

Lawrence of Arabia

Lawrence of Arabia and the crash helmet

When T.E. Lawrence – immortalised as Lawrence of Arabia – died 80 years ago he could not have known that the accident which took his life, and the surgeon who tried to save him, would eventually help to save thousands of others.

It was pouring with rain on the morning of Sunday 19 May 1935 when T.E. Lawrence died.

The man made famous by his Great War exploits in the Middle East finally succumbed to the head injuries he had suffered six days earlier in a motorcycle accident.

“In Lawrence we have lost one of the greatest beings of our time,” said his friend Winston Churchill. “I had hoped to see him quit his retirement and take a commanding part in facing the dangers which now threaten the country.”

It was not to be. At the age of 46, Lawrence of Arabia was dead.

Mourning was international. The New York Times called it a “tragic waste” and speculated that the accident which brought his death had been “unwarranted and perhaps avoidable”.

Lawrence had been pitched over his motorcycle, a Brough Superior SS100, near his Dorset home. A dip in the road apparently obscured his view of two boys on cycles ahead. The manoeuvring to avoid them cost him his own life.

The machine on which Lawrence suffered his fatal crash was guaranteed to be capable of more than 100mph, though there is no firm evidence that he was speeding recklessly when he came off it.

Lawrence had nicknamed it “Boa” or “Boanerges” which means “Son of Thunder” in Aramaic, and recorded his love of speed on previous rides.

“Boa and I took the Newark road for the last hour of daylight. He ambles at forty-five and when roaring his utmost, surpasses the hundred. A skittish motor-bike with a touch of blood in it is better than all the riding animals on earth,” he wrote.

Lawrence of Arabia 1888-1935



- British scholar, writer and soldier who mobilised the Arab Revolt in WW1.
- A trained archaeologist with deep sympathies for the Arab people, Lawrence became an adviser to the Arabs and led small but effective irregular force against Turkey, attacking communication and supply routes.
- Sensationalised accounts of Lawrence's war exploits made him famous, but he spent the rest of his life trying to escape his own celebrity.
- His memoir, *Seven Pillars of Wisdom*, formed the basis of David Lean's 1962 film *Lawrence of Arabia*, starring Peter O'Toole.

Whether Lawrence was riding safely in the run-up to the accident is unclear. "It's difficult to know exactly what the road would have been like in 1935 because it has changed so much, but the evidence is it was purely an accident," says Philip Neale, chairman of the T.E. Lawrence Society.

"He lost control and went over the handlebars. The Broughs didn't have fantastic brakes. The roads were very different in those days. Even the road in Dorset would have allowed some speed because traffic was light."

There was no mention in his obituaries that Lawrence had been without a crash helmet. In 1935 riders were typically bare-headed. Lawrence's death was to help change that – eventually.

One of the medics who attended Lawrence was a young doctor called Hugh Cairns, one of Britain's very first neurosurgeons.

His post-mortem examination established that Lawrence had suffered "severe lacerations and damage to the brain" when his unprotected head struck the ground. Had he survived, brain damage would probably have left him blind and unable to speak.

The loss of Lawrence was not forgotten by Cairns.

“We know from Cairns’ diaries that he was thinking very hard about head injuries to motorcyclists and crash helmets before World War Two. They were mentioned in his diaries and the first mention is around the time of T.E. Lawrence’s death,” explains Alex Green, consultant neurosurgeon at the Nuffield Department of Surgery in Oxford, which Cairns founded.

Cairns began to gather evidence on head injuries suffered by bikers. It was pioneering work.

It was more than six years after Lawrence’s death though before Cairns was ready with his first research. In October 1941, and by now consulting neurosurgeon to the Army, he published his initial results in the British Medical Journal. The article was entitled “Head Injuries in Motor-cyclists – the importance of the crash helmet”.

It revealed that in the 21 months before the start of WW2, 1,884 bikers had been killed on British roads. Of the cases Cairns studied, two-thirds suffered head injuries.

Things got even worse with the start of the blackouts prompted by air raids, despite petrol rationing reducing traffic. In the 21-month period from September 1939, 2,279 bikers died, or roughly 110 a month – an increase of 21%.

The contrast with modern figures is a stark one. In 2013, 331 bikers – roughly 28 a month – died on British roads, despite the huge rise in traffic volume.

Cairns was careful not to claim that crash helmets would solve everything. He was certain though that they would help.

“There can be little doubt that many patients in this series would have lived if their heads had been adequately protected,” he wrote.

His biggest problem, he conceded, was finding enough riders who did wear helmets voluntarily to show it made a difference. Cairns could only gather evidence from seven riders wearing helmets who were involved in accidents. All survived.

“In all of them the head injury was mild, though in four there had been considerable damage to the crash helmet,” he wrote.

The Army, at that point losing two motorcycle riders a week in accidents, was convinced. In November 1941 it ordered all despatch riders to wear helmets. Cairns had won his first victory.

What the Highway Code says

“On all journeys, the rider and pillion passenger on a motorcycle, scooter or moped MUST wear a protective helmet. This does not apply to a follower of the Sikh religion while wearing a turban. Helmets MUST comply with the Regulations and they MUST be fastened securely. Riders and passengers of motor tricycles and quadricycles, also called quadbikes, should also wear a protective helmet. Before each journey check that your helmet visor is clean and in good condition.”

