

# NEW ZEALAND Memories



Erika Grundmann  
Box 227  
Mansons Landing BC V0P 1K0

April/May 2001

issue  
29



Maori Battalion

1953/54 Royal Tour

German George returns

Images of the regions: Waikato and Manawatu/Wanganui

ISSN 1173-4159

29



9 771173 415007





Despite their being hopelessly in debt, George and Elisabeth partied the entire week of the German equivalent of Mardi Gras. His stay in New Zealand had a marked influence on Dibbern. With his artist wife he designed and produced the costumes; and performed a "Polynesian" dance, 1925



# GERMAN GEORGE

## RETURNS

**In response to numerous requests for another instalment in the life of George Dibbern, Erika Grundmann has provided this equally entertaining sequel.**

Ten years after his return to Europe in July 1919 aboard the S.S. *Willochra* along with more than four hundred other *Somes Island* internees, George Dibbern was married, the father of three little girls - and at the end of his rope. The Germany that he had returned to was not a welcoming place. His many attempts at finding employment or starting up a business (never a problem for him in New Zealand) had failed. In 1929 he had moved the family to Berlin, where he felt Elisabeth's artwork and his stories of life in New Zealand would bring in much needed money. But things had gone from bad to worse, and now he was a relief worker. Wouldn't his family be better off without him?

Back in 1925, when all he managed to save of his investment in a small boat building operation was the hull of an 10 metre Baltic double ender, George was hospitalized after being hit by a motor vehicle. His doctor, on learning that he had lived in New Zealand, had given him a book entitled *Vom Kulturreich des Meeres* (The Cultural Realm of the Sea). As George later wrote in his own book, *Quest*, the Polynesian mythology he knew so well from New Zealand was "ably interpreted for the German mind. [...] The whole book inspired me, and in it my wife and I found the name of the boat." *Te Rapunga*: the third step in the Maori creation myth. This early stage between darkness and light, the first stirrings of the vital force, was presented as "longing." Peter S. Buck in *The Coming of the Maori*, referred to it as "seeking." Both interpretations reflected Dibbern's frustration. Already Elisabeth had recognised her husband's restless nature; she had vowed that all earnings from her intricate scissor cuts would go to outfitting *Te Rapunga*, and that George eventually *would* again sail to New Zealand, *would* once more visit Mother Rangi.

While in *Quest* he describes his decision as spontaneous, it was only the timing of his departure that was sudden. A fellow relief worker's challenge of "...why don't you go in your bathtub of a sailboat ... and conquer the world?" set him think-

**In the early 1930's Dibbern handed out this photo as a sort of calling card to people he befriended, including John Dick, Town clerk of Napier Borough in 1935/36, whose son, W. Keith Dick still has the original given to his father in 1934.**



Courtesy W. Keith Dick, Napier

ing. He had sunk so low, the constant struggle to make ends meet had put an unbearable strain on the marriage: his family's circumstances could only *improve* if he left. Friends and social services would take better care of them than he had been able to. He would sail to New Zealand where Mother Rangi would help. He would get himself established then bring out the family.

It was not an easy parting, and as Elisabeth regularly insisted, this was the only inaccurately depicted episode in George's book. She herself had encouraged him in his vision of a return to New Zealand, had worked toward this goal. Moreover, with his "red" socialist views, which he made no effort to hide, it was just a matter of time before he would be in serious trouble with the authorities. This was the moment: he had to go.

George was 41 years old when he left Berlin at the end of May in 1930. In Kiel he found *Te Rapunga* sadly in need of attention - requiring money he didn't have. Since he was in debt to his nephew Günther Schramm, who as a result owned a significant part of *Te Rapunga*, George offered him the experience of a lifetime - a sailing trip to New Zealand. The money problem was partially resolved by the signing on of his friend Albrecht von Fritsch (who had published some of Dibbern's stories) and Albrecht's divorcée sister, Dorothea, with the generous alligator purse. *Te Rapunga* finally set sail in mid-August of 1930.



