

German aristocrat's cunning wartime escape from Auckland prison camp



German navy officer and Auckland prisoner of war Count Felix von Luckner escaped from Motuihe Island in 1917, only to be captured at sea eight days later. Photo / Herald archives

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A stiff northerly was blowing when Count Felix von Luckner and 10 other German wartime prisoners hopped into a stolen motor boat and slipped out of Auckland unnoticed.

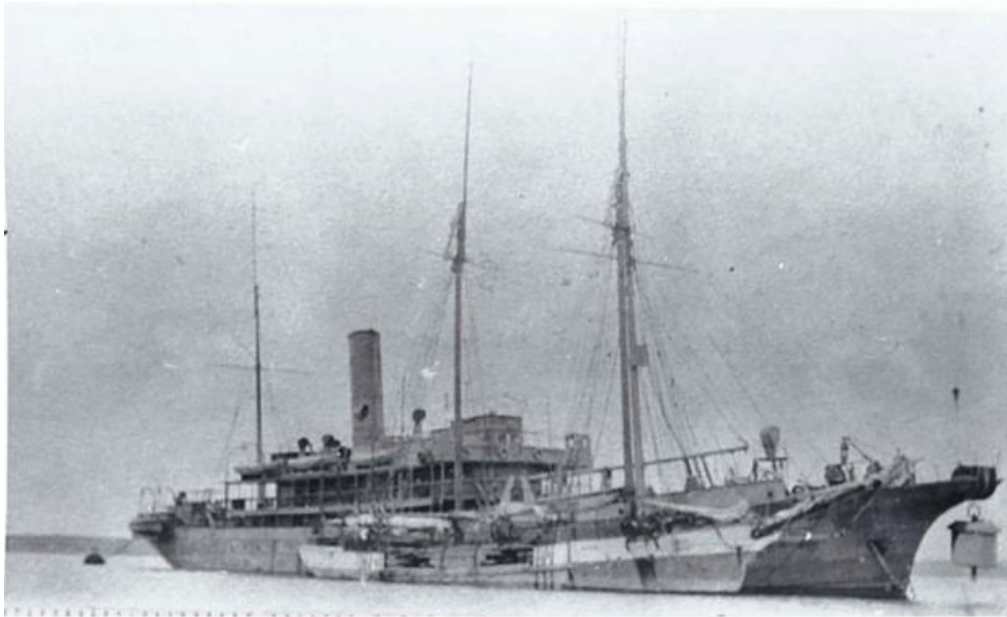
They were resourceful men. They had built a navigation sextant and radio, they had stored up food and pilfered petrol, and they had disabled their captors' telephone line at the internment camp on Island in the inner Hauraki Gulf.

It was soon after 6pm and they also took the only other boat on the island, a dinghy, leaving the guards unable to follow. It wasn't until midnight that the phone line was repaired and authorities on the mainland could be notified. Von Luckner, a German naval officer, had a six-hour head-start on his pursuers.

His audacious escape on the evening of December 13, 1917, during the First World War, and his recapture at sea eight days later, captivated the New Zealand public and helped to create his folk hero status.



The gun on the Iris that fired the shot that halted Felix von Luckner's escape from New Zealand in 1917. Photo / Auckland Libraries, Sir George Grey Special Collections



The Iris, at rear, with the Moa alongside at Auckland, after the recapture of Felix von Luckner in 1917. Photo / Auckland Libraries, Sir George Grey Special Collections

"No local news which has been published in Auckland or in New Zealand since the war commenced has aroused such an indignant storm of protest as the escape of the Germans ...," the *Herald* wrote at the time.

An indignant storm of military protest swung onto the camp commander, Lieutenant Colonel Charles Turner, on whose boat *Pearl* the Germans had fled. He faced a court-martial and was sacked over the lax security at the camp.

"There was virtually no security; there were no fences," says Fiona Alexander, of the Motuihe Island Restoration Trust. She is helping to organise an event, including historical talks and walks, at the island next Sunday to mark the centenary of von Luckner's first stay there.

