

Charles Frederick Harrington (1914-1941), was born on 22 June 1914, at Eagle Junction, Brisbane, the son of Herbert Ernest and Laura Irene Harrington, nee Barton, the younger brother of Wilfred Hastings Harrington, later to become Rear Admiral, RAN. Charles Harrington was educated at Kings School Sydney, from 1921 to 1931. He was the recipient of Remove Form Prize 1926, Form III Prize 1927, Wentworth Bucknell Memorial Scholarship 1928, Form V Prize 1929, University Exhibition and Distinction Awarded in the Leaving Certificate Examination 1931. In 1932, Charles F Harrington was admitted to the Faculty of Medicine at Sydney University. During his time at Sydney University, Harrington was an active member of the Sydney University Regiment. The skill-at-arms he was instructed in while a member of the Regiment would stand him in good stead during his naval service. In 1938, Harrington graduated from Sydney University, Bachelor of Medicine and Bachelor of Surgery. He was then appointed to Royal Prince Alfred Hospital, and later to the Royal Alexandria Hospital for Women. Before volunteering for naval service in 1939, he was a resident medical officer at Newcastle Hospital.

On 1 September 1939, Harrington volunteered for service in the Royal Australian Navy as a Surgeon Lieutenant, RANR. He was mobilised by proclamation on 5 October 1940. He was then appointed to HMAS *Rushcutter*, additional, and then HMAS *Penguin* for the auxiliary HMAS *Wyrallah*, before joining HMAS *Parramatta* on the East Indies Station by Troop Convoy **US8**, and then by service transport. At the time of his joining on 11 February 1941, *Parramatta* was employed as convoy escort to the following for part or all of the voyage noted:

Convoy **BN.13**, departing Aden on 17 January 1941, arriving at Suez on 24 January 1941.

Convoy **BS.13**, from Suez 19 January 1941 until dispersal on 27 January 1941.

Convoy **BNF.1**, departing Bombay on 26 January 1941, arriving Suez 6 February 1941.

Convoy **BN.16**, departing Aden on 17 February 1941 until dispersal on 20 February 1941.

Convoy **BS.20**, departing Suez on 18 March 1941 until dispersal 26 March 1941.

On 1 June 1941, *Parramatta* was transferred to the Mediterranean. The journey to Alexandria from the Red Sea via the Suez Canal was without incident. The sloop entered harbour on 3 June, securing to a buoy after fuelling to find she was in harbour with HMA Ships *Perth*, *Stuart*, *Voyager* and *Vendetta*. *Waterhen* was at sea but arrived the next day from Tobruk. On the night following *Parramatta*'s arrival, a large-scale air raid took place on Alexandria. The barrage put up over the harbour was impressive, and the ship's company also heard the sound of shrapnel falling consistently into the water with a steady zipping sound, occasionally hitting the steel deck and fittings. After this experience, the ship's company of *Parramatta* were to treat their steel helmets with great respect. An extensive and prolonged air raid took place on the evening of 7 June. It lasted most of the night, with bombs and mines causing casualties in the city, fires,

along with some damage ashore. *Parramatta* took an active part in the various barrages. On the night of 10 June, an experiment of making funnel smoke from the ships in harbour was seen to be quite effective as cover by observing aircraft. This evolution became standard procedure during later night air raids. *Parramatta* was brought to short notice for steam on 15 June for Operation *Battleaxe*. This operation consisted of naval assistance to an Army advance against an enemy position in the Western Desert. During the day, *Parramatta* embarked a Naval Port Party intended to occupy Sollum after its capture, sailing at dusk with two small HM Ships; anti-submarine whalers *Setra* and *Southern Sea*. The voyage was uneventful, and the three ships arrived and berthed at 12:00 on 16 June. HM Ships already at Mersa Matruh were HM Gunboats *Gnat* and *Cricket*, a Tug, and a small merchant ship. Operation *Battleaxe* was cancelled on 18 June, so *Parramatta* left Mersa Matruh for Alexandria at sunset, escorting the Tug *St. Tsay*, with HMS *Southern Sea* towing a captured Italian schooner. The voyage was uneventful, except that *Southern Sea* had some problems with her tow, dismasting the schooner off Alexandria when turning the tow over to *St. Tsay*.

