

A vivid account of a U-boat's activity in the days of the First World War.

Up Periscope!

By MARTIN NIEMÖLLER

[Dr. Martin Niemöller, the German Lutheran pastor of Berlin-Dahlen, has been a controversial figure since his arrest in July, 1937, by the Nazis on charges of sedition. Today he remains in prison, his plea for naval service ignored. Less well-known to the American public than his opposition to Nazi control of the churches are this pastor's experiences during the World War as a U-boat commander. The following is an excerpt from Dr. Niemöller's book, 'From U-boat to Pulpit'.*—THE EDITORS]

I DID not have long to wait for a command, for I had joined at a time when several junior submarine commanding officers had been ordered to take over new types of underseas craft. So it came about that in May, 1917, I got my boat, the UC67. I was lucky in securing Sub-Lieutenant Karli Topp of Lippstadt as my executive officer. He was a fellow-townsmen and old playmate of mine. The only snag was that the UC67 had first to

complete a long refit which would last all through the month of May.

The UC37, commanded by Lieutenant Kümpel, was to sail with us from Brioni, on the Dalmatian coast, on the night of June 30-July 1. At 10 P.M. we reported both boats ready for sea and cast off, accompanied by the cheers of our comrades in arms.

A sirocco had been blowing the previous day and the sky was covered with a white cloud; the air was heavy as lead and there was an ominous absence of wind. Toward night the wind blew up and spray came over the bridge. The visibility was so hopeless that neither we nor the enemy were likely to see each other.

In this way we made good progress, but at 2:30 A.M. a destroyer on our starboard beam is seen making straight for us. 'Crash dive!' As we go down we wonder whether she really spotted us. We hear her propellers overhead, but no depth charges are dropped; evidently she has not noticed us. Shortly afterward we come up

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and cover a good distance before daybreak.

We now run into further trouble. Between the coast of Italy at Cape Santa Maria di Leuca and the northern extremity of Corfu, a stout steel net has been rigged, its upper edge a fathom under water so that it is just possible to scrape over it on the surface, while the lower edge is a good 200 feet under water, making it difficult to dive under. This net has already caused the loss of several of our submarines.

At daybreak we sight the drifters and motorboats guarding the net barrage to the south. We have to hug the coast of Corfu in order to slip through the opening near it. It means submerging to periscope depth. Toward noon we steer for the opening at 190 feet, while a number of patrol vessels cruise overhead. Depth charges are dropped, but they explode far from us and by 4 P.M. we are safely through the Straits of Otranto.

II

Our operation orders are simply: 'Lay a mine-field off Marseilles; destroy commerce along the French coast.'

We spend the next two days steaming toward Malta on a southwesterly course. Once we sight smoke on a parallel course and our superior speed enables us to approach the ship for an attack. Everything works out perfectly, but our torpedo does not leave its tube, for we are dealing with a large and shallow-draft submarine-chaser, with lots of heavy depth charges on her quarterdeck. If she is wanting us to fire torpedoes under her, in order to smother us with depth

charges, she had better get on without making our acquaintance.

In the forenoon we are between Malta and the southeast corner of Sicily, where another surprise awaits us; aircraft are patrolling the lines of communication. Is this a new form of anti-submarine protection? We proceed under water for a couple of miles to avoid being sighted and reported. When we come up we see a submarine which we cannot clearly identify as ours. The recognition signals for today are a red and white star as challenge and a double green star as reply. We fire our challenge. Has she seen it? . . . A minute later comes the reply: green, green! Soon we are within hail of UC73. She is homeward bound and tells us that shipping for the eastern Mediterranean is going south of Malta and between Pantelleria and Cape Bon. It is as well that we hear this. We show our gratitude to the lieutenant in charge by sending him a bottle of brandy on a heaving line. With another 'Cheerio' we both continue on our way. After dark we alter course south in order to arrive between Cape Bon and Pantelleria by the time the next day breaks.

On the next morning Pantelleria is on our starboard bow. We steam north at slow speed and keep a sharp lookout. The sea is fairly smooth and the horizon is clear. Nothing in sight. Patience. Wait and see.

Our patience is rewarded. At 8 A.M. Sub-Lieutenant Topp reports smoke right ahead. I interrupt my breakfast and go to the bridge. There is a large number of columns of smoke and they keep increasing. Then the masts are visible and we see a convoy coming toward us. About twenty steamers, escorted by an equal num-

ber of patrol vessels, which include a yacht with a kite balloon, destroyers and trawlers. Everything imaginable and making straight for us!

After a good look around we submerge and approach the armada at slow speed. There are five columns of four steamers each, it would seem. We are on their right flank and it looks as if we will slide between the two right-hand columns of steamers, so that we might bag two of them with torpedoes from our bow and stern tubes—if the escort do not prevent us and if our torpedoes run true. The distance decreases rapidly and the leading escort, a trawler, is now passing us. It is time to alter course and we slowly turn eastward. Then a signal is hoisted by all the ships and, as it is hauled down a couple of minutes later, the whole convoy alters course east. 'Port twenty! Full ahead both! Hydroplanes zero!'

