

Lawrence and the Arab Revolts
Osprey Men-at-Arms Series No. 208 (1989)
Text by David Nicolle; colour plates by Richard Hook

Review by Rob Morgan

With the centenary of the start of World War I now having arrived, this is another early Osprey volume deserving closer examination. Historically, the events of the Great War across the Arab World have been decisive in the terms of the problems of the era. From a wargamer's viewpoint, this was the Great War in the best of mobility terms ; in fact the Middle East conflicts, almost a dozen of them possibly, arguably more, were bitter, fluid and complicated, to say the least! The book, for the benefit of American readers, does *not* deal with the many small wars and risings in Persia and beyond during 1914-1918.

The Ottoman Empire was active in the war by October 1914, and Nicolle begins by describing the substantial Arab components of the Ottoman army, almost a third of the total at the outbreak. The military events in which the Arabs and Ottomans were involved were far broader than Lawrence of Arabia's heroic activities. First, he deals with the Sanussi revolt north of the Sahara, the Sanussi were a movement in Islam, later inspired and led by Turkish officers and specialist troops. The war began with effective attacks on Italian columns in August 1914, and continued with the invasion of Egypt in the following year. This was a hard conflict, involving 100,000 allied, French, British and Italian troops including support from warship bombardment, bombers and armoured cars – all to capture a string of tiny green dots on the face of the desert. These were Sanussi-defended oases, probably, as Nicolle suggests, no more than 2,000+ irregulars, but effective fighters, who were not finally subdued until the Spring of 1917. The matter was complicated further by the trouble caused by highly mobile and active Tuareg raiders who continued fighting against the French and, occasionally, the Italians well into 1918. A series of campaigns that are clearly still neglected and little understood by European and American historians.

The bulk of the text goes on to deal, not with Ottoman-inspired and led revolts like the two described above, but the liberation wars of the Arabian peninsula and beyond, although Ottoman hands were active around there too, in fomenting trouble with small British and allied garrisons, egging on minor rulers and inciting jihad. Nicolle's account is a short and a sound introduction, but of course for any reader, the main Arab revolt is far better dealt with by Lawrence himself in the finest

military text written in the 20th century, 'Seven Pillars of Wisdom.' It was a really complex activity this war, the Arabs changed sides moving from paymaster to paymaster, deserted or simply went home with some regularity.

There was a vigorous war around the territories of Yemen and Aden, in which tribe fought tribe, Somalis, Ottoman, Indian and British troops in small-scale actions, raids and invasions which are ideal for the wargames table. Neatly described here.

The text moves on to deal with the amazing events of the Iraq War -- more than the powerful and doomed thrust along the great rivers to the battles of Ctesiphon and the siege of Kut, and the busy fight for the oil fields. Both the Ottomans and the British and Imperial forces employed irregulars in rather substantial numbers; attacks upon supply columns and small outposts were almost daily events until the end of the war, in a few cases beyond that. Nicolle ends his text with a decent, and readable account of the Egyptian Army in the Great War, another overlooked force which surely deserves an Osprey in its own right.

The illustrations and photographs are an interesting and valuable aid to the researcher, and, as always, Richard Hook's colour plates are of high quality. They cover all of the fronts described, and the illustrations of Arabs in Ottoman service, and of the tribesmen of Yemen and the Gulf, in particular, offer plenty of scope for figure painting and conversion. The Egyptians are made to look workman-like, but the Italian colonial troops are splendid, elegant and colourful, again ideal figures for the table top. Only one criticism, T.E. Lawrence, rightly described by General Giap as the greatest commander of the age, looks like he's off for a few shots on the range at Bisley; and not at all like Peter O'Toole in the film.

As for a choice of wargames figures: Irregular Miniatures in 6mm for bigger events, and the best range must be that of B & B miniatures in 25mm, though there are plenty of options in 15mm, using a few figures from Peter Pig's WWI and Sudan ranges for those in plate G, and there are Mick Yarrow's Omani 15mm camel and infantrymen for Plate F, 2 and 3. The Tuareg plate, B2, is provided for by the Peter Pig Tuareg 15mm range, awesome looking figures, but need a few rifles to replace the spears and javelins. In 25mm scale, look no further than Raventhorpe's Abyssinia series for the three figures at Plate H; the astonishingly uniformed Eritrean Askari, the Camel Corps, and the Libyans. Raventhorpe also make an Italian Lancia armoured car, and a Rolls Royce too. My own small collection of Ottomans and enemies dates back to the

splendid and long-vanished Peter Laing 15mm range, though somewhere I still have a little group of Arab irregulars taken from the Airfix Arabs set. You don't need a mass of figures, small units fought these wars, even the Europeans learned that-eventually.

Ideal solo stuff. 10 out of 10 for this one!

