

Basic Detail Report



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Title

Boatswain Karl Muller smoking a pipe and hosing the deck of SEETEUFEL

Date

May 1938

Primary Maker

Samuel J Hood Studio

Medium

Emulsion on nitrate film.

Name

Nitrate negative

History

At about midnight on 20 May 1938, the German Count and war raider, Felix Graf von Luckner, anchored his

auxiliary schooner SEETEUFEL in Watsons Bay, Sydney. While he waited for Customs officials, over the rail of his yacht he appeared anxious to dispel the rumours he was acting as a spy for Adolf Hitler's Nazi regime. In his customary loud voice, he said: 'I am a citizen of the sea. There are no politics at sea ... We are happy at sea, and I will tell you why. We have no diplomats - and no road signs! We have the stars, and the sun, and the compass. And there is one thing that binds us all together. The S.O.S.! If we sailors are in distress, and we call for help, the sailors who hear our call do not first ask what country we are from. Every sailor will answer that call at once and do all in his power to help. Those people on shore could take that brotherhood of the sea as an example!' ['Von Luckner in Sydney', 'The Sydney Morning Herald', 20 May 1938, p 13, <http://nla.gov.au/nla.news-article17467104>] Before his arrival in Sydney, the Count had moored near an uninhabited island somewhere between America and New Zealand. Twenty-one years previously, he'd buried treasure, or as he told the American press, 'a chest with gold and German banknotes'. He told 'The Australian Women's Weekly' that a 'plan of the hidden treasure was tattooed on his knee' and he was finally making the journey from his country to retrieve it. There have been many labels used to describe Count von Luckner - war raider, Nazi spy, gentleman pirate, 'rollicking buccaneer', and the list goes on. Some of them are unfounded, but some of them contain elements of the truth. So when the man known as 'Der Seeteufel' (The Sea Devil) finally arrived in Sydney, photographer Samuel J Hood was on hand to photograph the man famed for sinking 28 Allied merchant vessels in 1917. From the very first moment of the Count's arrival, he wasted no time. The Count was going to charm his way into Australia, like he'd done everywhere else. By all accounts, he was tall, with blue eyes and an expression that was 'open and lively'. He had a deep, booming voice and the lines on his face told of many years

spent at sea. His exuberance was captured in Cinesound newsreels which are now held in the National Film and Sound Archive of Australia. In them, the Count speaks rapidly and excitedly of his time spent travelling across Australia: 'I am not a stranger of your great country! Thirty-four years ago, the boy of 13, I landed in Fremantle in a Russian ship. I started a dish washer and I ... got homesick ... I thought of the promise I had given my father to become a lieutenant in the army, and here I realised 'well boy, if you have given a promise you must stick to it'. But how shall I manage to become a lieutenant here in Australia so one day, I met the Salvation Army. Well, I didn't know what kind of army it was, but they had lieutenants, but so I thought 'By Joe! Here I have a chance to fulfil the promise I gave to my father to become a lieutenant in the Salvation Army' ... but it took me too long time to become a lieutenant. So I joined magicians as a bill poster, responsible for their advertisement. With the magicians I travelled through your country for seven months and I assure you, my dear Australians, only a tramp really knows how great your country is!' The cameras were given behind-the-scenes access to the Count and his wife Countess Ingeborg von Luckner's living quarters below deck. These films reveal what the museum's photographs don't. As the publicity machine churned, a jovial and charismatic von Luckner proclaimed his desire for peace and an alliance between Britain and Germany. However, this goodwill and apparent bubbly enthusiasm did little to stem the tide of protest and suspicion demonstrated by members of the Australian public. Letter poured in to the Australian Government from concerned members of the public, questioning how they could allow a Nazi warmongering spy to land on Australian shores. More than 150 people reportedly gathered outside the Australian Broadcasting Commission's studio in Market Street, and waited for the Count to appear hurling cries of 'Felix the Cat! We don't want you in our democratic country' and 'Down with Hitler and Fascism'. On the morning of 9 June, a group of six men and women from the School of Modern Writers attempted to read an 'address of welcome' to the Count. Von Luckner was furious, as the students read of the 'unspeakable barbarity' being committed by those in power in his country. But while certain members of the public focussed their suspicions on the Count, the Commonwealth Investigation Branch (CIB) also had their sights set on the crew, including a person they least expected – Countess Ingeborg. The numerous files kept on the von Luckners held at the National Archives of Australia communicate the political climate of the day as one of paranoia and suspicion during a time where the dark shadow of Adolf Hitler's Nazi regime had descended upon Europe. One crew member named Colin Moore, a New Zealand radio announcer who joined SEETEUFEL while the Count was in Auckland, seemed to be the source for much of the information gathered by the CIB investigators. The CIB concluded that if a member of the German secret police, the Gestapo, was on board SEETEUFEL it was probably not the Count but more likely one of two crew members: Engineer Paul Kunert or Seaman Frederick Thiele. In the end, they concluded that Kunert was the more likely of the two. However, in another report the investigator concluded: 'I am inclined to think that Colin Moore is imaginative and probably misinterprets ordinary incidents'. Added to these reports was the surprising conclusion that the Countess was colluding with Communists against her husband. According to Moore: 'the Countess is the brains of the ship, is a talented person and the impression she creates on visitors is that she is just a nervous woman entirely dependent upon the Count ... is evidently contrary to fact as she controls practically all the activities of the ship'. In another incident, an unknown gentleman came aboard to see the Countess. Moore allegedly overheard the Countess saying 'I did not get it, I did not get it' and 'the Count knows nothing'. Despite the cloud of suspicion and the endless interviews with witnesses including the accounts from Moore, the evidence suggesting the Count

was a spy is weak and inconclusive. In some cases it appears completely fabricated. In one file, an article published on page one in Brisbane's the 'Sunday Mail' on 9 February 1941 features a photograph of Hitler and members of his inner circle and is included as evidence to link the Count with the Nazi leader. However, someone has drawn in von Luckner's signature smoking pipe and captain's hat on one of them individuals in the photograph, as if just by doing that results in a positive identification of the Count. As von Luckner travelled around Australia he stopped at a range of locations to give lectures including Wagga Wagga, Albury and Henty in New South Wales, Canberra in Australian Capital Territory, Melbourne in Victoria, Adelaide in South Australia and Cairns and Brisbane in Queensland. [Source: Nicole Cama, 'Espionage and paranoia: The Sea Devil tours Australia', 25 Oct 2013, ANMM blog, <http://anmm.wordpress.com/2013/10/25/the-sea-devil/>]