



# A Leader's Grief

T.E. Lawrence, *Leadership, and PTSD*

James J. Schneider, Ph.D.

*I had believed these misfortunes of the Revolt to be due mainly to faulty leadership, Arab and English. So I went down to Arabia to see and consider its great men.*

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

LEADERSHIP IS PERHAPS the most human imperative. Without leaders—without purpose, direction, and motivation—society as we know it would not exist. Leadership is a fundamental birthright that at one time or another we are all called upon to exercise as leaders and followers. Both roles demand personal character and professional competence.

Leadership at its core is a harmonious blend of character and competence, with character expressed as a person's virtue, personality, and especially identity, and competence manifested as the ability to decide and act when confronted with problems. Although men long understood that character was a key component of leadership, they later realized that there was another equally necessary component, *competence*, the ability to make informed rational judgments about choices. Throughout much of history, competence was conflated and folded into the rubric of genius. However, as warfare became increasingly more complex, because of the Industrial Revolution, training and education had to greatly supplement a leader's "genius."

By the end of the 19th century, awareness of the psychological dimension of leadership grew, especially as it related to character. Out of this milieu emerged a leader who served two combat "tours" of duty in the Middle East and struggled with many of the same issues our leaders—military and civilian—struggle with today: Thomas Edward (T.E.) Lawrence, known to history as Lawrence of Arabia. An accomplished diplomat, strategist, littérateur, and peacemaker, he fought in the Arabian Desert for Arab freedom during World War I. Four times wounded, he struggled with the horrors of psychological shock, the uncertainty of operating within an alien culture, and the usual burdens of protracted conflict. Throughout the long war, he strove to maintain his effectiveness as a compassionate and charismatic leader, but at a high personal cost.

James J. Schneider is Professor Emeritus of Military Theory at the School of Advanced Military Studies, U.S. Army Command and General Staff College, Fort Leavenworth, KS, where he has taught for 25 years. Schneider served in Vietnam with the First Infantry Division and received his Ph.D. in history from the University of Kansas. His book on T.E. Lawrence, *Guerrilla Leader*, was published last year.

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PHOTOS: Left, T.E. Lawrence at Rabigh; right, at Aqaba. Saudi Arabia, 1917.

Thus, the story offered here is about a leader's *grief*: about how Lawrence eloquently expressed that grief and how he managed to deal with it. Lawrence's experience provides a unique historical perspective into the least known or discussed social and psychological dynamics of wartime leadership. Although there are many books written about him, few address the *leadership* of T.E. Lawrence in any detail. (However, see the author's *Guerrilla Leader: T.E. Lawrence and the Arab Revolt*, Bantam/Random House, November 2011). Largely expressed through his own words, immortalized in *Seven Pillars of Wisdom*, his sensitive personal reflections portray the heavy emotional burden and internal turmoil borne of leadership. Lawrence experienced symptoms we now recognize as associated with post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD). These symptoms directly challenged the integrity of Lawrence's character and identity and threatened to subvert his ability to lead.

## Modern War and Heroic Virtue

Remarkably, most studies on PTSD rarely deal with the condition among officers, largely because of a professional paradox and an institutional bias that do not admit its existence. Today, to a large extent, military leaders—and leaders in general—still operate under the Achilles or Hector paradigm of heroic leadership, not that of Odysseus or Lawrence. In reality, the dawn of modern industrialized warfare has since rendered heroic leadership inadequate to meet the challenges of protracted war and persistent conflict. The heroic leader and his troops no longer struggle on the fields of Waterloo maintaining unflinching courage and bravery for a morning or afternoon. Instead, today's modern, prolonged fights erode all the heroic virtues. The modern carnage of war devours the old warrior ethos and eats away at the warrior's very soul and sanity.

The psychological aspect of war, the emotional devastation it leaves among returning troops—the “grief of soldiers,” a phrase coined by Chaim F. Shatan in 1973—has been slowly recognized and formalized as PTSD. However, there is little mention of its qualitatively different manifestation, among leaders as a *grief* of leaders because of the cult of the heroic leader who as the consummate tactician never flinches in battle and who never shows weakness. The leader who shows weakness of any sort is



Lieutenant Colonel Thomas Edward Lawrence.

deemed unworthy and unfit to lead. Thus, the leader remains silent.

