

## Travel Tales

# In Search of Lawrence of Arabia: Britain's Most Enigmatic Hero Part 2

by  
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Last month we learned about the wartime life of T.E. Lawrence, and visited his odd lonely cottage at Clouds Hill in Dorset. This month we will speak about his different post-war guises, learn about his death, and visit his effigy and grave.

After World War I, Lawrence became a research fellow at All Souls College, Oxford, served for a time as an adjutant to King Feisal and advisor to Winston Churchill and the Colonial Office, and published the excellent, straightforward account of his desert campaign, *The Seven Pillars of Wisdom*. It was named after a verse in Proverbs, which says that, “Wisdom hath builded her house, she hath hewn out her seven pillars...and she crieth...whoso is simple, let him turn in hither.”

By 1923 Lawrence became disgusted with British and French policy toward the Arabs, which was to carve up the Middle East into European-controlled territories and deny the Arabs their independence. In protest and to shun the limelight, he joined the Royal Air Force as a lowly aircraftsman, under the pseudonym John Hume Ross. When he was quickly discovered, he joined the Royal Tank Corps as a private under the name of Thomas Edward Shaw.

In 1925 as Shaw he re-joined the Royal Air Force, where he became a brilliant designer of fast RAF rescue boats, which saved many pilots in the Channel and Western Approaches during the next war. To make some money, he translated the *Odyssey* from ancient Greek into English for an American publisher. He also wrote *The Mint*, a stark account of British military life in the ranks. Most noteworthy was his description of “square-bashing” – in which he marched in full heavy kit up and down his barracks square for hours and hours, on punishment parade. Oddly enough, he seemed to enjoy it.

Lawrence loved motorcycles, and it was this love that eventually killed him. His favorite type was the Brough Superior, and he owned seven of these in succession, each faster than the last. His nicknames for the last one were Son of Thunder and The Velvet Rocket. It was capable of over 100 mph, and he delighted in roaring down country roads at high speed, on his way to visit Winston Churchill, Noel Coward, George Bernard Shaw or other distinguished friends.



*The death motorcycle of Lawrence of Arabia, called "The Son of Thunder"*

On May 13, 1935 Lawrence was driving his motorcycle from Bovington Camp to Clouds Hill. He came over a crest, and saw two boys on bicycles ahead of him in a dip in the road. He swerved to avoid them, crashed, and was thrown over the handlebars. Six days later he died of head injuries, at the age of 46. There were rumors that he was assassinated and that a mysterious black van was present, but these rumors have been discounted. The deadly Velvet Rocket is now on display at the Imperial War Museum in London.



*The isolated church where Lawrence is buried*

We visited the magnificent effigy of Lawrence designed by his friend and pall-bearer Eric Kennington, located in the obscure St. Martin's Church, Wareham, Dorset, about seven miles from his grave. The effigy was designed to be located in St. Paul's Cathedral, London, along with all the other major British heroes. But the controversy of Lawrence's life and death led to the effigy being rejected. It was also rejected by Westminster Abbey and Salisbury Cathedral. Finally the effigy was placed in the quiet rural church in Dorset which had been in ruins for 100 years, and which Kennington had to help pay to rehabilitate, to hold his masterpiece.

The effigy is life-sized, about 5'5" long, and is designed in Crusader style, a period Lawrence studied and loved. It shows Lawrence in full Arab regalia, wearing a tribal Agal-Kyffieh headdress. His head rests on the saddle of a camel, and nearby are the three books he always kept with him, even on campaign: the *Greek Anthology of Verse*, the *Oxford Book of English Verse*, and (fittingly) the *Morte d'Arthur*. At his side are camel whips, and he holds on his chest the gold twelve-inch Jambiya dagger which was a gift from King Feisal, and

which Lawrence, impoverished by the Depression and his low military pay, sold to repair the roof on Clouds Hill. At his feet are two fighting Hittite bulls, celebrating his extensive archaeological excavations of Carchemish, a classic Hittite site on the Euphrates north of Damascus.



*Lawrence's effigy, a beautiful carving rejected by St. Paul's and Westminster Abbey*

Eventually a bust of Lawrence was placed in the crypt at St. Paul's, so he is now represented in that pantheon of British heroes.

We visited Lawrence's grave in the village of Moreton, Dorset, population 270. It was a cold day in November, and it gave more meaning to the phrase "in the cold, cold ground." His grave continued the theme of unexpected oddity. Although most British military men would have killed for a "K" (a knighthood), Lawrence had continued his recalcitrant ways by refusing the honor of Knight Commander of the British Empire (K.C.B.E.). He did accept the "gongs" of



*A religious tombstone for an irreligious hero*

Companion of the Order of the Bath (C.B.), Distinguished Service Order (D.S.O.), and the French Legion of Honor. His C.B. and D.S.O. could have been engraved on his tombstone as post-nomial letters, but characteristically were left off. Instead, his gravestone, designed in haste and piety by his mother and brother, only says, "To the dear memory of T.E. Lawrence, Fellow of All Souls College, Oxford," gives his dates, and states that, "the dead shall hear the voice of the son of God, and they that hear shall live." The stone at his foot says "Dominus Illuminatio Mea" or "The Lord is My Light" – the motto of All Souls College. It is doubtful that if Lawrence had been involved in the design that it would have been so

religious. As an adult he believed in God but shunned Anglican services.

Winston Churchill described Lawrence as "one of the greatest beings of our time...we shall never see his like again. His name will live in history and in the annals of war."

On the day we visited, an earlier visitor had left a lit candle and a note on the grave. The note said in part, "T.E., I've conquered over 4,000 miles just to see you, and here we are, close as we'll ever be. Through your faults, talents, and mortality, you have been a great light to me. I hope you've at last found some sense of belonging, peace, happiness, good music, good books, and fast motorcycles, wherever you are. P.S., Wear a helmet next time!"

Here endeth the lesson on T. E. Lawrence, whose initials could most fittingly stand for the "Truly Enigmatic" Lawrence of Arabia.

Lew and Susan Toulmin are Anglophiles, collect British military medals, and never ride motorcycles. They live in Silver Spring.

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