

Stories from the Honour Boards

Stories of those who served and are remembered on the Honour Boards in the Merrington Anzac Memorial Peace Chapel at Saint Andrew's Uniting Church

Booklet Number 211

BENJAMIN NORRIS DAVIS 1895 - 1977



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Corner Ann and Creek Streets
Brisbane QLD 4000
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Benjamin Norris Davis

Benjamin Norris Davis (known as Norrie) was born on 11 March 1895, the only son of Joseph Davis (1858 – 1923) and Elizabeth née Brittain (1862 – 1956).



Burke's Hotel c1929

Joseph Davis, an Irishman born at Glenmaquin, County Donegal, was a hotel keeper at Burke's Hotel in Annerley Road, South Brisbane.

Mr and Mrs Davis lived at Glen Brae in Edmondstone Street, South Brisbane, a street made famous by the Australian writer and poet, David Malouf¹ who lived at 12 Edmondstone Street.

Norris Davis served an apprenticeship at Harvey and Son, Margaret Street, Brisbane in all classes of work connected with fitting and turning. At the time of the Great War in Europe in 1917, he was working on Gardner oil engines and dynamos while in charge of the power house at the Military Hospital at Enoggera, pursuing a lifetime interest in mechanical engineering. In 1918 and 1919, B N Davis joined a force of specialist workers who served Australia in Great Britain as their contribution in the world conflict. He became a Munitions Worker along with some 6000 other Australian volunteers. His Munitions Worker Number was 4011.²

World War 1 made enormous demands on all combatant nations. Labour became a scarce resource as the need for troops and the need for industry at home to support them, multiplied.

1. Malouf, David. *12 Edmondstone Street*. Chatto & Windus, 1985
2. Australian Munitions Worker records are kept at the National Archives of Australia

After early 1916, the labour pool in Britain became even tighter with the adoption by the British Government of conscription for military service. British women provided a major source of labour but this was largely unskilled. Britain turned to the Empire for skilled labour to sustain the war industries. As the War continued, Britain's needs changed and manual labourers were also needed to build new factories and related infrastructure. They worked in a wide range of industries, often in appalling conditions and weather, for pay rates well below what they were earning in Australia.

The knowledge and expertise that Benjamin Norris Davis had gained in the field of fitting and turning was valuable in Britain under these conditions. In his application for inclusion in the scheme he stated he was prepared to embark for England from the end of January 1918 and that he would prefer general fitting work, erecting bench work and turning. His application was successful and he embarked on *SS Balmoral Castle* from Sydney on 13 April 1918, arriving at Tilbury Docks¹ on 22 June.



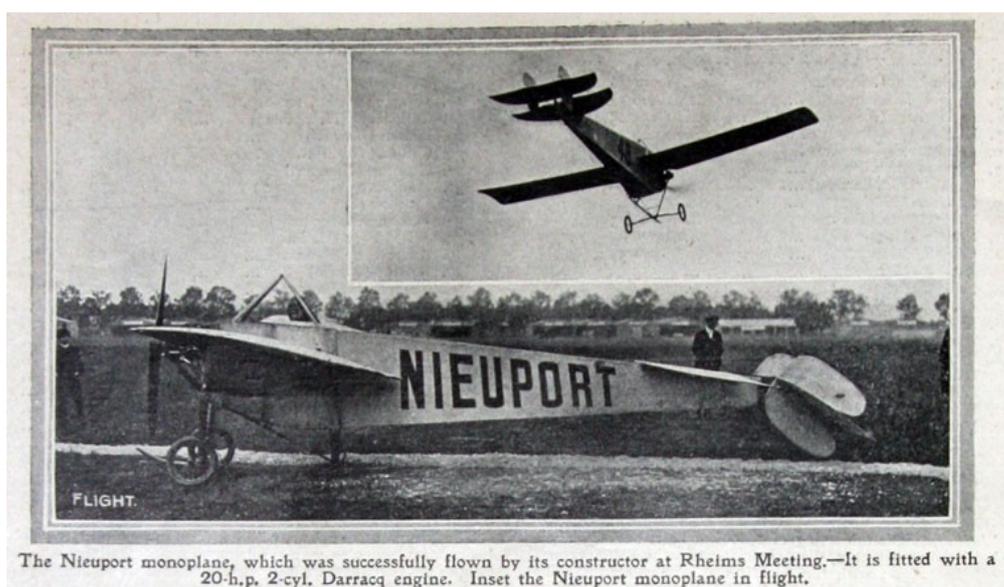
Under the scheme all volunteers reported to the Officer-in-charge, Australian Munitions Workers Office at 84 Cromwell Road, London on arrival.

Headquarters, Australian Munitions Workers

1. The Port of Tilbury is located on the River Thames at Tilbury in Essex, England. It is the principal port for London.

A formal agreement was signed. This was not a contract but it assumed that basic goodwill and honesty motivated the volunteers and they usually did. "The London Office recognised that the men, as well as being scattered all over Britain, could not be controlled as a teacher might control children, but had to be treated as adults – perhaps being pointed in an appropriate direction but ultimately responsible for their own actions."¹ Norrie Davis would have received his badge-holder's certificate and information about living in Britain. He would have been paid the last instalment of his travelling allowance, given any accumulated mail and handed a stamped postcard printed with the office address for him to notify the office of his ultimate address and employer in Britain once he had been placed in work. He called at the office a few days later, reporting he "could find nowhere to go".

He was directed to Marlett House where presumably he received temporary assistance. By the end of July 1918 Norrie was able to advise the Officer-in-charge he had obtained work and lodgings at Cricklewood. He worked at the Nieuport and General Aircraft Co. Ltd. at Cricklewood until 21 December 1918.