Lawrence was perhaps the first leader to break that silence when he spoke so articulately of the corrosive effects of protracted war on the mind and the leader's ability to lead. His book is a challenge to all institutions, including the military, to reconsider their leadership ethos. Today's leaders can no longer stand silent and alone, for long.

The military leader stands between the men he leads and the character of his own integral identity and self-worth. As such, the leader is a mediator between the interior, personal realm and the exterior, social world in which he leads. Lawrence operated in both domains. World War I's protracted flux put Lawrence under enough stress to threaten the collapse of his leadership ability. Lawrence operated in a vortex of fatigue, fear, anxiety, horror, and loss while among the Arabs, a stranger leading strangers in a strange land. Yet, through all the challenges to his direction and guidance, Lawrence for the most part maintained a rock-like stability within himself and among those he led. Only with the insight of modern psychology and sociology can we begin to appreciate the full measure of his accomplishments

as a leader and recognize the emotional price of his success; that price I have called *the leader's grief*.

T.E. Lawrence grew out of a unique cultural milieu, which shaped his character, ultimately making him the leader he became. Hundreds of years of English culture had placed great emphasis on the idea of the *heroic leader* as the natural exemplar of military leadership. We study the Great Men of history intensely for insights into leadership and into those qualities of character that made average leaders special. Men like Achilles, Xenophon, Alexander, Hannibal, Scipio, Caesar, and a host of others brought the English to rely heavily on the humanities as a great font of historical revelation. Along the way, they developed a rudimentary psychology of human behavior based largely on the philosophies of Socrates, Plato, and Aristotle and mythic power of Homer. A powerful leavening of Christian orthodoxy also contributed to these ideas.

At the same time, it was understood, though perhaps vaguely, that a person's character was also the irreducible expression of his personal identity and self-worth: all those characteristics that marked the person as a unique individual, distinct and distinguishable from another. Over time, the West recognized a certain set of qualities as especially desirable for a leader to possess. These noble qualities or *virtues* made a person particularly worthy; those who lacked these singular traits were deemed base and unworthy. According to this view, most men were born naturally into the realm of high character through noble birth and the grace of God. There was no reason for the lowborn and base to develop qualities through personal growth and improvement because Providence had foreordained their diminished lot in life.

The coming of the Enlightenment in the 17th and 18th centuries fundamentally challenged this view. Enlightenment scholars argued that man had the opportunity and even the obligation to create his own identity through personal growth and intervention in the world. No longer preordained to a particular fate, he could develop himself through education and self-improvement. The world suddenly opened up to the belief in a meritocracy that went well beyond the notions of birthright and nobility—now any man might be king.

Questions remained, however, as to the particular virtues toward which one ought to aspire. For most,

the answer was simple—only the virtues of the heroic leader were worthy of emulation: courage, self-sacrifice, honesty, fortitude, bravery, duty, charity, compassion, and the like. Education and strong doses of religion would guide the lay acolyte to the Elysian Fields of noble character and offer him the mantle of leadership.

## The Industrial Revolution

Then, suddenly, the material influence of the Industrial Revolution overturned 4,000 years of warfare in a very brief time. Just as dramatic, but in a more subtle and elusive fashion, it also transformed the psycho-dynamics of warfare forever. Even as early as the American Civil War, glimpses of the future were already evident in the protracted nature of the emerging conflict. Soldiers now engaged in battles and engagements of interminable duration. Previously, most battles ended quickly in a morning or afternoon of fighting, but toward the end of the Civil War troops engaged for weeks and months in the trenches. By the end of the first year of World War I, the endless battle was commonplace.

