

The life and death of Thomas Lister

HASSAN MAHAMDALLIE



Captain Thomas LISTER - killed in action at Jidballi, 10th January 1904. Memorial at Eton College - "To the dear memory of Thomas Lister, eldest son of Thomas Lord Ribblesdale and Charlotte his wife. Born May 2nd 1878. Captain 1st Royal Hussars DSO in him His Majesty lost a most gallant and promising officer. He served throughout the South African War at the Battle of Paardeberg, Poplar Grove, Driefontein, Houtnek, Vet River, Diamond Hill, Wittenbergen and the Relief of Kimberley. Killed at the Battle of Jidballi, Somaliland January 10th 1904 aged 25."

Do avoid the bush my precious boy, it is a premium on the enemy to meet him there.
(Lady Charlotte "Charty" Ribblesdale)

The Honourable Thomas Lister was born into a very wealthy English family in 1878. He was the son of the 4th Baron Lord Ribblesdale and Lady Charlotte "Charty" Ribblesdale, the daughter of Baron Sir Charles Tennent. In his youth Thomas decided on a career in the army and became a captain in the Royal Hussars. He served with distinction in the Boer war against the white settlers in South Africa. After the Boer war he was stationed in India, but wearied of the day to day burden of colonial rule. In 1903 Lister volunteered to fight the nationalist leader Sayid Maxamed Cabdule Xasan (Mohammed 'Abdulle Hassan) and was posted to British Somaliland, hoping for adventure and to make a name for himself. A year later he was dead. In *The Crows Plucked Your Sinews* playwright Hassan Mahamdallie transposed the date of Lister's death from 1904 to 1913.

The war diary of Tommy Lister and personal letters between him and his family, and correspondence around his death are preserved in the family archives. These can be found in the Yorkshire Archaeological Society's H L Bradfer-Lawrence collection in Leeds www.yas.org.uk

Sister Diana 27th April 1903 written on decorated floral notepaper

My darling Tommy. I am sorry not to have written before to you, but I have had such a lot to do, so you must not mind. Do you know that we are going to a fancy dress ball most of the blessed days...Laura is going as Joan of Arc she is going to wear a whole suit of armour from head to foot then she is going to have white cloth tabard embroidered with fleur de lys, after that she is going to have a white cloak lined with pale blue cloth, over the tabard she is going to have a belt and a helmet. I am going to be her standard bearer. I am going to be dressed in pale blue tights over that a brown tabard sort of coat, and over that a grey tabard with a belt, similar to Laura's. I think it will be very nice. I wish you were here to see us it would be so lovely. From your very loving little girl, Diana Lister.

Lady Ribblesdale 10 June 1903

I was so pleased to get your nice letter. Dear thing we think so much about you. I feel so anxious. I am afraid it is a horrid place. As far as climate goes worse than India. But it is active service. Which I suppose makes a difference, I don't suppose you shall do much, as to pursue the Mullah must be an expensive job. I truly pray this may be the case and that you will soon be home. ... I hate to think of all the discomforts you are enduring ...I was asked to go and see Lady Farquhar whose son has also gone to Somaliland but of course she has not heard from him. And I had nothing to tell her either. She lives a few doors down from us in Gloucester place.

Lady Ribblesdale July 3 1903

My darling boy, the news has been better later from Somaliland. The Abyssinians seem to have had a good fight and been victorious and one tribe with an unpronounceable name has deserted the Mullah apparently, which is a mercy if true. I fear darling that the heat must be awful where you are, when I am sweltering here, I think of my poor darling little boy in Africa. ...your devoted mother who prays always for your success and safety.

Tommy Lister June 4 1903

My darling Mothersey. Here I am settled into what looks like being my quarters for the next 3 or 4 months. No sooner arrived at Berbera than I got orders to come up to this place, 25 miles from the coast and on the Bohotle main road...The are certainly not a very lively people at Berbera and like all Base people full of gossip and scandal – The only amusing thing I saw there was the disembarkation of the elephant, conducted by an Indian Marine officer – the old elephant never caused a moment's anxiety and was as clever and active as a monkey. Yr loving son T. Lister.

Brother Charles Lister June 1903

Dear old boy...I am so glad you are enjoying yourself in Somaliland, and in a safe position. I don't think things looking well there still no one knows. The elephant must have been a great diversion. Charles Lister.

Lady Ribblesdale 22 July 1903

My darling boy...[we] have been to several balls ...last Sunday I met Lord Grenfell who gave me a vivid and alarming description of what fighting in the bush means – it must be awful not knowing who is near you, do avoid the bush my precious boy, it is a premium on the enemy to meet him there.

Tommy Lister 21 December 1903

My darlingest Mothersey, they hope to make a big move about December 19th – The Abyssinians for whom we are waiting, are still hanging fire abominably and until they get into position, I don't suppose we shall do anything. This is a hideously dull letter – it's very late and I feel as stupid as a owl. This is not an inspiring country or occupation. Goodbye darlingest, my love to you all and happiness for 1904. Ever your loving son, T Lister.

On 10 January 1904, the British and “friendly” forces, commanded by General Sir C C Egerton, engaged the Sayyid's forces at Jidbali. The British counted the battle a success.

Telegram Jan 12 04

*To: Lord Ribblesdale 32 Green St Park Lane, London W
Regret to inform you that telegram has been received from General officer commanding Somaliland Dates Jidballe 11th January Reporting your son Captain Hon T. Lister of 10th Hussars missing
-military secretary*

Letter from Charles Lister to his father dated Jan 12 1904

Dearest father you cannot imagine what a crushing blow it was to us all to see Tommy reported missing in the Yorkshire Post today...all feeling pretty desperate thought still hopeful that he may have been caught overnight in the pursuit and bivouacked in the open. It is cheering to know that we are masters of the field and it would have been a still more paralysing stroke had it been a defeat or repulse. Tomorrow's paper will perhaps lift us out of suspense it is hard to bear. In deep distress Charles Lister.

Telegram Jan 14 1904

*To: Lord Ribblesdale
Deeply regret to inform you news has just received from General Egerton dates thirteenth Jidballe begins Captain Lister 10th Hussars missing since found shot and speared.
Resident clerk War Office*

Letter from Lady Ribblesdale to her husband 12 Jan 1904

Oh! How I wish he had never joined the force, it seems so strange that with such a level head as his is, he would have got into difficulties...He has never lost his head as a rule. That cruel awful bush may have done him.

Official report of Jidbali from General Sir C C Egerton

Poor Lister lost his life in a very sad way. I did not know he was missing until late in the afternoon when search parties were at once sent out. The mirage here is most deceptive and I think he must have mistaken a party of the enemy for our own troops.

Letter from Lady Ribblesdale to her husband 12 Jan 1904

Why did our darling leave the base and yet I love him for doing it, thou I would give my life now to have prevented him. This is the last dear letter...I got it on Sunday last. ...It seems so strange and cruel that he should have been lost. He had such a good head and such a wonderful eye for ...I can't believe it. I can't believe it.

Note from Captain Greg of British forces at Jidbali to the Ribblesdales.

The cross for Lister's grave was done very neatly – it will stand about 2ft 6 or 3 foot above the ground.

Capt: The Hon'ble T Lister DSO X Hussars

Killed in action

10th January 1904

was printed on the cross.

I fancy the cairn will already have been built

and the cross erected before you receive this letter.

Always yours most truly

JG Grieg

