

## What really happened to von Luckner's *Seeadler* in 1917?

Count Felix von Luckner is one of the more controversial figures in twentieth century New Zealand history. My interest in him stems from the fact that he was one of the few Germans to overcome the anti-German hysteria which pervaded New Zealand during World War I. His escape from internment on Motuihe Island in 1917 turned him into something of a legend. My research into von Luckner has been concerned with penetrating the myth and setting the record straight. In the process I have discovered that the truth has often turned out to be much more interesting than the fiction. One case in point is the wreck of von Luckner's raider the *Seeadler*.

The circumstances surrounding the loss of the *Seeadler* have over the years been shrouded in secrecy, myth and legend, much of this due to subterfuge initiated by von Luckner himself. Over the last few years, however, archival material has become available, the most significant being Hans Schenk's edition of the *Seeadler* war diary,<sup>1</sup> which, taken together with other accounts, enables us to resolve much of the mystery concerning this incident, and examine the reasons for the myths which have arisen concerning the sinking of the *Seeadler*.

Von Luckner's mission with the *Seeadler* was to capture and sink Allied merchant vessels, the aim being to undermine business and insurance confidence in the trading routes of the countries with which Germany was at war. From January to July 1917, the *Seeadler* sank fourteen allied ships, eleven in the Atlantic and three in the Pacific. In August, however, the *Seeadler* was lost altogether: she was wrecked on an atoll in French Polynesia. How did this happen?

The *Seeadler*, proceeding into the Pacific, could not sustain the level of captures it had achieved in the Atlantic, finding only three vessels between 14 June and 8 July 1917— the American ships *A. B. Johnson*, the *R. C. Slade*, and the *Manila*.<sup>2</sup> The twenty-eight men and one woman from these vessels taken captive by von Luckner had an

interesting fate awaiting them. After the *Seeadler* had spent a further fortnight cruising around the Pacific shipping lanes with no sign of traffic, the ship's doctor reported that there were signs of beri-beri among the crew, and it was decided, in the interests of health and morale, to head for an uninhabited island. Eventually the Society Islands atoll of Maupelia was chosen, as the ship's information claimed that the island was uninhabited, but had 'fish and coconuts in abundance'.<sup>3</sup>

On 31 July, the *Seeadler* anchored near Maupelia, but, after the anchor dragged along the coral reef, it was decided the following morning to anchor close to the entrance to the lagoon so that the ship could be secured by cable to land. On the morning of 2 August, the *Seeadler* ran aground on a coral reef and could not be freed. Von Luckner's report to the Admiralty of 7 July 1920, accompanying his proposal for decorations for the crew of the *Seeadler*, blames a tidal wave ('Flutwelle') for the destruction of the vessel: 'After 35,000 nautical miles of uninterrupted cruising, we were forced because of scurvy to land on Mopelia Island in order to recover there. On 2 August 17 the ship was destroyed by a tidal wave.'<sup>4</sup> In *Seeteufel*, von Luckner characterises in dramatic terms the huge tidal wave from an underwater earthquake which caused the *Seeadler* to be wrecked, later on even describing pumice from the underwater volcano which caused this massive wave:<sup>5</sup>

On the 2<sup>nd</sup> of August, towards 9.30 a.m., just about to send off a boat with those who were allowed on shore, we saw the surface of the sea on the horizon starting to swell in a peculiar way. What was that? Initially we assumed it was a Fata Morgana; after a time we noticed how the swelling was rolling closer and closer, getting higher and higher the nearer it came. It was a tidal wave which had been caused by a undersea earthquake. [...] the monstrosity rolled nearer. The ship was already rising in the swell that preceded it. We could count the seconds that remained to save the ship. Everyone was listening for the sound of the engine. Too late! The wave raged up, grabbed our ship from underneath, lifted it up and crashed it down on the coral reef. The masts, the crown of our ship, collapsed into pieces; big blocks of coral weighing a hundred pounds and as big as barrels had broken off as we hit the reef and were thrown on to the ship like grenades,

and when the tidal wave had passed away, there was our proud ‘Seeadler’ smashed to pieces, reduced to a wreck on the coral reef.<sup>6</sup>

