Captain John King Davis
and SY Aurora

... bringing Mawson and the team home

A presentation by Anna Lucas
for the Mawson Symposium, Adelaide, February 2014
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“Very glad they are all safe in Australia again, without mishap.”

Captain JK Davis
Adelaide, 26 February 1914
FEBRUARY 1913 – FEBRUARY 1914

This understated expression of gratitude masked the flood of relief that Davis must have felt after the challenges of the previous twelve months.

In February 1913 he had made the difficult decision to leave six men at the hut at Cape Denison to wait for Mawson, Mertz and Ninnis who had not returned from their exploratory far-eastern sledging journey. The hut was stocked with supplies for more than twelve months, but the men knew that the ship could not return until the next summer.

During his stay, Davis had ordered the re-installation of wireless equipment and the re-erection of wireless poles which had been blown down in blizzards. As ship’s captain and as second-in-command of the expedition, his concern was to collect Frank Wild and his men from the Shackleton ice shelf, 1500 miles away, before the build-up of sea-ice denied access to the Western Base.
FEBRUARY 1913

Davis:
“I tried to tell myself that Mawson and his party were all right but could not help wishing that I could march out myself and make sure; all sorts of possibilities presented themselves to me as I stood looking to the Southward over that icy slope.”

8 February
Davis, increasingly concerned about the men at the Western Base, left 6 men at the hut at Cape Denison to wait for Mawson.

On the same day, Mawson, severely debilitated, returned and sent a wireless message …
8 February 1913

TO CAPT DAVIS
AURORA

ARRIVED SAFELY AT THE HUT     MERTZ &
NINNIS DEAD     RETURN & PICK UP ALL HANDS

SGD   DR MAWSON

Handed to Captain Davis on the bridge by Walter Hannam the wireless operator.
The ship, which had receiving but not transmitting capability, returned to Commonwealth Bay. Caught in a gale, Davis could not send a boat to shore. Unable to communicate his decision to leave the well-provisioned Main Base and its seven occupants in favour of collecting the more vulnerable men waiting at the Western Base, he departed. Wild and his men were waiting, not on land but on an ice-shelf, and with a diminished food supply. Navigating his way through increasingly heavy pack ice and threading his way through numerous icebergs, Davis reached the ice-shelf in time to embark the waiting men.

He returned the expedition members who were onboard to Hobart, then spent most of 1913 organising a relief voyage for Mawson and the other six men at Cape Denison.
Davis and SY *Aurora* were back in Hobart with all members of the Western Base and most of the men from the Main Base.

**APRIL 1913**

Davis left for England on RMS *Orama* to report on the expedition’s progress and to raise funds. The ship needed repairs, supplies had to be bought, and wages had to be paid for the crew of the Mawson Relief Voyage.

**MAY 1913**

He arrived in London, but initially found his appeals overshadowed by the Scott Memorial Fund (Scott had perished the previous year) and for the Crystal Palace Fund.
At first the editor of the London newspaper, *The Times*, refused to publish an appeal for the Mawson Relief Fund, but a small paragraph did appear in late June. The greater proportion of contributors were those with Antarctic connections, including Scott’s widow and others who had travelled with him.

Davis also succeeded in gaining financial support from the British Government, the Royal Society, and the Royal Geographical Society.

The Australian Government also contributed.
JUNE/JULY 1913

THE TIMES

The Mawson Relief Fund
The Bank of Australasia
4 Threadneedle Street
London

• Sir Robert Lucas Tooth £1,000
• British Government £1,000
• Royal Geographical Society
• Royal Society
• Commander Evans / Kathleen, Lady Scott
• Gran / Griffith Taylor / Ponting / Priestly / Wright
• Buchanan / Cherry-Garrard / Lt. Pennell / Debenham
• Mrs. Dorothea Bussell (Bickerton’s sister), and others

• Australian Government £5,000

Waiting in Antarctica:

Douglas MAWSON
Cecil MADIGAN
Frank BICKERTON
Robert BAGE
Alfred HODGEMAN
Archibald McLEAN
and
Sidney JEFFRYES
AUGUST 1913

Davis travelled back to Australia on RMS *Oronto*.

