

CALL THE HANDS

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Loss of HMAS Parramatta (II): First Hand Accounts

Recently the Naval Historical Society of Australia was favoured with two handwritten letters from survivors of the sinking of HMAS Parramatta (II) off Tobruk overnight 27 November 1941. The first is by Able Seaman Harold Moss is to the mother of Ordinary Seaman Lyall J. Smith who was lost when the ship sank. The second is a somewhat more upbeat story by reporter Reg Greenwood of the Western Mail as told by Able Seaman F.W. Tysoe.

Letter: Able Seaman Harold Moss to Mrs Smith

AB H Moss
Mess 5
HMAS Napier
c/o GPO
29 July 1942

Dear Mrs Smith,

I have been asked by my mother to write to you and to tell you what I know about Lyall. I would like you to understand that I would have written to you months ago, only for the fact I felt that to write then would be to induce more grief to you than you were already suffering; so I thought I would drop in and see you when I return home.

But now as you have asked I will say what I would have said before. First my really deep sympathy to you for his loss. The last four or five months before he died I was one of his real cobbles. He joined up the same time as I did and we both travelled to Melbourne together. That ten days leave in August 1940 we were together. I saw him several times in Adelaide. Then back we went and finally overseas together. Of course, he had his own particular cobbles and stuck to them. We also incidentally used to go out and to the same place to see our girls and his girl knew mine and we sometimes used to go to the theatre together. Anyhow we arrived in England and were sent to depot where we were sent on leave. I went to Scotland (Glasgow) and he went to Edinburgh. I never saw him until we were back on leave. Then we were drafted to the *Aurora*, we were nearly 9 months on her and then paid off. After some more leave we were split up and 8 of us were drafted to the *Parramatta*.

He was then separated from his cobbles, one of whom was Alan Roberts. Anyhow we used to get together and talk about the different things we were going to do after we got out of the Service and he was telling me he didn't think he would marry until after finishing his 12 years. We went ashore together in Durban and Suez. In Suez we had our photos taken in Arab dress. I went back there when I was there last to try and get the photo again but the negative was destroyed. I really was looking forward to getting that photo. We picked up our ship there and later on was to see our first bit of action. A German plane attacked us in the Red Sea but his bombs fell over us. We caught him as he went away and was later credited with shooting it down. I recon we were all rather nervous but none of us new hands said anything and then after that we felt like old hands. Shortly after that we went through the canal to the Med. We went ashore together in Alexandria. After that we had several air attacks and once went to Tobruk at night. Coming back we anchored in Mersa Matruh and had hardly dropped

anchor when they started to bomb the shore. They kept us awake for hours. We came back and two days later we left Alex for Tobruk. These were the days of the siege and supplies just had to get through. We took a convoy of small supply ships with us.

Anyhow to get to the night on which we were sunk, we were off Tobruk and this night was rather heavy seas, moon was generally hidden by dark clouds and rain. This rain by the way caused the greater majority of deaths. Every(one) used to sleep on 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 12.20 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 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 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 2½ hours. Although the chaps below who were forward wouldn't have had a chance to get away there was 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 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 that everyone who is 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 were gone and it affected me for a long time I'm not of a emotional character myself but have found myself close to tears whenever I remember that night.

I'm afraid that all I can tell you. I can give you Ian Roberts address but of course he wasn't on the ship. I do sincerely hope I haven't told you anything which may cause you more grief but rather may help you.

Anything more I can do I shall only be so pleased.

Yours sincerely,

Harold Moss



HMAS *Parramatta* (2) at Port Tewfic September 1940

RAN Image



Sourced from The Western Mail, Perth dated 23 April 1942

A West Australian Survivor of HMAS Parramatta - Exclusive Story

Able Seaman William Frederick Tysoe of Denmark (W.A.) was a member of the crew of HMAS Parramatta which was torpedoed in the Mediterranean Sea early this year. Now back home on leave he told his story to Reg Greenwood, The Western Mail representative of Albany.