This account of the wreck of the *Seeadler* has survived remarkably intact over the years. It was basically accepted by Henry Newbolt in his 1928 history of naval operations.<sup>7</sup> It was embroidered even further in 1958 by Ralph Varady: ‘A tidal wave lifted the *Seeadler* from her anchorage and tossed her onto the reef. The wave was estimated to be forty-five feet in height, and the ship’s engines could not be started in time.’<sup>8</sup> As recently as 1999, Wolfgang Knappe, in his book on von Luckner, repeats von Luckner’s version: ‘On 2 August a tidal wave took hold of the anchoring ship. The “Seeadler” was dashed against a coral reef and destroyed.’<sup>9</sup>

Other sources, some of which have been available for some time, cast doubt on von Luckner’s version of the events leading up to the stranding of the *Seeadler*. The *New Zealand Herald* carried two articles in October, 1917, on the stranding of the *Seeadler*, neither of which mention a tidal wave. The first, on 23 October 1917, refers to ‘a gale’ which ‘swung the ship on to the reef.’ The second, two days later, refers to “a little puff of wind”. Then there is the account by James Cowan (‘of Wellington, New Zealand’), published in *The Wide World Magazine* in 1918, which is also at variance with von Luckner’s account. Here there is no mention of a tidal wave, only wind: “Four vessels were captured in the Pacific by the enterprising raider before she came to grief as the result of a gale.”<sup>10</sup>

As far as alternative published German sources are concerned, the 1929 book by the *Seeadler*’s navigator, Carl Kircheiss, based on his diaries, goes into some detail as far as Maupelia is concerned.<sup>11</sup> According to Kircheiss, they decided to anchor outside the entrance to the lagoon at Maupelia because the strong current coming out of the lagoon, combined with the prevailing wind, would keep the ship away from land. Kircheiss says he took a group in a motor-boat into the lagoon to investigate the ‘natives’ huts’ that they had seen from the ship. There they found four kanaka from Maupiti — three men and a

boy, employees of a copra company in Tahiti. With the help of the kanaka, they gathered coconuts, caught a pig and piglets, and returned to the *Seeadler*. There they were told that the anchor was slipping from the reef. They did not worry about this; in fact, they were quite relaxed about it, as they thought that ‘if the current and wind were so strong that even the anchor could not hold,’ there was no way they could get too close to land. The next morning they returned to their anchorage. Part of the crew were allowed to go on land, while the others had to scrub the bottom of the ship. It was decided that the next morning they would have a picnic on land, to which the captains of the seized ships would be invited. The next morning, on 2 August 1917, he writes, the wind had slackened; the ship was drifting to and fro in the current and was coming closer to land; the aft stay sails were set to keep her away from land. Hardly had they set off on their picnic expedition when they noticed that the foresails were being set.<sup>12</sup> His account continues:

We expressed our astonishment at this; but then there followed two cannon shots in quick succession and white double stars. This was the arranged emergency signal that everyone on land had to return immediately. We turned around and drove back at full speed. As we got nearer we saw that the ship was running aground. [...] The high surf was pushing the ship deeper and deeper into the coral. Water was streaming into the lower areas. [...] The ship had drifted at anchor into one of the high breakers, had got caught up in it and could not break loose.<sup>13</sup>

This account would tend to authenticate the New Zealand reports. There is no mention of a tidal wave. Chief Engineer Krause’s personal diary, seized by Fijian authorities when he was captured, along with von Luckner and four other colleagues from the *Seeadler* on 21 September, backs up Kircheiss’s version of events.<sup>14</sup>

There are two official accounts of the stranding of the *Seeadler*. They back up the descriptions given by Kircheiss, Krause and the early New Zealand sources, but also

differ substantially from von Luckner's statements. The first is the war diary of the *Seeadler*, for which Kircheiss was responsible at this stage. The relevant entry reads as follows:

Ship drifted at 9.25 a.m. of 2.8. towards land. Order given immediately to start the engine, but could only start after four minutes. Meanwhile the ship had at 9.27 a.m. struck against coral. No engine manoeuvre had desired effect. The wind which in the preceding days was blowing to NE had in the gust which drove S.M.S. 'Seeadler' on to the reef gone to NW strength 3/4. The stern anchor was lost and bringing out another took too much time. The ship was continuously running hard aground and the rear hold got full of water in the course of the afternoon. At the same time water ran into the engine room and in the course of the afternoon the forecastle had also sprung a leak. The ship was abandoned at 3 p.m.<sup>15</sup>

This corresponds to the account in the ship's diary also.