How did von Luckner come to be a prisoner-of-war in the South Pacific?

He commanded the Seeadler (Sea Eagle), an armed sailing ship with auxiliary engines, in which he attacked merchant ships in the Atlantic and Pacific.

He sank 14, with the loss, it is said, of just one life, and his captives, some of whom he sent off in a French ship he had captured, said he had treated them well. All of this, along with his earlier life as a circus worker, professional boxer and international jack-of-all-trades after running away to sea at 13, fed his later reputation in New Zealand as a decent chap.

His good fortune ran out, however, in August 1917 when the Seeadler hit a reef at Maupihaa Island in French Polynesia. The crew stripped gear off the ship and got ashore with their 46 prisoners and set up camp.

Von Luckner and five men set out in one of the ship's boats for Fiji, some 2900km to the west. On the way, they stopped at the Cook Islands, passing themselves off as Norwegians to the New Zealand resident at Aitutaki, who was suspicious but hadn't the means to detain them.

At the Fijian island of Wakaya, the police were called. They arrested the Germans and sent them to Auckland.

The Motuihe wartime internment camp was for "first class" Germans, such as the Governor of Samoa Dr Erich Schultz, his chief judge and other senior officials. Von Luckner the aristocrat joined them, with his second in command and a rating as a steward. The other three seamen were sent to Matiu/Somes Island in Wellington.

Such was the gentleman's security at the camp that commander Turner is said to have requested von Luckner not to escape. The internees were even allowed trips into the city.

"Not just shopping, but for medical treatment," says Judit Tunde McPherson, who will give one of the historical talks on Sunday.

"There was a radio technician and before their escape they wanted to have a radio. This technician made one from scratch. There were a couple of bits they couldn't make from scratch so he pretended to have tooth ache. They put him on the launch and took him to the barber [who did dental work] at Narrow Neck where he got the parts he needed."

CAPTURED GERMANS

NOW IN AUCKLAND

VON LUCKNER'S SURRENDER

MOA FLYING GERMAN FLAG

SHOT FIRED ACROSS BOWS.

LAUNCH PEARL LOST AT SEA

SCOW TOWED BACK TO PORT

[BY TELEGRAPH.—PRESS ASSOCIATION.]

WELLINGTON, Wednesday.

An official statement regarding the escape of the German prisoners from Motuihi and the recapture of the party was issued this evening, as follows:

On the evening of December 13, 11 German prisoners of war, under the leadership of Commander von Luckner, lately in command of the German raider *See-adler*, made their escape from Motuihi Island, Auckland Harbour, in a motor-launch named *Pearl*, attached to the island. From the motor boat they transferred to the sailing scow *Moa*, which was seized in the Bay of Plenty, and in her they left the New Zealand coast.

They were recaptured on the evening of Friday, December 21, in the vicinity of the Kermadec Islands, by an armed vessel despatched by the New Zealand Government to those waters for the purpose, and they arrived this afternoon in Auckland, where they were at once landed.

The crew of the *Moa*, consisting of five men and a boy, were still on board their vessel when it was recaptured, and state that they have been well treated in every way by the Germans. The *Moa* herself was towed back to Auckland by the capturing vessel, and has suffered no serious damage as a result of her experiences.

The motor boat *Pearl*, which was being towed by the *Moa*, was lost in the heavy weather experienced after leaving the New Zealand coast.

The officer in command of the capturing vessel, in his report, states:—"At about noon on December 21 the *Moa's* masts were sighted about 15 miles away. As soon as she saw that she was being chased, she stood away to westward under a press of canvas and hoisted the German naval ensign, but we overhauled her in about an hour and a-half. As she paid no attention to my signal to stop, I fired a shot across her bows, when she immediately shortened sail and stopped. The German captain, in response to my verbal order, came on board in his own boat and formally surrendered, and the German ensign was then hauled down on the *Moa*. The remainder of the escapees were then removed by an armed escort. They had fair amount of provisions with them, and plenty of water, but they had thrown overboard such arms as they possessed as soon as they saw their capture to be inevitable.