On a recent evening a sturdy bright-eyed sailor lad, with a fine crop of light wavy hair, brushing by, rose to his feet on the crowded floor of the Denmark Public hall. In a few halting sentences he expressed thanks to hundreds of well-wishers of the town and district for the goodwill and congratulations showered upon him and his respected aged parents on his return to the tiny naval home which he left nearly 3 years earlier, in search for adventure, and with keen desire to serve Australia in her hour of need.

In his hands he held, a collection of gifts as tangible evidence of the esteem he enjoys throughout the district where he grew to manhood, worthily playing his part in varied vocations until he heard the call for duty. Nearby sat his parents Mr & Mrs Roger Tysoe, who had come from Staffordshire (England) over 30 years ago to face with stout hearts the vicissitudes self-pioneering days in the then sparsely settled Denmark bushlands. Their hearts swelled with pride as various speakers eulogised the good qualities of the sailor son young Fred now his 23rd year.

He is one of the survivors of the complement of 172 of HMAS *Parramatta*, a unit which played a glorious part for our navy until she fell a victim to an enemy submarine in the Mediterranean Sea about 1 o'clock in the morning of Thursday November 27th 1941.

In the intervening four weeks young Tysoe – mourned as lost by his parents and eight sturdy brothers – endured suffering and encountered adventures in Northern Africa such as seldom falls to the lot of those with a craving for thrills.

There was however little trace of privation on his erect and sturdy frame when he stepped over the threshold of his home a week ago, to enjoy to the full 23 days of leave granted, after two years and nine months of service with the boys in blue.

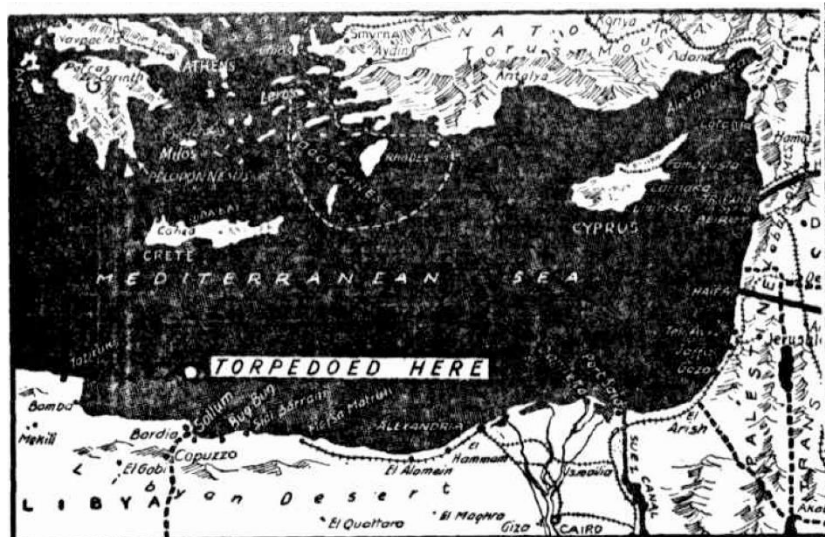
Training Days

Seated on the veranda of his home, a mile from Denmark young Tysoe modestly related his experiences, and a note of pathos occasionally intruding, as he spoke of many gallant comrades and Commander Walker, who went down with his ship. "In fact, we lost the whole of our 10 officers said Tysoe."

"I was posted to Flinders Naval Depot on August 4th 1939", he continued "and drafted to the *Parramatta* 10 months later as ordinary seaman. Some months of patrol was followed and on June 30th 1940, we sailed from a West Australian port for overseas. We had Aden for our base for nearly a year doing convoy duty in the Red Sea to Port Sudan, Our ship transferred to the Mediterranean about July of last year, and we ran from Alexandria to Tobruk. Things were pretty warm in that section just about this time and we frequently had to beat off air attacks. A quite spell on the Port Said – Cyprus run followed.

