

The Gentleman Rogue of EAGLE's Family Tree

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The U.S. Coast Guard's three-masted barque EAGLE has trained Coast Guard Academy cadets for 68 years, and with her continued prudent sailing and thorough maintenance, she could conceivably serve our nation for another 50 years or more. Although technology is rife throughout the world's navies and maritime industry – GPS navigation, satellite communication, engineering systems automation – seas and shoals still prove lethal today; EAGLE is the perfect platform for scores of young men and women to relatively quickly gain a solid understanding of, and healthy respect for, the weather and the oceans' perils – the most crucial contents of a sailor's seabag. Of course, nothing better captures the romance of the sea than a square-rigger with a bone in her teeth and heeling under the press of full sail – the perfect experience to win over a young heart despite the hardships of going to sea.

EAGLE is a wonderful ambassador for the Coast Guard Academy, the Coast Guard and the United States. The hundreds of officers and crew who have sailed in her have each walked with the subtle yet distinct swagger of a true sailor – the epitome of a professional mariner. Yet how many of these proud seamen are aware that they have a 20th Century pirate – a pirate sailing under a proverbial letter of marque from Kaiser Wilhelm II – to thank for the teak decks they've walked upon and the towering rig in which they've climbed?

It turns out that an unlikely archaic hero who emerged from World War I would indirectly inspire the construction of EAGLE, originally Segelschulschiff HORST WESSEL, and her sister ships GORCH FOCK, ALBERT LEO SCHLAGETER, MIRCEA and HERBERT NORKUS. This swashbuckling Imperial German naval officer

was the larger-than-life Lieutenant Commander Felix Count von Luckner, also known as “The Sea Devil.”

Born into an unbroken line of German cavalry officers, young Felix nonetheless turned his back on family tradition. At the age of 13, a dismal failure in school despite personal tutoring, he ran away from his grandmother’s house to try his luck going to sea. Although initially a shock for a boy accustomed to the trappings of German aristocracy, von Luckner quickly adapted to a life of flop houses ashore and forecastles afloat. He took on the pseudonym “Phelax Luedige” (Phelax spelled P-H-E-L-A-X; “Luedige” his mother’s family name) and, with the help of Peter Boemer, – a washed-up old salt living in the Hamburg waterfront district of Sankt Pauli – obtained a proper seabag and signed as cabin boy aboard the Russian full-rigged ship NIOBE. On this first voyage to Australia, he quickly discovered the difficulties of life before the mast, even falling overboard at one point. Nevertheless, for the next seven years he continued to refine his seamanship skills aboard square-riggers and to work odd jobs ashore – such as an assistant lighthouse keeper and boxer in Australia, and a prize-winning wrestler in Sankt Pauli – before finally sailing for two years as a mate for the Hamburg-American Line. In February 1912, having shed his “Phelax” moniker, he was called to service and commissioned as Lieutenant Felix von Luckner in the Imperial German Navy. Only

then, wearing the Emperor's uniform, albeit Navy and not Army, did Felix return home to his family.

In stark contrast to his failure in school years earlier, Lieutenant von Luckner excelled in naval studies and quickly adapted to life aboard "modern" steam-powered ships, initially serving aboard the gunboat SMS PANTHER off of Cameroon.

Following the indecisive Battle of Jutland in May 1916, in which Lieutenant von Luckner served as a gun turret captain aboard the battleship SMS KRONPRINZ WILHELM, the German Admiralty realized that Germany could not hope to prevail against the British by relying upon an outnumbered fleet of battleships and battle cruisers, and instead would have to resume unrestricted submarine warfare and attempt commerce raiding with surface vessels. Running the British blockade of the North Sea, however, was becoming ever more difficult. As a result, the Admiralty was willing to take a gamble and called in von Luckner – the only young naval officer known to have served in windjammers – and assigned him to refit and take command of a sailing ship merchant raider. The idea did make some sense, as Germany maintained no coaling stations in the Atlantic Ocean, a square-rigger was the ideal guise to slip through the British blockade, and Germany just happened to have recently seized a perfect candidate vessel. The three-masted, 1,517-ton full-rigged ship PASS OF BALMAHA, an American merchant sailing with supplies for Russia, was seized in the summer of 1915 by a British blockade crew and then subsequently captured by the German submarine U-36.