SEPTEMBER 1913

Davis was back, and SY *Aurora* was taken to the Victorian State Government Dockyards at Williamstown for repairs and refitting.
During the course of the repairs, Davis was obliged to get government approval. Armed with a written statement about the purpose of the expedition, he met the Premier of Victoria and as he began to read was abruptly stopped.

“Captain,” said the Premier “I know you are in earnest, not because you have a statement that you want to waste my time reading, but because they tell me that last year when repairs to your ship were completed by us, you went to sea on Melbourne Cup Day! I have instructed the engineer in charge of the dockyards to do everything to ensure that your ship is in the best condition.”

Taken aback, Davis thanked the Premier and took his leave. He was grateful for the man’s support, but noted in his journal: “What had we to do with the Melbourne Cup, anyway?”
SY Aurora left Hobart, and sailed to Macquarie Island with government meteorological officers who would replace the AAE men at the base there.
NOVEMBER 1913

While the changeover was being effected, SY Aurora was engaged in sounding operations around the island. The uncharted waters with reefs of submerged rocks had caused numerous shipwrecks, and Aurora had twice collided with them on previous visits. Davis considered that some time spent documenting these reefs “would not be time wasted” especially when it was a little too early in the season to be attempting a passage into Antarctic ice.

Macquarie Island lies about 1500km to the south-east of Australia, approximately halfway between Tasmania and Antarctica. It has since been established that the 34km long island in the Southern Ocean is one emergent peak of a long ridge uplifted over millennia from the ocean floor. Its formation, its colonisation by various species, and its history, make fascinating reading (Cumpston, 1968; Terauds and Stewart, 2008), and at http://www.parks.tas.gov.au/fahan_mi_shipwrecks/infohut/geology.htm
DECEMBER 1913
Departure from Macquarie Island.
Captain Davis set a direct course for Commonwealth Bay and the Main Base, and continued his oceanographic work en route. The ship sailed through gales and, when the force subsided, was “bowling along under topsails and foresail” until thick mist prompted the order for the crew to take in the sails and to keep a sharp lookout for icebergs. Davis manoeuvred through the ice, changing direction when it proved impenetrable.

In higher latitudes and in close proximity to the Magnetic Pole, the ship’s compass was unreliable. Navigation was by the sun’s position (when it could be observed) and by the direction of the coastal wind “which seldom varied more than two points from S.S.E.” (Davis 1919).

MEANWHILE at the Main Base in Antarctica …
Mawson had partially recovered from the ordeal of his long sledging journey the previous year but was understandably feeling down after the unplanned additional year of isolation.

11 DECEMBER
Mawson: “The dreary outlook, the indefinite surrounds, the neverending seethe, rattle and ping of the drift in Antarctica ... the anxiety for the future.”

13 DECEMBER
SY Aurora anchored in Commonwealth Bay; Davis and a few men went ashore to a noisy welcome. Shortly afterwards, Mawson went onboard and, in a happier mood, described the change of food, noting especially the fresh vegetables.
13 DECEMBER 1913

Mawson:
About 8 am we were wakened by a shout without, and in came Capt Davis and party ... I went off with some of them to ship. The change of food on board, especially fresh vegetables, was topping!

Davis:
It was not long before we were discussing how the remainder of the season could be most usefully employed.
JANUARY 1914

During the homeward voyage, tensions arose between Mawson, as leader of the expedition, and Davis as captain of the ship.