"My arrival at Auckland was delayed by having to tow the *Moa* and by continuous heavy westerly weather, which necessitated the ship heaving-to for a considerable time."

REPORT ON OFFICIAL INQUIRY

COURSE OF FURTHER PROCEDURE

[BY TELEGRAPH.—OWN CORRESPONDENT.]

DUNEDIN, Wednesday.

Referring to-day to the inquiry regarding the escape of German prisoners from Motuihi, the Minister for Defence stated that at the conclusion of its proceedings the Court will forward a report on the facts to the Minister for Defence. The report will be sent on by the Minister to His Excellency the Governor-General. The Cabinet will then advise His Excellency what action to take.

After slipping away from Motuihe, the escapees made for the Mercury Islands northeast of the Coromandel Peninsula. With a gun they boarded a timber transport boat the Moa and turned offshore.

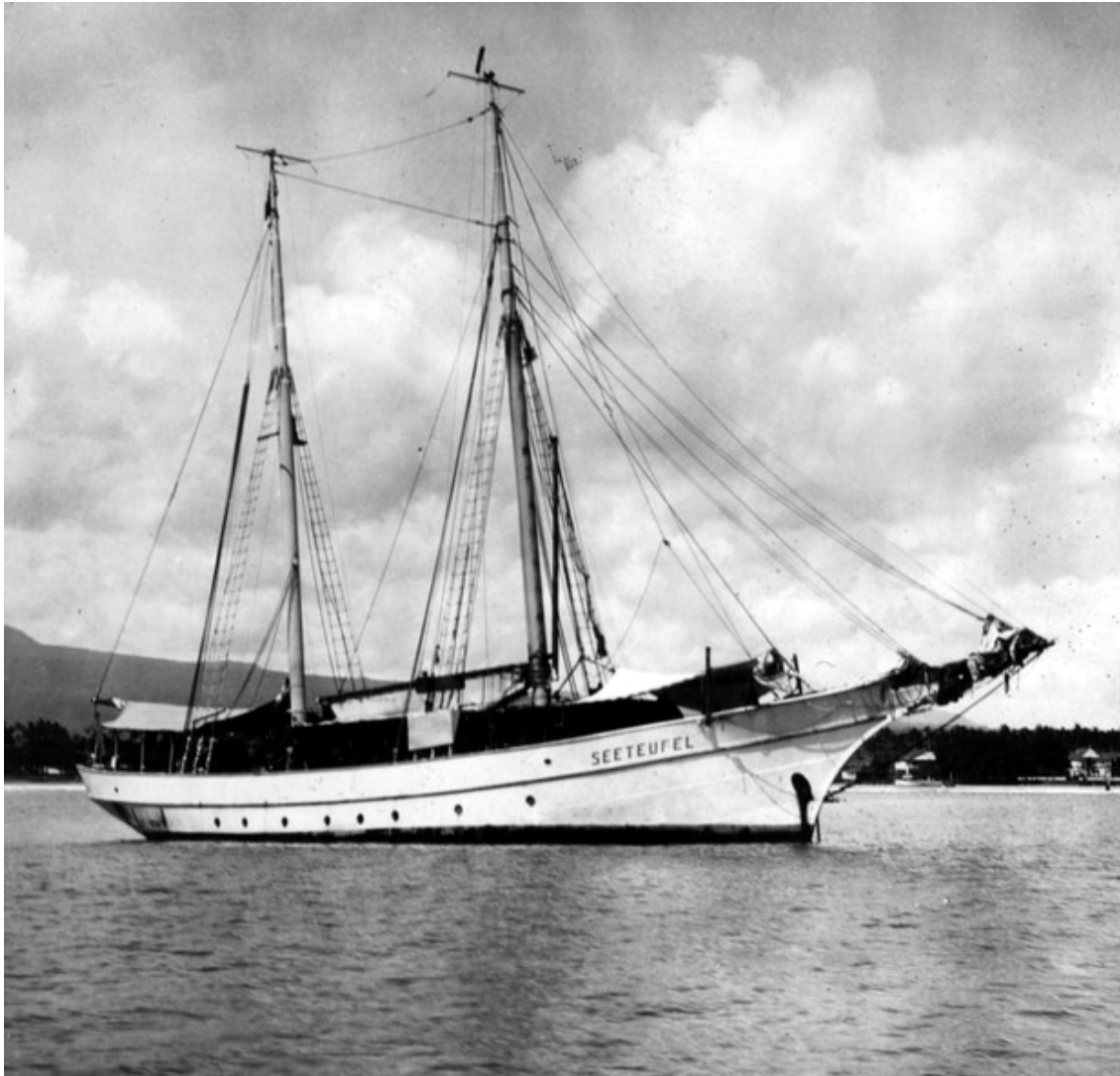
But they were seen from Moa's companion boat the Rangi several kilometres away and its crew soon landed and told the authorities.

