**Scouting on the Somme**

When my father wrote “SAD’s War” in the late 1980s it was first and foremost a recollection of what his father had told him about his experiences in the Great War, recounted to him half a century later. However he did a great deal of historical research to help him understand the context of his father’s memories. His sources included the classic “The First Day of the Somme”, the contemporary history, “The 18th Division in the Great War”, and the unpublished war diary of 8th Battalion, The Norfolk Regiment (WO95/2040) in which SAD served for most of the war.

After my father died I gave a copy of the document to the Norfolk Regimental Museum and was introduced to Mr Dick Rayner who has made a detailed study of the history of the 8th Norfolks. He very kindly did a critique of the historical content of my father’s document and identified some errors and omissions. He also drew my attention to a source that my father had not come across, the patrol reports of the 53rd Brigade (WO95/2035), of which 8th Norfolks was part, and provided transcripts and annotated maps. This source contains several mentions of my grandfather in his capacity as a battalion scout, operating in advance of the comparatively minor battle of Boom Ravine.

There is an excellent detailed history of the battle in “Boom Ravine” by Trevor Pidgeon (1998), which refers to the patrol reports, with several references to my grandfather and his commanding officer at the time Lieutenant William Bunting MC, of whom more below. Boom Ravine is the name the British Army gave to a feature to the north-east of the village of Courcellette in the central section of the Somme battlefields, and known to the locals as Les Grands Royarts. It is only a short distance north of the Commonwealth War Graves Commission cemetery at Regina Trench. Boom Ravine consists of two un-metalled roads cut into the chalk sub-soil that combined into a single route running north east down towards the valley of the River Ancre. The main part of the ravine was over forty feet deep in places and was turned into a major communications trench by the Germans.

*Figure 1: Regina Trench Cemetery looking down over Boom Ravine*
SAD’s military service to October 1916

Sydney Albert Dace (hence “SAD”) was born in 1895 in White Ash Green, near Gosfield in Essex. He was the younger son of Charlie Dace, the gamekeeper on the Cut Hedge estate in Gosfield. Cut Hedge belonged to George Courtauld, a partner in the famous firm of textile manufacturers which owned silk mills in the nearby towns of Braintree and Halstead. SAD was recorded in the 1911 Census as an assistant gamekeeper and was working on the adjacent Gosfield Hall estate, which belonged to George Courtauld’s cousin, Louisa Lowe. In the Courtauld family tradition Mrs Lowe was a generous patron of good causes. One of her favoured projects was the creation in 1908 of a Baden-Powell Boy Scout Troop, of which SAD was a founding member. After the Great War Mrs Lowe wrote a memoir of the early years of the troop and SAD is mentioned in it several times. Sometime in late 1912 or early 1913 SAD moved away from home and became a junior gamekeeper on an estate at East Dereham in Norfolk.

When war broke out in 1914 he joined the Norfolk Regiment, perhaps keen to emulate his elder brother Alf, a Territorial with the Essex Regiment who was called up for active service. Technically he was two weeks too young to join the army but he gave a false birth date, and was posted to the 10th Battalion. SAD was ideal soldier-material. He was comfortable being outside in all weathers and was an excellent shot. He appears to have been a natural leader and was rapidly promoted to Lance Sergeant. In early August 1915 he was posted to 8th Norfolks, which formed part of 18th Division. The division had gone over to France a couple of weeks earlier and 8th Norfolks was billeted at Laviéville (Somme). Companies of the battalion took turns to go into the line for familiarisation in mid-August, and on 4th September the battalion as a whole took over a sector of the line between Carnoy and Mametz. SAD was wounded, apparently not seriously, in November 1915 and in March 1916 was promoted to Sergeant.

On 1st July 1916, the first day of the Battle of the Somme, 8th Norfolks fought its first major action, advancing towards the village of Montauban. The battalion achieved all its objectives, mercifully without the appalling casualties suffered by many other units on that day. However in subsequent actions at Delville Wood, where the casualties were on a par with 1st July, Thiepval Wood and Schwaben Redoubt losses had grown steadily. The battalion was in action again on 21st October at Regina Trench, fighting in knee-level mud. SAD’s bravery on this occasion was noted by the Divisional commander and resulted in the award of the first of his two Military Medals. By the end of October only c.700 officers and men remained of the c.1000 present on 1st July. 53rd Brigade was now occupying trenches at the top of the left hand branch of Boom Ravine, an area known to the troops as “Oxford Circus”.