Parramatta arrived at Alexandria at 12:00 on 19 June, refuelled, then landed the Naval Port Party. HM Ships *Flamingo* and *Auckland* and HMAS *Parramatta* were then transferred to the operational control of Rear Admiral, Alexandria - Rear Admiral George H Creswell - for escort duties on the ferry supply service to the 'invested fortress of Tobruk.' The fourth ship, HMS *Grimsby* - recently part of the Red Sea Force - had been sunk by bombers several weeks before, close to Tobruk. The RAN destroyers *Stuart*, *Voyager*, *Vendetta* and *Waterhen* had been taking supplies into Tobruk and carrying personnel and evacuating casualties for some time. Their routine was to sail into Tobruk at high speed after dusk, unload during the night, then sail in time to be as far away from the coast as possible before dawn. Even so, each of them had been frequently attacked. Intensive air raids were experienced on the nights of both the 21st and 22nd of June. Some of the aircraft glided in from seaward, their engines silenced, with several passing close overhead. As a consequence, close range weapons were continually in use.

On 22 June, *Parramatta* in company with her senior ship, HMS *Auckland*, left Alexandria at 19:50, to escort the small British steam tanker, SS *Pass of Balmaha*. This vessel was loaded with a cargo of seven hundred and fifty tons of aviation fuel and petrol, intended for the besieged garrison at Tobruk. The ordered route was followed, and traversed without incident, on 23 June. On the morning of 24 June, *Auckland* was on station ahead, and *Parramatta* was astern of the tanker. Both escorts carried out independent zigzags. At 08:40, a single enemy reconnaissance aircraft was observed to the west and was fired upon by *Auckland*. At 09:15, an Italian S.79 aircraft came out of the sun from astern, dropping a stick of bombs which fell ahead of *Parramatta*. At 11:48, three S.79s attacked with torpedoes, two being on either quarter of *Parramatta*. Bursts of fire at each of these aircraft from both escorts caused them to drop their weapons early.

Parramatta turned to starboard to avoid the torpedo on the starboard side. At 13:45, an attack was made from the port side by a single S.79, which dropped four bombs, straddling *Parramatta*. At 17:35, *Parramatta* opened fire at maximum range on a large formation of enemy aircraft. Two more large formations were observed working their way westward at maximum range towards the sun. Observers in *Parramatta* identified these aircraft as German JU88 *Stukas*, flying at fourteen thousand feet, with sixteen aircraft in each formation. One of these formations attacked *Parramatta*, whereas the other two formations homed in on *Auckland*, both escorts engaging with long range and close-range guns. At 17:50, *Auckland* became obscured in dense smoke, indicating that she had been hit. When she emerged from the smoke, she was heading directly towards *Parramatta*, forcing the latter to make a rapid change of direction to avoid a collision between her and *Pass of Balmaha*. *Auckland* had taken on a list to port and started to swing to port. As she passed down *Parramatta*'s starboard side, it was obvious that she was a blazing wreck aft of her mainmast, with no stern or quarterdeck visible, but her forward guns were still firing. The attacks continued for another fifteen minutes, then the enemy retired. *Pass of Balmaha* appeared unscathed and was ordered by *Parramatta* to keep to seaward and remain underway. *Auckland* had stopped, and her crew was abandoning ship. She continued to lie with a heavy list to port, blowing off steam, with smoke streaming from fires inside her. Several officers were still onboard destroying the confidential books and any other secret documentation. *Parramatta* stopped to windward of the men in the water, and lowered her whaler, a dinghy, lifebelts and floats.

