

A HISTORIC SEXTANT

by

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A historic sextant made under extraordinary circumstances, the "Saginaw Sextant" was described and illustrated in the U.S. Naval Proceedings of September 1935.

In the Dominion Museum at Wellington, New Zealand, there is also a very interesting sextant expertly made under most difficult conditions. So impressed was the writer by an examination of the fine workmanship of this instrument, that he was led to a further study of its history. Known as the "Von Luckner Sextant", it has been generally believed to be the personal handiwork of the much publicized Count, during his term of captivity in New Zealand.

On close scrutiny of the sextant a faintly inscribed "W. v. Z." indicated some other person's participation in the work. It then became necessary to retrace the story of the capture of Count von Luckner and his men in an endeavour to establish the identity of the maker of the sextant and the conditions under which it was made.

The depredations of Count Felix von Luckner under the World War, his capture, subsequent escape, and recapture, provided one of the most interesting side-lights of the war. In command of the sea raider *Seeadler* he left Hamburg during Christmas week of 1916. The vessel was successful in getting through the English blockade by posing as a Norwegian sailing ship named the *Irma*.

After seven months' raiding, during which she sank 14 of the Allied merchant ships (186,000 tons), the *Seeadler* was wrecked on Mopelia Island in the Society Group in August, 1917. The vessel came to grief on this mid-Pacific Island owing to a storm which arose while it was being careened for repairs.

Taking five men with him in an 18-foot boat, von Luckner set out, armed with machine guns and rifles, with the object of capturing some unwary vessel and returning for the remainder of the crew. Posing as Norwegians they visited Atiu and Aitutaki in the Cook group and then proceeded towards Fiji. At Wakaya he and his party were captured.

About this time a German merchant ship was interned in Pago Pago Harbour, and several young cadets in her crew, bursting with desire to fight for their fatherland, set out in a lifeboat for Apia, which unknown to them had been captured and occupied by New Zealand troops. Von Luckner and his crew, together with the cadets, were taken to New Zealand and imprisoned on Motuihi Island, near Auckland. Their waking hours were spent devising ways of escape in order to continue their effective though bloodless war on Allied merchant shipping.

On the pretext that they wished to continue their navigation studies, the cadets sent to Pago Pago for their sextants, but on their arrival in New Zealand the censor refused to deliver them. The New Zealand government had very obligingly allowed them to set up a small workshop, and it was here that one of the cadets, W. von Zartowsky, a lad of eighteen or nineteen years of age, undertook the manufacture of a sextant.

This sextant is an example of high-class craftsmanship under most difficult conditions, for Zartowsky worked with scraps and odds and ends, mainly parts of a primus stove, and achieved an accuracy with the completed instrument which is little short of that obtainable from a factory-made article. It has practically every detail and adjustment found on standard modern sextants, including vernier, clamp, tangent screw, frosted arc shade, lens, shades, and adjustment means for index and collimation errors.

The arc was cut from a section of the brass bonding of a launch steering wheel, and is very accurately divided, as is also the vernier. The tangent screw was obtained from an old safety razor handle, and no parts of another sextant were used. In brief, all young Zartowsky had to work with was an old primus stove, a safety razor handle, a piece of brass from a launch wheel, and a few scraps of brass and glass. How many men, even skilled instrument makers, could have produced such an instrument under similar circumstances ?

The writer recently had an opportunity to check this instrument, and found that even though it has aged somewhat during its twenty years in a museum, its errors are still within adjustment limits.

The completion of its manufacture coincided with the culmination of plans and means of escape of von Luckner and his fellow prisoners. Although Count Felix von Luckner is given the credit, the New Zealand authorities maintain that Lieutenant Kircheiss was the real organizer of the escape.

The first essential was a rapid means of get-away, and for months the prisoners planned the time of escape in the prison commandant's own launch, the *Pearl*. They overhauled the boat and ballasted it for deep-sea work, and succeeded in making their escape, with a crew of eleven men. Setting north along the New Zealand coast, they overtook a small sailing vessel, the *Moa*, which they captured. After transferring their crew to the *Moa*, they proceeded to the Kermadec Islands.

On a shrewd guess that von Luckner and his men would make for the Kermadecs to replenish their supplies, the New Zealand authorities despatched the cable steamship *Iris* to that vicinity, where they succeeded in capturing the escapees, who were returned to New Zealand and kept under closer guard until the end of the war.

On the voyage North in the launch, and later in the *Moa*, the home-made sextant gave excellent results.

Count von Luckner is once again in New Zealand, but this time with the Countess on a friendly visit in his yacht the *Seeteufel*, and I have had the opportunity of verifying the aforementioned facts relative to this historic sextant.

It was interesting to learn that the young cadet von Zartowsky is now captain of the North German Lloyd training ship, while another of the cadets, Melert, is, or at least was until recently in command of the SS. *Bremen*.

