

Ladies and gentlemen,

Permit me to say some words on the occasion of this unique meeting its origin dating back to 45 years ago when HMS Walker sunk the German submarine U 99.

Before I revert to what can already be considered history, let me express to you hearty thanks on behalf of the U 99 crew members and their ladies present here, for the super welcome accorded to us. We especially wish to thank you, dear Roy, for all your efforts and trouble taken in arranging this meeting which can be considered a most successful affair. We are sure also to-night's dinner dance will be enjoyed by all of us just as much as the trip to Bath and Wells, touring Bristol, the lunch in Roy's home, last night's pub party and especially the visit to the Council House where we met the Lord Mayor of this beautiful city.

We are delighted to also meet to-night members of the Submarine Old Comrades Association to whom we wish to say thanks for allowing us to stay in this hall and providing us with musical entertainment.

I am sorry that not more members of the U 99 crew could accept your kind invitation but old age and illness have taken their toll. I wish to assure you however that those who could not come over here are with us in spirit including the 'Old Man', Admiral Otto Kretschmer, and Jochen von Knebel who arranged the wonderful gathering in Neustadt and Aumühle last year. I need not mention they are all sending through us their sincere greetings - Admiral Kretschmer did this by cable to Roy Hemmings yesterday - and hope on some future occasion they may also see you again.

Well, ladies and gentlemen, what happened 45 years ago is history, indeed. We were young people, full of enthusiasm about events happening at that time and hardly thinking about what fate might have in store for us. Suddenly we found ourselves thrown into a war the length and cruelty of which we did not yet realize. England - our enemy ! Relentlessly we were driven on by the news media at that time, radio and the press, to accept this as a fact. We have to admit we fell victims to that campaign and hardly could wait for the day to leave the naval base of Kiel on our first operation with the newly commissioned U 99.

We were cocksure nothing would ever happen to that boat as we were sailing under a commander already well-known and, moreover, had welded onto both sides of the conning tower gilded horseshoes which by a strange coincidence had become attached to the two flukes of the sub's anchor as it was weighed during a trial run in Kiel harbour.

When still in the North Sea we had our first encounter with war, not with the enemy but with a German war plane mistaking us for a British sub and showering us with a series of bombs which fortunately caused only minor damages to the boat but we still had to return to the naval base at Wilhelmshaven for repair. On that route we got into a British mine field where it proved that the two horseshoes at the conning tower brought us good luck. We were frozen listening to the nerve-racking noise of the boat's hull scratching along mines which miraculously did not detonate. Anyway, thanks to the skill of the Commander and the first mate we safely reached Wilhelmshaven.

Recalling the events of that first partial operation we found our enthusiasm had already slightly dwindled and when on resumption of the operation and another six to follow we had to live with depth-charge bombing, air attacks and gun duels almost every day, there was no enthusiasm left except when ashore in the French naval base of Lorient, we full of wine and champagne and in the company of charming mademoiselles.

Again at sea we followed the meanwhile daily routine of submarine warfare with all its horrors and fear. How did we hate the ping, ping, ping of the enemy destroyers' Asdick, the swash, swash, swash of their propellers accelerating in speed, running over the sub and next the horrid and ear-deafening detonation. I think I cannot better describe our weary life and feelings than shown by the picture 'The Boat' which certainly many of you have watched. Apart from some scenes which would not have been tolerated by former submariners that picture gives a record of how we lived and what we felt. Our feelings against those keeping us under water and relentlessly plastering us with depth charges were certainly not the nicest and all we could think of were - let me use some rude language - the bastards above you undoubtedly referring to us as the bastards below.

And then came St. Patrick's day, the 17th of March 1941. Able Seaman Roy Hemmings and his team mates had dropped their last and only depth charge left onto the enemy below and accomplished what hundreds of similar charges on that operation had failed to. We were deadly hit, sinking rapidly down to almost 850 feet every moment expecting the boat hull to crush in. Well, those above had managed after all ! But our comrades in the control room had not given up yet. A jammed valve was opened, air was blown into the tanks and buoyancy returned popping us up to the surface within a matter of minutes. Before the conning tower hatch was opened the 'Old Man' had already given the command: 'Gun crew ready for action' which we found a bit strange as we knew we were surrounded by at least two destroyers which would blow us to bits before we had a chance to man our 8.8 gun. Belonging to the gun crew and jumping from the conning tower onto the slippery deck, I noticed with hardly concealed glee that one of the depth-charges must have caused a direct hit to the old gun as its barrel hung down at an awkward angle.

