The Arab Revolt And The Anzacs

This paper highlights some of the contacts with and major contributions of Anzac forces to the Arab Revolt and 'Lawrence of Arabia'.

The term ‘Anzac’ refers to the Australian and New Zealand Army Corps and was first used as a descriptive of those forces at Gallipoli in 1915. The term has continued to be used in all theatres since then where such forces have been deployed. Under Australian Government legislation, official approval by the Minister for Veterans Affairs is required to use the term Anzac – except in a descriptive manner or on such things as ‘Anzac biscuits’.

Also coming from the Gallipoli campaign is the term “digger” as our soldiers had to ‘dig’ so many trenches for protection. This too survives in common usage as an affectionate term for today’s Australian soldiers.

In 1914 Australia had been a Federation of former Colonies for just 13 years. Its population was around five million. Its military force was small, only for domestic defence and maintained as an allegiance to the “mother country”, England. By law, when England went to war so did Australia; and New Zealand, Canada and South Africa. However, each country had the right to determine to what extent it went to war. The Governments of Australia and New Zealand with their British born politicians were most enthusiastic, as became the population. Voluntary recruitment saw a rapid formation of the Australian Imperial Force (AIF) – until the reality of Gallipoli and France became known.

Anzac soldiers, by nature, were independent, self-sufficient, creative, and almost reckless with a desire for adventure. A "mate" was first and last; a creed said a man must stand by his mate. This was born of his upbringing in 'the bush', or the 'outback' or in the gold mines.

Even today, Australians and New Zealanders pay little substance to formality and officialdom, preferring freedom of thought and action to do “what seems right at the time”, still with that air of adventure. Anzac traditions, born in WW1, continue in our military and, probably, much of society. If you know an Aussie or a Kiwi, you will know life “down-under” does not breed mindless followers; just as Lawrence and the Arabs discovered – hopefully to their joy.

Mankind has occupied the Middle East for around 50,000 years. Arabic culture provides hospitality to a visitor for up to three days without question. That same culture allows five generations to seek retribution if a tribe or clan is dishonoured. The desert is a harsh landlord and life is cheap to those who have little and seek comfort from another. This is not Islamic culture, it is Arabic and their “law of the land”; and their “land” is the desert. There are few friends and no cohesion between tribal peoples – only within the tribe and the clan.
Sheik Hussein fired his first shot to start the Arab Revolt in June 1916 with a great hope in his heart. He was unsure in early 1916 just what British support he would receive but, fire he did and he hung onto his dream. A few months after that shot, Lt T.E. Lawrence and Sir Ronald Storrs arrived in the Hejaz, followed soon thereafter by British and Dominion support.

With the British support came considerable assistance from the Dominion governments and military forces of Australia, New Zealand and India. Most of this Dominion support was part of the British led Egyptian Expeditionary Force (EEF). Anzac involvement was substantial throughout the campaign while Indian troops were more evident from late 1917 and early 1918 after the British government withdrew its own well-trained infantry forces to the France/Western Front theatre.

As part of the EEF, Anzacs gave valuable service to the Arab forces and their liaison officer, T.E. Lawrence, on many occasions and in many forms. There were also occasions where things did not go well between them. Both get some mention here.

**Australian Ship Supports the Arab Revolt and Moves Lawrence around the Hejaz**

The *Official History of Australia in the War of 1914-1918* briefly mentions the war service of the auxiliary cruiser HMS *Suva*, (really an Australian ship) where ‘*she played a not inconsiderable part in supporting the Arab Revolt*’. The opening paper of *Australian Maritime Issues* 2007: SPC-A Annual; “*HMS Suva, Captain W.H.D. Boyle and the Red Sea Patrol 1916-18: The Strategic Effects of an Auxiliary Cruiser upon the Arab Revolt*” gives much greater detail of *Suva’s* role in the Arab Revolt.

Capt T.E. Lawrence went from Yenbo to Jeddah on board the HMS *Suva* after his first meeting with Emir Feisal, and again when Feisal fell back to Jeddah. She was initially the ss *Suva*, an Australian owned 2,229-ton passenger-cargo steamer of the Australasian United Steam Navigation Co, provided by the Australian Government to Britain’s war effort and converted to an armed vessel for duty with the Red Sea Patrol (RSP). By this time though, a Royal Navy crew had replaced the Australian merchant crew. In fact, she was then commanded by Capt W.H.D. Boyle, RN, Commander of the RSP.

The naval aspects of the Arab Revolt are little known and certainly overlooked, so little seems to be recorded of the Royal Navy’s Red Sea Patrol (RSP) [but see National Archives record FO 141/527], other than it plied the Red Sea against Turkish and African piracy, gave direct support to the Arab Revolt, protected Arab cities along the coast, prevented mine laying that could have blocked the Suez Canal and minimised insurgent delivery and weapons smuggling along the coast of Africa, the Arabian Peninsula, Yemen and the British Protectorate of Aden.

In this role, the ships of the RSP gave support to the forces of Sheik Hussein and the armies of his sons Ali, Abdullah and Feisal at different locations and at different times throughout the Revolt and war years.

The ss *Suva*, now *HMS Suva*, “… was an important element of the Red Sea Patrol … between Mar 1916 and Dec 1918 she:

- bombarded seven Turkish garrison towns,
- helped occupy three towns with her naval landing forces,
- transported Arab Revolt troops at least nine times,
- transported troops and supplies from Suez to Aqaba after its capture by Arab forces,
- conducted four dhow interdiction operations,
- survived two ship groundings during operations and two ship fires.”

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And so the ss Suva provided considerable Australian Government support for the time of its service until final return to Australia in 1919, battle scarred but happier for the experience.

**Australian Machine Gun Instructor for Lawrence and the Arabs – Sgt Charles Reginald Yells, DCM**

The Arabs knew machine guns and mortars were a ‘wicked’ thing to have. Trouble was they made a big noise and terrified the rifle-familiar tribesmen. Lawrence sought and received regular military instructors.

