

NEW ZEALAND Memories



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issue
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World War II pilot Frank Welford

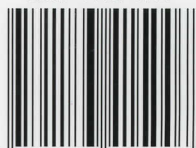
Kerikeri Music Camps

Childhood memories - 'Strawberry Fields Forever'

Antarctic journey : Robert Falcon Scott

Images from the regions : Hawke's Bay and Otago

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Courtesy: Dr Frauke Dibbern Ploog - photo by Harold Egerton Studio, Dannevirke



The Flying Trapeze

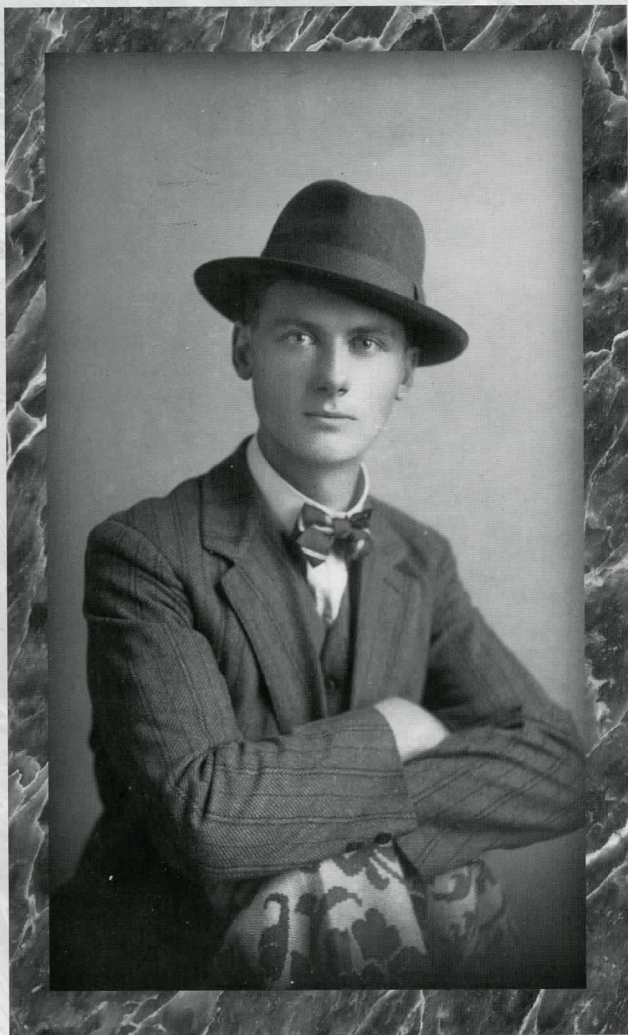
An unusual photograph introduces an unusual story. The Harold Egerton Studios in Dannevirke were responsible for capturing this action shot of George Dibbern (swinging below) on the trapeze circa 1916. Turn to page 42 for an insight into the life of this interesting character.

GERMAN GEORGE

Erika Grundmann is researching the intriguing character of George Dibbern. In this short excerpt Erika explores a segment of George's diverse life whilst living in the Hawke's Bay.

of rust, lured by the freedom of Australia, he jumped ship in Sydney and set out to seek his fortune in the Blue Mountains. Confident to the point of appearing cocky, his motto was "I'm a sailor - I can do anything!" He worked with the blasting crew in the Lithgow Tunnel construction, and as a waiter at The Hydro Hotel in Medlow Bath where he quickly learned English and became known as "George." It was at The Hydro that he met fellow German Wilhelm Hugo Hildebrandt with whom, in 1910, he travelled to New Zealand.

Hildebrandt, ten years Dibbern's senior and married to Francis Keneally, a young Australian widow with two



Courtesy: Dr Frauke Dibbern Plog; photo by Midget Photo Co., Sydney

George Dibbern, as "Business Man," Sydney, 1911

George Johann Dibbern was born March 26, 1889 in Kiel, Germany. His father was a master mariner who sailed his schooner to exotic places and passed on his love of the sea to his son. As a boy Georg spent many a day playing at explorers, smugglers and pirates, improvising sailing craft with his friends. After he had completed school in March 1907, he headed off to sea aboard the square-rigger, *Pamelia*, of the Flying P Line. Three voyages later, tired of the monotony of the food and the incessant chipping

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W. H. Hildebrandt

Letter of reference for George Dibbern, written by W. Hugo Hildebrandt using his business letterhead. The name "The Hydro" comes from the now "Hydro Majestic Hotel" in Medlow Bath, Australia.

children, settled in Napier where he established his own "Hydro," an "Institute for Scientific Massage, Electricity, Physical Culture & Chiropody," at the corner of Emerson and Dalton Streets. George, however, in pursuit of adventure, soon left New Zealand. He travelled throughout Tasmania, back to Sydney, and subsequently took a job on a steamer home to Germany. It wasn't long before he returned to Sydney to start a business importing a type of canvas canoe manufactured in Germany. Soon his partner lost interest, the business failed and Dibbern, with only four dollars in his pocket, looked up his friend in New Zealand.