The armed steamer the Iris was sent in pursuit and on December 21, 1917 glimpsed the Moa's masts at the Kermadec Islands, nearly 1000km northeast of the mainland. Von Luckner hoisted sails and a German naval flag and tried to flee.

"... but we overhauled her in about an hour and a half," the commander of the Iris said in the Herald. "As she paid no attention to my signal to stop, I fired a shot across her bows, when she immediately shortened sail and stopped."

The Germans threw their guns overboard, von Luckner surrendered and they were taken back to Auckland.

For the military there was a court of inquiry, a court-martial and a sacking. For von Luckner, there was a return to confinement, at Mt Eden Prison, Ripapa Island in Lyttelton Harbour and Motuihe. He and his men and other Germans went home in May 1919, six months after the end of the war.



The German Government wanted Felix von Luckner's world voyage in the Seeteufel in the late 1930s to be a propaganda mission, but he ordered the propaganda books thrown overboard.

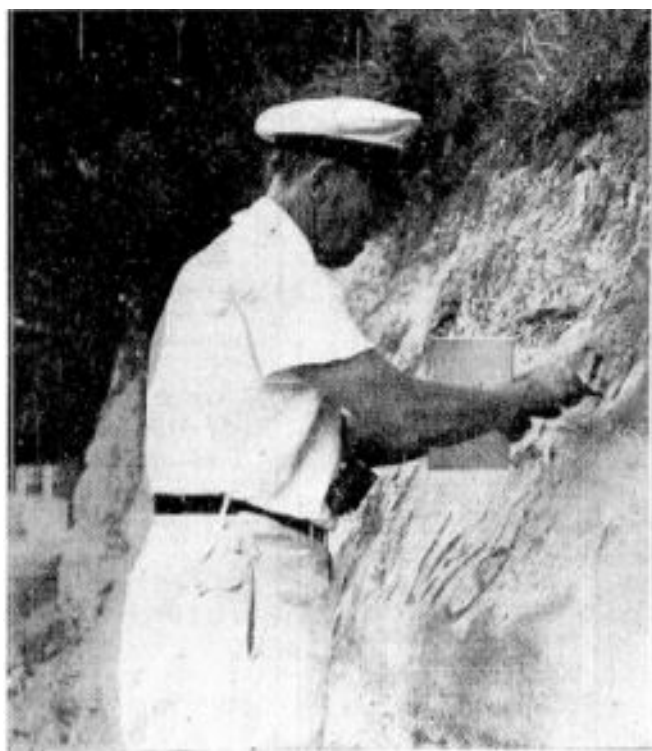
A raconteur, von Luckner undertook lecture tours and books were written about his exploits, building his reputation as the "Sea Devil".