The Lewis gun instructor was an Australian sergeant named Yells – who Lawrence dubbed “Lewis”. Lawrence was fond of ‘Lewis’ describing him as ‘long, thin and sinuous, his supple body lounging in unmilitary curves. His hard face, arched eyebrows, and predatory nose set off the peculiarly Australian air of reckless willingness and capacity to do something very soon…full of suggestion, he emerged bursting with delight at what had been well done whenever a thing happened.”

The British mortar instructor was a young man named Brooke, dubbed Stokes. Lawrence reports “Stokes never offered an opinion until after action, when he would painstakingly recount the mistakes he must avoid next time.” Lawrence says, “They were both admirable men.”

*Lewis* was with Lawrence for around three months in which time he gave instruction to the Arabs, as best could be done with an unknown language, compensating with much use of hand signals and facial expressions and roaming from thunderous assault to wild cheering, depending on the tribesman’s quickness of uptake in lessons.

Lawrence further expresses admiration for *Lewis* with his affinity for life with the Arabs and the acceptance of their way of life and culture; “the Australian from the first seemed at home, and behaved freely towards the Arabs. When they fell into his spirit, and returned the fellowship, he was astonished.”

Planning grew for an attack on the Hejaz Station at Mudowarra and *Lewis* expressed his desire to volunteer himself and *Stokes* to be part of it, even though his role was only instruction. Lawrence immediately saw the benefit in the technical advantage of having them there, just in case the tribesmen were doubtful in their role or hesitated in this new action – a highly likely event based on past experiences. Nonetheless, Lawrence felt obliged to warn *Lewis* and *Stokes* “that their experiences might not at the moment seem altogether joyful. There were no rules; and there could be no mitigation of the marching, feeding and fighting, inland. If they went they would lose their British Army privilege, to share and share with the Arabs (except the booty!) and suffer exactly their hap in food and discipline. If anything went wrong with me, they, not speaking Arabic, would be in a tender position”. *Lewis* replied that he “was looking for just this strangeness of life.” This typical Australian response resulted in *Lewis* and *Stokes* being given favoured camels – which could have made their day!

They arrived at Guweira to pick up the Howeitat tribesmen with Auda Abu Tai. Here it was 120 degrees in the palm-shade, itself alive with flies. Dodging bombs from a Turkish aircraft was the daily ritual; clinging off the huge rock that dominated the fort to avoid the bombs, like bats from a fruit tree, was part of this ritual. Then, as sometimes happened, tribal and clan dissent and squabbling saw a reduced force set off for Mudowarra Station.

On arrival near Mudowarra they mined the track and set up positions for an attack. However, the Turks soon spotted a group of tribesman basking on the sand ridgeline to enjoy the sunset, causing Lawrence to abandon the idea of attacking the Station with its superior force and so he determined to wait for a train. Fortuitously, it wasn’t long before one came from Hallat Ammar, the next station south, before a Turkish force could catch up.
The Lewis guns and Stokes mortars were set in place and the mine detonated under the second of the two engines. Loaded with sick (typhus) and wounded troops, families of soldiers, household effects, food and weapons, and escorting soldiers, the train was derailed and decimated by effective machine gun and mortar fire. Lewis consistently provided accurate support fire while himself under fire from the Turks defending the train. With success, the Arabs plundered and looted in a wild frenzy with sensibility deserting them, eventually abandoning the scene with the booty tossed aboard the baggage camels. Lawrence and the two sergeants, now camel-less, were left to their own devices, with their valuable guns and mortars abandoned by the newly loot-laden Arabs.

Lewis found some baggage camels and the machine guns and mortars were loaded for escape. Weapons and ammunition that could not be loaded had to be destroyed, the main baggage camels having been filled with booty and gone, much to Lawrence’s dismay that he had not ordered the saving of their main weapons and stores before loading booty.

In the escape, Lewis fitted one of the machine guns across his legs to fire from there as protection against the following Turks – fortunately the exploding ammunition made such a commotion the Turks halted their advance and escape was made.

The whole group arrived in Aqaba some days later, in glorious display of their booty. Lewis and Stokes immediately departed by ship for Egypt as, according to Lawrence, “Cairo had remembered them and gone peevish because of their non-return.” He went on to say “They had won a battle single-handed; had had dysentery; lived on camel-milk; and learned to ride a camel 50 miles in a day without pain. Also Allenby gave them each a medal.”

Sgt Yells was awarded the Distinguished Conduct Medal, presumably at Lawrence’s recommendation.

Gold and the Commonwealth Bank of Australia

Part of British rewards for the Arab Army was gold. This was to be used to pay the tribes an inducement to join or remain with Sheik Hussein’s Revolt. Tribal leaders responded well to this, just to help them love their King a little more. The tribesmen enjoyed some of this spoil as shared out by their tribal leaders, but also sought the greater joy of plundering the battlefields after a successful engagement.

Only gold sovereigns were “currency”, not bullion or nuggets. England had a mint but no gold mines. India was a big user of gold but had neither mines nor a mint. South Africa and Australia, both resource rich countries, had gold mines, but only Australia had been able to mint the sovereigns. So it was up to the old convicts to supply.

S.C. Rolls (an armoured car driver of Lawrence’s for 18 months) tells us “On the day of our arrival in Guweira Lawrence decided to make his first raid by car on the Turkish railway. We loaded two tenders with a large supply of gun-cotton, a week’s rations and water, a case of 5,000 sovereigns marked Commonwealth Bank of Australia, several coils of electric cable, a battery exploder, and several other articles which had been found useful on previous demolition raids.”

Lt Col George Langley, CO 1st Anzac Camel Battalion, states “…cases of gold coins were regularly brought out from Australia and paid out to the Arab Bureau in Cairo for Lawrence’s Arabs.” These coins had to come from the Commonwealth Bank of Australia (CBA), it being the only authority able to export gold in the prohibition period of gold-export during the war years. At that time the Australian Government wholly owned the CBA.