Looking at these reports, written at the time or based on notes written at the time, it is evident that, with a sudden change in wind direction or drop in wind speed, the sails which had been counteracting any drift towards land were no longer functioning in the way intended, and that when the ship struck the coral reef it was at the mercy of the breakers hitting the reef, which pounded the ship against the coral and damaged the propeller, thus rendering the engine useless. Comparing them with von Luckner's account, the first thing that occurs to us is: what about the tidal wave, and what about the masts? These reports refer to high seas, strong currents, and the sorts of breakers that one would expect on a coral reef, but none mention a tidal wave. Similarly, the ship's diary states that the rigging was threatening to collapse, and Kircheiss writes that the masts were shaking and looked as if they might fall overboard or on to the deck, but there is no mention of the masts actually "collapsing into pieces" as claimed by von Luckner. And yet, there is the famous photo of the *Seeadler* as a burnt-out wreck with masts broken. How do we account for this?

The war diary solves the mystery of the collapsed masts. Here we see that Sub-Lieutenant Pries, acting under orders from Kling, who had taken command on 24 August

1917 after von Luckner's departure, led a demolition party on the morning of 30 August to blow up the masts of the *Seeadler*, as there was concern that "they were visible from a distance of 15 nautical miles". Four blasting cartridges were mounted on the main mast two metres above deck. "The main mast swayed for some seconds, then fell overboard to port and took the mizzenmast and the topmast with it." The foremast remained standing, as intended. However, the demolition of the main mast had unexpected consequences:

Unfortunately, the blasting cartridges caused the gases emanating from the fuel and the rotting provisions to ignite, so that within some minutes the whole ship was in flames. We had not foreseen this unexpected turn of events, because in all previous detonations above deck, on seized ships, fire has never resulted.

In the afternoon the foremast went overboard as well.<sup>16</sup>

The well-known photograph of the wreck of the *Seeadler* thus shows her not as a victim of a tidal wave, as one might conclude from von Luckner's account, but of a botched attempt by Pries's demolition party to blow up the ship's masts.<sup>17</sup> Why, therefore, did von Luckner invent the story of a tidal wave which sent the *Seeadler* crashing into a coral reef with such force that all masts were broken? There are various possible answers to these questions.

The first possibility is that the shipwreck was the result of a ruse by the captains of the three American ships that von Luckner had captured in the Pacific. One of these captains, Andrew Petersen, of the *A. B. Johnson*, made a statement to the French authorities which makes this scenario seem not quite as unlikely as might be thought at first sight. On 31 July 1917, he says, they arrived at Maupelia in calm seas, and the waves were not breaking over the coral reef. When it was clear that it was not possible to enter the lagoon, von Luckner sent for the three captains and asked them "if there was any danger in anchoring his ship near the reefs." Petersen says that they were "surprised" at such a question, which "could only have been asked by a man poorly informed in

navigation matters,” and did not hesitate to confirm to him that they always did that themselves and kept their ship in place by way of cables attached to the reef. Von Luckner overruled Kling’s objections and followed their advice. “From then on,” Petersen states, “we were certain the ship would be wrecked as soon as the wind changed” and thus they no longer had “any fear of being taken as prisoners of war to Hamburg, which the Commander had repeatedly told us was going to happen.”<sup>18</sup>

One cannot help thinking when reading this statement that the captains concerned would of course have been very keen to take responsibility for the sinking of the *Seeadler*. If their advice had been as instrumental as Petersen makes out, one might have expected von Luckner to have demonstrated some anger or at the very least resentment towards them once the stranding occurred, but Petersen admits himself that that was not the case: von Luckner did not reproach them in any way, and if he was irate at “having been duped in this way” he did not show it.<sup>19</sup> However, one cannot discount the theory that von Luckner’s story of the tidal wave was a way of neutralising the captains’ subsequent claim to have been responsible for the wreck of the *Seeadler*. Norbert von Frankenstein argues that it was highly likely that von Luckner and Kling did ask the captains for advice, simply because the latter were familiar with that part of the Pacific. Thus it is not beyond the bounds of possibility that von Luckner fell into their trap; however, such a contention is impossible to prove.<sup>20</sup>