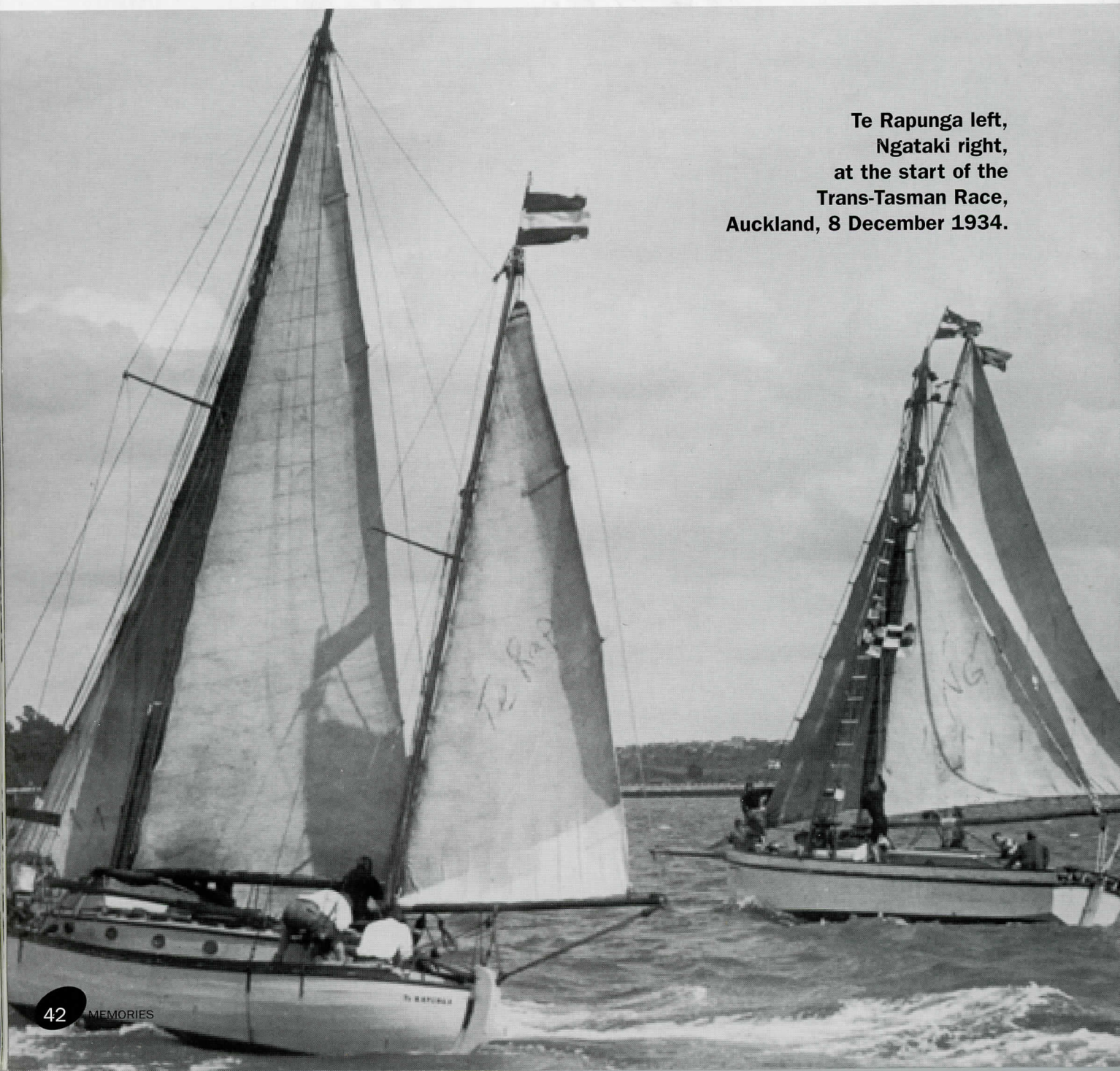
The trip to New Zealand is fully described in *Quest*. Albrecht did not stay long. Dorothea came and went, came again, and left again. In order to keep *Te Rapunga* afloat, Dibbern took on paying passengers and sailed wherever they wished, mostly in the balmy Mediterranean - while Elisabeth and the girls struggled in the cold of Berlin. Much of *Quest* deals with Dibbern's self-recrimination, soul searching and pursuit of meaning in life, meaning in *his* life.