Voyages from Australia to Egypt via the Indian Ocean were long and subject to very active German submarine interdiction. The CBA therefore, conducted gold shipments in the utmost secrecy. Officers of the bank would, after hours, move the gold by lighter down the Swan River in Perth and
load it aboard vessels already at sea – rather than have waterside workers handle such treasure with the possibility of this information being ‘got-at’ by enemy agents. The Commonwealth Bank history states “Ships would then only sail on assistance and advice afforded by the Navy” and that “in no case was any loss occasioned”. Some twenty million British pounds were so moved without loss (allowing a 3% p.a. inflation rate, that’s ~GBP 331,500,000 today) [not all this went to Lawrence and the Arabs].

In this way the Australian Government through its natural resources of gold and its minting capability made a significant contribution to rewards for the Arab Revolt that the British Government probably could not otherwise have maintained. It ensured the constant supply of gold and the meeting of promises from the British Government and Lawrence to Sheik Hussein’s Arab forces, retaining their loyalty to a successful conclusion.

The Empire Soldiers Club

Life was meant to be enjoyed!

Two Australian women, both non-military, one a youthful 26 year old and the other near 60, became the loved creatures of many a soldier and wandering visitor. Jennifer Horsfield in her “Rainbow Macphillamy” relates that Verania Macphillamy (the younger, and commonly called Rania or ‘Rainbow’) and Alice Chisolm “set up the Empire Soldiers Club in Port Said, and later, Kantara and Jerusalem (as they followed their Australians in their advance). The clubs offered rest and recreation facilities for men on leave from the front, regardless of rank or class.” Any nationality was welcome.

In 1917 the daily average number of visitors was 2,500 during the 24-hour service. As the Beer’Sheva battle in September 1917 approached and troops were given leave in preparation, the daily average soared to 4,500 happy soldiers.

These ‘clubs’ were canteens where resting soldiers could get a substantial meal (often better than their messes and where officers got the same as soldiers, they just paid more), a shave, shower, buy writing materials and other food items, smokes and sweets. With some ingenuity and amazing donations of things ‘found’ they were creative; a staff member could “pedal a fixed bicycle ingeniously connected to a drum-like contraption for churning ice and cream and fruit into real ice cream” – in the desert! With a gift for making contacts for supply, they regularly served fresh vegetables and meat, much to the delight of their guests. “Such a significant enterprise, which was contributing to the welfare and morale of the troops, soon won official respect, even enthusiasm. The presence of a charming young woman with eyes of an intense dark blue did not go unnoticed” continues Horsfield.

They also managed to ‘acquire’ timber in a tree-less country, to build huts for the canteens – Australian ingenuity perhaps; or dark blue eyes of persuasion!

General Allenby himself, upon the personal approach of Rania, authorised the establishment of the Jerusalem canteen. You’d have to think these were two ‘ballsy’ ladies.

Major T.E. Lawrence visited the Kantara club on at least one occasion. “Lawrence had not yet become newsworthy and the romantic figure which the postwar world made of him. To Rania’s eyes he was just a small and rather unremarkable British officer en route to the eastern theatre of the war, though she confessed after the war to being an admirer of his achievements.”

Certain Arabs connected with the Arab Revolt also visited. Rania was gifted Bedouin robes and headdress by Nasib al Bakri described as “…a tall bearded gentleman dressed in flowing robes and headdress of a Bedouin tribesman. But Nasib was not a man of the desert. He was a sophisticated Arab townsman from Damascus and his passion was for the creation of an independent Arab state after the war. He was one of the founders of the Damascus Protocol.” Rania’s family still have the Arab clothes gifted to her. Lawrence describes him as “Feisal’s host in Damascus, now exiled from his country with a death-sentence over him.” Nasib travelled with the Arab Army and Lawrence throughout their desert
campaign, finally winning to Feisal’s side some of the local Arab tribes around the Damascus area. Lawrence reports that during their travels Nasib often spoke of developing the Arab nation after the war.

Horsfield also records that “At least once in 1917, the canteen played host to a group of 17 Arab dignitaries…perplexed at what to serve these gentlemen and knowing the tribal preference for shared dishes, Rania and Alice decided to set out plates of sweet jam, pieces of bread and small cups of sweet tea. The men were very satisfied and declared their visit had been a pleasure. A photograph shows Alice and Rania gathered outside the canteen with some of the guards of the delegation.” Whilst many were greatly impressed by the handsome bearing and fearsome looking weapons “…the Australians were less impressed by their undersized and scrawny ponies.” Hardly surprising when compared to the Australian “Whaler” horse that was a cross of stock horse, mountain goat and galloper that could carry up to 160lb and go up to 30-40 hours without water and up to 70 hours in operational requirements.

Australian ladies’ hospitality won the hearts of many a serviceman and visiting Arab and it can be a fair bet that many a story will never be told that shouldn’t be told of soldiers on leave.

Now, back to hostilities.

Air Power

Air power was in its infancy. It was doubted by many of the ‘old school’ Generals, and even its advocates were uncertain of what it could achieve, untested in combat, flimsy in design and construction - but it scared the crap out of ground troops [on all sides] when machine gun fire and bombs rained down on them. It provided invaluable battlefield intelligence through aerial photos, recon reports of troop dispositions and movements, eventually air to ground fire control, movement of officers between HQs and field positions, resupply of weapons and ammunition as well as food and water, dropping propaganda to local inhabitants and, battlefield message dropping. The pilots were cheered when they were able to fight off enemy planes that were upsetting the daily routine of the ground troops through their bombing and strafing.

No. 1 Squadron, Australian Flying Corps (AFC), was stationed in Egypt in 1915. In the early months its three Flights (18 aeroplanes) were separated and utilized as No. 67 Sqn, within the Royal Flying Corps (RFC) in mixed locations, before being re-concentrated in late 1916. The Squadron then spent the rest of WW1 as an AFC squadron in the Sinai and Palestine.

