

“The German Raider”

A front page headline in the *San Diego Union* screamed the news: “AMERICAN GUNBOAT TAKES HUN RAIDER OFF MEXICAN COAST.” Less than a year after America’s entry into World War I, San Diegans were riveted by reports of a captured German raider ship set “to create havoc with Pacific coast shipping.”

Three U. S. Navy gunboats had taken their prize fifteen miles off the coast of Mazatlan on March 19, 1918. “Heavily armed” and reportedly flying the flag of the Kaiser’s Imperial Navy, the “German corsair” had surrendered after a Navy cruiser fired a shot across its bow. Its German crew had tried to cripple the ship by destroying the engines, but an American warship had the boat under tow, now destined for San Diego.

Americans in 1918 were willing to believe the worst about their wartime enemy, including stories of vast German conspiracies from Mexico. “It is a well known fact,” the *Union* decided, “that thousands of Germans throughout Mexico, who have been constantly intriguing against the United States, cheerfully would expend hundreds of thousands of dollars to assist in the work of outfitting German corsairs for the purpose of preying on Pacific coast commerce.”

As a “German corsair,” the captured ship seemed an unlikely choice. The alleged raider was an 85-foot schooner named the *Alexander Agassiz*. Many San Diegans remembered the ship. Built locally in 1907 as a research vessel, scientists from the Scripps Institution had used the *Agassiz* for a decade before selling it to three Los Angeles investors for use as a coastal trading ship in Mexico.

Two of the new owners sailed south from San Diego in January 1917 and began their trading business on Mexico’s west coast. They were poor businessmen, apparently, and fell quickly into debt. They decided to sell the schooner but the third owner—a woman named Maude Lochrane—decided to rescue her investment and headed for Mazatlan.

In her mid-thirties, Lochrane was described by the *Los Angeles Times* as “a virile young woman with flaming red hair . . . an adventurous spirit with an abundance of experience and plenty of nerve.” But the bold “mystery woman of the *Agassiz*” was unable to straighten out the finances and soon became desperate.

A German Navy officer named Fritz Bauman appeared on the scene. Formerly interned at Angel Island in San Francisco as an enemy alien, Bauman had moved to Mexico after being released. In Mazatlan, Bauman met the distressed Miss Lochrane and somehow managed to gain control of the *Agassiz*.

With a crew of German sailors, Bauman overhauled the little schooner—recaulking the hull, rebuilding the auxiliary engines, adding new sails, and preparing the vessel for a career as a raider. The plan, according to witnesses in a later federal court trial, was for the *Agassiz* to pick up guns and ammunition cached on nearby Venados Island and then “capture a Pacific mail boat running to Panama, outfit it with heavier guns than could be mounted on the *Agassiz*, recruit a full crew from pro-Germans now living at West Coast Mexican ports, and then start out on a reign of terror.”

Bauman was well aware of U.S. Navy ships patrolling the waters off Mexico. But he believed that the *Alexander Agassiz* would be ignored by the warships as an inoffensive, “hapless trader.” He was wrong.

As the *Agassiz* dashed from the harbor on the morning of March 19, the U.S. Navy was waiting. Scuttlebutt from the Mazatlan waterfront had alerted the Navy to the possible raider. The cruiser *Brutus*, the patrol boat *Vicksburg*, and the submarine chaser *SC-302*, quickly corralled the fleeing schooner. A signal from the *Brutus* told the *Agassiz* to heave to. When the schooner’s crew refused, the cruiser fired a three-inch shell across the bow and the raider stopped its engines.

As Navy ships closed on the *Agassiz*, the small crew “labored like Trojans throwing overboard everything that they thought would be incriminating.” When the sailors boarded the schooner they found one German seaman hiding in the ship’s bottom, holding a revolver. He was quickly disarmed. A small quantity of guns was recovered and several German flags. Captured as prisoners of war, were five Germans, six Mexicans, the anxious Mexican wife of the *Agassiz* engineer, and one befuddled woman from Los Angeles: Miss Maude Lochrane.

