

LOCAL HERO

Frederick William Lister M.C.



In the Autumn of 2020 I was walking past my local church, St Laurence, Northfield, Birmingham, and for the first time I noticed a green sign upon the boundary wall saying that the churchyard contained Commonwealth war graves. With an interest in local and military history, and with my curiosity aroused, I decided to do some amateur research.

From the Commonwealth War Graves Commission (CWGC) website I discovered that St. Laurence churchyard is the resting place of sixteen local servicemen. Of these, fifteen were casualties of World War Two, of whom eight served in the Royal Air Force, six in the Army, and one in the Home Guard.

The sixteenth, however, stood out because the soldier lying there served in World War One. This is unusual because, as we know, most of the casualties of the so called "Great War" are buried or commemorated where they fell, in France, Flanders or in other theatres of that appalling conflict. We are all familiar with the images of rows and rows of immaculate white headstones in mass cemeteries such as Tyne Cot in Flanders, and in very many smaller sites scattered across the Western Front. And, indeed, the poignant memorials to the missing at Thiepval on The Somme and The Menin Gate at Ypres.

But there, just inside the gate in Rectory Road, is the final resting place of Frederick William Lister M.C, a Major in the Tank Corps. It can be seen from the photograph that his headstone is in the shape of a cross, unlike the pristine ranks of CWGC headstones overseas and indeed those of the fifteen other servicemen laid to rest at St, Laurence.

Frederick was born in Northfield on 12th August 1892. His father was Wooldridge Lister, a jeweller's travelling salesman, born in London in 1842. His mother was Wooldridge's second wife, Harriet Sarah Lister (née Pratt), born in 1854 in the village of Much Birch, Herefordshire.

Frederick grew up with his brothers and sisters in the family home on Woodland Road, Northfield, in a large house a few doors up from what is now a children's nursery. His father passed away in 1902, and the church gate in Rectory Road is dedicated to him and his family. It is now known as "The Lister Gate" and the plaques upon it tell us that it was renewed in March 1946 and later in September 2017. It appears that the widowed Harriet and the family then moved to a cottage in Church Road, a short distance away, and took in lodgers, presumably to help make ends meet.

In September 1904 Frederick was admitted to King Edward's School in Edgbaston, where the following year he earned a foundation scholarship. Apart from his academic prowess, coming first in his class in 1906, he was evidently a talented sportsman, particularly proficient in boxing and running. In 1907 he and his friend performed a display of "scientific boxing" to an appreciative crowd at Birmingham Town Hall.

Upon leaving school he took up employment as a clerk at a motor car manufacturer's. We can only assume that this was at Herbert Austin's factory at Longbridge, close to the Lister home and founded just a few years earlier.

At the outbreak of war, Frederick immediately volunteered for service, enlisting in the West Africa Rifles in August 1914. The following year he gained a commission as a Second Lieutenant in the 1st Worcestershire Yeomanry, and in 1916 he was promoted to Captain in the South Staffordshire Regiment. A year later he was attached to the then recently formed Tank Corps, 3rd Company, 1st Battalion in the rank of Captain.

In August 1918 Frederick was heavily involved in the final stages of the war on the Western Front, when the Allies were pushing back the German forces over the ground they had gained during their Spring Offensive earlier in the year. This is an extract from the Tank Corps regimental history:

“On 4 July 1918 at Le Hamel and in front of Amiens on 8 August 1918, tanks played a central role in the crushing success of the Allied attack. Before Hamel, the Australian Corps carried out intensive training with the tanks in order to overcome lingering doubts after Bullecourt and to tighten up infantry/tank co-operation. 450 of them took part in the Amiens attack, where the Whippets and various armoured cars penetrated deep behind the German defences. In conjunction with the new artillery and infantry tactics, tanks proved to be useful in crushing wire; over-running machine gun posts and strong points; helping infantry through the streets of destroyed villages. However, tank losses were significant and within days of the initial assault the Tank Corps was a temporarily spent force. It was not until the assaults on the Hindenburg Line in late September 1918 that a large enough force had been assembled again. From 21 August 1918 to the Armistice on 11 November 1918, some 2,400 men and officers of the Tank Corps became casualties.”

Frederick was in command of probably four or five tanks, either the workhorse Mark V or the faster and lighter armed Whippet. On August 18th at Beaucourt-en-Santerre, south-east of Amiens, and again on August 23rd at Méaulte, south of Albert, Frederick performed incomprehensible acts of gallantry by leading his tanks into action on foot in order to better direct them. One can only imagine the horrors of the scene and marvel at the boundless courage of this young man during those actions. The motto of the Tank Corps was “Through mud and blood to the green fields beyond,” evoking a very poignant image.

For his bravery, Frederick was awarded the Military Cross, the third highest honour for gallantry in the field after the Victoria Cross and Distinguished Service Order. His award was published in the London Gazette on 29th November 1918, and reads:

“His Majesty the King has been graciously pleased to approve of the following award in recognition of conspicuous gallantry and devotion to duty in the Field. He led his tanks into action and directed them personally to their objectives up to the moment of their engaging the enemy. Throughout two actions he was on

foot with his tanks, and showed an absolute disregard for personal safety. Awarded the Military Cross."

The Tank Corps Book of Honour adds the following details:

"On two occasions he (Frederick) rallied his tanks to deal with severe local opposition every tank reached its objective his initiative and complete control of the various situations were wonderful, and his conduct beyond praise."

At the conclusion of the war Frederick was promoted to Acting Major and was transferred to Wareham Training Camp in Dorset, now the home of the Bovington Tank Museum, presumably to train new tank crews. There he developed pneumonia, complicated by the effects of a gas attack during combat. Frederick passed away on 24th February 1919 at the age of just 26.

Frederick came home and rests just inside St. Laurence churchyard against the boundary wall, together with his brother Albert who died in 1936. His mother Harriet passed away in 1941 at the age of 86 and is buried in the family plot just inside the Lister Gate alongside her husband Wooldridge and several other family members of several generations, including one born in 1783 and another having died as recently as 1974.

If you are passing by there, perhaps say a prayer and spare a thought for Frederick William Lister M.C, our very own and true local hero.



Clive Witcomb
Northfield, Birmingham
May 2021

Sources: King Edward's School Roll of Honour, Census 1901 and 1911, London Gazette, Commonwealth War Graves Commission, Tank Corps Book of Honour