Most of the pilots and observers were former Light Horsemen, accustomed to independent movement from their homeland upbringing in the outback where freedom of movement, thinking and action with initiative was a way of life and survival. So they adapted to the “sport” of flying and chasing “Huns” in the desert with youthful excitement and reckless enthusiasm – a favourable observation that Lawrence later mentioned in Seven Pillars of Wisdom.

Aqaba Airfield

The first AFC encounter with the Arab Revolt was after the capture of Aqaba. ‘A’ Flight was deployed to Aqaba from where it flew missions with the Royal Flying Corps (RFC) against the Turkish ground forces and German aircraft.

‘A’ Flight was used in direct support of Lawrence and the Arabs in the nearby desert, around Guweira and along the Hejaz Railway between Ma’an and Mudowarra. Their role included attack of ground troops and rolling stock along the railway, protection of the armoured cars and light car recon patrols, ‘dogfights’ with the German aircraft and resupplying the Arabs’ forward elements with ammunition and rations, even establishing a forward landing ground.

The Hejaz Railway was a constant target as the pilots always knew where it was and that it would always be there. And it was a constant supply line for the Turkish garrisons all the way to Medina,
so of constant interest. The major station of Ma'an was a prized target as it had a large troop garrison and plenty of rolling stock as well as stores.

Pilots and Observers were also called upon to draw maps that didn’t exist or ‘correct’ some of the old maps of the terrain that proved to be inaccurate.

**Taxi Service**

Capt Ross Smith, a former Australian Light Horseman, became one of the most gifted pilots of the whole Palestine campaign. On 16th May 1918 he flew Lawrence from Katrani to Ramleh to Gen Allenby’s HQ. This flight is recorded in the aircraft logbook for Bristol Fighter No. B1229 now held in the Australian War Memorial, Canberra.

Smith once more flew Lawrence (having to leave his normal Observer behind), in September just after Allenby’s offensive had commenced, from GHQ to the Azrak fort and his forces. Fearful of enemy aircraft action and the disruptive effect on the Arabs as well as fearing mass desertions, Lawrence had requested his own air support. Allenby agreed and AFC pilots and aircraft were deployed.

Very soon thereafter, Lawrence was able to witness the effect of Ross Smith piloting the Handley-Page bomber and the Australian pilots of the Bristol Fighters, or Brisfits as they were called.

**The Handley-Page**

There was only one Handley-Page (HP) in the whole Palestine theatre and Capt Ross Smith, among all the pilots in the five British and one Australian Squadron in Palestine, had been selected to fly it. Lawrence describes it: "Before dawn, on the Australian aerodrome, stood two Bristols and a D.H.9. On one was Ross Smith, my old pilot, who had been picked out to fly the new Handley-Page, the single machine of its class in Egypt, the apple of Salmond’s eye." [Salmond, the British commander of the RFC/AFC]. Lawrence continues "Then our car flashed northwards again. Twenty miles short of Ul em Surab we perceived a single Bedawi, running southward all in a flutter, his grey hair and grey beard flying in the wind, and his shirt (tucked up in his belly-cord) puffing out behind him. He altered course to pass near us, and, raising his bony arms, yelled, ‘The biggest aeroplane in the world’, before he flapped on into the south, to spread his great news among the tents." On arrival at Ul em Surab, the Arabs had flocked in admiration of the great big plane exclaiming the oft-quoted line “Indeed and at last they have sent us a ‘Tiyara’[roughly translates to ‘female flying thing’], of which these other things are foals.”

Handley Page at Lawrence’s camp
Lawrence continues “our men drew from her bomb-racks and fuselage a ton of petrol; oil and spare parts for the Bristols; tea and sugar and rations for our men; letters, Reuters telegrams and medicines for us. Then the great machine rose into the early dusk, for Ramleh, with an agreed program of night-bombing against Deraa and Mafrak, to complete that ruin of the railway traffic which our gun cotton had begun.” Lawrence used to great effect the immense optimism that came over him to inspire the continued allegiance of his ever-uncertain tribesmen.

The arrival of the HP with Ross Smith at the controls was a saving factor in many of the tribesmen remaining to fight another day, rather than dessert and head for safer areas to loot or loiter in. Ross Smith used the HP to great effect, bombing Turko-German airfields and destroying aircraft and supplies on the ground. It was used for carriage of large quantities of ammunition, rations, fuel, weapons and water for the Northern Arab Army’s desert forces. Apparently, the Arabs created tremendous amusement for the pilots and ground crew, as they had to touch every part of the great aeroplane and whistle and groan with delight at this wondrous ‘female flying thing’.

**Australian Airmen**

Lawrence had also indicated that enemy bombs and machine guns had struck a heavy blow at the nerves of the natives, who scattered in panic at the airmen’s appearance. He appealed to Allenby who sent elements of No. 1 Sqn of the AFC to restore order. They destroyed five aircraft in the air then bombed and destroyed the German airfield at Deraa.

In combination with the HP and Bristols, the air was made safe through the destruction of the Turko-German air force, leaving the Arab ground troops unhindered by enemy aircraft for the closing stages of the campaign. The Arabs even gave the name ‘flying carpet men’ to their idolised pilots and their observers who fired the guns and dropped the bombs.

At one time [perhaps repeatedly] Lawrence lamented that the Australians saw his serious war as nothing more than a sporting feat, moving from one goal to another. The airmen seemed not to give respect to a serious affair. Indeed, those airmen may not have seen this as serious an affair as a game of Rugby to be won at any cost against the New Zealanders, or selecting a sure bet on a starter in a horse race in their old Light Horse encampments on a rare day-off!

Nevertheless, Lawrence seemed to take joy in his description of an attack by Turko-German planes while the Aussie crews were in his camp. “It was breakfast time with the smell of sausages in the air. We sat around, very ready: but the watcher on the broken tower yelled ‘Aeroplane up’, seeing one coming over from Deraa. Our Australians, scrambling wildly in their yet-hot machines, started them in a moment. Ross Smith with his observer, leaped into one, and climbed like a cat up into the sky. After him went Peters, while the third pilot (who was without his observer and gunner, having been tossed out so Lawrence himself could get a ride home!) stood beside the D.H.9 and looked hard at me. I seemed not to understand him.”