A 1999 television documentary by Jürgen Stumpfhaus came up with an interesting alternative theory. According to Stumpfhaus, “almost the entire crew together with the captives were at a picnic on the beach”. Only the 3<sup>rd</sup> Officer, a mechanic and an eleven-year-old boy from one of the American sailing ships were on board. The boy noticed that the ship was drifting towards the reef and informed the 3<sup>d</sup> Officer, who yelled out the command: “Start the engine! Full speed astern!” Before he could change this erroneous command to “Full speed ahead” the damage was done, the propeller was dashed to pieces on the coral. The ship lay wrecked, “all because of a false command

from the Third Officer.” A court martial would have resulted in the 3<sup>d</sup> Officer being shot. “But Luckner did not want a court martial. No accusation. No death sentence. No execution. He invented a legend.” All members of the crew, according to Stumpfhaus’s documentary, swore that they would never reveal the truth that there was no tidal wave. “The crew kept quiet and stuck to Luckner’s version of the story all through their lives.”<sup>21</sup>

While there may be some element of truth in this version, it is difficult to accept in its entirety. First of all, not even Captain Petersen suggests that the entire crew went off on a picnic leaving only the third officer, a mechanic and an eleven-year-old boy on board. Petersen makes it clear that the picnic was for the German officers (apart from one instructed to remain on board) and the captive captains only. If only three had been left on board, who would have carried out the 3<sup>d</sup> Officer’s allegedly erroneous order? And who would have set the sails referred to in Kircheiss’s account? The boy and the mechanic? And if, as everyone seems to agree, the diesel engine took four minutes to start, surely there would have been adequate time to change an obviously incorrect command? Quite apart from this, the idea of the crew’s keeping to von Luckner’s tidal wave theory all their lives is demonstrably untrue. If there ever were such a conspiracy, then it was immediately broken, for neither the ship’s diary nor the war diary mention a tidal wave; nor does Krause’s personal diary, for that matter. And if we are talking about published reports, then the “conspiracy” was broken by Kircheiss in 1929 when his diary-based account appeared, which certainly makes no reference at all to a tidal wave.

Norbert von Frankenstein’s theory also concerns von Luckner’s reluctance to have a court-martial, but emphasises von Luckner’s relationship to Sub-Lieutenant Pries. Pries, fourth in seniority on the *Seeadler* after von Luckner, Kling, and Kircheiss, had, according to von Frankenstein, been hand-picked by von Luckner. It was Pries who had been left in charge of the *Seeadler* when she foundered, and it was Pries who led the botched demolition of the masts which ended up with the whole ship in flames. And



after von Luckner and Kircheiss had departed on their journey westwards, leaving Kling in command, it was Pries who led a revolt against Kling, saying, according to the war diary, on 26 November that he “did not recognise Kling as acting commander”. Von Frankenstein argues that Pries had in fact under the law of the time staged a mutiny. Yet in spite of Kling’s request to do so, von Luckner refused to allow a court martial. On the contrary, he instead proposed in 1920 that Pries along with other members of the *Seeadler* crew should be decorated for bravery. Von Frankenstein implies that a court martial of Pries would not only have spoiled the story of the “heroic deeds” of von Luckner’s crew, but would also have led to awkward questions being asked about why Pries was left in charge of the *Seeadler* at the time of the stranding.<sup>22</sup> One could take this argument a step further. According to Petersen’s report, Pries had protested to von Luckner at being left in charge of the *Seeadler* as he had concerns about its safety, but von Luckner dismissed these concerns as being “not really justified.”<sup>23</sup> A court martial would not only have berated von Luckner for leaving an inexperienced officer in charge of the *Seeadler* (as von Frankenstein suggests) but would presumably also have deemed him, in overruling Pries’s protest, to have borne the full responsibility for the *Seeadler*’s demise.