“He provided proper scientific data of the beneficial effects of crash helmets and that was the thing I think. Although people had thought about it as a good idea before they didn’t have the data,” says Green.

Cairns was far from finished on the subject. Now he could start to compare despatch riders, in helmets, with civilian riders, still generally bare-headed.

By 1943 Cairns was able to show, in another BMJ paper, that a good helmet could reduce skull fractures in bikers who suffered head injuries by 75%.

Three years later, Cairns had gathered further evidence. His 1946 study in the BMJ showed that total motorcycle deaths had fallen from a monthly peak of nearly 200 just before the Army introduced helmets to around 50 towards the end of the war – even with civilians still not wearing them.

Cairns was now sure of his evidence.

“From these experiments there can be little doubt that adoption of a crash helmet as standard wear by all civilian motorcyclists would result in considerable saving of life,” he concluded.

Despite Cairns’s painstaking research and analysis though it was not until 1973 that the House of Commons voted to make wearing a crash helmet on a motorbike or moped mandatory.

Cairns’s evidence was not in doubt, and riders increasingly adopted helmets out of choice in the post-war years. For defenders of individual freedom however, that right to choose was sacred.

One opponent of the plans for compulsion was Enoch Powell, who attacked the proposals in the House of Commons in April 1973, in the debate on the bill which made helmets compulsory.

“The maintenance of the principles of individual freedom and responsibility is more important than the avoidance of the loss of lives through the personal decision of individuals,” Powell told fellow MPs, “whether those lives are lost swimming or mountaineering or boating, or riding horseback, or on a motor cycle.”

The compulsory wearing of crash helmets marked a turning-point in road safety. Libertarians like Powell had lost the argument, and more compulsion followed, albeit after further opposition.

In 1983, after several Parliamentary setbacks, seatbelt wearing in the front of cars became compulsory. By 1991 all car passengers were required to wear one.

Whatever the arguments about freedom of choice, there’s no doubt that modern crash helmets save lives.

“In our unit it’s rare to see motorcyclists with head injuries. We deal with a population of three million and we see maybe one a week. You would expect the numbers to be much higher, given there are many motorcycle accidents. I’ve no doubt helmets must prevent or reduce many of those injuries,” says Green.

Hugh Cairns did not live to see the change to the law his research helped to bring about. He died of cancer in 1952.

It seems likely Cairns would have been pleased. But how a free spirit like T.E. Lawrence would have reacted to being forced to wear a motorcycle helmet is another matter.

Source

<http://www.bbc.co.uk/news/magazine-32622465> [Accessed 11 May 2015]

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Reading

1. Lawrence of Arabia was killed because he ...

- a. was taking part in a dangerous war mission. ☐
- b. tried to avoid two cyclists. ☐
- c. was speeding on his motorbike. ☐
- d. the road was in a particularly bad condition. ☐

This is a retrieval question which asks you to find and convey information.

2. Are the following statements true or false?

	True	False
Lawrence of Arabia was killed in New York.		
People all over the world grieved for Lawrence.		
Lawrence enjoyed his fame.		
Lawrence would have made a full recovery had he survived.		

This is a deduction question. You need to read the texts carefully and show that you understand them.

3. What is the meaning of the word 'conceded' as used in the following sentence?

'His biggest problem, he conceded, was finding enough riders who did wear helmets voluntarily to show it made a difference.'

- a. admitted ☐
- b. replied ☐
- c. added ☐
- d. repeated ☐

This is a context question. You can identify the correct meaning of a word by reading and understanding the surrounding text.

4. What evidence did Cairns gather in order to persuade people that wearing crash helmets was a good idea?

This is a retrieval question which asks you to find and convey information.

5. Why do you think the author of the BBC online article included information from the Highway Code?

[illegible]

This question tests your ability to identify the purpose and intended audience of a text.

6. Why did Enoch Powell oppose plans to make the wearing of crash helmets mandatory? Do you agree with his opinions? Explain your reasons clearly.

For this question you will need to analyse the text. Remember to give your own opinion and use evidence from the text to back up your answer.

[illegible]

Writing

7. Create a leaflet outlining safety issues for young cyclists. Write 300-400 words.

Remember the following when writing:

- purpose
- audience
- structure
- style

The acronym PASS is an easy way to remember this.

Oracy

8. In a small group discuss your feelings about making the wearing of crash helmets mandatory for cyclists.

Ensure that everyone has a chance to give his/her opinion and that you listen carefully to everyone.

9. You have been asked to take part in a radio programme in which you have to give a short talk on road safety for young people. Your talk should last 4-5 minutes.

Make your radio talk convincing by using features such as:

- rhetoric
- irony
- contrast
- repetition
- surprise

Link your points using appropriate discourse markers such as:

- In addition ...
- Of course, we can also add ...
- Furthermore ...
- What is more ...
- Most worrying is ...
- The best thing about this is ...

Think carefully about the ending of your radio talk. You might like to end by:

- inviting the audience to think about their own interpretation of the topic;
- creating a climax to the talk using repetition or rhetoric.