Translation: the pilot was really pissed-off that he couldn’t get up into the air to join the fun and Lawrence was the culprit, worsening the whole affair by not leaping aboard to fire the damn Lewis Gun! “He was an Australian, of a race delighted in additional risks, not an Arab to whose gallery I must play.”

The Australians destroyed several of the invaders and returned to Lawrence’s description “Ross Smith was back, and gaily jumped out of his machine, swearing that the Arab front was the place.”

“Our sausages were still hot; we ate them, and drank tea, but were hardly at the grapes from Jebel Druse when again the watchman tossed up his cloak and screamed, ‘A plane!’ This time Peters won the race, Ross Smith second, with Traill disconsolate, in reserve.” – translation: bloody Lawrence wouldn’t go up again!21

But of course, this is simply Lawrence’s story. And, whilst Lawrence has been accused of embellishing some of his yarns, two Australian pilot-authored books each confirm these stories from their times with No. 1 Sqn AFC. They add more detail of the ‘downings’ of enemy aircraft, aerial activities, extensive individual personnel stories and Arab jubilation. These books are *Aces and Kings*
by L.W. Sutherland, M.C., D.C.M. and The Flying Carpet Men by Pat Conrick, son of Lt Clive Conrick, one of the Observers.

General Allenby later gave great credit to the Australians of No 1 Sqn stating; “Deception of dispositions [referring to the EEF’s infantry, artillery and cavalry troops] were greatly successful due to RAF and AFC activities, especially AFC No. 1 Sqn and Capt Ross Smith.”

After the Turkish surrender he also stated “this Squadron played an important part in making this achievement possible. You gained for us the absolute supremacy of the air, enabling my cavalry, artillery and infantry to carry out their work on the ground practically unmolested by hostile aircraft. This undoubtedly was a factor of paramount importance in the success of our aims here.”

Ross Smith received seven awards including the MC and Bar, DFC and 2 Bars, AFC and was knighted post-war for services to aviation. He tragically died in a crash in 1922.

It’s also worth noting that many Australians flew with the RFC squadrons, enlisting with wild enthusiasm before the formation of the Australian Flying Corps. Although some few transferred to the AFC, many flew on with, and added incredible skill and charm to, the RFC ranks.

The Beni Sakr Tribe

Es Salt Raid

There was (at least) one regrettable failure of the Bedouin forces. General Allenby had tasked the Beni Sakr tribe with supporting the Anzac force of the Desert Mounted Corps in their attack on Es Salt. Lawrence was not to be a party to this attack and perhaps this was their downfall.

Consistent with tribal custom, the Beni Sakr delayed their participation, waiting to see the result before committing. Their failure to support the Anzacs at a critical time allowed the Turks to dominate and contributed to the attack’s failure. The dominant objective of the Beni Sakr was to see which losing side they could loot and take advantage of.

This failure of the Beni Sakr extinguished good relations with the Anzacs permanently and left Allenby with no doubt about the reliability of tribal Bedouins and his inability to depend on them. It is arguable that his future purpose for them was political, with no military ambition of consequence that his own forces or those of the Arab Army could not achieve; tribal participation thereafter was of little consequence to the final outcome. The Arab Army under Emir Feisal was however, highly regarded.

It should be noted however, that Allenby’s planning for the Transjordan actions was deficient and this contributed more to the failures than Beni Sakr folly.

The Ziza Incident

As a result of General Allenby’s early successful advance in September 1918, General von Sanders ordered the withdrawal of all Turko-German forces towards Deraa and Damascus. Some had climbed aboard trains and made good distance. Others were on foot and struggled, chased by tribesman waiting at the peripheries for stragglers and small groups that they butchered and looted. The retreating Turks were also far from angelic, slaughtering a whole Arab township on the way north.

A force of around 5,000 Turks from the Ma’an garrison was retreating towards Amman when it was surrounded by up to 10,000 Beni Sakr near the Hejaz station of Ziza, just south of Amman in today’s Jordan. Around the same time, Australian aerial reconnaissance located the Turkish force, with orders to direct further bombing strikes on the retreating force.
A note was dropped to the Turkish commander advising him that an Anzac force was immediately to their north and they should surrender or be decimated by bombing. Two squadrons (around some 500 men) of the 5th Australian Light Horse Regiment under Lt Col Donald Cameron were dispatched to seek and accept the surrender.

On arrival, Cameron noticed hundreds of tribesmen on hills around the Turkish force, unaware there were thousands more behind the hills. He rode on, oblivious of the Bedu but concerned about being outnumbered some 10 to one by the Turks. To his relief, a Turkish officer with a white flag came out of the Turkish position, indicating that the Turkish commander, Colonel Ali Bey, wished to meet to discuss surrender.

Ali Bey indicated his willingness to surrender but was greatly concerned that the small Australian force was too small to protect his men from the murderous tribesmen. Cameron then took his turn to become concerned once he realized the extent of Bedu numbers.

The Beni Sakr believed the arrival of the Australians was an attack signal, with their looting to follow – oh what a joyous day! The tribesmen gathered, like vultures over a mammoth road-kill.

Cameron therefore, contacted Maj-Gen Chaytor (a New Zealander), the commander of the Anzac Mounted Division, whose role was the mopping up of the Ma’an to Amman area, and urgently requested reinforcements. Chaytor despatched the remainder of the 2nd Australian Light Horse Brigade and he set off himself, arriving at Ziza later that afternoon.

Next, it dawned on Cameron that the Turkish force was due to be bombed at 3 pm. Wireless messages and ground markers were frantically set up to deter the over-enthusiastic pilots, well known for their daring-do and keenness to drop a bomb or three. This raid was called off in the nick of time.