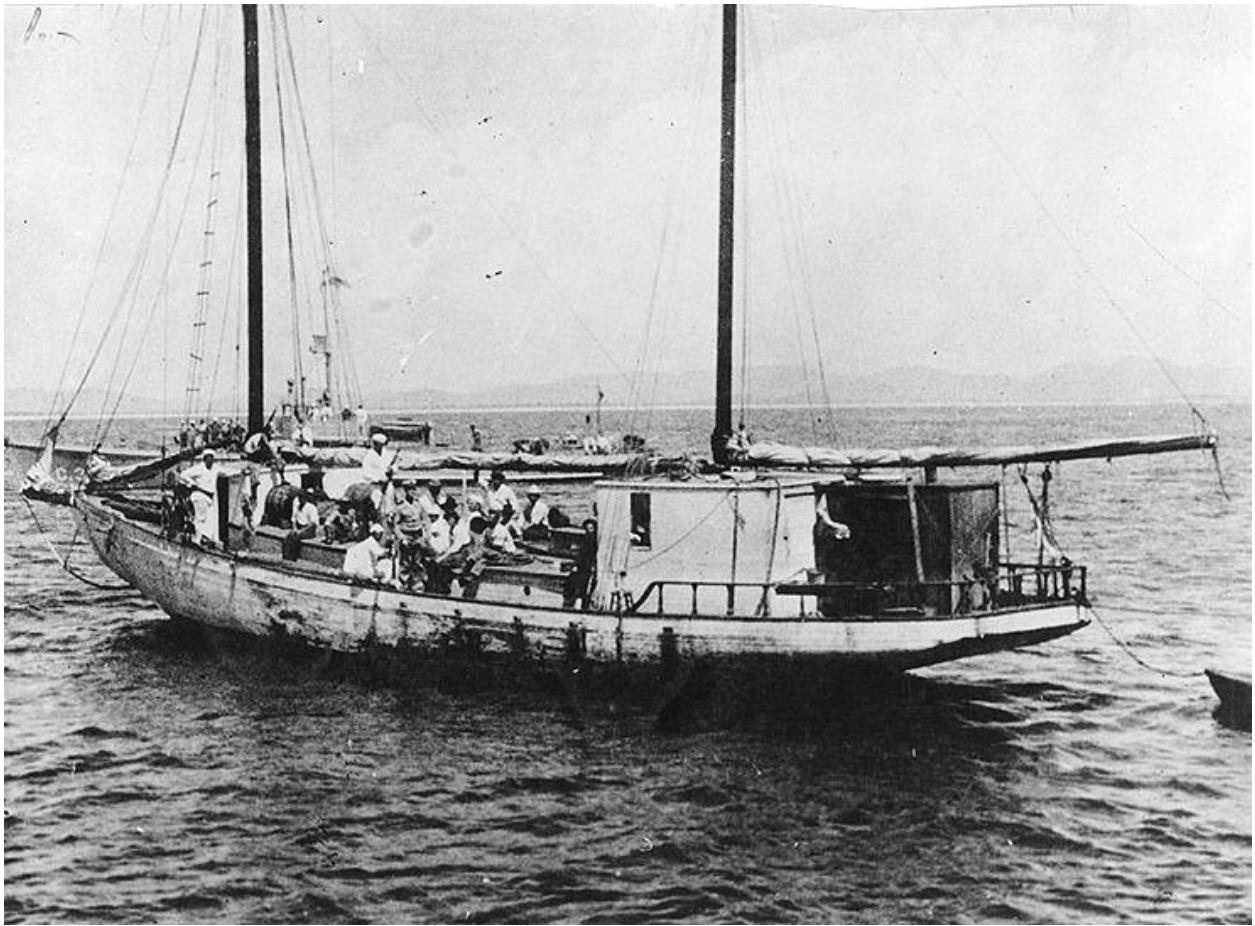


Prisoners aboard the USS *Vicksburg*. U.S. Naval Historical Center

“The Germans aboard the cruiser are a hard looking lot,” the *Union* reported as the *Agassiz* and *Brutus* anchored in San Diego on March 27. “They are manacled and under the constant guard of a bluejacket guard who pace back and forth near the men with fixed bayonets. The two women are being allowed the freedom of the gun deck.”

After hearings in a prize court held in the Federal building in early April, the five German prisoners were taken to Los Angeles and locked in the county jail. The Mexican nationals were released and Maude Lochrane was freed without bail. Miss Lochrane, unfortunately, was soon re-arrested after she reportedly “indulged in so many uncomplimentary remarks about President Wilson that it was thought best to put her in jail until the trial of the crew.”

Three *Agassiz* crewmen, all charged with espionage, were taken to Fort MacArthur in San Pedro to be interned for the remainder of the war. All others were exonerated, including Maude Lochrane, who would briefly regain ownership of the schooner and then lose it again in bankruptcy. The *Alexander Agassiz* would find work as a bit player in a “blood-and-thunder” sea drama for the Famous Players-Lasky film studio, before ending its days running aground in San Francisco Bay in 1920.



The schooner *Alexander Agassiz* after her capture on March 19, 1918.
U.S. Naval Historical Center photograph.

From Richard W. Crawford, *San Diego Yesterday* (Charleston, SC: The History Press, 2013), p. 45-48.