

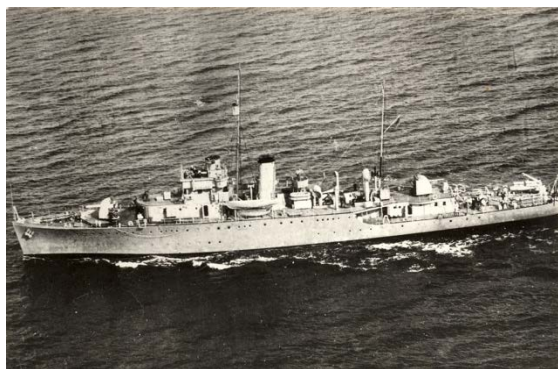


Saluting the Sacrifice of HMAS *Parramatta* (II)

Rob Garratt

27 November 2021 marks the 80th anniversary of the loss of HMAS *Parramatta* (II), we pause to recognise the ultimate sacrifice made by the 138 men killed when the ship was torpedoed and sunk while conducting convoy escort duties supplying Allied troops in the besieged city of Tobruk, Libya.

Parramatta was a *Grimsby* Class Sloop built at Cockatoo Island Dockyard in Sydney and commissioned into the RAN on 8 April 1940 under the command of Lieutenant Commander Jefferson H. Walker, RAN. Mere months after her commissioning, the ship departed Australia, sailing from Fremantle on 29 June 1940 and arriving in the Red Sea at the end of July.



Parramatta departed Australia in June 1940; she would not see home waters again.

The ship was immediately put to work as part of the Royal Navy's Red Sea Force, conducting escort duties, patrol work and minesweeping operations. In May 1941, *Parramatta* was redeployed to support efforts in the Mediterranean, promptly being assigned to escort duties in support of the Western Desert Campaign in Egypt and Libya.



Parramatta ratings ashore in Egypt.

The area was hotly contested, the port city of Tobruk being particularly prized as it offered the only deep-water harbour in Eastern Libya. Tobruk had been captured from Italian forces by a combined Allied Task Unit in January 1941. Tobruk's strategic value was highlighted by the fierce fighting that surrounded it, as the Allies dug in against the Axis powers.

The men of *Parramatta* had seen this firsthand on the afternoon of 22 June 1941, when, during her first 'Tobruk Ferry Run' in company with the sloop HMS *Auckland* and the steam tanker *Pass of Balmaha* the convoy came under attack from successive waves of German Junkers Ju 87 dive-bomber aircraft (commonly known as Stukas) and later Italian Savoia-Marchetti SM.79's. A fierce battle ensued, during which *Parramatta* miraculously avoided damage despite numerous 'near misses'. HMS *Auckland* was not to be so lucky and following a series of direct hits was forced to abandon ship, shortly before listing to port, experiencing a large internal explosion and sinking.

Following the action, which continued into the night, *Parramatta* proceeded to the scene of *Auckland's* loss. There she was met by fellow RAN ships *Waterhen* (I) and *Vendetta* (I) and, while being circled by the attendant RAN destroyers, proceeded to pick up 164 survivors from *Auckland*, who were then transported to



Alexandria. Commander Walker was awarded a Distinguished Service Cross for this action and his superb leadership in the Mediterranean. It was later awarded to his widow after his death in action at a later date.



Commander Jefferson Walker was recognised for his actions on 22 June 1941. Sadly, he would go down with his ship just months later.

18 November 1941 saw the British Eighth Army launch its long-planned offensive in Libya. The resolute efforts of the 'Rats of Tobruk' proved invaluable as the port was able to provide the sorely needed reinforcements and supplies for the army advance. However, enemy attacks against the Tobruk garrison had reduced their ammunition to a dangerously low level.ⁱ To relieve the situation, *Parramatta* and the destroyer *HMS Avon Vale* sailed from Alexandria on 25 November escorting the deeply laden ammunition ship *Hanne* to resupply the allied troops.

Around midnight on 26 November the three ships were some 25 miles north of Bardia off the Libyan coast. It was pitch dark and raining with heavy seas making both manoeuvring and visibility difficult. In a letter written by Able Seaman Harold Moss to the mother of his good friend, Ordinary

Seaman Lyall J. Smith who was lost during the attack, he recorded the events as they unfolded.

