

CAPTAIN THE REV WILLIAM MANSTEAD BENTON (1885-91)

Date of Birth	11 July 1873 in Chelsea, London
School Information	Prefect. Gooch Medal for Elocution 1887, 1888. Mantle Essay Prize 1890. Cricket XI 1888, 1889, 1890. Football XI 1888-9 & 1889-90.
Career Information	<p>Initially became a Stockbroker after inheriting a small fortune when his father died when he was only 17.</p> <p>He then enlisted in the Royal Marines, but after a fight with a corporal deserted and went to Australia under the name of Richard White. He served in the South African War in Australian Artillery as a gunner. He served throughout the war and was on the verge of being commissioned when the war ended. Travelling to South Africa he enlisted into the Cape Mounted Police and began his duties. While in Cape Town he heard there was a job going in the leper settlement on Robben Island (later to be Nelson Mandela's "home" for over 25 years) as a cook. There he worked not only as a cook but also as a painter, laundryman, and dogs body. His work on Robben Island had a profound effect on him.</p> <p>He gave himself up to the authorities, was tried by a Court Martial, served his sentence and was finally released.</p> <p>He then spent 2 years at Lichfield Theological College before being ordained Deacon in 1907 and Priest in 1909. He became Curate of St Peter Walsall, where he was known as "The Fighting Parson". However his experiences at Robben Island called him back and he became Chaplain at the Island. Eventually he returned to England and became Curate of Bearsted. He had always been a fine cricketer and played whenever he could.</p> <p>In 1913 he made his first class appearance twice playing for Middlesex at cricket, scoring a total of 25 runs.</p> <p>On the outbreak of the war he became a military Chaplain and went to France. His experiences of German 'frightfulness' and gas were too much for him and he became an infantry Lieutenant joining the 12th Battalion Manchester Regiment, later becoming a Captain. He was later put in charge of the Brigades Snipers. See later a letter he wrote him.</p>
Date Of Death	17 August 1916
Cause of Death	Killed in action. See below letters that describe how he died.
Location	Somme, France
Cemetery	Heilly Station Cemetery, Mericourt-L'Abbe, Somme, France
Rank	Captain/Army Chaplain
Branch of Service	Manchester Regiment, 12 th Battalion

We are indebted to researcher Nigel McCrery for transcripts of the following letters.

Letter written home on 3 April 1916:

"I am still with the 51st Brigade and like them very much. General Piicher sent for me the other day and told me he thought that great credit was due for the way in which we had got under the evening sniping on our front. They had the best of it to begin with, but we have only had two men hit by snipers since we came in

(though we have had many hit by shells and shrapnel-fire), and they were both on the first day, and we have knocked over thirteen of them. There is a lot of shelling going on. I am at present working under Lord Dunmore. We have a man coming out to stay with us who will have some money to spend on the men for games and things. We shall be glad of his help. Yesterday the Editor of the West Minster Gazette and his wife came out to visit our camp. He was very much struck with all our arrangements, and he is starting a fund in his paper for providing amusements and games for our men. Did I tell you that General Maxwell called me out and thanked me personally for the assistance which the Major told him I had given him? I was rather bucked, though I don't know that I have done anything particular here. . . . General Woodhouse has been round to inspect the Company. He congratulated the Major and the staff on the 'splendid work done in camp and the tone of the men' (his own words), so we feel rather pleased about it. One of the doctors and I are digging in our spare time a 6 X 6 X 6 ft. sunk pit for an officers' bath-tent. The ground is gravel and flint, so it takes some getting through."

On the 8th August 1916 Major Magnay 12th Batt. Manchester Regiment wrote to Mrs Benton.

"Dear Mrs. Benton, Just a short note to tell you that your husband was wounded the other day. He asked me to write to you if things went wrong. I am afraid he has gone through most of the torments of Hell, but I consider him the most gallant gentleman in the world. He knew absolutely no fear. On my orders he went forward to try and reorganize after an attack which had failed. Whilst on the front line he saw a wounded man trying to crawl back from near the German trenches. He at once went out to help him. He got him back some way when both were hit by snipers, your husband in the right leg below the knee. He got into a shell-hole. He was wounded about 5 a.m. I sent four parties out to try and get him in, and two other battalions sent out patrols at my request to bring him in, but they could not find him, and when they shouted they drew bombs and machine-gun fire and several men were hit. Next morning your husband showed himself, and two officers went out at about twelve, noon, and brought him in. I cannot tell you what a relief it was to me to see him again. I have known him only for three or four weeks, but in that time I have come almost to worship him for what he is, and that is the finest and manliest man I have ever known. " I am desperately sorry to have to tell you that he is wounded, but I am sure that you will be relieved to have him safe at home under any conditions. I am very sorry to lose his services and only wish I had him with me when we go back into the fight. " With kindest regards, " Yours sincerely, " P. W. Magnay (Major):'

Just over a week later the following letter was sent by the Chaplin, 36 C.C.S., B.E.F., France. 17 August, 1916.

"Dear Mrs. Benton, It is with the deepest regret I write to let you know that your dear husband, Capt. W. Benton, passed away about 2 o'clock this morning. I have been in close touch with him since he was admitted here on the 6th, and he was always so grateful for my ministrations. He received Holy Communion two or three times, and I read and prayed with him almost every day. I was with him till twelve o'clock last night, and he was then sinking fast, and the night nurse tells me he passed peacefully away about 2 a.m. During the first few days after being admitted we had such pleasant conversations. He told me of his ministerial work and his chaplaincy before he took a combative commission. It is a comfort to know he died not only a good and brave soldier of the King, but as a good soldier of the King of Kings. " Please accept my sincere sympathy in your very sad loss, and I pray God may comfort and sustain you. " Yours sincerely, " C. A. Adderley, C.F."

