parts. A Bedouin can live solely on camel milk for three or four weeks for it is rich in minerals, proteins, and vitamins, lower in fat than cow's milk and higher in iron potassium and vitamin C. And it can be made into butter. Camel feces are so dry that the Bedouins use them to fuel fires without drying them out. Camel urine which is a thick syrup is recommended by the prophet Mohammed to treat insect bites, scalp ailments, sores, and wounds."



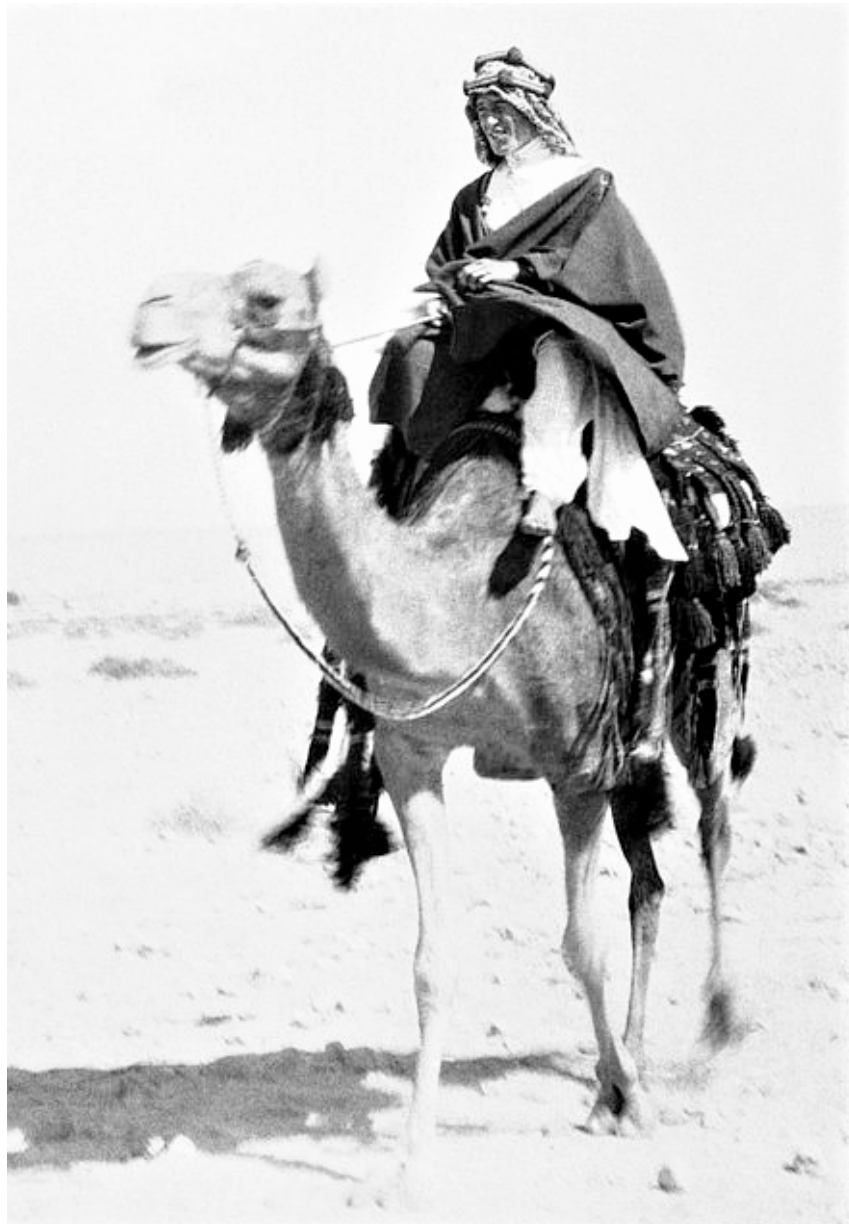
Dromedary camel – John O’Neill, Wikimedia. Transporting a soldier and his equipment, a camel can maintain an average speed of 3 miles per hour, and while trotting, six miles an hour. For medium distances, they can sustain speeds of 25 mph, and in camel races, they can reach 40 mph.



Camels in Guelta d'Archei, Chad – Dario Mnasce, Wikimedia. A dromedary camel can drink 50 gallons of water in three minutes, not requiring more water for ten days. While other pack animals lose 20 to 40 liters of fluid per day, camels lose only 1.3 liters of fluid every day, and can withstand fluctuations in body temperature that would kill most other animals. Camels can withstand losing 25% of their body weight to sweating and survive, whereas most mammals can endure only 14% dehydration before cardiac arrest. Without the endurance of the camel, the Arab Revolt would have not been possible.