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The Battalion Scouts

Forced into immobility by trench warfare, British generals were still keen to maintain an aggressive spirit. One way to do this was to dominate “No Man’s Land”, between the British and German front lines. One senior general, Sir R. Haking, went so far as to ban the use of the term “There is no such place opposite my Corps. All the land right up to the edge of the enemy’s parapet is our land, and we have got to have control of it”. During the day Germans unwise enough to show themselves could be shot at. Selected officers and men were trained in the use of telescopic sights and long range shooting techniques by suitably qualified experts, such as the former explorer and hunter, Major H. Hesketh-Prichard, author of the well known book “Sniping in France” (1920). At night patrols could be sent out to reconnoitre the area. Another experienced officer Major F. Crum, who had served with Sir Robert Baden-Powell in the Boer War (and was also involved in the Scouting movement) published an unofficial guide, “Scouts and Sniping in Trench Warfare”, in 1916 and later authored an official pamphlet “S.S.195 Scouting and Patrolling”.

Although S.S.195 was published after the events recorded below, it was based on practical experience from the previous couple of years. It recommended that “each Company of the Battalion should maintain four specially trained Scouts... (who) may be temporarily be employed collectively under the Scout officer for special tasks as the Battalion Commander may direct.” The Scouts should be volunteers and selected for “their character, physique, intelligence and education. They should have good sight and hearing and be expert shots”. They should also be “practised in map reading, simple sketching and the study of aeroplane photographs”. Each battalion “...should have a Scout Officer who is responsible to the Battalion Commander for scouting, sniping and intelligence duties”. It states that “the duties of the Battalion Scout Officer are important and arduous, and he should devote the whole of his time to them. He should be one of the additional officers of the Battalion, not an officer from a Company. He should live at Battalion Headquarters and attend all Battalion conferences.”

The role of a scouts were defined as follows: “Before the assault to reconnoitre the enemy’s wire and to locate enemy Snipers, Machine Gun and, generally, to observe and report on all changes, movements and incidents in and about the enemy position” and “...to secure complete mastery in No Man’s Land”. “After the assault to locate the enemy’s new position and to obtain information as the ground between that position and our most advanced line”, “...to act as guides for (wire) cutting parties, reconnoitring officers, troops coming up to relieve, or pass through, their own unit” and “...to follow up the retreating enemy and seize tactical features, temporarily unoccupied by the enemy beyond the line already gained by our Infantry”.

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As Hesketh-Pritchard dryly notes “...going out into No Man’s Land in the dark, especially if you are alone, is a distinctly eerie business”. In addition to the risk of finding unexploded ordnance, scouts were obliged to crawl over the bodies of men who had been dead for weeks. They had to work silently; noise would result in the launching of flares and would draw rifle and machine gun fire, if not an artillery barrage. Probably the most trying situation of all was lying in wait for German patrols. The intention was to deliver “Silent Death” using knives and coshes. SAD preferred a pickaxe handle, the head weighted with lead and covered with blakeys (boot heel caps, also known as segs). Bodies would be frisked for written materials and unit badges cut off the uniforms, and passed on to G Branch staff officers, responsible for intelligence.

Figure 2:
“Silent Death”

Note the British soldier with a cosh and the German soldier with the “potato masher” grenade.

SAD as a Battalion Scout

By his own account SAD’s favoured weapon was a hand grenade. It seems likely that SAD was initially trained as a ‘bomber’, an expert in using grenades, and each rifle company of a battalion had a number of these. However it is probable that his skill as a marksman attracted the attention of the officer responsible for sniping and scouting. SAD did some sniping using a hunting rifle or the Canadian-issue Ross rifle rather than the standard British SMLE Mk III rifle, but it was as a scout that his activities are noted in official documentation. He and the other fellow scouts from 8th Norfolks undertook various night patrols into No Man’s Land in some of the harshest winter weather of the War.
The first reference to him is in the War Diary of 8th Norfolks for 30th–31st October 1916:

“The Battalion remained in the Trenches, the weather being exceedingly bad with a great deal of rain, and the trenches – especially the communication trenches – were in a very poor state. During this period the shelling was not severe, and several good reconnaissances were made by Sergeant Dace, and Sergeant Roper, of the Battalion Scouts.”

However the bulk of the personal references to him are the 53rd Brigade Patrol reports during a particularly busy few days in early February when preparations were being made for a major attack planned for 16th/17th February 1917.

4th February 1917

The Patrol reports of the 53rd Brigade record that Lt Bunting and three other ranks were operating in front of the left hand side of the battalion frontage.