As Chaytor was assuring Ali Bey they would not be allowed to fall into Arab hands, Brig Ryrie arrived with the remainder of the 2nd ALH Brigade. Nevertheless, the growing force of Beni Sakr still considerably outnumbered the total Anzac force. Ryrie now was concerned the Arabs would be emboldened by their numbers and, with night approaching, decided there was only one thing for it; add his forces to the Turkish forces and stand together!

So, with the consent of the Turkish commander and much to the amusement of his regimental commanders, Ryrie organised the deployment of the Australian troops amongst the Turkish soldiers, allowing them to keep their weapons.

Always thoughtful, and remembering the previous encounter with the now surrounding Beni Sakr, Ryrie then “invited” two of the Sheiks to come into the camp for a bit of a chat so he could let them know what was going on. Eagerly, in they came. It was then that Ryrie offered them overnight hospitality, without hearing of any disagreement, and informed the two Sheiks something to the effect that they would be knocking on the door of Paradise before sunrise if their Arabs attacked.

With this, the Australians “introduced themselves to their new trench mates. For once all enmities were forgiven and our men and the Turks boiled their quarts and made chapatties over the same fires” wrote Lt Col Richardson, commander of the 7th Light Horse Regiment (part of the 2nd ALH Brigade) in their Unit History.

Early next morning the Aus-Turko force was delighted to see the arrival of the New Zealand Mounted Rifle Brigade and the departure of the Beni Sakr – followed at some distance by the now easier breathing Sheiks, fresh from the graces of their new found friends from Australia.

The Anzac captures included 4,602 prisoners, 14 field guns, 35 machine guns, 25 trucks and three trains. And the 7th Light Horse Regiment was now distinguished by being the only AIF unit to have fought alongside the Turks.
But Ryrie wasn't finished. As the whole force headed towards Amman, he allowed the Turks to keep their weapons, just in case the Beni Sakr returned in larger force. Apparently, the sentries at Amman couldn’t believe their eyes as the combined armed force arrived in the city.

**Damascus**

Somebody said, “There are three sides to every story; yours, mine and the truth.” And so it is with the entry to Damascus and the subsequent administration of it.

The first “side” comes from Lawrence. He claims that Prince Feisal’s force was first into Damascus on the morning of 1st October 1918, with “the Arab flag on the town hall before sunset”\(^\text{24}\) the night before. Jeremy Wilson in his “official biography” supports Lawrence.

Lawrence may have been influenced by British political policy that seemed to have changed from the **Sykes-Picot** policy of 1916 and the **Balfour Declaration** of November 1917, to the **Declaration to the Seven**\(^\text{25}\) policy of July 1918. This latter policy noted to significant Arab leaders based in Cairo, giving recognition to territories within Syria, Palestine and Iraq liberated or held by Arab forces at the conclusion of hostilities – hence the vigorous desire of Feisal and Lawrence to get into Damascus first to ensure its inclusion in an Arab nation and avoid its control by the French.

The second “side” belongs to Colonel (temp Brig-Gen) Archibald Wavell, General Staff Officer XXth Corps of the EEF\(^\text{26}\); Lt-Gen Chauvel, the Australian commander of the Desert Mounted Corps\(^\text{27}\); W.T. Massey\(^\text{28}\) the official British war correspondent on the scene; British and Australian official histories; numerous unit histories and a number of books written by authors who were there. These indicate Lawrence and the forward elements of the Arab Army arrived some two hours after the Australian 10\(^{th}\) Light Horse Regiment as described in ‘The Entry’ below.

The entry into Damascus by the Australians was for military expedience to capture the retreating Turks and they had no desire to ‘hold’ the city or occupy it. The arrival of Lawrence and the Arab forces saw ‘occupation’ as their intent. The Australians were probably quite unaware of the political implications and in any case, were only concerned with the military aspect. Feisal and Lawrence were clearly intent on the political consequence and really, as the two purposes are different, and in the passage now of time, little regard now exists as to ‘who was in Damascus first’; it is now simply a matter of record.

The third “side”, truth, belongs to you – you decide, as the difference is political, not of military significance.

*The Entry*

General Allenby had issued orders that allied troops were not to enter Damascus before the Arab Army of Prince Feisal, unless operational conditions warranted otherwise. This seemed principally politically motivated by direction from London – the aim being to give the Arabs access to Syria and so deprive the French of that land area that the Sykes-Picot Agreement had awarded them.

For his part, Lawrence makes light of the Arabs not entering Damascus on the night of 30\(^{th}\) September. He also infers the Australians viewed being first to enter as some sporting “trophy”. Although he categorically denies the Australians were in before the Arabs in other writings, his light-hearted description here could be interpreted as an acknowledgement – but who can tell now?

Lawrence’s fervour for Damascus was first noticed in his initial meeting with Feisal who asked him how he liked their place at Wadi Safra, to which Lawrence replies “Well; but it is far from Damascus.”\(^\text{29}\)

Again, towards the end of their desert march near Jebel Druse and south of Damascus, certain chieftains told him that their duty was complete and Allenby could finish off. But he affirmed “This attitude passed me by, since if we withdrew to Jebel Druse, we ended our active service before the game was
won… I was very jealous for the Arab honour, in whose service I would go forward at all costs. They had joined
the war to win freedom, and the recovery of their old capital…” 30. His motives may be understandable.

On the other hand, Allenby had given the Australian 3rd and 5th Light Horse Brigades (ALH) the
task to cut-off the retreating Turkish army to prevent its escape north, through Homs towards
Aleppo and west towards Beirut. To do this they had to negotiate the Barada Gorge to the north
west of Damascus, on the road towards Beirut. This was a long and narrow gorge, a maximum 100
yards in width, with the railway and Barada River flowing through it and surrounded on both sides
by very steep and boulderous rock outcrops. The ALH troops had caught thousands of battle-weary
and exhausted Turkish and German troops, trucks, guns and animals in the gorge and slaughtered
them from above, as they ignored instructions to surrender. The destruction and the terrain made
the gorge impassable. Others had evaded the slaughter and were making their way toward Aleppo
and hopeful escape. The steepness and defile of the Gorge with its mounds of carcasses and
destruction prevented the ALH’s movement around Damascus.

