

CAPTAIN THE REV WILLIAM MANSTEAD BENTON (1885-91)

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| 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> |
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| 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 and additional information.

On rejoining the troops he was again put in command of the Brigade Snipers. Writing home on 3 April 1916, he says :

"I am still with the 51st Brigade and like them very much. General Pitcher 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."

Major Magnay writes again, dated 25 August 1916 :

"I cannot tell you how deeply I sympathise with you in your great loss. . . . He was so brave and cheery all through. The doctor



sent me a note saying what a magnificent fight for life he made, as we knew he would, but that the septic poisoning got the upper hand at last. ... I made him my second in command (though really he was far more fitted to command the battalion than I). He often spoke to me of you when we were alone together, and he left me a note at last asking me to write to you, as he cared for you so much. . . . Perhaps this letter may make your grief even harder to bear, but I only wished you to know that although I am a stranger I too share your loss, and that his place in the battalion can never be refilled.

If ever I can be of the least service to you I hope that you will remember that I was his friend.

Yours sincerely,

Philip Magnay (Major), Commanding 12th Manchester Regt."

Sadly Major Magnay, who wrote such kindly letters to Captain Benton's widow, was killed in action soon afterwards.

A memorial service and requiem for the repose of the soul of Captain Benton was held in the parish church at Bearsted, where the dead soldier-priest had worked during the incumbency of the Rev. T. G. Lushington of Sandling Park, Maidstone. The church was packed with people who were anxious to pay a last tribute to the Padre's memory.

The service was well arranged and impressive. The band of the Royal Engineers (from a camp near) and their choir took part in the service. Gounod's " Berceuse " was well played as an opening voluntary by the band.

Mr. Lushington, vicar and rural dean, preached a touching sermon, choosing as his text, "Now there are diversities of gifts, but the same Spirit." After speaking of the great work done by Captain Benton as priest and soldier, he told the congregation that " an officer going into the War Office not long ago said, ' The bravest man I ever came across was a man called Benton,' " and the man who said it did not know he was speaking to one of Benton's friends. Other officers who had known the man they mourned had said he earned, if he did not win, the Victoria Cross some five or six times and the D.S.O. some twenty times. The preacher confessed he regretted it when his friend decided to give up his work as a chaplain for that of combatant officer, but he could not condemn that choice after such magnificent testimony. If there were some who did not approve of all his methods they knew that a great man had fallen — a man cast in no usual mould, but that heroic mould in which the world's great princes Avere made, a fearless self-sacrificing spirit.

At the end of the service the congregation remained standing while the combined choirs led the singing of the Nunc Dimittis, after which bugles at the church door sounded the Last Post.

Other information on him

Captain Benton made a splendid observation officer. He had such an eye for detail, and his memory was extraordinary.

Once when passing through a large military camp a woman who was walking in the same direction as himself began asking him questions about the camp which he considered suspicious. He therefore made a mental note of her smart appearance, which he afterwards wrote down and communicated to the authorities. His description turned out to be astonishingly accurate in all particulars: height, hair, eyes, size and shape of hat, details of dress, stockings and shoes, even to the gloves and shape of hands, as well as a small bag she carried. So clear was the description that the police identified the woman in the course of two days. He had only seen her for a few moments. Captain Benton often said the British soldier was too un- suspicious, and in consequence easily outwitted by a more wily enemy. He was very anxious to dress up in a German soldier's uniform and see if he could not pass through an English camp undetected, and he believed he could do it. The idea was not carried out, owing to the difficulty at the time of getting the necessary uniform.

Captain Benton was at all times anxious to hand on what he had learnt from experience. This was much appreciated by most of those with whom he came in contact. In the words of one who knew him well, "he was loved as an unselfish, whole-hearted, true soldier and friend." If he could save a soldier from getting into trouble he was happy.

While at Ripon holding these classes he failed one evening to turn up for tea where his belongings were awaiting him. He had been giving a lecture in the North Camp. Time passed on, midnight came, and still no Captain Benton. He arrived in the early hours completely exhausted, and explained he had been detained. It was found out he had been on his way home, and when passing through the town had come across various soldiers just back from leave. All were more or less intoxicated and had no officer or non-commissioned officer with them. The men were quite unable to find their way to camp, and resented interference from him, but he forced them to form fours and arrive at some sort of order, collecting others until he had about fifty or more, and then marched this strange company through the town and out of harm's way, keeping them on the move until discipline was fully restored and the men recovering, when he took them back to the North Camp.

It was difficult to get anything from him about the incident, but I know he was very happy at having saved the men from getting into trouble.

In February, 1916, Captain Benton returned to France, but before leaving England he wrote to his sister, saying:

"I hope I shall see you to say 'good-bye,' as it may be a very long one. At the present rate of officers falling there is mighty little chance of coming through. They seem to be dead-marking all our officers and that is why we shall need every available man before we're finished. God bless you always.

Your affectionate brother, Dick.

P.S. — Remember me sometimes."

On 21 May 1916, Captain Benton writes to his friend. Major Tullock :

"I have been trying to write to you for quite a long time but have had no chance. You may guess what it has been like when I tell you that I was thirty-one days in the trenches at the final."

Then, evidently referring to some leave he might have had, but did not take, he continues :

"I did not want to be away, as the Boches attacked on each side of us, and as we were expecting to be relieved it seemed likely they would have a go at us. However, they made a miss. We came straight out and did a four days' march here, had twenty-four hours' rest, and are now doing eleven days' intensive training for 'the attack.' After that nobody seems to know what will happen. . . .

I am glad the sniping is going on so well in the north and west. The more I see of it out here the more I am convinced that in normal trench-warfare there is no better way of inflicting punishment on the enemy, and preventing wastage in our own ranks, than well-organized sniping, but it must be whole heartedly taken up or not at all.

