

## Travel Tales

# In Search of Lawrence of Arabia: the Oddest Hero

## Part 1

by

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When I was eleven, I saw the fabulous movie *Lawrence of Arabia*. I wanted to be Lawrence. I wanted those white robes and that big dagger. I was fascinated by this odd and complex hero. Years later I determined to make a pilgrimage to some of the sites in his odd life and death.

The life of Thomas Edward Lawrence was odd even before it began. His father, Sir Thomas Chapman, seventh Baronet of Killua Castle in Ireland, deserted his wife and their four daughters, and ran off with his household's governess. She had been baptized Sarah Junner but was living under the name Sarah Lawrence, after her possible father, a John Lawrence. Sarah was illegitimate, and by Chapman she fathered nine illegitimate children, including their most famous



Thomas Edward Lawrence "of Arabia," Britain's oddest hero

son, Thomas Edward Lawrence, who was born in Tremadoc, Wales in 1888.

Chapman and his mistress lived under the assumed name of Lawrence, and all of the nine children used that name, but legally none were entitled to it. Later in life T.E. Lawrence continued this strange practice, assuming two other fictitious names himself. His extraordinary achievements may partially have been an attempt to overcome the shame of illegitimacy.

Lawrence may have illegitimate, but he was very smart. He took a first class honors degree at Jesus College, Oxford. His senior thesis was on Middle Eastern Crusader castles, based on his own research, including a solo 1000-mile hike around Syria. He was proficient in French, Arabic, Turkish, German, Syriac, Latin and

Ancient Greek, and by 21 was knowledgeable in military tactics, weapons, armor, old coins, heraldry, medieval glassware, photography and carpentry.

He began work as an archaeologist in the Middle East, but this gradually became a cover for intelligence work. Lawrence mapped the Negev Desert for the British military, who were

worried about an attack on Egypt through the Negev by the Turks. After the outbreak of World War I, Lawrence was commissioned as an Army lieutenant at age 26. He was ready. He could run a mile in under five minutes, had a photographic memory for terrain, could hit a small Turkish coin five times out of seven at 25 yards with a Colt .32 automatic pistol, and could hit a small target at 1200 yards with his Mannlicher carbine.

During the war, as shown in the movie, Lawrence became the trusted advisor of King Feisal, leader of the Arab Revolt against the Turks. Lawrence spent months on camel-back leading guerilla attacks on the Turkish railway line that led from Damascus south down the western portion of Arabia to Medina. Lawrence convinced the Arabs not to over-run Medina, but rather to keep it threatened, meanwhile attacking its supply line and killing its reinforcements. This tied up numerous Turkish troops who might otherwise have aided the Germans.

Lawrence was an early advocate of automatic weapons, replacing his Lee Enfield .303 rifle (now on display in the Imperial War Museum) with a aircraft Lewis light machine gun and a magazine of 97 bullets, which he carried in a scabbard on his camel. His personal bodyguard of 90 men was similarly equipped, with one machine gun for each two men, plus numerous rifles and pistols, generating incredible firepower.

In one incident described in his classic book on the desert campaign, *Seven Pillars of Wisdom*, Lawrence perhaps had too much firepower. Leading a wild camel charge against a Turkish position, his favorite female racing camel went down “as if pole-axed” and Lawrence somersaulted over her head. He awoke a long time later, to discover that “in the back of her skull was the heavy bullet of the fifth shot I had fired.”

The movie hinted that Lawrence was homosexual, and attracted by his two young Arab servants. In fact, Lawrence probably wasn't homosexual or heterosexual, but asexual. He likely suppressed his sexuality, in a sort of reverse Oedipal complex, because of intense conflicts with his mother. In college he was attracted to at least one young woman, but he probably was a virgin when he was tortured, beaten and likely raped during the war by the Turkish Bey of Deraa, Syria, as shown in the movie. After this terrible experience he seemed to shun all male and female sexual contact.



*Peter O'Toole played Lawrence well in the movie, but was too tall and heavy for the part.*

Perhaps in response to the Deraa incident, Lawrence led the slaughter as depicted in the movie of a fleeing column of hundreds of Turkish, German and Austrian soldiers, taking no prisoners, the only time he did this. These soldiers had murdered local women and children in a nearby village, and so Lawrence said, “we killed and killed, even blowing in the heads of the animals.”

The climax of the desert campaign was the collapse of the Turkish army in just ten days, routed by regular troops under General Sir Edmund Allenby advancing north through Palestine, assisted by Lawrence and his several thousand Arab irregulars marching inland through the desert. This led to the capture of the Syrian capital of Damascus, effectively ending the Turkish Ottoman Empire, which had existed since 1299. Lawrence, wearing his Arab robes, entered Damascus in triumph, in his dusty armored open 1920 Rolls Royce Silver Ghost pickup known as the “Blue Mist.” His two years of intense warfare were over.

After the war, Lawrence became famous due to public lectures given by American journalist Lowell Thomas. Lawrence, promoted by this time to Lieutenant Colonel, could have had any career he wanted. Instead, to avoid publicity, he enlisted in the RAF and then in the Army as a private, under assumed names. His enlistment papers describe Lawrence as 5’5” tall, weighing 130 pounds, with “scars on both buttocks.” At the capture of Damascus, after campaigning hard and eating little for months, he had only weighed about 97 pounds. (By contrast, Peter O’Toole in the movie was about 6’1” and 195 pounds.)

We visited Clouds Hill, the odd, tiny but attractive house that Lawrence bought in 1923 when he was posted to Bovington Army Camp in Dorset as a private. It was isolated in the trees, in a rural part of the county.

Over the small entry door was an unusual motto, “Ou Phrontis” carved in stone in ancient Greek, which means “Why Worry?” This was drawn from the story of an ancient Greek named Hippocleides, who lost a contest to gain a bride, because he lewdly danced on his back, with his legs and private parts waving in the air. When told that he had lost the contest, he said the words “Why worry?” The story and motto must have appealed to Lawrence on many levels – he bought the house as a care-free getaway from military life, he was not worried that he had given up his career ambitions, he did not care that he no longer desired women, and it was a message to his guests to relax.

Inside the house, the oddities continued. The house had no kitchen, no toilet, no real bedroom, few windows, and no electricity or water supply. Downstairs was the “music room,” where Lawrence and his visitors, including his Army buddies, lounged on a large platform during the day, listened to Mozart on the gramophone and warmed themselves by a large fireplace. Upstairs was the “book room,” where he kept his general library, including such light reading as *The Confessions of St. Augustine*.



*Clouds Hill is a peculiar house for a peculiar hero*

The “necessary” was performed outside in nature, or sometimes in a slit trench 60 yards from the house. The house did contain a bathtub, in which Lawrence did much of his reading. When Lawrence wanted to sleep, he often used a sleeping bag marked “Meum” (mine) laid out on the floor, giving his guest space on the floor to use a sleeping bag marked “Tuum” (yours). (The Meum bag was stolen from Clouds Hill in 1965 and anonymously returned from Belgium after 36 years, in 2001.) Sometimes Lawrence slept upstairs on a pad on a narrow bureau, in a tiny room with a porthole salvaged from HMS *Tiger*. The bureau drawers were filled with canned vegetables, the only food that Lawrence really liked.

Guests subjected to this odd life at Clouds Hill included George Bernard Shaw, Robert Graves, E.M. Forster, and other literary lights.

Next month we will take a trip to learn about the death and find the tomb of T.E. Lawrence. We will find that his oddities continue even beyond the grave.

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Lew and Susan Toulmin live in Silver Spring, and have seen *Lawrence of Arabia* at least six times.

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