Now it is only a question of a bow shot at the last ship, and even this is open to doubt. 'Slow both! Up periscope!' Yes, we can do it. The only escort ship that might threaten us is a full five cables' length off. 'Down periscope!—No. 1 tube ready!—Up periscope!'—60, 90, 130 feet. Explosion hit! The phonograph in the fore peak plays: '*Deutschland, Deutschland über alles!*' A hundred and sixty feet.

Depth charge! Out go the lights and fuses. Crockery breaks. 'Switch on emergency lights!' 'Boat at one hundred ninety feet, sir!' We are on the hand gear for everything, to avoid noise. Another couple of big depth charges explode near us, then all is quiet overhead. We run on for a mile and a half to the north and then rise slowly to periscope depth. 'Up periscope!'

There lies the steamer with one—no, two—trawlers alongside, taking off her crew. The convoy is steaming east, north of Pantelleria, as hard as it can.

Topp, Arnoldi, the navigating warrant officer and the rest of them also take a peep through the periscope. When I get to it again the steamer has sunk and both trawlers are steaming east, but several patrol vessels are approaching from Cape Bon and a seaplane is also in sight. There can therefore be no question of coming up yet and we run north under water for several more miles.

At 11 A.M. things seem more peaceful and we surface. Soon both oil engines are running and we are off to Marseilles. Anyhow, we have sunk the first steamer—a fine ship of at least four thousand tons. Nationality? Probably British, as the French would have taken survivors westward to Tunis or Bizerta.

III

Just before noon I relieve the navigating warrant officer to allow him to take his noon sight and as I look round I see a black spot against the sun. A plane! 'Crash dive!' The watch tumble down into the conning tower, the automatic vents whistle and the water gurgles round the conning tower: 30, 40 feet! Crash! Explosion aft. Crash! Another over the conning tower, knocking me off my feet and throwing me against the side. A three-inch stream of water follows. Crash! Explosion for'ard.

The engine room reports: 'Water coming in through E. R. hatchway.' Only that was wanting! We are at 65 feet and going down rapidly. Thank goodness! The E. R. reports the leak

stopped. All seems to be well in the fore part of the boat.

Two men are working in the conning tower to plug the hole in the deckplates. They succeed pretty well in checking the inflow of water.

We bob up and down between 130 and 90 feet. The regulating tank has been pumped out, but we must now empty the bilges, even if it means a telltale patch of oil on the surface, because the boat is still far too heavy. What is to be done?

I study the chart and we alter course eastward toward the Adventure Bank west of Malta, where the soundings are below 200 feet and where it is possible to lie on the bottom, if necessary, to carry out repairs.

I go into the engine room and am told that the hatch was blown open by the first detonation, allowing a huge volume of water to pour through, but that the pressure of the water then jammed the hatch down so tightly that not another drop came through.

The pilot of the seaplane appears to think that he has destroyed us with his three bombs, so he does not trouble us further. We do not, however, know what is going on overhead and our hydrophones are not to be relied upon after these explosions. We cannot therefore tell whether any patrol vessels are near us.

A thorough examination of the boat establishes the cause of her excessive heaviness. The lead-in pipe, a heavy steel tube enclosing the lead-in from the aerial aloft, has a leaky valve and has filled with water. The damage might have been far more serious, but even so it is quite bad enough.

At about 4 P.M. we come up to 60 feet to take a look round. 'Up

periscope!' Bump, bump, bump . . . nothing further happens and the motor stops. 'Couple up the hand gear!' But the periscope will not budge and all our efforts to move it prove useless.

'Up spare periscope!' It actually rises! A good thing to have a spare periscope. 'Rise to thirty feet!' As I look into the periscope I see nothing but pitch-black darkness. So the spare periscope is also done in. 'Go down to ninety feet!—Down periscope!' We now feel really uneasy; a submarine without a periscope ceases to be a submarine and is merely a blind cripple.

There is nothing to be done—we must wait for nightfall. Four hours slowly pass and as a further precaution we circle round for a few hundred yards. 'Stop both!'—'All quiet in the boat! Listen!' All ears are laid against the boat's sides to pick up any sound. Everything remains quiet. We repeat the procedure at 50 feet and still hear nothing. Well then . . . 'Blow all tanks! Surface!'

Hardly is the conning tower clear of the water than I tear the hatch open and scramble through. The night is dark and the sea slight, with nothing to be seen. 'Blow everything!'