Thus it seems likely that von Luckner invented the story of the tidal wave primarily to protect himself from accusations of having been duped by the American captains, of having behaved irresponsibly by leaving his ship in charge of someone clearly not up to the task, and ultimately to avoid being court-martialled himself. Ironically, once von Luckner had left Maupelia for the journey west, a tidal wave did hit the atoll, with devastating results. The wave — in modern parlance probably a “sea surge” — was not forty-five feet, but just 1.9 metres high, yet much bigger than any of the kanaka had ever experienced. Kling reports in the war diary that the sea was so high that it actually entered their tents. The forty metre-long jetty built by the captives was totally obliterated; most of the provisions which had been stored on the little island near

the entrance to the lagoon were swept away into the ocean, and that island was under a metre of water. This tidal wave strengthened the Germans' resolve to leave the island as soon as possible.<sup>24</sup> However, it did not affect the *Seeadler*, which was already well and truly wrecked.

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#### NOTES

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1. Hans D. Schenk, ed., *Graf Luckners 'Seeadler': Das Kriegstagebuch einer berühmten Kaperfahrt* (Hamburg, 1999).
  2. Schenk, 53-81.
  3. Schenk, 85. My translation.
  4. RM5 2246, 'Betrifft: Verleihung der Eisernen Kreuze an die Besatzung S.M.S. "Seeadler"', Halle, 7 July 1920, Bundesarchiv-Militärarchiv, Freiburg.
  5. Von Luckner, *Seeteufel*, 229.
  6. *Ibid.*, 207. My translation.
  7. Henry Newbolt, *History of the Great War Based on Official Documents: Naval Operations, Vol IV* (London, 1928), 204.
  8. Ralph Varady, *Many Lagoons* (London, 1958), 66.
  9. Wolfgang Knape, *Felix Graf Luckner: Der Seeteufel aus Sachsen* (Leipzig, 1999), 25. My translation.
  10. James Cowan, 'The Pirate of the Pacific: German Naval Officer's Daring Escape from his Prison Island and Recapture in Mid-Ocean,' *The Wide World Magazine*, July 1918, p. 254.

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11. *Das neue Kircheiß-Buch: ein Buch von Mut und deutscher Art*, edited by Charlotte Schultz-Ewerth (Berlin, [1929]). A note on page 6 reads: ‘This is the first time that my diary entries, which had already served as partial documentation for the book “Seeteufel” by Count Luckner (Köhler-Leipzig), have been reproduced in such detail.’ My translation.
  12. *Ibid.*, 16-18. Passages quoted are my translation.
  13. *Ibid.*, 18f. My translation.
  14. ‘Diary of Krause’, 2-3.
  15. *Kriegstagebuch* entry for 12 August 1917, in: Schenk, 89.
  16. *Kriegstagebuch* entries for 29 and 20 August 1917, in: Schenk, 101-103. My translation.
  17. Varady, 73, confirms that the irregular shape of the side walls of the shell casings that were still to be found at the site of the wreck in 1958 was proof that a ‘fire had started and the forward ammunition magazine had exploded.’ According to a report of 21 May 1938 in the *Sydney Daily Telegraph*, the *Seeadler* was also dynamited by a party from the cruiser *Encounter* in 1917.
  18. ‘L’Épopée de von Luckner’, in: *Le Memorial Polynésien*, collection dirigée par Philippe Mazellier, Tome V 1914-1939 ([Papeete], 1977), 119. My translation.
  19. *Ibid.*, 119. My translation.
  20. Von Frankenstein, 93.
  21. Jürgen Stumpfhaus, *Die Piraten des Kaisers: Graf Luckners legendäre Fahrt mit der Seeadler*, Produktion: Engstfeld-Film Köln, Co-Produktion WDR/RB 1999, script, 9. My translation.

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22. Von Frankenstein, 93 and 117-120. Another reason that Kling's request for a court-martial was not followed up could be that Kling had not returned from Chile, whereas Pries had.
  23. Quoted in: Philippe Mazellier, editor, *Le Memorial Polynisien*, 119.
  24. *Kriegstagebuch* entries for 31 August to 3 September 1917, in: Schenk, 107-111.