Meanwhile, the diesel engine team tried to get the boat under way but there was no movement whatsoever as the two props seemed to be also damaged by the depth-charges. We were now assembled on deck and on the conning tower waiting for - let me use bad language again - the bastards. And through the darkness of the early dawn emerged a destroyer approaching at slow speed, the HMS Walker, we soon found out. About 500 yards away from us would she start gunning us to hell ? That was in fact what we had expected as we were hunting for the last two days and nights a convoy and the destroyers protecting it before we got into the fangs of the Walker. However, no action on part of the ship. Perhaps she would not waste any shells realizing the damaged sub might capsize any moment. All of a sudden the destroyer changed course - she had spotted another sub as we were later told - and we jumped from the conning tower into the sea or slid down into the icy water from the slanting deck when U 99 finally started on her last dive.

The Walker out of sight we all thought that would be the end as the cold water began soaking into our leather clothing, our limbs turning numb and only the life vests keeping us floating on the rough sea.

After some time and after we had given up all hope we saw lights ahead and could make out the dim shape of a destroyer. It was the Walker again and some rays of hope flared up in us. Would they take us now aboard? Yes, the destroyer slowly approached, rope netting hung over her sides and lights were flashed to show us in what direction to swim. One by one we were finally heaved on deck from the sea which meanwhile had turned very rough. Utterly exhausted we were face to face with the enemy! Were these people who were forced to climb down the rope netting at the risk of their lives to our rescue the devils who occupied our minds day and night?

We were still too dazed to realize what actually had happened to us and only felt our senses fully returning when eventually taken below deck. Neither offending words nor actions. No pushing around. Instead, even a friendly clap on the shoulder and after we had wrapped ourselves in dry blankets we were offered hot tea and rum. The sailors really treated us well, they were almost chummy, kept smiling and tried hard with gestures to make themselves understood as they found but little response when talking to us in English.

Meanwhile, the ship's radio had been switched on and we noticed a tall and slim sailor sliding in his wellingtons over the wet and slanting deck whistling to the tune 'In the mood', nodding to us in a friendly way. I never forgot that ginger-haired sailor showing by his carefree attitude that there was no reason to worry and whenever I happen to listen to the tune of 'In the mood' I think of him. When in spring last year we met some members of the Walker crew after 44 years, I immediately walked up to 'Ginger' Mortimer telling him: 'You must be the fellow having whistled 'In the mood' early in the morning of St. Patrick's day'. I was dead right.

During the two days and nights we stayed on the ship we tried hard to talk to each other, showing the water-soaked fotos of our families and being shown theirs. They took special care of our sick people and we promised to meet again after the war.

Before we arrived in Liverpool and were lined out on deck to be handed over to the army addresses were exchanged. Roy Hemmings noted my Cologne home address and he gave me a pack of 'Woodbine' on which his address was written. Unfortunately, that pack was later confiscated by the army and I wonder if Roy ever got a love letter from a member of that branch. Leaving the Walker we turned round on the gangway waving to the crew who returned our farewell greetings without taking notice of the angrily shouting crowd of people gathered on the pier and the platoon of soldiers who were to escort us to a prison in the port area of the town.

Our stay on HMS Walker drastically changed our attitude towards the British Navy and her sailors. Hatred became replaced by gratitude and admiration and these feelings have remained with us ever since. There followed our years as prisoners-of-war first in the Midlands and later in Canada. The dreadful time after the war, the period of reconstruction, job finding, marriage, becoming fathers, grandfathers. The war almost forgotten occasionally meeting old comrades in the submariners' club and the U 99 crew every five years.

HMS Walker - what happened to her crew who rescued us at the risk of their lives? The memory of St. Patrick's day 1941 dwindled away until one day three years ago, I had a letter from the Hamburg Submarine Association with another letter enclosed. Sender, a Roy Hemmings. God, who was Roy Hemmings of Bristol? Perhaps a bloke from Imperial Tobacco with whom I had dealt in business? No, it was Roy Hemmings of the HMS Walker having recovered my address and although I had in the meantime moved to Hamburg, the association

got hold of me bringing us into contact again. Two months later on his way to Yugoslavia Roy had to pass through the city of Graz in Austria where we held a meeting of the U 99 crew and it was of course one of the highlights of the gathering to welcome a former member of the gallant crew of HMS Walker in our midst. The meeting in Graz was followed by a U 99 gathering in Northern Germany last year on which occasion we already could welcome six members of the Walker and we are delighted to now meet the rest of the bunch here to-day.

Before ending my story let us raise our glasses and propose a toast to our ladies who for so many years have had to listen patiently to the yarns of their husbands with each whiskey having sunk one more sub and one more destroyer until there were, in fact, no more subs and destroyers floating on the seven seas.

Well, that done let us now enjoy the hours of our friendly gathering in the hope that the 'Chevrons' will also strike up the ever-green 'In the mood' with Ginger and all of us sliding over the dancing floor.

Ladies and gentlemen, thanking you !