Under elaborate measures to ensure secrecy, von Luckner saw to the conversion of the PASS OF BALMAHA from a grain carrier to a stealthy auxiliary cruiser. Two 500-horsepower diesel engines were installed, along with large diesel oil and fresh water

tanks. The cargo holds were converted to berthing areas for 400 prisoners, with staterooms set aside for ships' captains and mates. Secret doors and fittings were added throughout the ship, including the means to conceal two 105mm deck guns. Lieutenant von Luckner also personally selected his crew of 64, ensuring that nearly 30 of them spoke Norwegian – a language he spoke fluently. To assure secrecy of their vessel and mission, von Luckner sent each of his selected crewmembers on leave until the finished raider was anchored offshore. Crewmembers were then ferried piecemeal out to the vessel, where the captain disclosed their mission and finally named the auxiliary cruiser SEEADLER – in English, “Sea Eagle.”

Sailing in late December 1916, posing as a Norwegian lumber carrier named IRMA, the SEEADLER was initially able to pass unmolested through the British blockade when a fierce winter gale chased picket vessels into safe havens and drove the square-rigger at top speed west towards Iceland. The Germans' luck ran out on Christmas morning, however, when the winds abated and a British auxiliary cruiser intercepted the “IRMA.” Von Luckner sent most of his crew below into the converted cargo holds. Those remaining on deck, all whom spoke Norwegian, donned sailors oilskins and played out a ruse that convinced the British that “IRMA” was a legitimate lumber hauler; one of the engineers even dressed as von Luckner's Norwegian wife “Josephine!”

Once free in the Atlantic, von Luckner pitched his deckload of lumber overboard and steered SEEADLER for the tradewinds off the west cape of Africa. Along the way, he quickly developed and perfected his tactics for raiding commercial shipping with a square-rigger. Disguised as a neutral cargo carrier, SEEADLER would typically draw in

a freighter, sail or steam, by signaling a request for the time or feigning a fire on deck. Once close aboard the unsuspecting prey, von Luckner would hoist the German Imperial Navy Ensign, unmask his guns and fire to disable any wireless transmitters. The freighter's captain would quickly realize his untenable position and surrender, at which point the SEEADLER's crew would transfer all personnel and any desired cargo from the freighter to the raider before sinking the ship with gunfire or scuttling charges. In this way, the SEEADLER sunk eleven ships throughout the spring of 1917.

Knowing that the British were actively hunting for SEEADLER in the Atlantic, after four months it was time for the Sea Devil and his crew to seek new hunting grounds. Von Luckner captured a twelfth ship off Brasil, the French barque CAMBRONNE. Unlike the eleven previous ships that were sent to the bottom, von Luckner instead loaded all of his prisoners aboard the CAMBRONNE, destroyed the wireless set aboard, and cut down the barque's topmasts. With this reduced rig, von Luckner was confident that SEEADLER would be around Cape Horn and hunting on the Pacific Ocean before CAMBRONNE and her prisoners would arrive in Rio de Janeiro.

Although far from the British auxiliaries searching for the wily German raiders, sailing to the west of Cape Horn posed an entirely new set of challenges to SEEADLER and her crew. In addition to the vast distances between landmasses in the Pacific, nearly all of the islands aligned with the Allies – Britain, France and the United States. Raiding was far less successful as well: unlike the eleven ships sunk in the Atlantic in just eight weeks, only three succumbed in the Pacific over five full months. With food stores short and water growing ever more stagnant, the Sea Devil and his crew were beginning to suffer the maladies of sailors of centuries past, including scurvy and beri-beri. Von

Luckner knew they had to reprovision, but had to carefully select the destination. The atoll of Mopelia seemed a perfect location, both in its available resources and its obscurity. Unfortunately, SEEADLER met her ultimate fate at Mopelia when a tsunami swept the raider onto the coral reef, shattering her keel. The adventures of von Luckner and his crew continued through the war in a series of stories that I won't recount here, but the stories include open boat sailing, seizure of a schooner, capture by the New Zealanders, escape and recapture by the British before finally returning home after the armistice in 1919.