'We were off Tobruk and this night [there] was rather heavy seas, moon was generally hidden by dark clouds and rain. This rain by the way, caused the greatest number of deaths. Everyone used to sleep on the deck, and through the rain, they all had to go below. Lyall was my opposite watch then and at midnight when I went below, he came on deck to keep his watch on the forward gun. It was raining and just before I went down, I had a funny feeling. I thought that it would be pretty awful to be adrift in that sea. I went right forward to try to get a place to sleep but there was no room so I came back amidships and lay on a stool in a little spare mess we had. My lifebelt was blown up and near my feet. At 1220 I looked at my watch and then I was just dozing off when she was hit. I never want to hear that noise ever. I was thrown to the deck and the lights were out. I grabbed my lifejacket and was up the ladder and on the deck in 10 seconds. I just got on deck when she lurched over and immediately began to sink. I couldn't tie my belt on and then it was swept away. I was then in the water and swam to where I saw a float. I got on and began helping other fellows on. We floated away and soon lost sight of the ship. We were picked up in about two and a half hours. Although the chaps below who were forward wouldn't have had a chance to get away, there were those on deck who should have been alright. A large party of men were on a big float and the last chap to be picked up said they were still OK when he left. I can't possibly help you in definitely saying how Lyall went. Because no one I know who knew him ever saw him. There were lots of men clinging to rafts and pieces of wood. The next morning there was no survivors in sight. The night was bitterly cold and I couldn't have lasted much longer myself. For myself I can't believe everyone missing is dead and I feel that there may be some who are in POW camps in Germany. It was hard for me to realise that my friends, chaps who I had known as brothers we gone, and it affected me for a long time. I'm not of an emotional character myself, but I have found myself close to tears whenever I remember that night'ⁱⁱ

ROYAL AUSTRALIAN NAVY SEA POWER SEMAPHORE



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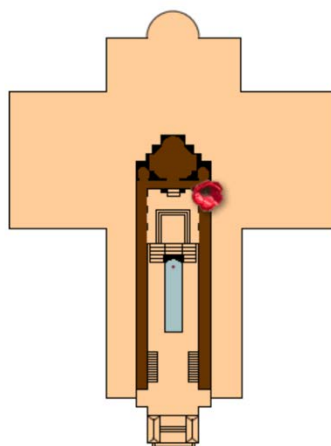
Parramatta members Bill Wood, Harold Moss and Ted Fryer. Harold Moss was the last living Parramatta survivor, passing away in 2011 aged 88.

The convoy had been under the surreptitious observation of the German U-boat *U-559*, having being sighted by the boat's Commanding Officer during a lightning flash. With great patience and precision, the German had been silently positioning his boat so as to achieve maximum damage with his attack. Shortly after midnight and at a range of just over two thousand yards, a spread of three torpedoes was fired by *U-559* with no success. Time was of the essence as the convoy was rapidly nearing the Tobruk approach route. At 1245 the U-boat fired a single torpedo at range of 1640 yards, hitting *Parramatta* amidships and inflicting grievous damage. There was a secondary explosion almost simultaneously, thought to be *Parramatta's* depth charges exploding. The ship was plunged into darkness and, fully aware of the ship's perilous state, Commander Walker gave the order to 'abandon ship' before she rolled violently to starboard and began to rapidly sink.

Anyone caught below deck had no chance of escape. Those lucky enough, threw themselves into the black, oil covered ocean, clinging to any debris that might be nearby. Two sailors had swum towards a large black shape unaware of what they aiming at, where they were pulled from the water, near exhaustion by *Avon Vale*. Nineteen other survivors were also plucked from the water by the British destroyer. Tragically, an Oropesa float containing around 30 men was sighted but was soon lost in the gloom and never seen again. Three *Parramatta* sailors were able to embark a Carley Float and row to shore the following afternoon, making land some 20 miles north of Bardia, where they would later be

discovered by South African forces and taken to Alexandria for rest and recuperation.ⁱⁱⁱ

Of the ship's 162 crew, 138 lost their lives. Among the deceased was Commander Jefferson Walker and all the ship's officers.



Names of the members of Parramatta's crew lost in action can be found on panel four in the Commemorative Area at the Australian War Memorial.

- ⁱ [HMAS Parramatta \(II\), Royal Australian Navy, HMAS Parramatta \(II\) | Royal Australian Navy](#)
- ⁱⁱ [Loss of HMAS Parramatta \(II\): First Hand Accounts, Call The Hands, Occasional Paper 35, September 2018](#)
- ⁱⁱⁱ [A West Australian Survivor of HMAS Parramatta, The Western Mail, 23 April 1942](#)