To his right “A patrol of 3 men under Sgt Dace (8th Norfolks) left No. 3 Post at 4 a.m. in order to locate the enemy post reported at R .17.a.1.5. On previous nights, flares have been frequently fired but on this night none were fired, nor were any sounds heard from it.”
5th February 1917

“A patrol under Sgt Dace and 3 other ranks (8th Norfolks) left post at R17.a.30.25 at 4.30 a.m. and moved north to our wire. The object of the patrol was to discover whether the enemy post reported at R17.b.2.5 was occupied. The patrol listened outside our wire for some time. They then crawled on and went about 40 yards from our wire, two shots were fired at them evidently from point 85 (R16.b.8.5). After the patrol had crawled another 20 yards to their front a Very Light and two Golden Sprays were fired about 150 yards to their front and from a point 20 yards east of the edge of The Ravine. This seems to suggest that the enemy have a post about R17.a.2.5.”.

Sergeant Roper and four others were scouting to SAD’s right.

6th February 1917

At 4.30 am Bunting and six other ranks set out to look for a suspected post to the east of the area covered by the patrols on the 4th and 5th. They crawled fifty yards along an obliterated trench, two yards wide and two foot six inches deep, running north-east. The trench got deeper as they moved towards the German lines. After stopping for a quarter of an hour to listen, Bunting heard the sounds of picks about three hundred yards away. Finding no sign of the suspected post he then headed south, crossing another obliterated trench before reaching the British wire.

Battalion snipers were active during daylight on the 4th and 5th but on the 6th thick mist made shooting impossible. On the night of 5th British trench mortars were shelling the opposing German trenches and on the 6th there was a gas alarm at 5.30 am, which proved to be false. Oddly the battalion diary records states for the period 3rd to 6th February “nothing of importance took place”.

On the night of the 7th the 10th Essex, operating to the left of the Norfolks, was to launch a limited attack on to capture and hold Folly Trench. In support of this 8th Norfolks were to
advance Posts 6, 7 and 8, to the left of the area where Bunting and SAD had been operating previously, into Cross Trench. In anticipation of this Bunting and SAD were to reconnoiter Cross Trench to establish whether the Germans were occupying it.

7th February 1917

“Lt. W. Bunting, Sgt Dace and L/Cpl Talbot (8th Norfolks) started from The Ravine at 4.30 a.m. and proceeded to our post at R16.b.5.2 with the object of reconnoitering Cross Trench and its approach to R16.b.8.5. The Patrol proceeded 120 yards along Cross Trench in a north east direction. At this point about 50 yards in front of the patrol there was a marked dip in the ground running north and east. This dip is cut by Cross Trench at about R16.b.7.3 whence the trench turns slightly to the west and runs straight up the slope of the bank to R16.b.8.5. Cross Trench has been knocked about by shell fire but still affords about 3 feet 6 inches of cover. There are no obstacles in the trench. From the point at which the patrol halted it was possible to see along the trench for another 50 yards. Field glasses were used, and there was no sign of the enemy. By this time it was about 5.15 a.m. and getting very light. The patrol returned to our lines.”

That evening, despite it being very cold, frost and bright, Bunting ventured out again.

“Lt. W. Bunting, Sgt Dace, and 7 other ranks (8th Norfolks) left post at R.16.d.7.9. at 9.30 p.m. with the object of reaching Point 85 (R.16.b.8.5.) in order to see whether it was held or not. The patrol proceeded N along CROSS Tr. until it was within 60 – 70 yards of the strong point. Four of the patrol then moved forward to reconnoiter while the remaining five acted as covering and flank parties. When about 40 yards away the sounds of a pick and a cough were heard. The patrol decided to attempt to get nearer and finally reached the post itself. Sgt Dace who was ahead saw 2 Germans in a shell hole. He came back a few yards to warn the remainder of the reconnoitering party, which then moved forward. Fire was opened on the enemy (one of whom at least was hit) but the latter immediately replied with about 15 rifles. He undoubtedly holds the post with 1 or 2 groups lying out in large shell holes with a double sentry in front. Our patrol retired quickly and managed to reach Cross Trench without loss, although it was heavily sniped. Patrol reached R.17.a.0.2 at 11.50 p.m.”
The 10th Essex attack, launched shortly in the early hours of the 8th of February, was successful and 8th Norfolks were able to move Points 6, 7 and 8 into Cross Trench as planned.

