



The dramatic diorama depicts Lawrence and Arab fighters attacking Ottoman defenders of the railroad station at Abu el-Naam on 26 March 1917.

Fire in the Desert

James H. Hillestad tracks T.E. Lawrence and Arab guerrillas' attacks on the Ottoman Empire's key Hejaz railway during World War I to find inspiration for creating a diorama.

Text and Photos: James H. Hillestad

T.E. Lawrence, who became known as Lawrence of Arabia, was born on 16 August 1888 in Tremadog, Wales. While an undergraduate at Oxford University, he travelled around the Middle East to pursue his interest in archaeology. After World War I erupted in 1914, Lawrence volunteered for the British Army and was assigned to the Arab Bureau, an intelligence unit based in Egypt. He went on missions to Arabia and Mesopotamia in 1916. As the Arab Revolt unfolded, he became a liaison to guerrilla forces along with other British officers aiding the Arab Kingdom of Hejaz's struggle for



British Army officer T.E. Lawrence in Arab dress.

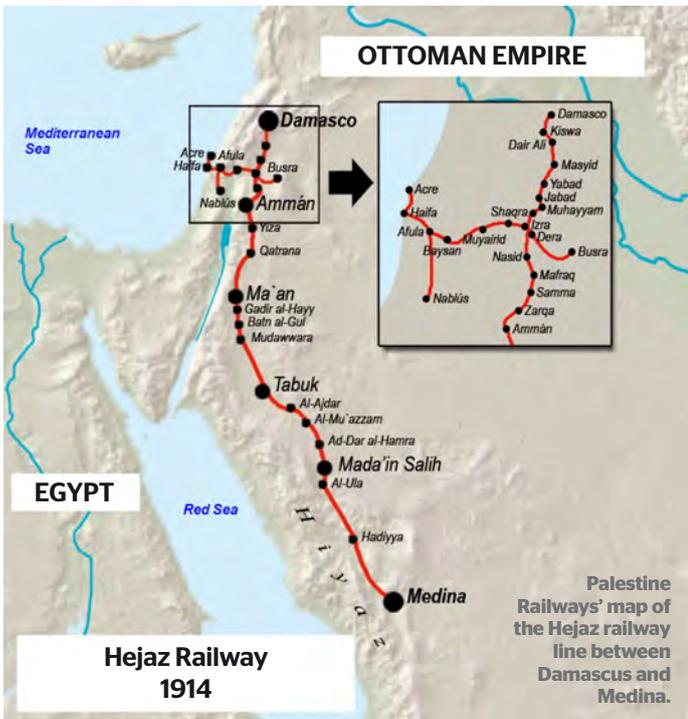
independence from the Ottoman Empire. Alone and wearing a *thawb*, the traditional flowing white robe of Arab men, Lawrence led ferocious Arab raiders into battle against well-defended Turkish positions. They crossed waterless deserts by camel to dynamite or ambush enemy trains. Lawrence himself blew up 79 bridges along the strategic Hejaz railway.

Hejaz Railway

The Hejaz railway was the brainchild of Ottoman Sultan Abdul Hamid II. Construction began in 1900, and it attracted British suspicions from the start. It was suggested that the project

German engineering expertise and resources helped the Ottoman Empire build the Hejaz railway through rugged desert terrain.





A British 4.7-inch gun crew goes into action if support of the Arab attack.

was an effort by the sultan to link up the seat of his temporal power as sultan at Constantinople with the seat of his Islamic spiritual power as caliph of Mecca. The narrow-gauge railway ran from Damascus to Medina, a distance of 1,300km (810 miles), through the Hejaz region of modern-day Saudi Arabia. The railway reached Medina in 1908. The original plan called for the railway to terminate at the holy city of Mecca, but construction was halted by World War I. The project was funded by the Ottoman Empire (the names Ottoman Empire and Turkish Empire were often used interchangeably). Imperial Germany supplied the engineering expertise that

the sultan needed to build the Hejaz line along with the rails and many of the trains that ran on them. The railway transformed travel throughout the lawless Arabian hinterland. A forty-day desert march or an expensive voyage by sea down through the British-controlled Suez Canal now took just three days by train. This achievement brought the Ottomans into mounting conflicts with Arab tribesmen accustomed to plundering rich pilgrims travelling to Mecca. →



A British scout car provides covering fire.