“Meat, milk, butter, medicine, fuel, and transportation,” Giovanni said, “the Bedouin relied on the camel for survival.”

“When Lawrence got back to the armored car base in Guweira, he got the bad news. Major Joyce and Feisal’s had failed at Mudowwara — the same story, terrible coordination between regular and irregular troops, an unresolved weakness of the Arab Revolt. The good news was that £30,000 in gold had arrived from Akaba. His finest camel had been delivered, Wodheiha, a former racer in splendid shape who’d turn left or right by a simple tap on the saddle-horn, pacing so smoothly over level ground that in the saddle he could read a book.”



T. E. Lawrence at Akaba, 1917 – Unknown author, public domain, Wikimedia

“Getting back up the mountain to Tafilah was another saga,” Giovanni said. “The wind and snow were as bitter going up as it had been coming down. When their camels balked at climbing a twenty-foot bank of slippery mud, the men stripped off their boots and barefoot in the icy mud, pushed the camels up the slope. The ceaseless glacial wind stiffened their fingers into claws and ripped through their clothes as if they were wearing none, freezing their legs brittle stiff in the cross legged position on camel back. ‘Nothing in Arabia,’ Lawrence said, ‘could be more cutting than a north wind at Maan.’ Burdened with the weight of the gold, the camels were struggling, slipping, and falling, pitching their riders into the mud and ice. Hour after hour the wind relentlessly beat them down until the other men flung themselves to the ground and refused to go on. But Lawrence couldn’t stop. He had to get the gold to Tafilah.”

“Upon spotting the fires of a Bedouin camp,” Giovanni continued, “he left the other men there and loaded another £4,000 in gold onto Wodheiha and continued on alone. While crossing a stream on foot, he fell through the frozen crust into a bog and sank so deeply that he could only free himself by grabbing the fetlock of Wodheiha to pull him out. Pressing on, blinded by the falling snow, he slipped off the edge of a precipice and Wodheiha fell eighteen feet into deep drifts of snow. Wodheiha was so exhausted from the weight on her back, she couldn’t climb the steep slope. Lawrence realized that the snow was too deep for her get any traction. Over several hours with his bare hands he carved out a path three-feet deep and twenty paces long and then urged her at top speed through the trench and over the crest. They came again to another steep slope and Wodheiha, weighed down with £6,000 in gold, flat out refused to climb. If he forced her to go on with the heavy load he knew his favorite camel might die. But if he unloaded the gold, it certainly wouldn’t be there later waiting for him. Without gold, there’d be no troops. Without troops, there’d be no war. He had to risk Wodheiha’s death by pushing on. He took her back a hundred paces and charged up the slope flying over the top. Galloping on slippery ground where the snow had thawed, Wodheiha’s feet went out from under her and she skidded down a hundred feet into a ravine. Hitting the stony bottom, she leaped to her feet and charged up the slope and over the top with Lawrence clinging to the saddle horn for dear life as Wodheiha, the racing camel loaded with gold, galloped trumpeting into the Senussi village of Rasheidiya.”

“I can just see it,” I giggled, “Lawrence hanging on, his camel running at breakneck speed and trumpeting victoriously as only a camel can trumpet. But his victory was shadowed by a terrible mistake.”

“What was that?”

“On a mission for Allenby, he left on a reconnaissance mission to the Jordan valley leaving Feisal’s youngest brother, Zeid in charge of the gold.”