Following the Great War, von Luckner became a celebrity of sorts both at-home and abroad. Amazingly enough, one of the things that so enamored von Luckner to both the Axis and Allied forces was the fact that he killed but one sailor in his nine months of exploits on the high seas. His notoriety was a bright spot amidst the otherwise decimated and demoralized German Navy and, in 1921, Lieutenant Commander Count von Luckner was charged by the government to restart a sail training program for young naval officers. He chose to purchase a tired three-masted jackass barque that had long been moored on the Hamburg waterfront. Originally a four-masted schooner of 1913 Danish construction and named TYHOLM, there is a bit of historical irony in the fact that von Luckner's newest command was renamed NIOBE, the name of the Kaiser's Imperial Navy first training ship but also the name of that first windjammer upon which the 13-year old "Phelax Luedige" sailed.

Lieutenant Commander von Luckner successfully renewed NIOBE's rig and returned her to sea, but he captained the barque for just one year. While he was a great success in training young naval officers, often through unconventional means such as

shore raids to obtain provisions, he eventually ran afoul of the new government in Berlin when he refused to strike the Imperial Navy Ensign flying at the gaff and replace it with the flag of the National Socialist Party – the “Nazis.” As such, the Count retired from the German Navy in 1922, and instead turned to raising money to purchase a personal sailing vessel to undertake a goodwill tour to the United States with his new wife. NIOBE, however, continued to sail and train aspiring naval officers throughout the 1920s. Amidst the social unrest and hyperinflation of post-World War I Germany, NIOBE, her famous captain and her young sailors were a frequently seen beacon of hope and national pride.

Tragically, on July 26th, 1932, within sight of the German island of Fehmarn on the Baltic Sea, NIOBE was struck by a white squall and downflooded, sinking within minutes. Although 40 of the crew and cadets were rescued, 69 died in the incident. The loss of NIOBE raised a large public outcry, but there was not a loss of resolve among the Germans in supporting sail training for naval officers; some of the lost sailors’ grave stones were engraved, “Don’t complain, try again!” As a result of public collections and sales of NIOBE commemorative coins, funds were quickly raised to undertake the construction of a new sail training vessel.

The German Admiralty turned to the well-respected Hamburg shipyard Blohm+Voss to replace NIOBE. With direction to build a ship focused solely on sail training, Blohm+Voss was able to leverage the skills of both aging shipwrights that had overseen the construction of the great Cape Horn windjammers of the Flying P Line and the emerging technologies of joggled riveting and arc welding to design and build arguably the safest sailing ship ever built. In May 1933, less than a year following the foundering of NIOBE, the three-mast barque Segelschulschiff GORCH FOCK was

launched. And once GORCH FOCK had sailed for the German Navy and proven her stability and seaworthiness, the Admiralty ordered the construction of the slightly larger, but proportionally identical, barques HORST WESSEL and ALBERT LEO SCHLAGETER – today’s EAGLE of the United States and SAGRES II of Portugal.

Disaffected with the turn of politics in Germany, and actively discredited by the Nazi regime, Felix Count von Luckner – now an old salt himself, lectured and sailed around the world and eventually settled in his wife’s country of Sweden, where he died in 1966. Little known to the scores of green young hands that sail aboard New London’s own tall ship each year, von Luckner is nonetheless that colorful “old uncle” that deserves a more prominent recognition in EAGLE’s 77-year history.

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Lieutenant Commander Felix Count von Luckner,
a.k.a. "Phelax Luedige" and "The Sea Devil"



The German Raider SEEADLER ("Sea Eagle"),
ex-PASS OF BALMAHA



The German Navy Training Barque NIOBE,
Ex-Schooner TYHOLM



The German Navy Training Barques HORST WESSEL and GORCH FOCK