The psychological effects on the soldier were profound. Civil War observers began to speak of “soldiers’ melancholia,” an early reference to what would become known as post-traumatic stress disorder. Before the Industrial Revolution took hold in the 19th century, martial virtue demanded that soldiers be brave, courageous, bold, and all the rest for a few short hours. Now, under modern conditions, the soldier had to maintain his martial character for weeks, months, and even years—if he was lucky enough to survive. During Lawrence’s war, military doctors began to observe more cases of what they referred to as “shell shock,” believing its cause the result of weak character. It would take over 60 years before military medicine would truly understand the psycho-dynamics of shell shock, and the profession was none too pleased when confronted with its reality, for the results challenged the viability of its age-old warrior ethos.

**...the material influence of the Industrial Revolution overturned 4,000 years of warfare ...**



**Attendees of the 1920 Cairo Conference included (from left to right, front row) Colonel T.E. Lawrence, Emir Abdullah, Air Marshal Sir Geoffrey Salmond, and Sir Wyndham Deedes.**

Pioneering work by researchers like Chaim F. Shatan, Jonathan Shay, and others helped to transform the central features of the post-Vietnam syndrome into the more rigorous formalization of post-traumatic stress disorder. Its main symptoms include—

- Loss of control and authority over common mental functions, especially the reliability of memory and perception.
- Self-punishment and feelings of guilt.
- Rage and other violent impulses against indiscriminate targets.
- Combat brutalization and its attendant, “psychic numbing.”
- Alienation from one’s own feelings and from other people.
- Substance abuse.
- Anxiety and apprehension about the continued ability to love and trust others.
- Persistent expectations of betrayal and exploitation leading to the destruction of the capacity for social trust.
- Suicidality and feelings of despair, isolation, and meaninglessness.

Throughout most of his later life, T.E. Lawrence manifested many, if not most, of these symptoms. Though most biographers attribute much of Lawrence’s quirkiness to his “genius,” in fact as a combat veteran of a long war, he was struggling against the ravages of PTSD, and his struggle began in the Arabian Desert. Lawrence’s grief is a particular type of psychological anguish and suffering shared by all modern combat leaders who undergo protracted, catastrophic, and traumatic war experiences.

Every individual is a social and moral construction who builds his identity upon what is right and what is wrong. Culture, society, and family decide what is right and what is wrong and create the individual in their own moral image. As the person grows older, morality, identity, and self-worth become an irreducible whole that constitutes the integrity of the individual and the foundation of his personal character. Thus, challenges to our ideas of “what’s right” become threats to our personal identity and sense of worth and value. In Lawrence’s case, the Sykes-Picot Treaty—a diplomatic agreement between France and Great Britain over the final disposition of Arab territories after the war which Lawrence viewed as a sell-out of the Revolt—becomes a betrayal of “what’s right” and an event that threatened his identity and character as a leader. Throughout his book, we see him struggle to maintain his moral and psychological integrity during the long desert war. Finally, on the road to Damascus, a momentary collapse occurs. Berserker rage overwhelms his moral integrity, and the massacre at Tafas ensues—dramatically recreated in the 1962 film, *Lawrence of Arabia*. Essentially, Lawrence loses his ability to lead.

## **Lawrence the Survivor**

The final years of Lawrence’s life were very much like those of many a modern veteran who returns from a long and brutal war: he seeks reintegration of his moral self into society and he seeks redemption for his guilt. Perhaps it is no accident that Lawrence would spend nearly three years translating *The Odyssey*, a story of another veteran seeking a way home through moral redemption. Psychiatrists have also pointed out that writing about one’s wartime experiences creates a “healing narrative” and helps the veteran reconstruct

his shattered identity into some semblance of its former whole. The idea reminds us as well that to heal is to make whole again. Thus, Lawrence's writing *Seven Pillars of Wisdom* must have been a very therapeutic process for him.