At 18:28, another aerial attack was observed forming, but *Parramatta* could not immediately move. Due to survivors from *Auckland* in the water in the vicinity of her propellers, she could not go ahead. The attack, when it came, caught *Parramatta* while she was still gathering speed. This was a level bombing attack by a V formation of six Italian S.79 aircraft, flying from east to west, at five thousand feet. Steady gunfire at these aircraft appeared to not deter them, as they pressed home their attack on *Parramatta*, dropping many bombs. Some were close but short, which lifted the ship bodily out of the water. However, *Paramatta* remained unscathed. After flying past *Parramatta*, the attacking aircraft turned and concentrated their attention on *Pass of Balmaha*. Fortunately, this effort also missed. Heavy fighter support of some twenty or thirty ME 109s and 110s were seen forming up as the bombers finally withdrew. As these aircraft made their attacking passes, they also strafed *Auckland*'s helpless survivors in the water. Shortly after, there was a loud internal explosion caused by *Auckland*'s boilers exploding, which lifted what was left of her clear out of the water. Her back was broken, with a visible crease down her starboard side, she eventually settled with a pronounced list to port, which gradually got greater, until she rolled over and sank. *Pass of Balmaha* had lowered her boats, as if they intended to help pick up survivors, however, this was not the case, they were wisely abandoning ship as her cargo of fuel was highly explosive. It was obvious that *Parramatta* and the small tanker

could not get into a position of safety from dive bombers before dusk. Then there was the need to pick up the survivors from *Auckland*, who would have to wait until after nightfall to be rescued. *Parramatta* moved to seaward to give herself some manoeuvring room, while still remaining in the immediate vicinity. As the sun got low on the horizon, several aircraft formations could be seen. The enemy was coming from the south-east, working around towards the sun, then overhead to attack. At 19:55, the attack began with three formations of JU88 *Stukas*. *Parramatta* zigzagged at her best speed, endeavouring to turn beam on to each attack, all the time putting up defensive fire with all the guns at her disposal. These inflicted at least three direct hits with four-inch shells on aircraft, and pieces of a fourth were seen falling into the sea. Each dive bomber appeared to release one large bomb and four smaller ones. Although *Parramatta* was showered with shrapnel, she was not structurally damaged, and, fortunately, there were no casualties. All available weapons were constantly firing, and the men who manned them fought with purpose. This included the aft Vickers machine gun crew, manned by sick bay staff, and trained by Harrington. The Surgeon's time served with Sydney University Regiment was put to good use, under actual combat conditions.

The last few aircraft did not attack, and finally withdrew as the sun began to set. *Parramatta* then turned westward towards the darkening horizon, ever alert for the possibility of a torpedo attack from this direction. With the aerial threat diminished, *Parramatta* slowly approached the boats and *Auckland's* survivors still treading water waiting to be rescued. HMAS *Waterhen*, and later HMAS *Vendetta*, came into view. *Parramatta* signalled the position(s) and distance(s) of *Auckland's* survivors and was picking them up when *Waterhen* arrived. The destroyer then circled the area, carrying out an anti-submarine patrol. *Pass of Balmaha*, now manned, reported that she was damaged in her boiler room and could not 'flash up' her boilers. *Waterhen* was then assigned the task of taking the tanker in tow to Tobruk. Having embarked all of *Auckland's* survivors *Parramatta* left at 21:40 on 24 June for Mersa Matruh in accordance with instructions received. However, being low on ammunition, and having onboard several seriously wounded survivors, the command in *Parramatta* decided to then head directly to Alexandria, and signalled these intentions to Rear Admiral, Alexandria. Meanwhile, the wardroom and the petty officers' mess were turned into sick bays. Harrington, with the assistance of Leading Steward Richard Bampton, and the two Sick Berth Attendants, SBA George Poyser and SBA John Warner, worked through the night among *Auckland's* wounded and suffering. They treated men black with oil, and men burned by the fierce fires in *Auckland* before she sank. They also treated men sick with shock; men vomiting from the ingestion of fuel oil; men fighting to get air into lungs concussed by the effects of underwater explosions; men with broken limbs and ruptured body parts; men blind with gases from toxic fumes; exhausted men from struggling among spouting columns of water thrown up by exploding bombs; men at the last stages of human endurance. They sprawled on chairs, on the deck, or on tables.