A Hellish Night

We left Alexandria on November 24th, with Commander Walker (just promoted) in charge of the *Parramatta*, our complement being 172 officers and men. The first day out was uneventful but on the 2nd day a Junkers plane flew over our convoy of four ships. We opened fire on it but did not contact. It was raining at nightfall, and there was a choppy sea. About 1am we were hit by two torpedoes from a submarine whose presence was unsuspected. One of these exploded by the wardroom, under the off gun blowing the turret to blazes and causing some casualties. The sloop of 1,060 tons reeled like a drunken man with the impacts and then broke in halves & capsized. Our position at this time was about 25 miles from shore 120 miles north of Bardia. Her bow and stern were projecting. There was no time to launch boats and some of the crew were trapped below. Discipline was however excellent despite the pitch blackness of the night and a rough sea. I had just came off watch at midnight and was asleep in a motor boat on the upper deck. The impact jolted me off my slumber and I secured a cork lifebelt which I just draped under my arms, not having time to don it. I had to climb the upper deck midships and then walked down the sloping side, and entered the water which was coated with oil. I swam about for some time, and contacted two mates, but later lost touch with them. I then swam back to the ship and was pulled on the stern by another man to join nine others. One chap near the water slipped, but we stayed there about half an hour. The stern part then tilted and put us back in the water. This would be about 1:45 am. One of the convoy was standing by, about a quarter of a mile away and we swam towards her, but she did not remain, fearing the submarine might also get her. She did pick up 19 of our chaps. I then swam with a mate to a Carley Float about 4ft 6ins long and 3ft wide. There was another chap - Signaller Miller of Glenelg, South Aus. on the float and my mate was another "crow" Alec Sadhams of North Walkerville, Adelaide, SA. It was now 3am and pretty cold, I was fully clothed except shoes, and Miller was pretty right also, but poor Sadhams only had a pair of shorts on. The float had no provisions and only one paddle. We drifted until daylight, and often heard calls but could do nothing for those less fortunate than ourselves.



That's the End

That's the end of it; we'll try and make shore said Miller next morning, when a ship about 10 miles off failed to see us. About midday we saw a whale boat, dropped from one of our ships. It was about a mile closer to shore, which was just discernible. Miller, with one paddle managed to get our float close to it, and we boarded only to find it half full of water- somebody had forgotten to put in the plug. We found plenty of bully beef, biscuits and water on her and also a tin hat, with which we baled. Poor old pal Ladhams was feeling – and looking pretty blue owing to lack of clothes and we used to snuggle him between us at night and let the whaler drift closer to shore. At times two of us would row and the other steer.

About 5pm on the day after we had lost our ship we landed on a little beach between two reefs about 20 miles north of Bardia. We beached our craft high and removed the provisions and plenty of water. On an adjacent ridge we could see trucks passing occasionally and thought they were some of ours. We were making towards them when we ran across an Arab camp of about 30 tents. They first took us for Italians, our bodies being discoloured through swimming in the oily water when the ship went down. Believe me the fumes were pretty crook. We were taken before the chief who spoke broken English, having been a native policeman. We were allowed to wash and given clothes. I had an issue of a pair of British Army trousers, and the rest was of Italian make. We were not given footwear, as they thought we might run away. Our feet were too sore for that however having been cut by barnacles, and we had no desire to do so. Our first meal comprised a boiled egg each, coffee and Arab bread, which isn't the best in the world. We were given a tent and had dropped off to sleep about 6:15pm.

Hid by Arabs

We stayed with the Arab camp about a fortnight. The Arabs had some women in their party, and the old chief seemed to have about 10 wives. One of these gave Ladhams the "Glad Eye", and we told him he was in the boom. The weather was still bad, and we were flooded out one night having only grass mats for bedding. We just sat like shags on a rock and awaited daylight –pretty wretched and miserable. One day the chief got word of a likely move from a big German camp about 2 miles away, so he removed us to a big cave for the day. We came back at night

About three miles off a big tank battle was in progress and at night planes could be seen dropping bombs. Our ration was now mainly bully beef from the whaler. When this gave out we went back to Arab fare. We tried to get a letter through to the English lines by an Arab messenger, but we never saw, or heard of him again. Frequently Italian and German soldiers came to the camp, and had a meal before going on. We were hidden in a nearby tent under blankets and could hear their conversation very plainly. Luckily the old chief never gave us away. He was a great diplomat and maintained neutrality, at least outwardly.