All veterans like Lawrence are survivors of their experiences. Many of these episodes have been dramatically captured by researchers. However, there is relatively little consideration given to the effects of PTSD or its manifestation among combat leaders. Indeed, there lies a fundamental and complex paradox: first, the leader—even today still under the ethos of the leader as heroic warrior—would seldom admit to any psychological devastation of his own, for to do so would be an acknowledgment of weakness and to be weak is to be unworthy to lead. The second part of the paradox has to do with the psycho-dynamics of modern, persistent conflict: the longer the leader leads, the more his personal identity and his moral character are likely to erode. At present, there are no known remedies that address this riddle. Leaders lead until the enemy kills them or they burn themselves out. This is the ethos of heroic leadership that worked well when battles were of short duration and decided in an afternoon. Under modern, protracted conditions of warfare, the idea of withdrawing leaders from combat for long periods of rehabilitation will be resisted, ironically, by all good leaders, not to mention the military institutions that perpetuate, and are gatekeepers of, the heroic warrior ethos.

Although Lawrence resolutely met the challenge of battle straight on, he also contended with another demand that caused perhaps as much psychological and emotional stress as deadly combat itself—leading a national revolt among a primitive nation whose moral construction was alien to almost everything he knew. (Our leaders today also struggle with this complexity.)

Culture would determine “what’s right” and create essential differences between the character

of Lawrence and his Arab followers. Lawrence had to transcend two distinct cultural challenges: Arab social culture and conventional military culture. Ultimately, he struggled trying to solve this “problem of problems,” how to make a long journey across two cultural “voids.”

Lawrence worked on a broad canvas in the Middle East during the Arab Revolt of 1916-1918. Here his media of expression were the space, time, and mass of the military artist: the desert vault, battle time, and the armed Bedouin. Perhaps Lawrence's greatest military achievement was the bending of these disparate media to his will. His greatest challenge was in shaping the living medium of the Bedouin. In doing so, Lawrence shaped and transformed his own identity and character.

“I was sent to these Arabs as a stranger,” he writes, “unable to think their thoughts or subscribe to their beliefs, but charged by duty to lead them forward and to develop to the highest any movement of theirs profitable to England. If I could not assume their character, I could at least conceal my own, and pass among them without evident friction, neither a discord nor a critic but an unnoticed influence.”

Working a crimson canvas, he noted, “Blood was always on our hands: we were licensed to it. Wounding and killing seemed ephemeral pains, so very brief and sore was life with us. . . . We lived for the day and died for it. When there was reason and desire to punish, we wrote our lesson with gun or whip immediately in the sullen flesh of the sufferer, and the case was beyond repeal.”

The price? “Bedouin ways were hard even for those brought up to them, for strangers terrible: a death in life. When the march or labor ended I had no energy to record sensation, nor while it lasted any leisure to see the spiritual loveliness which sometimes came upon us by the way. In my notes, the cruel rather than the beautiful found place.”

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Lawrence wrote that he led a “Yahoo life,” having bartered his soul to “a brute-master.” Lawrence’s expression of grief here is very much reminiscent of veterans returning home from Vietnam. We see, for instance, a similar story played in the case of John Paul Vann during Vietnam.