Once more in Napier, where he likely lived with the Hildebrandts, he spent a month washing cars, followed by a short time driving a taxi. He "sold the car for the boss to some Maoris," moved to the Dannevirke area and drove for them for a year till he was able to afford his own car (a Willys Knight) and establish his own taxi service. In his book *Quest* (W.W. Norton, N.Y., 1941 and John Lane, London, 1941) he writes, "That was where I made my best friends, all through that car.

They were my customers and I became one of them, because that's the Maori way."

Dibbern was enjoying life. He made a lot of money. He was



George Dibbern, standing left, with the Hildebrandt family Wilhelm Hugo standing right, Beatrix Keneally seated left, Francis Keneally Hildebrandt seated right with G.W. Hugo Hildebrandt on her knee. ca 1915

NAPIER, N.Z. 1. 9. 13.
Mr. G. Dibbern
lives in Australia
New Zealand as a
young man.
I recommend M. G. D.
a man, having
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and.

Courtesy: Dr Frauke Dibbern Ploog

Courtesy: Dr Frauke Dibbern Ploog - photo by Fischer's Studio, Napier

passionate about the races and claims to have known everything there was to know about horses and racing, but obviously not everything, for he lost as much as he won! He was by no means ready to settle down. He sold his car by auction, collected his money and took a steamer to Rarotonga. Like many a young man he was seduced by the beauty and lifestyle of the south sea island. This was where he would spend the rest of his life! He would just back track to New Zealand to wrap up his affairs and then return to the plantation that he had already picked out.

The year was 1914. Cashing in his assets took longer than anticipated. War was declared and that put an end to George's dream. Initially he was not interned, but neither was he permitted to drive a taxi. He credits the Maori for taking him "into the deep warm

Polynesian heart." He was invited to live with Manahi Paewai and when the patriarch died, he was "inherited" by Rangi Rangi Paewai with whom he came to share a special bond. Having lost his parents early in life (his father had died when he was six, his mother when he was seventeen), George thrived under the nurturing attention, and in the friendship of Ted, Wal, Jim, of Sid, of Charlotte and Wirihana. For the first three years he reported to the police in Dannevirke twice a week. He started bee farming with Henry Stockmar who managed the undertaking on his property, allowing George to live among the Maori where he kept another lot of bees. He helped "Mother Rangi" drive and maintain her cars. With the horse she had given him, he helped in looking after the sheep, participated in (and later wrote about) shearing, harvesting, eel roasts, sheep trials, horse shows.



Courtesy: Dr Frauke Dibbern Ploeg- photo by J.N.O. Marshall, Dannevirke

George Dibbern with the horse given to him by Rangi Rangi Paewai. Dannevirke, December 1917

The hat became something of a "trademark" during the ten years he lived in Germany after his deportation in 1919. Dibbern is referred to in G.R. Halkett's *The Dear Monster* (Jonathan Cape, London, 1935, p. 314) as "wearing a kind of Boy Scout hat."

It was Dibbern's riding in a local agricultural show in December 1917 that moved some citizens to agitate for his internment - while their sons were fighting to the death in Europe, "German George" was enjoying the good life right before their eyes. Although the accusations regarding Dibbern's alleged "disloyal statements" were withdrawn, George Dibbern was apprehended on June 4, 1918 and interned on Somes Island four days later. On the 14 of May 1919 he was among the passengers, including Count von Luckner, to board the ship Willochra for transport to Rotterdam where they arrived on the 18th July. At thirty years of age, Dibbern had already lived what some would call a lifetime of experiences, but for him that was just a beginning!

***The author would welcome
correspondence from anyone who
was either personally or indirectly
associated with George Dibbern.***

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Dibbern considered Mrs Luxford Peeti, better known as Rangī Rangī Paewai (standing) his "spiritual mother."

The lady seated may be Mrs. Mark who accompanied Mrs Peeti to visit him during his internment on Somes Island.