In this Brigade we began a little doubtfully. They only allowed eight per battalion for sniping and observation. Later they allowed four more and later again another four, making eight snipers and eight observers per battalion. Later I asked again for four more snipers and got them, at the same time propounding a scheme with coloured maps showing sniper- and observation-posts in the zones of fire and observation, and offered, if they would let me have four more men per battalion, to keep the whole front watched and leave every other man free for duty, work, or what not. It was granted, so we now have one officer and twenty-four N.C.O.'s and men per battalion. These we used half in the trenches for eight days and half out. The half out practised shooting during the day on a range we had made, and then came up at night for four hours to build sniper- and observation-posts. The half in the trenches kept watch and shot day and night.

Later on I hope to get the scouts for night work, patrols, etc. Our bag at the finish was seventy-one men hit (including three jaegers and five other snipers), forty-four plates smashed or perforated, one hundred and twelve periscopes — these make excellent practice for our men, and they came on wonderfully and seldom missed one if it showed during the last couple of weeks.

The trenches we took were in a pitiable state and a mere death-trap. Wherever you went if you looked round

you could see the Boche lines looking right down into you. The communication trenches were very little waded, and wide enough to drive an eighteen horse-power along. The Brigade worked marvelously. The men in rest only had twenty-four hours for a night and a halt, and then up again. Three companies from each battalion every night for work. The amount of sheer earth shifted was colossal. We left the trenches with a parapet in front varying from eight to thirty feet thick in front, the close supports and subsidiary lines all built up and riveted, five strong localities in front line almost crump-proof, the communication trenches narrowed, curled, and riveted, and generally the whole place in a strong defensible state. The Corps Commander gave his opinion that the 17th Division had done fine work, and especially the 51st Brigade, but the best comment came from the C.R.A.

I met him one day at the 4.5 howitzer battery, and was telling him of a beastly village over against us in the enemy lines which looked right down into us and worried us day and night with machine-guns, snipers, fixed searchlights, and in which the Boches could move about at will to annoy us. He could not be convinced that it was necessary to strafe it down, so I asked him if he would come along our front line and I would convince him. At first I thought he would put me under arrest for cheek, but eventually he consented. It was the funniest thing to see him. I would take him along a few yards under cover of the front-line trench and then step him back about two yards from it and tell him to look round and then he was looking bang up at this village. 'Oh, Lord ! 'he would say, and duck under like smoke. This happened all along the line and he was very much convinced, and when we got back he promised he would do his best to get all the heavies turned on and level it. They had levelled every brick that was anywhere near our lines, and so I pointed out this unfair advantage.

On our return he remarked on the amount of work done, and asked how long it had taken and how many pioneer battalions we had to help. When I told him none he would not believe it, and when finally convinced said, ' Well, all I can say is it's colossal.'

My wound is all right again, though I felt the shock from it a bit. You should not blame me for not having come home for a week or two, but about that time the work was very heavy and some of the youngsters lately out from home were doing nothing but wish for Blighty. By good fortune I got a chance of correcting them, and naturally took it, and my lecture has been successful. I have heard less of Blighty since.

It was hard lines to be moved when we had got the hon's share of the work done; however, the incoming troops will benefit. The weather is very hot now and a little trying for intensive training.

Yours to a cinder,

Dick Benton."

In the last letter Captain Benton wrote to his wife after his leg had been amputated he says :

"... I got a smack on my right leg which broke it up a bit and I had to have it amputated, as it got septic, as I was left out and could not move to get in for a day or two. ... I always thought if I got one on the right side it would be a warm one. Love to all. Cheery oh ! . . ."

At the time these letters were written breaking the news to his wife, much was still unexplained of how it all happened. Sitting peacefully at home it is difficult to grasp all the confusion, turmoil, and surroundings of a battlefield. I have seen something of it and know that often, for some time, it is not possible to gather up and connect the threads of the battle's happenings. I have heard since that while gallantly rescuing a wounded man who was trying to crawl back from No-Man's-Land, Captain Benton was severely wounded while carrying the man on his back. The enemy snipers had exactly got the range; besides wounding Captain Benton they shot the man on his back dead and the man at his side helping to support the rescued. Captain Benton then crawled into a shell-hole with a wounded left arm and right leg. There he remained unconscious for two days. When found he was brought into the dressing-station, being then in a serious condition. Two operations were performed in hopes of saving his leg, but it became necessary to amputate it, and after this he died. He had previously been wounded three times; the fourth was fatal.

There were many people who considered Captain Benton should not have undertaken combatant service, but remained a chaplain. Whether it is right or not for clergy to fight is a much discussed question. There are strong

points both for and against, and I think that in whatever capacity Captain Benton was employed he would always be working for the God of Hosts whom he found among the lepers on Robben Island. The echoes left in the many valleys where Captain Benton wandered are haunting and pleasant, being full of hope and encouragement to other wanderers. His moral courage was remarkable, born of deep religious conviction and an enthusiastic and emotional nature which enabled him to lead where many would have hesitated. In the trenches he would kneel down, whether muddy or dry, and say his prayers out loud, hoping that perhaps others might join in and find help or comfort in prayer.

We are indebted to John Corbyn, vicar of Holy Cross, Bearsted where William Benton was a curate, for sending us the following article. He adds "He was the priest in Charge of Springbokfontein, South Africa 1910-11, Curate of St Barnabas, Cape Town 1911 and I assume it was in 1911 that he acted as chaplain of Robben Island Leper Colony which is off Cape Town."

HEROIC CURATE.



Captain W. Benton has been wounded for the fourth time. Curate-in-charge of Bearsted, Kent, he went to the front as chaplain, and subsequently took a commission.