One man, who appeared uninjured, sat calmly smoking in a chair until he quietly died. To add to their misery, the atmosphere in the ship below decks was foul and putrid with the fumes and stench of battle, and underfoot, the decks were dark and slippery with a slurry of blood and water. But because of Harrington and his hard-working assistants, the injured and sick were reasonably calm and cheerful. Harrington in particular was described by an officer shipmate, 'as a magnificent character, drily humorous, keenly intelligent and very efficient.' *Parramatta* arrived alongside at Alexandria at 19:45 on 25 June with one hundred and sixty-two survivors from *Auckland* on board. Of these, twenty-two were serious medical cases. Two men had died of their wounds and were properly buried at sea with due reverence.

In recognition of this service, Harrington was recommended for the award of the Distinguished Service Cross (DSC), the citation for which - in part - reads thus:

'For outstanding gallantry, fortitude and resolution whilst serving in HMAS *Parramatta*. This officer on his own initiative trained a crew from his staff in the use of a Vickers Machine Gun, mounted aft. During several actions he took charge of the gun and crew with calm efficiency, and he set an inspiring example, not only to the crew of his own gun, but also to the men in nearby action stations. When wounded and survivors were embarked into *Parramatta*, he worked with splendid devotion in their care, and when the men from *Auckland* were finally landed, he had himself reached exhaustion. His excellent organisation contributed to the saving of lives and the comfort of the wounded. His example was inspiring to all onboard.' On Thursday, 8 January 1942, Surgeon Lieutenant Charles Frederick Harrington, MB, BS, RANR, was awarded the DSC. Unfortunately, due to circumstances beyond his control, he would never receive it in person.

Parramatta was ordered to immediately prepare to sail again on another convoy, heading westward at 06:00 the next morning. The need for escort ships was desperate. The ship's company fought against exhaustion to work through the night. *Parramatta* was cleaned of the debris, grime and blood of action. She refuelled and quickly restocked her magazines with her full complement of ammunition. Before dawn of 26 June, the sailing was cancelled. However, the crew continued to work through the 26th. Wireless aerials destroyed by bombs were renewed; two Oerlikon guns were fitted amidships, and just after dusk they sailed. At 06:25 the next morning, off Mersa Matruh, a rapidly approaching 'contact' was made by Asdic, followed by a torpedo track under the ship's keel amidships. *Parramatta* had not recently been degaussed, but the enemy for his part had failed to fit the torpedo with a magnetic firing pistol, plus the weapon had been set too deep. *Parramatta* turned on the still visible track made by the torpedo. Contact was then made by Asdic, followed by three separate patterns of depth charges. Asdic then indicated that the submarine was moving very slowly. Oil came to the surface, then contact faded and was lost. *Stuart* met up with *Parramatta* towards mid-

day to continue the search. *Parramatta* then went into Mersa Matruh and *Voyager* came out to replace *Stuart*. *Parramatta* transferred twelve depth charges to *Voyager* to help them 'have a go at their submarine.'

By the end of August 1941, *Parramatta* had been commissioned for over seventeen months. Her main armament and essential fittings and fixtures had been worn and worked almost to breaking point. The ship's company as a whole had borne the strain of war as best they could, but now they were really feeling the effects of continuous active service. Lack of sleep had worn them down as much as continuous action had. Night after night the air raids had given them no respite. As an anti-aircraft ship, *Parramatta* always joined in the barrage. This had become quite tedious, and the crew were more or less living on their nerves. The ship was at Famagusta on 29 August, returning to Alexandria on the 30th, and the next few days were spent cleaning boilers. Raids were almost constant. On the night of 5 September, a JU 88 swept close above *Parramatta*'s foremast and dropped a large bomb between her and HM Ships *Woolwich* and *Kandahar*. On 7 September, *Parramatta* went to sea for a shoot at a sleeve target. At 18:00, she was in transit to Port Said as escort for the merchant ship SS *Clan Forbes*. There were many aircraft aloft throughout the moonlit night. *Parramatta* anchored in the Great Bitter Lake to act as anti-aircraft ship for the assembled merchant ships. The Suez Canal was heavily raided to the south from 23:55 to 05:30. *Parramatta* held her fire to avoid drawing attention to the merchant ships in her charge. The next day, she proceeded past sunken wrecks to Tewfik. At Tewfik, *Parramatta* anchored each night at Attaka, mooring each morning in the Tewfik Roadstead. Nearly every night she was duty anti-aircraft ship. She was kept at one hour's notice for steam, or at immediate notice during raids. Raids were experienced at the Canal on the 9th, 12th, 13th and 14th at Suez, coming in from many directions. On 13 September, *Parramatta* was fitted with new four-inch gun barrels to replace the worn-out old ones. During this time, there were many departures from the ship. Experienced men went to new ships. Several of the officers were sent on courses, and one was invalided out. Although a hard core of officers remained with the ship, including Surgeon Lieutenant Harrington.