The major attack took place on South Miramont Trench on 17th February as planned. ‘A’ company of 8th Norfolks, plus some bombers from ‘C’ Company and some HQ personnel, was in the first wave advancing towards Grandcourt Road at 5.45 am. The remaining companies were in supporting role. 53rd Brigade achieved its objectives, driving the enemy out of their allocated section of Boom Ravine but overall the assault fared badly. It was clear that the enemy were well aware of the British plans and reacted accordingly. Reports from German prisoners of treachery by a British deserter on the eve of the attack were taken seriously by the British at the time but the truth of this has not been established. In early March 8th Norfolks was nominated for an assault on the village of Irles. Again SAD was scouting as part of the preparation.

7th March 1917

“A patrol of 5 men under Sgt Dace (8th Norfolks) left the ditch at G31.D65.55. and proceeded north for about 80 yards. Sgt Dace then heard talking and the cracking of twigs. He advanced 20 yards further when the talking became distinct. This seems to confirm the location from which Very Lights were fired last night.”

8th March 1917

“At 9.40 PM on 8th March 1917 Sgt Dace (8th Norfolks) left the ditch at G32.C20.45. and proceeded up the narrow road to Irles. The road is in good condition with scarcely any shell holes in it.”

On 10th March 10th Essex and 8th Norfolks led the attack on Irles, conducting flanking attacks from the north and south whist artillery pounded the village itself. The attack was a
complete success with less than sixty casualties.

**William Bunting**

The Scouting and Intelligence officer of 8\(^{th}\) Norfolks from late 1916 to early 1917 was Lieutenant William Bunting. He was born in 1895 in the village of Terrington St John, near Wisbech, Norfolk. He came from a humble background, in the 1901 Census his father John was described as an agricultural labourer, although by 1911 he is described as a farmer. Bunting had at least nine siblings. In 1911, aged sixteen, Bunting was living with his aunt in Kings Lynn, having won a scholarship to King Edward VII school. He came out top in French for his year in the Cambridge Local Examination and won another scholarship to King’s College, University of London in 1912. He registered for a BA and successfully completed his first two years in French, German and Latin, but he appears not have signed up for his final year having taken Civil Service exams. He was successful in these and was appointed Second Class Clerk in the Estate Duty Office (a predecessor of the Inland Revenue).

During his time in London he joined the University Officer Training Corps, probably because of the pay, and was promoted to Lance-Corporal. He passed the Cadet’s Certificate A qualification, and all but one element of the Certificate B. With the latter he would have been entitled to a Territorial or Special Reserve commission in the Army. In October 1914 he took up a post in the Estates Duty Office in Dublin but after six weeks or so he resigned in order to enlist in the army which he did on 27\(^{th}\) November 1914. His enlistment papers record that he was 19 years old, 5’ 5½” tall with a 35½” chest. At this time it was still possible to select which unit you joined and he chose to join the Norfolk Regiment as his younger brother John had already enlisted in the 3\(^{rd}\) battalion. John was only seventeen, two years below the minimum age for enlistment. The next few days were spent travelling and he arrived at the Norwich depot on 2\(^{nd}\) December and was posted to the 3\(^{rd}\) battalion on the 9\(^{th}\).

John Bunting was posted to the 1\(^{st}\) Battalion in France in May 1915, and remained a private throughout the war, but William Bunting decided to seek a commission. This was granted on 25\(^{th}\) March 1915 and he was posted to 9\(^{th}\) Norfolks as temporary second lieutenant. The 9\(^{th}\) Norfolks went to France on 30\(^{th}\) August. Bunting was not amongst the officers of 8\(^{th}\) Norfolks that were listed upon arrival in France on 25\(^{th}\) July 1915, so he was apparently transferred after the 9\(^{th}\) arrived in France. On 21st January 1916 Bunting was on patrol with another officer, a captain from another battalion, and three NCOs inspecting the wire in front of enemy trenches in the area known as Mash Valley. It was misty and the captain, leading the patrol from the front, and was shot and seriously wounded. Bunting and the NCOs began to crawl back to their own trenches, dragging the wounded captain with them. The mist began to clear and Bunting spotted two Germans. He fired at them with his revolver and scared them off. After an hour Bunting got back to the Norfolks’ trenches but the wounded officer died from loss of blood. Bunting was awarded the Military Cross and was given his medal personally by King George V on 10th May. On 1\(^{st}\) July he was attached to the battalion transport and did not participate in the attack.

