Was the little schooner Alexander Agassiz setting out to raid and plunder under the German flag, or was she merely the hapless victim of a bizarre set of circumstances?

**Mystery Raider of Mazatlan**

During World War One, the US Navy was very concerned over the possibility that German raiders might attack Allied shipping in the Pacific. Early in the war, while the United States was still neutral, the German cruiser Lepzig had outwitted American authorities in obtaining coal in Mexico, and had gone on to a brief career as a surface raider on the west coast of North and South America. Such German naval raiders, including the most famous of them — the Emden — had their brief moment of glory shortly after the outbreak of the war, after which only rumors spoke of their existence. Somewhat later in the war, however, the existence of German merchant raiders was even better documented than that of naval raiders. The Moewe made two highly successful forays into the South Atlantic, and the Wolf came out of the Atlantic into the Indian Ocean and the Southwest Pacific. Count von Luckner, the famous privateer, harassed Allied shipping from his innocuous-looking sailing ship, the Seeadler, which rounded Cape Horn and came into the Pacific, venturing as far north as the equator as late as the summer of 1917.

In the eastern Pacific, there had been persistent rumors of a German raider base near Mazatlan on the Mexican coast and, as late as 1917, the British Admiralty gave serious consideration to the report of a raider off the western approaches to the Panama Canal. At about the same time, the US Navy, lacking a ship to make the investigation, asked the Japanese to check out a rumored raider near Hawaii, which may have been the mysterious German-owned but American-operated steamer Maverick, which had earlier been involved in a gunrunning plot and had then become a kind of spook ship that accosted and frightened the crews of several ships.

Whether genuine raiders ever reached the west coast of North America after the time of the Lepzig is questionable, but the US Navy anticipated they might. The Navy's official history for the old unarmored cruiser Marblehead, vintage 1890, indicates that early in 1918 she was ordered "in search of possible raiders in the California area." This ship is known to have been ordered to Mazatlan in 1917 in search of a raider. But, as Ronald T. Strong, an officer serving on this ship at that time and subsequently a rear admiral in the US Navy, recalled many years later, "My experiences would indicate that all the rumors about German raiders, gunrunning, and radio stations were nothing more than rumors. Marblehead spent many miserable days trying to run down these rumors, but with very disappointing results."

However, even as the end of the war came near, American authorities had not ruled out the possibility of German raiders still operating in Pacific waters. In fact, early in 1918, with three West Coast ships, in the words of seamen, "gone missing" — the schooner Whitehall, the whaler Beagle, and the schooner Encore — there was speculation that another raider was at large in the Pacific. As it turned out, these vessels had indeed been captured by a raider — the Wolf — operating in the Southwest Pacific late in 1917.

Inevitably, there was an incident during the last year of the war that did appear to confirm the existence of German raiders along the Mexican coast. This episode involved the gunboat Vicksburg of the US Navy. This vessel, dating from 1897, was a 204-foot steel ship originally rigged as a three-masted barkantine, but was powered with a reciprocating steam engine that could drive her at more than twelve-knots.

After service in Cuba and the Philippines during the Spanish-American War and several years on the China station, she returned to the West Coast of the United States where she functioned as one of a number of Navy ships that were in and out of commission for the next decade. Back in service for the Washington fleet at the Philippines and in the Mediterranean, Vicksburg was reassigned to the United States Navy after the Armistice in November 1918.

Mazatlan was the best of Mexico's west coast ports, located in the State of Sinaloa on the mainland at the entrance to the Gulf of California, just a few miles south of the Tropic of Cancer. The US Navy had long considered it a center of both German activity and anti-American sentiment. In 1916, the State of Sinaloa, in which Mazatlan was located, reportedly declared war independently on the United States, a reflection of hostility arising from the Mexican revolution, not World War One. Although it is not perfectly clear that an official declaration was actually made, it was clear that the people of Mazatlan felt that they were at war.

Fortunately, however, the Mexican nation had not followed this example. By the early part of 1918, the political situation had stabilized somewhat and President Carranza whose government had been recognized by the United States. Nevertheless, there was still much intrigue generated in the State of Sinaloa by the restless German colony. On 14 March 1918, the Vicksburg, under the command of Lt. Charles E. Roordan, USN, arrived and anchored outside the mouth of the harbor at Mazatlan in response to a tip received several days earlier by the American consul. An informant had reported that German nationals would soon attempt to leave port on...