Their personal accounts can be read in their published diaries.
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>MAWSON:</th>
<th>DAVIS:</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Looks like another bad night for Davis.</td>
<td>Blowing a gale .. barometer indicates cyclonic disturbance.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Capt Davis busy all night.</td>
<td>Steaming E since 10 pm last night.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Capt Davis on bridge all night.</td>
<td>Blowing a blizzard since noon yesterday ... high sea, thick snow, innumerable bergs.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Capt Davis tired out.</td>
<td>This morning I was worn out.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>[Davis] very irritable and can scarcely speak civilly.</td>
<td>I asked M whether he wished to go on. He decided he did not.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Davis on duty all the time.</td>
<td>No time for writing today. Since 2 am we have been forcing our way through the pack.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Davis coming round.</td>
<td>I am glad to be out of the ice again ... a heavy strain ... I have been feeling pretty grousey for some days.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
FEBRUARY 2014

As the ship drew closer to Adelaide, those onboard who were technically-savvy rigged up a wireless aerial to facilitate the transmission of messages to ships within a limited range. To the Cape Borda (Kangaroo Island) lighthouse a message was sent by Morse Lamp.

25 FEBRUARY 1914

AURORA FOR ADELAIDE. DR MAWSON AND PARTY ON BOARD. ALL WELL.
26 FEBRUARY 1914

Davis:
“3:10 pm. Pilot boarded vessel off Semaphore Anchorage. Dr Mawson landed. Aurora proceeded up to Port Adelaide, where we made fast in the Company Basin at 5:45 pm.”

“Very glad they are all safe in Australia again without mishap.”
Third Antarctic Voyage:

Track of *Aurora* Hobart to Port Adelaide.

Davis papers SLV
WHY ADELAIDE?

Mawson was asked by a reporter in Adelaide why he had chosen that city as his last port of call instead of Hobart.

Mawson:
“It was my intention from the first, to return to Adelaide.”

Three reasons:
– The people of Adelaide had not previously been visited by a polar vessel;
– South Australia had been the first State to grant funding for the expedition; and
– Oceanographic work had taken them westward, so the ship was closer to Adelaide.
THE PEOPLE’S WELCOME

The Aurora Skipper

... Captain Davis stood up to speak to the accompaniment of a rousing cheer.

The Register 4 March 1914
Mawson:

“I cannot say too much for Captain J.K. Davis for his admirable conduct as second in command, and his masterly handling of the vessel.”
Mawson:

“I wish to express our gratitude to the intrepid captain ... for bringing the vessel ... through the ice-packed seas to our relief.

... but Davis and his men have done more than this ... for by their oceanographic investigations they have carried out a piece of research which, in scientific value, is comparable with that accomplished ashore.”

In the Introduction to With the “Aurora” in the Antarctic 1911-1914 by JK Davis (1919)
ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS AND AWARDS FOR DAVIS

• The King's Polar Medal, with clasp (twice)
• The Royal Geographical Society’s Murchison Award
• Fellow of the RGS
• President of the Royal Society of Victoria
• C.B.E. (1965)

• Davis Station and Davis Sea in Antarctica are named in his honour.

• Captain John King Davis (1884–1967) had a distinguished career, with many years spent as Commonwealth Director of Navigation.
And in conclusion, Antarctic historian HR Mill declared:

“I congratulate you on your place in history.”

— letter to Captain JK Davis, 1948
POINTS TO CONSIDER

• Davis was a young captain; his 30th birthday was on 19 February 2014, a week before they arrived in Adelaide.

• His decision to re-establish wireless apparatus at the hut was significant. Consider the consequences if Davis had NOT given that direction when there were plenty of hands to help.

• His decision to leave Commonwealth Bay and to pick up the men at the Western Base was a difficult one but, as he later wrote to his father, he did what he thought was right.

• In retrospect, Mawson, who suffered badly from sea-sickness, may not have survived the return voyage a year earlier, in his already exhausted and severely weakened state.

• The Victorian Premier’s amazement that Davis would choose to go to sea instead of enjoying Melbourne Cup Day illustrates the captain’s dedication to his work. He was totally focused.

• The seven men left at the hut were overjoyed to see the ship appear. It meant fresh food, and a passage home. But were the rescued men cognisant of the months of effort Davis had put into making arrangements while they were counting down the days for the ship’s return?

• Davis was an acknowledged master of ice navigation. He was demanding at times, but he rose to meet all challenges and brought the men home. Could another captain have accomplished the same outcome given the same challenges?
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