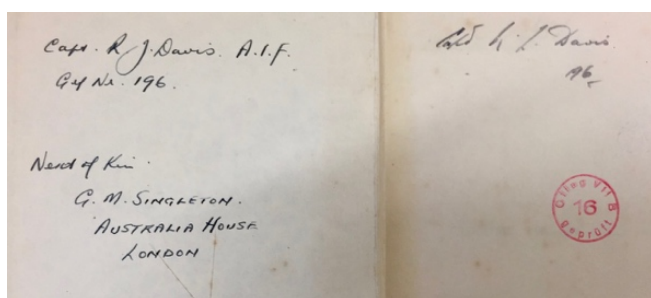


Two Well-Travelled Books

Prisoners of war shall be permitted to receive individually consignments of books which may be subject to censorship. Representatives of the protecting powers and of duly recognised and authorised relief societies may send works and collections of books to the libraries of prisoners' camps. The transmission of such consignments to libraries may not be delayed under pretext of difficulties of censorship.

Geneva Convention, Article 39

The RUSI Victoria Library has both volumes of Professor Ernest Scott's *Australian Discovery* (London: J.M. Dent & Sons, 1929). At first glance, the books might appear to be outside our collection policy which is centered on military books.



However, the inscriptions on the books tell a fascinating military story. Each volume has a blue ink inscription “Capt. R.J. Davis, AIF, Gef Nr 196, [Gefangener {prisoner} Number 196] and Next of Kin G.M. Singleton, Australia House London” on the front paste-down. On the opposite free front endpaper there is pencilled Capt R.J. Davis, 196. Below that is a circular red stamp reading “Oflag VIIB geprüft” [Prison Camp VIIB, checked]. (Material sent to POW

camps was checked to see that it did not contain contraband: the volume illustrated has had its pastedown scored to ensure that items like maps had been concealed.)

Oflag VII-B was a World War II German prisoner-of-war camp for officers (Offizierlager), located in Eichstätt, Bavaria, south of Nuremberg and about 100 km north of Munich. By the end of the Second World War, Oflag VIIB had a collection of 15,000 books in addition to 60,000 that belonged to individual POWs.¹

What does all this mean? Richard James Davis (born 28th August 1913) was the son of Mr and Mrs E.E. Davis, 2 Wairoa Avenue, North Brighton. He was educated at Elsternwick State School, Wesley College (he left in 1931) and Melbourne University where he took his Bachelor of Laws degree². He joined the Melbourne University Rifles and was commissioned (11th July 1938) and seconded to the Australian Imperial Force (AIF) on 13th November 1939³. He sailed overseas in January 1940. We can then trace his postings in the Sixth Division in the Middle East⁴.

On 20th July 1940 he is mentioned as being in 2nd/8th Battalion as a Lieutenant. By the 21st December 1940 he was appointed Staff Captain ‘A’, Base and Line of Communications Units but remained seconded in 2/5th Battalion. On 29th January he was appointed Staff Captain ‘Q’ of 1st Australian Corps and remained seconded in his unit. He was promoted temporary Captain on 7th February 1941 and remained seconded. His secondment ended on 7th June 1941. On 19th July 1941 he was ominously placed on the Permanent Supernumerary List (POW). This indicated that he was captured in the campaign in Greece - well over 100 men of this battalion suffered the same fate.

¹ Midge Gillies, *The Barbed-Wire University: the Real Lives of Allied Prisoners of War in the Second World War*, London: Aurum, 2011, p 260.

² *The Argus*, Wednesday 18 June 1941.

³ *The Army List of the Australian Military Forces, Part I, Active List, 1st June 1940* (RUSI Victoria Library).

⁴ *A.I.F. Orders (M.E.) Nos. 1 to 346 and A.I.F. Lists (M.E.) Nos. 1 to 30* (18.2.1940 to 16.5.1941) and *A.I.F. Orders (M.E.) Nos. 347 to 898 and A.I.F. Lists (M.E.) Nos. 31 to 61* (30.5.1941 to 29.12.1941) (RUSI Victoria Library).

Syd Trigellis-Smith's *All the King's Enemies: a History of the 2/5th Australian Infantry Battalion* (Ringwood East, Vic: The Battalion Association, 1988) is the history of his unit. VX 295 R.J Davis is in the Nominal Roll of the battalion but is not explicitly mentioned in the text nor in its list of POWs.

After his repatriation, he married Noella Gertrude Cornish in 1946. They lived at 1a Cheeseman Ave Brighton East. They had at least two children, Richard Francis born 15 August 1948 and David born 6 December 1953. Richard Davis died 19 April 1991.

So far, we have not been able to trace G.M. Singleton.

We purchased the books from a bookseller in Melbourne. How did they get to Germany and back to Australia? It is most likely that the books were sent to Oflag VIIB by the Australian Red Cross. Captain Davis took possession of them and brought them back to Australia on his release in 1945. They are a fascinating and rare relic of the Second World War.