That became the English name of his vessel, the Seeteufel in German, in which he made a soft-propaganda world tour for Nazi Germany in the count-down to the start of the Second World War in 1939.

His stay in New Zealand from February to May 1938 received enormous press coverage and was controversial.

The trip was partly funded by the German Government and its leader Adolf Hitler, but von Luckner repeatedly told the New Zealand press that he was just a sailor, he knew nothing of politics, he was not a Nazi Party member, and he had been forbidden to export Germany's politics. He portrayed himself as an ambassador of peace.

Playing up to what Kiwis liked to hear, he told the *Herald* New Zealand was a "most wonderful country" and he had great admiration for its people, who had "treated me as a good sport". He cruised the Waitemata Harbour, visited Motuihe and even carved his name on a cliff there.



Felix von Luckner carved his name into a Motuihe Island cliff face during his 1938 visit. Photo / NZ Herald, National Library

But the trip was a case of bad timing. Germany invaded Austria while he was here. Then the *Herald* interviewed him about this, he said the coup was a wise move, calculated to bring new life to a country that was not enjoying prosperity, and also to help maintain the peace of Europe.

He was attacked in the press by the Federation of Labour and an Auckland University College academic Professor A. B. Fitt.

"I am very sorry to see that Count Felix von Luckner has forgotten that he is a guest in a country with no discoverable Nazi leanings," Fitt wrote. "... in spite of his statement on arriving in this country that he did not intend to enter into political matters, Count von Luckner's statements would seem to make him a Nazi-German."

The Federation of Labour president and later cabinet minister Angus McLagan challenged von Luckner to a public debate - the German refused - and probed what had been meant when his trip was promoted as one of goodwill.

"Does he approve of the kind of 'goodwill' that has been displayed by the Nazis, first to the German workers and subsequently to the peoples of Spain, Austria and Czechoslovakia? Is this 'goodwill' the goodwill that is being shown towards those members of the Jewish race unfortunate enough to fall into Nazi clutches?" McLagan wrote in the Dominion.

Von Luckner's crew was thought to include two German Gestapo secret police, according to surveillance results reported by Police Commissioner D. J. Cumming in a 1938 memo to British security service MI5 and quoted by Auckland researcher Emeritus Professor James Bade.

Cumming noted that one crewman, Gregor Riethmaier, was trying to leave the boat and live in New Zealand and another, cameraman Hans Oesterreich, wanted to stay for two months to shoot a film. Oesterreich was "very friendly" with one of the suspected Gestapo men.



Gregor Riethmaier a crew member of Felix von Luckner's ship in 1938, stayed on in New Zealand and made his life here. Photo / supplied

Riethmaier stayed, was interned during the war, became a successful photographer, had a family, and died in 2004 aged 90. One of his three children, Paul, said Gregor spoke of von Luckner sometimes.

"They fell out. That's one of the reasons why he jumped ship in Auckland."

Gregor Riethmaier told Bade that von Luckner had once threatened him with violence.

He also said von Luckner had ordered that hundreds of propaganda books be thrown overboard when they were near the Panama Canal.

Oesterreich, who was a Nazi agent, dobbed von Luckner in after they returned to Germany, according to Bade's research paper. As the trip had progressed, the agent noted in a report, it became clear it was a purely private cruise, not a propaganda mission.

"All the claims that he published in German newspapers about his propaganda for the new Germany are based on untruths."

In a special court of honour, von Luckner was accused of not having "kept the National Socialist attitude expected of him and treated this trip, undertaken primarily in the interests of propaganda, as a private pleasure cruise". But the case was shelved because of the war and von Luckner was told to shut up. He died in 1966.

The Australian police thought that among Germans in Queensland von Luckner had "won many to the Nazi cause" and New Zealand Labour movement paper the *Standard*, believed his visit had given "fresh stimulus to Nazi activities".

Fiona Alexander remembers her mother saying she went to one of von Luckner's talks in Auckland in 1938.

"She thought he was wonderful."