He was promoted to temporary lieutenant on 2\(^{nd}\) September 1916, probably when he became Scouting and Intelligence office, and to temporary captain on 12\(^{th}\) February 1917.
After promotion to captain he became second in command of ‘C’ company, commanded by Captain A. Patten. In early July 1917 the 18th Division moved to Belgium to fight in the Third Battle of Ypres, also known as Passchendaele; and on 10th August 8th Norfolks was sent up to relieve 7th Bedfords of 54th Brigade, who were occupying Jargon Trench facing Glencorse Wood. The relief was only partially complete when a Germans raid captured a strongpoint still occupied by a party of Bedfords. The Norfolks counter-attacked with ‘C’ Company attacking from the front and ‘B’ Company from the right flank. The battalion and divisional histories accord Captain Morgan of ‘B’ Company with the credit for leading this (he was awarded the MC), but according to Captain Patten, who was in reserve that day, it was Bunting that organised it. As he recorded in a letter to Bunting’s parents, ‘Billie’ had reached the strongpoint at 4.00 am on the 11th to find the Germans in occupation, and had come up with a plan to retake it but was then shot by a sniper and died immediately. The Brigade Major of 53rd Brigade witnesses the event and recorded the Norfolks acted in “a most dashing and gallant manner. It was carried out without any artillery preparation and entirely on the initiative of the commanders on the spot. The assaulting troops advanced by rushed under the cover of fire from Lewis guns and rifles. The enemy losses were heavy...”.

Bunting is buried at Dikkebusse cemetery south west of Ypres, and is commemorated on the War Memorial at Terrington St John and in the records of King’s College, London. He was twenty two when he died. Kings College awarded him a War degree posthumously.

My father recalled seeing an entry in SAD’s personal diary of the War Years, tragically destroyed by my grandfather in the last few months of his life, which records that he was so distraught at the death of an officer that he marched up and down the trench parapet in full

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http://kingscollections.org/warmemorials/kings-college/memorials/bunting-william
sight of the enemy inviting them to shoot him. It seems likely that this was Bunting.

**SAD's military service from April 1917 to the end of the war**

During the events described above SAD was gazetted for his second military medal, although this again seems to have related to his activities in late 1916. On 21st March SAD was admitted to hospital in Rouen suffering from diarrhoea. He was soon able to return to his battalion but was hospitalised again on 7th May after being wounded at duty. SAD claimed this was due to an accident with a grenade during training which killed another man. However he was fit enough to have had his photograph taken when on local leave on 6th June. On his left upper arm he is wearing a bomber badge, an old-fashioned grenade with a burning fuse, which was the sign of a specialist in the use of hand grenades.

![SAD in June 1917](image)

Later that year, on 22nd October, 8th Norfolks fought at the battle of Poelcappelle, and SAD is again mentioned in the war diary concerning the preparations carried out during the nights before the assault:

“The wires and tapes will be laid out each night by the Battalion Intelligence Officer assisted by Sergt Dace of the Battalion Scouts as soon as it is sufficiently dark.”

This refers to marking up the assembly areas to guide troops to them in the dark. The attack appears to have been a text book example of a small-scale action with all objectives achieved with minimal losses.

In December 1917 SAD was sent back to the Somme area to the 5th Army School of Scouting, Sniping and Observation, rather improbably on a training course. He did so well that he was awarded an unofficial silver medal, and duly drafted on to the instructional
staff, teaching members of the newly arrived US Army about trench warfare. In his absence 8th Norfolks was disbanded as part of reduction of the number of infantry battalions in British divisions from twelve to nine. In early March 1918 SAD was sent back to an infantry battalion, the 8th Londons, a territorial unit known as The Post Office Rifles, with the rank of acting Company Sergeant Major. 8th Londons was in reserve when the Germans launched the huge counterattack on the Somme, known as the Ludendorf Offensive on 21st March, but it was soon rushed into action to protect the crossings over the Crozat Canal to the north of the River Oise. Early on 22nd March patrols were sent over the canal to Queussy, but in the thick mist the Germans penetrated the thinly manned front line and split the battalion into two. Both parts of 8th Londons began disorganised retreats along the north bank of the Oise via Tergnier, Viry and Chauny.

The battalion finally managed to regroup at Quierzy south of the Osie on the 26th. 8th Londons were then drawn back to defend Villiers Bretonneux, and were joined by two companies of reinforcements, coincidentally men formerly from 8th Norfolks. On the 17th April, during a German bombardment which involved unprecedented amounts of gas shells, one round hit the cellar containing the 8th Londons’ headquarters, causing ninety casualties, fifty of whom died.

SAD was evacuated on 18th April, after consuming food that has been tainted by mustard gas. He was sent back to England, and operated upon to remove a large amount of his stomach but with no expectation of him living for long. However he recovered enough to be sent to recuperate at a hospital in County Durham, and was finally discharged from the hospital and the Army on 2nd May 1919. He took up chicken farming, served as a major in the Essex Home Guard in the Second World War, and died in 1964.

Richard Dace

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