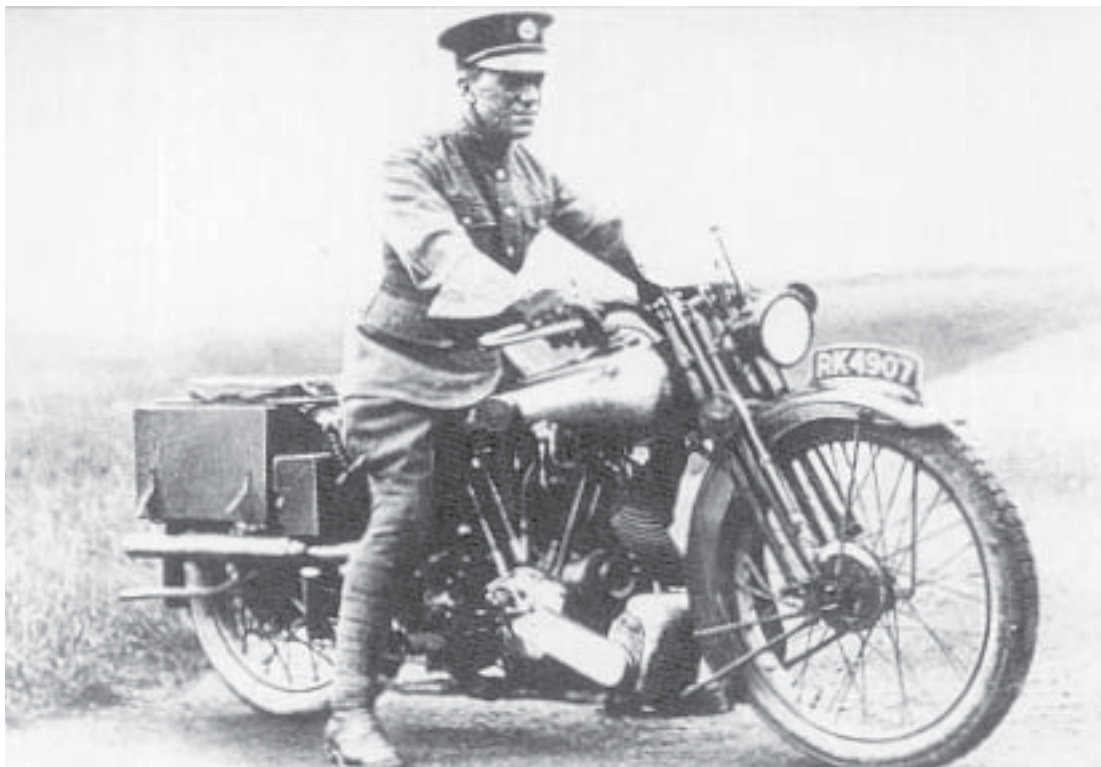
To lead the Arab against the Arab’s will, Lawrence became more like an Arab: “In my case, the effort for these years to live in the dress of Arabs, and to imitate their mental foundation, quitted me of my English self, and let me look at the West and its conventions with new eyes: they destroyed it all for me. At the same time I could not sincerely take on the Arab skin: it was an affectation only.”

Lawrence persisted in a kind of dual state of cultural existence: “Sometimes these selves would converse in the void; and then madness was very near, as I believe it would be near the man who could see things through the veils at once of two customs, two educations, two environments.”

The “problem of problems,” how Lawrence was able to make the long journey across two cultural “voids,” is a large question his book sought to

explore. Paradoxically, the cross-cultural role Lawrence played among the Arabs also began to subvert his own character and ability to lead as it eroded his own personal identity.

In the 19th century, Lawrence’s noted fellow soldier and fellow citizen, Sir William Francis Butler, wrote, “The nation that will insist on drawing a broad demarcation between the fighting man and the thinking man is liable to find its fighting done by fools and its thinking done by cowards.” Butler’s statement reminds us of the importance of the intimate and dynamic connection between learning and leading. Knowledge serves as an antidote to the consequences of interminable war. We have learned the hard lesson from Vietnam that education is an important inoculation against PTSD. Hard learning strengthens the mind to resist the shock and trauma of combat. Combat experience is the other antidote to the trauma of battle shock. Institutionally, we have made major strides with our soldiers, but the leader needs our help at this crucial stage of our Army’s history. **MR.**



Lawrence on a Brough Superior SS100. In May of 1935, while riding his motorcycle in Dorset, Lawrence swerved to avoid two boys on bicycles. His death due to this accident prompted calls for motorcyclists to wear helmets.



**Now are our brows bound with victorious wreaths,  
Our bruised arms hung up for monuments,  
Our stern alarums changed to merry meetings,  
Our dreadful marches to delightful measures.  
Grim-visage war hath smoothed his wrinkled front,  
And now—instead of mounting barbèd steeds  
To fright the souls of fearful adversaries—  
He capers nimbly in a lady's chamber  
To the lascivious pleasing of a lute.**

**William Shakespeare  
*Richard III, Act I, Scene I.***

U.S. Army soldier with the 82nd Airborne Division surveys the area from the dropdown stairs of his mine-resistant, ambush-protected vehicle while crossing the Khabari border from Iraq into Kuwait on 9 December 2011. (DOD photo by SSG Lynette Hoke, U.S. Army)