

Walther von Zatorski (6 June 1894 to 16 May 1981 aged 87 years)

Most of the information in this article was provided in 2022 by Walther's daughter Edda Clarke and his granddaughter Rebecca Crampton. Both live in England.



Walther von Zatorski was a young marine cadet in his early 20s learning to be a ship's officer on the SS *Elsass* a North German Lloyds steamer. They were in Pago Pago, American Samoa when WWI broke out (America was not in the war at that time). They decided to sail to Apia in Western Samoa where they were incorrectly informed that Admiral von Spee's East Asia Squadron was located, so they could join the German navy. Western Samoa had been administered by Germany, but it was taken over by New Zealand at the outbreak of war.

As enemy aliens, the 11 marine cadets were interned and transported to New Zealand. It must have been difficult for the government of the day to know what to do with a group of 11 fit young German men, trained to be ship's officers but not in the German navy. They were initially interned in Mt Eden prison which they protested about as they were not criminals. They were moved to Sommes Island and finally to Motuiki island. As they were captured right at the beginning of the war in 1914, they were interned for 4

years until the end in 1918.

Walther described the security as very slack as they were able to move around and virtually do what they liked. Walther learned carpentry skills and built himself a little house near the cliff facing Motutapu. He kept himself busy making a sextant. The sextant and its case are totally improvised and were made using the fuel tank from a Primus stove and the brass hinges from a rudder that had washed ashore. The adjusting screw came from the handle of a safety razor. Von Zatorski ordered tools and solder through the camp canteen to assemble the instrument.

He was climbing around the coast one day and found a boat washed up. He hid it in a cave. With some of his fellow cadets they enlarged the boat and stole provisions from the camp. Unfortunately for them when it was nearly ready, there was a big landslide after heavy rain and the cave with the boat in it was buried.

When Count von Luckner arrived on the island in October 1917 he took over the escape plans. Walther von Zatorski was one of the occupants of the *Pearl* (the camp commandant's motor launch) which was used to escape from the island. Using von Zatorski's handmade instrument and a map copied from a school atlas, the men navigated an accurate course to the Kermadec Islands – around 1000 kilometres northeast of New Zealand – before they were recaptured.

The New Zealand government confiscated the sextant on the prisoners' recapture. However, the fine workmanship of the piece was greatly admired and it was gifted to Te Papa's predecessor, the Dominion Museum, in 1918.

The family asked Te papa to loan the sextant to a German museum so Walther could see it again but they refused. During the 1990s some of the family visited New Zealand and went to Motuihe where they were shown around by Roni, Terry and Michael. They also visited Te Papa and saw the sextant.

After the war, in 1928 he became captain of the Training Ship *Bremen* which sailed around Cape Horn 16 times with no engine. He received the German Federal Cross of Merit and also he was the first German seaman to receive the Amicale Internationale Des Capitaines Au Long Cours Cap Hornier a French award to rounding the Horn in a sailing ship.

During the WWII Walther served in the Pacific:

- 1940/42 Commanded supply ships to Japan
- 1942/43 Marine attache to Japan
- 1943/44 Leader of the Navy base in Singapore
- 1944/45 Leader of the Navy base in Yokohama

Returned to Germany in 1947 (his 9 year old daughter Edda remembers him coming home)