Brig Wilson, the CO of 3rd ALH Brigade, had no choice if he was to catch the Turks and prevent
their escape. As W.T. Massey, the British official war historian reports, “The Brigade galloped into
Damascus. As they were riding beside a mud wall enclosure they met a heavy burst of musketry and the officer
charged a body of Turks. He then rode on to the Municipal building, and, finding that organised resistance had
ceased, gave directions for the preservation of order. Instantly, half of Damascus came into the streets. The people
gave the Australians an amazing welcome. They clapped their hands in truly Oriental fashion, threw flowers
and branches of trees on the road, and showered gifts of fruit on the victors.” With this, Major Olden
commanding the 10th Light Horse Regiment entered the Municipal building where he asked to see
the Civil Governor. Emir Said moved forward and through an interpreter said, ”In the name of the

After accepting the ‘welcome’ on behalf of the British Army, Olden had to decline the invitation to
celebratory feasts and activities. With that, the ALH re-mounted and, with the aid of a guide
provided by Emir Said, quickly galloped through Damascus city in hot pursuit of the retreating
Turks, as was their ordered task. Their intent was neither to capture nor hold the city of Damascus.

Massey continues that some two hours after the ALH departure, Lawrence and the forward
elements of the Arab Northern Army arrived in Damascus city and their purpose was first to hold
and then to administer Damascus.

It is likely that at the time of his entry into Damascus Lawrence was unaware of the earlier
Australian presence and took the exuberant local cheering and joy as signs of his liberating entry. It
would however, have been brought to his attention some short time thereafter.

Brig Wilson in his official Unit Report acknowledges that Jemal Pasha, before departing Damascus
on the afternoon of 30th September, had appointed Emir Said as Civil Governor. Jemal also
indicated that the Germans would burn Damascus to the ground, at which Emir Said and Shukri
Pasha demanded Jemal leave or be attacked by the Arabs. Wilson states “In Jemal Pasha’s presence
these people then produced a Sherif’s flag and displayed it at the Town Hall and declared it for the Sherif.”
This seems to concur with Lawrence.

Wavell indicates that during the day of the 30th September “Within the city, Turkish rule ceased during
the day; Arab flags were openly hoisted, and the government was assumed by a committee of Arab notables” and
that General von Sanders had appointed the Arab general in the Turkish Army, Ali Riza Pasha, “in
charge of the arrangements to resist the British advance…” quite unaware that “Ali Riza was the chairman of
the secret committee to take control of Damascus on the overthrow of the Turks”. Wavell continues, “At dawn
next morning, October 1st, the 3rd ALH Brigade, which had now received permission to enter the city, passed
through on its way to the Homs road. These were the first British forces to enter Damascus. Soon afterwards
Lawrence and his Arabs arrived, closely followed by the leading troops of the 5th Cavalry Division.”32
But on the day, the Australians likely didn’t give a tinker’s cuss about who was “first in” – they simply wanted to catch the remnants of the Turkish IVth Army; their job! Only later would the “political enthusiasts” find it of interest. As John D. Grainer states “The two forces had different objectives. The Arabs wanted the city for itself. The Australians wanted to get through it to ensure that the road further north was not blocked, and to cut off the retreat of Turkish troops.”

That the Arabs eventually lost Syria to the French, but only temporarily until Syrian sovereignty in 1946, was all to do with the Paris Peace Conference and nought to do with the Australians being there two hours before the Arab Army – so any dispute should be viewed from either the military or the political aspect to recognise the distinction.

**Civil Administration**

Sadly, civil administration was an area of contention between Lawrence, the Damascenes and the Australian staff.

There was initial confusion between Lawrence and Chauvel about which of the locals should be the Civil Administrator as Allenby had not made clear to Chauvel, the military commander, the political intent. And it was political that the Hashemite Arab Army be given the task of the civil administration of Damascus and Allenby so ordered. He also ordered Lawrence to provide continuing liaison – albeit this was short lived for other events were to follow that saw Lawrence leave quickly for England.

Lawrence was not a civil administrator and administration was not an Arab forte and it failed. It failed to the extent that Allenby had to order Chauvel to use his Australian troops to take over within days. The administration was then handed over to British forces of the Occupied Enemy Territory Administration (OETA).

Distribution of food and water had failed, as had public order and obedience that led to looting and murders of the local Syrians. It seems that whilst the Damascenes may have been content to support the Sherif in an uprising, they preferred British or their own administration and not the lawless looting, murder and mal-practices of the Bedouin with minimal ‘policing’ by the Arab Army.

Another major problem was the treatment of the sick and wounded from both sides. By this time the worldwide flu epidemic had hit, plus, both sides were decimated by malaria, dysentery, cholera and typhus and of course, the battle wounded. The Turkish hospitals had dead and dying filling beds and spread throughout the corridors. The hospitals were a disaster scene. Lawrence had sought to take over all the hospitals. Chauvel gave him the local hospitals but not the European ones. Eventually, Chauvel had to take back the local hospitals to prevent a continuation of the mass deaths through mal-treatment. Although Lawrence denied such poor Turkish and Arab medical treatment, British death records confirm it was so.

This administration issue became a major concern for Lawrence who intended to show the world that the Arabs deserved to be given responsibility for Syria and political control.

At this stage though, with the battle still going on and the remainder of the Turkish Army to be captured, neither Allenby nor Chauvel seemed of a political mind. Lawrence was quickly dispatched to England; readily sent (the Wavell, Chauvel version) or reluctantly acquiesced by Allenby (the Lawrence version). British administration by the OETA with the aid of the local populace and former administrators who had remained then set about restoring Damascus.

The military then got on with militaring.