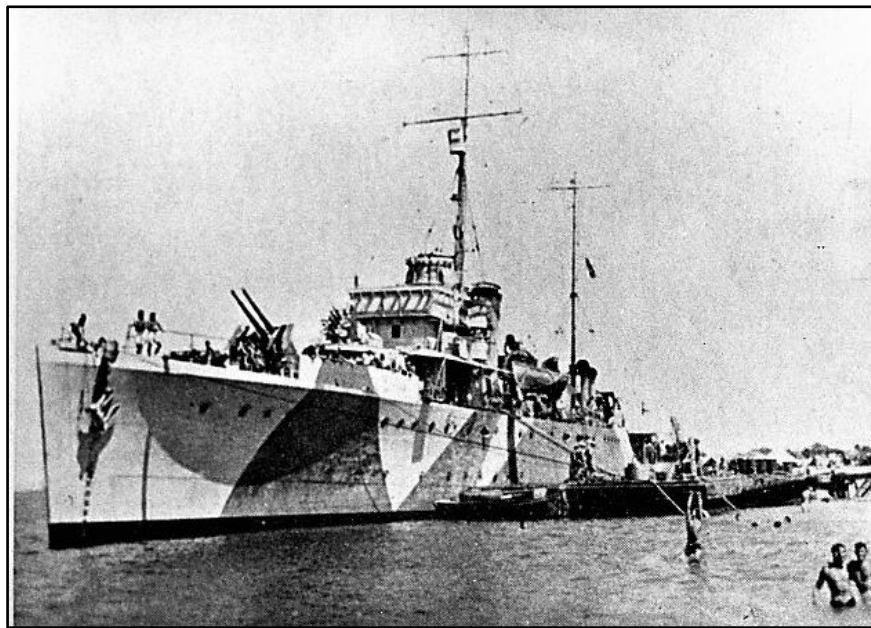
A South African force broke through the enemy lines one day and the Arabs welcomed them with open arms – so did we. The scouts at first took us as Italians; owing to our colour and a sentry challenged as we advanced towards him, I said” You’re a sight for sore eyes” and he lowered his rifle and grinned. They took us to trucks and fed us with tinned sausages, biscuits and coffee. I was given cut away sandshoes and the other two received books. We then went to headquarters off Bardia and were given fine treatment. Our next move was a field hospital. We had been dressing our cuts and abrasions with a compound called “Razorquick” found in the Arab camp and this turned out to be shaving cream. Anyhow it was effective, having healing ingredients.

It took us a week of travel with many stoppages to reach Alexandria. Our first move was to send cables to our folks telling of our safety. We spent two very happy months in that city, doing the sights in great style with a new issue of white shorts and singlets .

We sailed from Alexandria on January 20th for Bombay and arrived in Melbourne on March 28th. A Tasmanian lad named Smith had also been picked up in the desert after getting ashore from the *Parramatta*. He had a rougher spin than we did before the Arabs found him. He came home from with us and is now well.

Miller, Ladhams and I were all good pals in the Flinders depot being in the same class and we were drafted to the *Parramatta* together. Miller is 19 and full of courage, while Ladhams is 20 and a great scout also. I guess we will all enjoy our leave before reporting for duty again.

I know the old bed at home felt good to me after nearly three years absence from it. Still when one goes to sea, he cannot look for a luxury existence. My experiences to date have well fitted me for anything the future might hold. But it is sure great to see the parents and brothers at home rejoicing that I have returned safely. I have a brother somewhere in Singapore, I hope his luck will equal mine.



HMAS *Parramatta* (2) at Mersa Matruh, June 1941 RAN Image