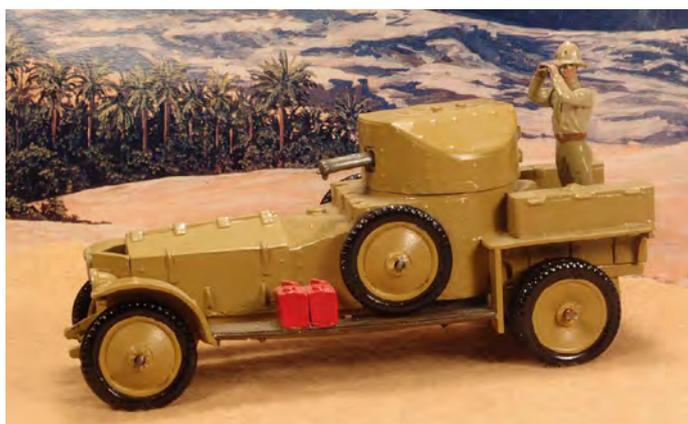
Turkish troops try to defend the railway station.



A concealed mine has disabled the engine of an Ottoman supply train.



The British pilot of a Royal Aircraft Factory S.E.5 biplane passes on reconnaissance to Bedouin Arab Sheikh Auda Abu-Tayeh, leader of the Howeitat tribe, who lived in what is now Jordan and Saudi Arabia.



Lawrence's use of Rolls-Royce armoured cars fundamentally changed the desert war. With their speed and mobility, the vehicles could attack isolated Turkish garrisons and disrupt the rail line.

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→ During World War I, Ottoman armies operating against British-controlled Egypt depended on the Hejaz railway. The slender steel track ran through hundreds of miles of blistering desert. If it was permanently cut, the loss to Turkey would be catastrophic. It was against this backdrop that Lawrence directed his audacious assaults. One of them was a successful attack on 26 March 1917 on the railroad station at Abu el-Naam, 70 miles northwest of Medina, which is the subject of my diorama enlisted to illustrate this article. The Arab attackers bombarded the station, dynamited a mile of track, destroyed an abandoned train, and took forty prisoners, leaving behind seventy Turkish casualties. The diorama is about 114.3cm by 58.42cm (45 inches by 23 inches). I collected the 54mm painted metal figures and vehicles from Somerset Ltd. and Toy Army Workshop. The desert buildings were produced by Department 56.

Tribute to an Enigma

The diorama is my tribute to Lawrence, one of the most enigmatic characters in British history. At the outbreak of World War I, he had no military training, yet he succeeded



Lawrence motions Arab fighters forward into action.

where all others had failed. Not only did Lawrence help unite the Arab tribes, he also led them to victory over the Ottoman armed forces. He returned to the United Kingdom as a full colonel. After the war, Lawrence joined the British Foreign Office, working with both his government and Emir Faisal, who promoted pan-Arab nationalism. However, Lawrence retreated from public life in 1922. Except for a brief stint in the Royal Tank Corps, he joined the Royal Air Force twice and served as an ordinary aircraftman under the assumed names of first John Hume Ross, then T.E. Shaw. It was during this period that he penned his autobiography, *The Seven Pillars of Wisdom* (1926), about his role in the Arab Revolt. Two months after leaving military service, the avid motorcyclist was fatally injured in an accident on 13 May 1935, near his Clouds Hill cottage in Dorset, England. He died six days later at age 46. Mourners at his funeral included Lady Astor, E.M. Forster and Winston Churchill who wrote, 'I deem him one of the greatest beings alive in our time.' British King George V sent the following message to Lawrence's younger brother Arnold: 'Your brother's name will live in history and the king gratefully recognizes his distinguished services to his country.' **END**

ABOUT THE WRITER

James H. Hillestad is a military historian and proprietor of The Toy Soldier Museum in Cresco, Pennsylvania, United States of America.