*Who Slapped Lawrence’s Face?*
Following the capture of Damascus, Lawrence indicated that his face was slapped by a “medical major” who spoke “with a brow of disgust at my skirts and sandals” and also at his horror of the state of the Turkish hospital. “You should have seen it the day before”, inwardly smirked Lawrence, the cause of the slap!

At the time, the Australians had taken over the European hospitals and given the administration of the Arab/Turkish hospitals to the Arabs to administer and care for. All the hospitals were in poor condition and limited resources were available for the treatment of sick and wounded. Regrettably once more, there is dispute between Lawrence’s version and that of Chauvel. Wavell and Massey identify with Chauvel’s account.

Nevertheless, on 20 July 1968, an article appeared in the *Sydney Morning Herald* (an Australian newspaper) titled “Who Slapped Lawrence’s Face?” and written by a former Australian officer, Aubrey Abbott. Abbott claimed the ‘medical major’ was Major Clive Single, an Australian. Coincidentally, Single became the husband of Rania Macphillamy of the Empire Soldiers Clubs mentioned earlier.

Records show that Maj Single was never in Damascus but at the 4th ALH Field Hospital in Kuneitra, some 20 miles away.

Ronald Hunter, an army colleague of Abbott and Single, wrote to Rania’s eldest daughter, Rania Murray, on 9 August 1968 correcting Abbott’s story. Reassuring her that her father would not have acted that way, he wrote, “Clive did not raise his voice or slap people – he could handle a situation on a higher level than that.”

There is no record from Australian Archives or the War Memorial indicating any medical major was in Damascus at the time and nor is there any known reason for Abbott’s unsubstantiated article. But we have the answer! Michael Asher in his book *Lawrence, The Uncrowned Prince of Arabia* says, “Suddenly he [Lawrence] was confronted by a British major of the Medical Corps, who asked if he was in charge. ‘In a way I suppose I am’, replied Lawrence. ‘Scandalous, disgraceful, outrageous,’ the Major said. ‘You ought to be shot!’ instead, the good major slapped him after Lawrence laughed at what he remembered of the previous day’s scene, compared to what the major now saw.” Well, he may have been British, but we still don’t really know who.

That these latter disputes involving Lawrence have occurred are unfortunate if they detract from an otherwise brilliant effort. Suggestions are that things were made worse through Lawrence’s sheer exhaustion and strain. He had endured two years of intense concentration and struggle, in a land and with people he may have admired but, as an Englishman and infidel, he would never be a homogenous or truly accepted part of.

**Epilogue**

Whatever the “truth” to the Damascus segment of the campaign, the Arab Army and Lawrence had performed acts of guerrilla warfare against the Turkish and German forces that made a significant contribution to the Arab Revolt and the efforts of General Allenby and the Egyptian Expeditionary Force. Lawrence had made a major contribution to the ‘art’ of guerrilla warfare that is still recognised by military institutions and their training.

There were numerous military contacts between the Anzacs and Lawrence with the Arab Army; most of these had positive and complimentary results and arguably, were vital at some stages to the Arab forces and their British Liaison officers, Lawrence in particular.

He may have had disagreement, compounded by exhaustion and political motivation for the welfare of the Arabs, but his memories of Lewis, Ross Smith and the other pilots of the Australian Flying Corps, elements of the Desert Mounted Corps and Chaytor’s Force, and Anzacs in the Imperial
Camel Corps (2,000 of whose camels he convinced Allenby to give him on the disbandment of the ICC), were pleasant, constructive and added to the success of the Arab Revolt.

And so was born the legend of that unusual British officer in Arab regalia, later called “Lawrence of Arabia” and remembered by all who studied him as a visionary, or an early extremist of that region.

Also born through WW1, was the legend of Anzac and the “diggers”. From this was born a national pride of two young nations, now to stand apart forever from their British coloniser, yet grateful for their birthright and happy to continue as part of the British Commonwealth, even up to today. And the Australians still fight beside British troops in the troubled lands of Afghanistan and Iraq.

**GENERAL SIR HARRY CHAUVEL, G.C.M.G., K.C.B.*

**Commander, Desert Mounted Corps**

- He served in volunteer mounted regiments for eleven years whilst a grazier in the Australian ‘bush’ before joining the Queensland Defence Force as a permanent officer
- He served with initiative and distinction in the Boer War
- He was a Brigade Commander on Gallipoli in 1915
- He rose in rank faster than any other Australian officer in WW1
- He was the first Australian to the rank of Lieutenant-General and the first to command a Corps
- As Commander of the Desert Mounted Corps he was the first non-British officer to command British, Indian, New Zealand and Australian troops
- He was knighted in the field for battle and leadership successes in Sinai
- As DMC Commander he was effectively General Allenby’s Second-In-Command
- A shy and humble man, he was revered by his troops for his professionalism and care for his troops
- “He wrote no book, he had a contempt for showmanship and, as a field commander, gave too little thought to what is now called public relations.” – A.J. Hill, official biographer
- He was a man of positive and effective action
- He went on to become Chief of the General Staff and was recalled to service in 1940 for WW2, dying five months before its end at the age of 75

Notes:

1. Lawrence, T.E. *Seven Pillars of Wisdom*, Penguin 1926, 111
3. Lawrence, T.E., 352
4. ibid
5. ibid, 356.
6. ibid
7. ibid, 385
12. ibid, 87
13. ibid, 88
14. ibid, 89
15. ibid
16. ibid, 90
17. AWM 1DRL/0655
18. Lawrence, 638
19. ibid, 640
20. ibid, 641
21. ibid, 639-40
22. [www.diggerhistory.info](http://www.diggerhistory.info) - 1 Sqn AFC, 4
23. Fenton, D. *Wartime; (Australian War Memorial), Issue #24*, 18-20
24. Lawrence, 665
29. Lawrence, 92
30. ibid, 645
32. Wavell, 228-30
34. Lawrence, 682
35. Horsfield, 237

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