With new gun barrels and several new crew members, *Parramatta* completed her tour as duty anti-aircraft ship at Suez and left for Hurghada airfield with one hundred and thirty air force personnel embarked. She then went on survey duty in the Gulf of Suez. German propaganda radio claimed that *Parramatta* was taking soundings for a refuge for the Mediterranean Fleet which the Germans proposed to eventually drive through the Canal. The Gulf is circled by mountains, and when attacking German bombing aircraft would come in from the desert and down the mountain sides in long dives before they could be spotted. The observers at Ismailia usually gave warnings of their approach, but the mountains prevented the ship's gunnery directors from giving accurate bearings while attacking aircraft were in their shadow.

On 15 November 1941, *Parramatta* returned to Alexandria in company with HMAS *Yarra*. On the 18th, they gathered together a small convoy for Tobruk. That same morning, British High Command opened their offensive, code-named *Crusader*, on a front fifty miles wide front from Sollum to Jarzbug. The whole North African theatre (land, sea and air) had exploded into battle. It had been preceded since October by an intensive aerial and naval campaign against the Germans lines of communication. At the height of this effort the Germans had lost sixty percent of their shipping on the Mediterranean crossing. The Navy continued to provide supplies and logistics, not only for the Tobruk garrison, but to also feed and supply the main Army push after the relief of the beleaguered garrison. The fortunes of war swung either way for several weeks. In those few weeks the ships carried enormous quantities of stores and logistics to Tobruk, fighting their way in and fighting their way out.

On 26 November, at 11:00, *Parramatta*, in company with HM destroyer *Avon Vale*, was escorting an ammunition ship. The first day at sea was quiet. But during the second day an enemy aircraft overflew the small convoy. By midnight of the 27th /28th, *Parramatta* was about twenty-five miles north of Bardia. At about 00:30, she went alongside the ammunition ship to give directions by megaphone her directions and orders for Tobruk. *Avon Vale* was at some distance away in the all-encompassing dark. *Parramatta* slowed to manoeuvre alongside the ammunition ship, then once the instructions were passed and acknowledged, speed was increased. A few seconds later, at 00:35, *Parramatta* was hit with two torpedoes. One struck amidships, the other struck underneath the quarter-deck. The two explosions had broken *Parramatta*'s back. She rapidly rolled over to starboard and sank. Only those on deck at the time had any chance of survival. About thirty, including two officers, clung to an *Oropesa* float amongst a mass of debris. They could hear shouting close by in the darkness. Suddenly, as if she was reluctant to take the final plunge, *Parramatta*'s stern broke the surface. Some distance off, a vague black shape was visible. Two sailors decided to take a chance and swim towards it. After a while and near exhaustion, they were rescued by *Avon Vale*. The destroyer had, by 03:05, rescued nineteen survivors from the wreckage strewn sea. No others were found, and although she had searched a wide area the destroyer could find no trace of the *Oropesa* float or any of its human cargo. Three more sailors from *Parramatta* reached the Libyan coast unaided, and were rescued by advancing British troops, making twenty-four survivors. One hundred and thirty-eight lost their lives, including each and every one of her officers.

Surgeon Lieutenant Charles Frederick Harrington, DSC, RANR, aged 27, is commemorated at the Plymouth Naval Memorial, Plymouth, Plymouth Unitary Authority, Devon, England, Panel 60 Column 2. Memorial ID 13294364.