IV

Topp takes over the watch and I accompany Arnoldi along the upper deck. First we examine the E. R. hatch with the aid of an electric torch; yes, some of the tumbler bolts for securing it have carried away. A few fragments of metal lie around, otherwise all is well. We go forward and look into the mine tubes. Here also bomb fragments are scattered and the upper mine in No. 1 tube has its top

crushed in like a child's rubber ball. It might be best not to lay these mines; they might go off prematurely. And now for the conning tower. The insulating bush of the lead-in tube is shattered, so the lead-in pipe is done for. The main periscope is projecting about three feet and is jammed. We manage to extract a couple of bomb fragments from its tube, but cannot get it to budge. There is no visible damage to the forward spare periscope; the defect must therefore be an optical one. It is obvious that we must now make for home.

At nightfall two days later we are off the entrance to the Straits of Otranto, having timed our arrival so as not to cross the first line of patrols until after dark to avoid submerging as far as possible. The three of us on the conning tower peer into the darkness. We get past the patrols safely and must now be approaching the great net. Sure enough, soon after 9:30 P.M. we sight a motorboat and turn east. A cable's length farther we see a second—and so we go, finding one boat after another, spaced so close together as to preclude any possibility of breaking through on the surface without being seen. Our minds are made up for us by a motorboat which approaches so close as to compel us to dive. There is no help for it now. We turn sixteen points to avoid fouling the net and then steer north at 190 feet.

After having passed the net without noticing it, we go on for the rest of that night at 90 feet, and then during the whole of the next day at 160 to 190, at a speed of three knots. Now and again we hear depth charges far away. If their sound gets nearer we alter course slightly. Beyond that, the

day passes peacefully and monotonously. There can be no question of coming up, for we are both blind and deaf.

V

A gentle hum is heard through the boat: the ventilating system has been started up. From noon onward we release oxygen at intervals. Strictly speaking, the ship's company, with the exception of the few E. R. and control room watchkeepers, should be turned in. But we do not feel like turning in, we are too preoccupied. The hands of the clock over the little chart-table in the control room move slowly round; mile after mile is reeled off; overhead the sun must be setting as daylight turns to dusk. Every hour we pump a little water from the regulating tank, during which process the hum of the pump is heard for a few minutes. The hydroplanes are scarcely audible; they, together with the vertical rudder, have been changed over to hand gear to save our electric current and to avoid any noise which might be picked up by enemy hydrophones.

Every three or four seconds a drop of water trickles down the main periscope and splashes down into the periscope well. Little is said and for several minutes at a time no word is spoken. Our thoughts are far from the straits of Otranto, in our distant homes, and beyond them again in a land where peace reigns supreme.

Is there peace anywhere? Will peace come to us—or shall we, like the Flying Dutchman, spend year after year at sea without rest or respite? And we are, as ever, faced by the eternal questions: life, the universe and God. These questions are not prompted by

curiosity—they force themselves on us. All we know is that we have not found the answers to them.

At 8 P.M.—‘Diving stations!’ The call goes through the boat like a breath of fresh air and the questions which occupied the crew’s thoughts and spirits so deeply are temporarily forgotten. We live our life, even if we do not know what comes after it. We are cogs in the world’s mechanism, even if its purpose is not revealed to us. We hear an order and are responsible for its execution; our life, which is so incomprehensible to us, is to hear and to obey.

Yes, that is the real purport of life!—to hear, to receive an order, a command, and to obey it! ‘Rise to sixty-five feet!’

We repeat our desperate attempts to utilize the enforced silence to try and pick up any sounds of the outer world through the hull plating. Then we come up to 45 feet; everything is peaceful and quiet.

‘Surface! Blow all tanks!’ Up we come, after twenty-two hours under water. The conning-tower hatch is pushed up. Less than a mile astern is a patrol vessel steaming at low speed. There is no help for it; we must submerge again and alter course consid-

erably to shake off our unpleasant follower. Have we by any chance a leaky fuel tank which is leaving a tell-tale trail on the smooth surface of the water?

The hands of the clock crawl round at a snail-like pace. The damp heat in the boat makes the perspiration pour off our faces. At last, at last it is 9 o’clock . . . 60 feet . . . 45 feet. . . . ‘Surface!’ It is quite dark and we are alone. A nocturnal trip up the Adriatic; we go ‘all out.’ At daybreak we steer a zigzag course, for weather conditions favor an attack by hostile submarines; the wind of force 4 and a slight sea might easily prevent us from spotting the track of a torpedo in good time. Toward evening we are off the entrance to the Bocche and fire the recognition signal.

We spend a day with our flotilla and return our mines, most of which, it now appears, are damaged and no longer serviceable. When the torpedo is to be drawn from No. 2 tube it cannot be moved forward or back; the whole tube has been distorted by the force of the explosion of that last sea-plane bomb. One more defect. So my first independent operation ends two days later at Pola Dockyard where all our hurts are to be healed.