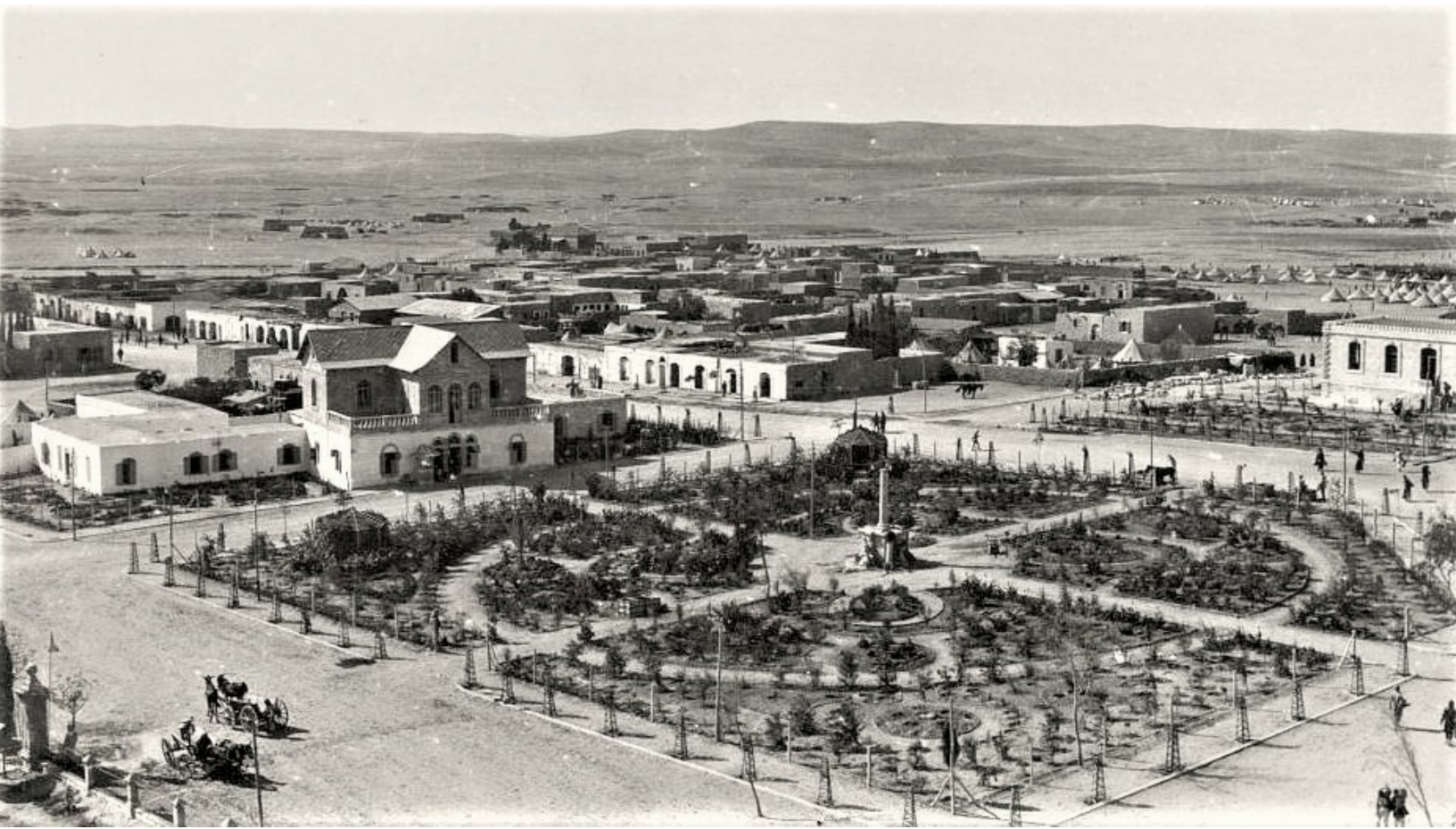
“I remember, when he got back,” Giovanni said, “the gold was gone.”

“So true, Zeid had spent ever last farthing.”

“After the torture,” Giovanni said, “of lugging the gold up the mountain in a blizzard, he had nothing to show for it.”