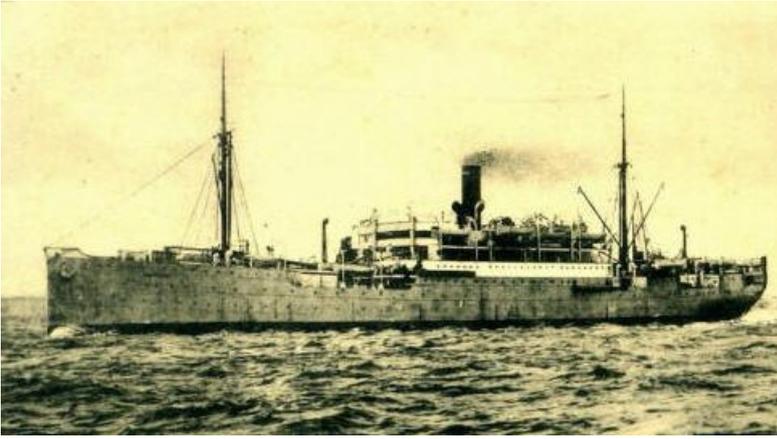
Nieuport and General Aircraft Co. Ltd., Cricklewood

1. Griffiths, Tony, *An Industrial Invasion: Australian Civilian Volunteers in British Factories 1916 – 1920*. P24

Unfortunately B N Davis contracted influenza soon afterwards. He stayed with a relative in Ireland and his doctor in Raphoe, County Donegal supplied a medical certificate at the end of June indicating he had suffered post influenzal debility and neurasthenia since 16 January 1919 and had been unable to work.

A few days later, B N Davis was instructed by letter to report at Plymouth for embarkation on *SS Bahia Castillo* on 14 July 1919. The voyage to Sydney was an unhappy experience. Of 9959 tons, built for the German Hamburg South American Line in 1913, *Bahia Castillo* had been laid up during the war, then surrendered to the British in 1919. Its configuration for 2000 passengers was upgraded to take only half this number as a 'family ship'. For this voyage it carried 586 Munition Workers, 342 wives and children, and 21 Army medical personnel. After refuelling and re-fitting in Liverpool, it docked in Plymouth on the 14 July 1919, still filthy from re-coaling and still short of basic supplies.

The passengers were waiting but immediately after boarding began complaining about sub-standard conditions. The crew were unfamiliar with the ship, its engines, its plumbing and its galley equipment. Some passengers wanted to get off; they were told to stay aboard or lose their right to a free passage home. The ship sailed on 18 July and travelled via Cape Town, Durban, Fremantle and Albany to Melbourne and Sydney. There were dramatic scenes throughout the voyage, attracting much publicity leading to a governmental decision to hold a Commission. In the end, the Commissioner's report favoured the ship. There were problems, undeniably, and exacerbated by the attitudes of the ship's master and the officer commanding the military detail, but passengers' expectations and reactions were too extreme.



Bahia Castillo in 1919



Passengers arriving by boat train to board the Bahia Castillo.



AUSTRALIAN WAR MEMORIAL

H01972

1919-07-14. Munition workers and their dependents preparing to board a tender to embark on the SS Bahia Castillo for their journey to Australia.

In the context of the recent world war when the nation was mourning the deaths of almost 60 000 men and the physical and psychological wounding of several hundred thousand, a few hundred disgruntled civilians could claim scant consideration.

Bahia Castillo arrived at Sydney Harbour on 22 October 1919, the date of Norrie Davis's discharge, completing his agreement as a Munitions Worker with the Department of Defence, Commonwealth of Australia.

It was his cousin Violet Canning whom Norrie Davis visited in Ireland while he was sick, after the war. His friend Jack Mellick with whom he was associated in the Australian Flying Corps also visited the home while he was recuperating. Jack and Violet became husband and wife. Their son Stanton was later active in St Paul's Presbyterian Church, Brisbane and is now an emeritus elder.

On his return to Brisbane, Norrie resided again with his parents in Edmondstone Street. His father died suddenly in 1923.

On 31 October 1929, Benjamin Norris Davis married Ivy Lillian Rollston, twin daughter of Mr and Mrs D Rollston of O'Keefe Street, Buranda. The Rev B Frederick, minister of Valley Methodist Church officiated. Norrie and Lillian settled at the family home, 49 Edmondstone Street and remained there for the rest of their lives. Norrie's mother died in 1956, aged 94. Their children were Joyce Patricia Davis (Patsy) who died aged 18 years, on 17 May 1953, June Elizabeth and Doreen.

June Davis, later Mrs Roseneder, described her father as “an energetic man who loved playing with cars”. She said that when her parents were married they owned a 1929 Morris Cowley which was eventually passed on to one of June’s cousins and is still in working order. Norrie was a mechanic who also gained other qualifications including boiler making. He worked for Bryce Limited, a trucking company at West End where he ran the garage. The family used to go on holidays in the car, camping wherever they found a nice spot. The family were always on the go, travelling somewhere every Sunday. Norrie also took an interest in beekeeping.

Norris Davis was the Treasurer of the Motor Mechanics Institute of Queensland. In 1941, its members contributed to the war effort by constructing a fully equipped emergency rescue trailer for use by Air Raid Precautions authorities in Brisbane.

Benjamin Norris Davis passed away on 20 October 1977, aged 82 years. His memorial at Mt Thompson Memorial Gardens bears the words, “In thy Father’s house are many mansions”. On his widow Lillian’s memorial stone beside it is inscribed the promise, “I go to prepare a place for you”. Mrs Ivy Lillian Davis died on 21 December 1980 at the age of 86 years.

References

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Acknowledgement

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Compiled by Noel E Adsett, Brisbane, April/May 2018. Rev Feb 2019



*A portrait of Benjamin
Norris Davis.*

Courtesy of the Mellick Family



Lest we forget