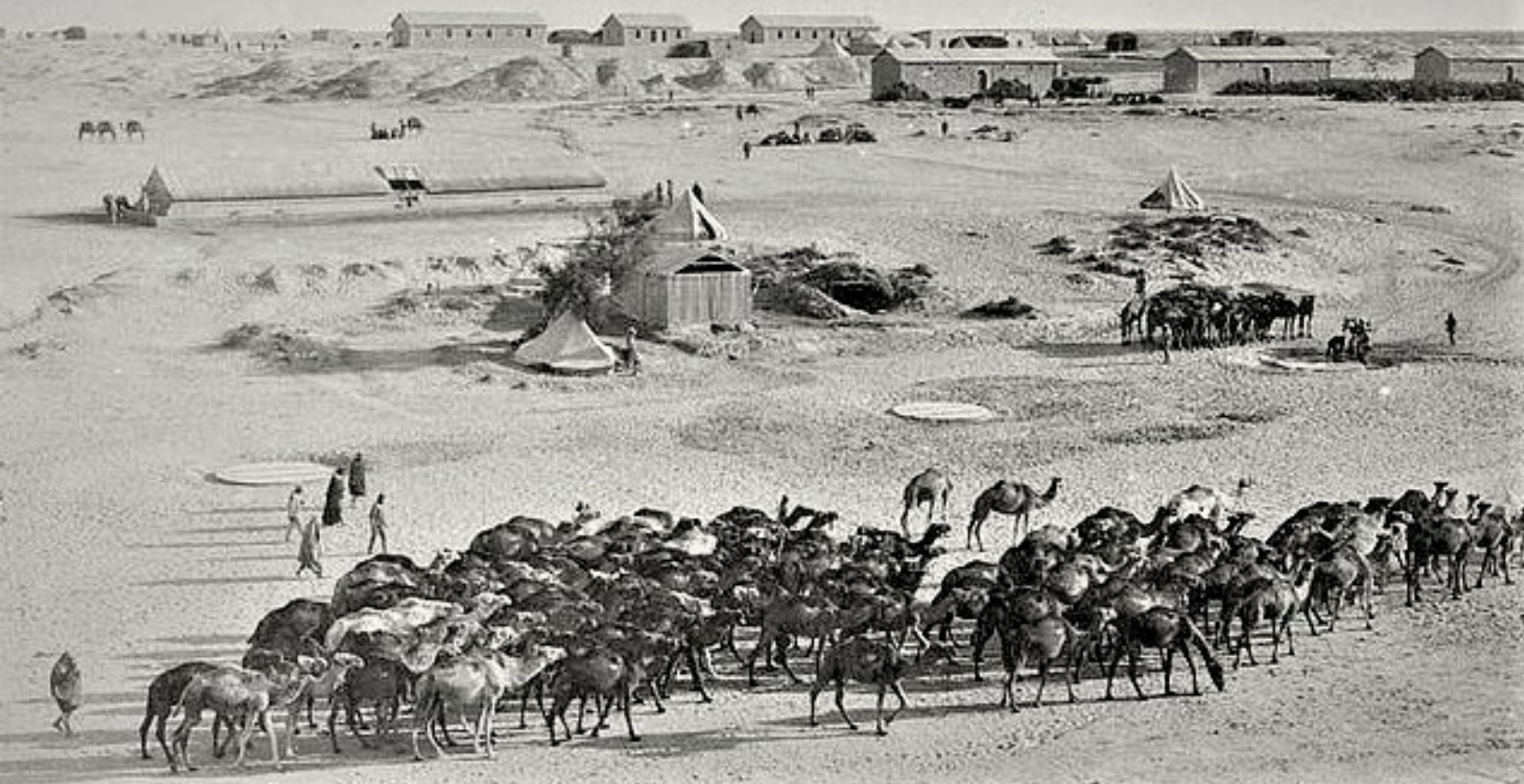
“Losing the gold was a metaphor for the entire revolt. Faced with the demands for payment from the Howeitats, the Beni Sakhrs, the villagers and the sheik of Tafileh, Zeid had given away all of the gold, even though it wasn’t due in advance. The lad had been hoodwinked.

“The worst of it was that because of blood feuds, none of the tribes who’d taken the gold could be used north of Tafileh. Zeid had been ripped off. Betrayed by the poor judgment of Feisal’s brother, Lawrence could no longer keep his promise to Allenby. Lawrence struggled all night trying to figure out what could be done. By morning he knew that with no gold there was nothing more he could do. It was a crushing failure. He was the one who left the gold. Leaving his bodyguard behind, he rode for Beersheba, the quickest way to Allenby camp, sick at heart for trusting Zeid.”



Beersheba, 1917 – American Colony Photographic department, U.S. Library of Congress, Wikimedia

“Lawrence was shamed by the loss of the gold,” I said, “sickened by the senseless slaughter of one thousand Turks in Wadi Hesa. He’d been wounded a half-dozen times and ‘so dreaded further pain that he had to force himself under fire.’ In that moment, he believed he was living an illusion. He was wearing an alien costume pretending to lead a rebellion of another race. In *Seven Pillars*, he said, ‘my empty soul was blown away by the winds of circumstance.’ For a year and a half, he had incessantly been on the move without a break. His body was wrecked. His will was destroyed. He couldn’t go on. The only honorable thing to do was to resign and go home.”



Camels at Maghaba, Sinai-Palestine Campaign – American Colony Jerusalem, U.S. Library of Congress, Wikimedia

“That was the end of chapter two in Lawrence’s life,” Giovanni said, finishing off his glass. “*Questo Vouvray e magnifico!* I’m going to buy a case of it. You rest for a while. I’m taking a walk in the woods. When I get back you can tell me the next chapter in Lawrence’s life.”