*Te Rapunga* finally sailed into Devonport, whence she was towed into Auckland, on March 8th 1934. George wasn't the first Dibbern to sail to the shores of New Zealand - in 1881 his father, "commander" of the schooner *Wagrain*, had docked in Dunedin. Like his father, George had been away from home for almost four years. More significantly, he had been away from New Zealand for fifteen.

Little was the same as George remembered. His friend Hugo Hildebrandt, known locally as "Hildy," had become a successful businessman and respected citizen of Napier. Oh, the welcome he extended to George was warm, but his values were different. George found his Maori friends, too, had changed: all had European names; the Maori lands had been divided and sold; they had lost their Maori ways which had so endeared them to him. The cruellest blow of all, however, was news that Rangī Rangi Paewai had died in 1928 - even before he had left Germany.

In the four years since his departure, Elisabeth and the girls had made a life, albeit of modest means, for themselves. They were not prepared to give up what little they had for the nothing that George could now offer. On the other hand, as Elisabeth wrote in May of that year "...I fear that in this new Germany your queer mentality would

**Te Rapunga left,  
Ngataki right,  
at the start of the  
Trans-Tasman Race,  
Auckland, 8 December 1934.**





find no place.” There was no turning back. There was no way forward. The invitation to participate in the Trans-Tasman Race provided a welcome diversion.

When they first arrived in Auckland, Dibbern and Schramm were made honorary members of the Akarana Yacht Club. The time till the Trans-Tasman Race was thus filled with participating in local regattas and cruises with additional crew from the Yacht Club. Coromandel. Great Barrier Island. Gisborne. Napier. Much needed repairs back in Devonport. Günther and George lived off the generosity of New Zealanders who were welcoming and admiring of these adventurers in a time when off-shore sailing in small boats was noteworthy. George, whose unaccustomed German accent added to the mystique of his adventurous spirit, earned a little extra by giving talks at clubs, schools and on the radio. He was a spellbinding raconteur who captivated, among others, the young Napier woman, Eileen Morris.

On hearing George recount his adventures at sea over the radio, Eileen was overcome with envy. It had always been her dream to travel, but she saw only a future as a stenographer in some stuffy office. She convinced her friend, Cara, to accompany her to the wharf to “just look.” *Te Rapunga* was a welcoming vessel and the moment Eileen stepped through the hatchway, she was hooked. George recognized how she was

drawn to the boat, how immediately at home she appeared. It was after tea that the subject of the girls’ joining the crew for a sail to Gisborne, was raised. Of course Eileen wanted to go - but of course she couldn’t. It simply wasn’t done.

The Trans-Tasman Race was scheduled to begin the afternoon of Saturday, December 8th from the Akarana Yacht Club. The distance was reported as 1630 miles. The destination, in honour of her centenary, was Melbourne. Only *Ngataki* and *Te Rapunga* took part, two rovers’ boats with no fancy sails and equipment. “The sea is still the kingdom of the vagabond,” the *New Zealand Herald* quoted Dibbern.

*Ngataki*’s crew consisted of her Captain, Johnny Wray, and crew G.B. Wray, R.E. Hunt, M. Robinson and I. Graham. Dibbern skippered *Te Rapunga* and her crew of Fred Norris, Noel Tattersfield, Austin Vaile and Günther Schramm, who tore himself away from Joe Nitschke’s land (where Hugo Hildebrandt had arranged for him to satisfy his agricultural yearnings for a spell) and (unbeknownst to George) Joe’s daughter, Muriel. The conditions at the start of the race were described in the December 10th *New Zealand Herald* as “boisterous” with “a strong easterly wind causing a short choppy sea.” The article continued, politely condescending: “Both the ocean-going craft afforded a striking comparison with the pleasure yachts which sailed about them.



George, wearing his trademark New Zealand hat, with his wife Elisabeth and their dog, Taps, at the homestead in Stocksee, Germany, 1922.





Courtesy: Bruce Dawson, Mount Maunganui

**ABOVE: George and Günther (his nephew 14 years his junior) were welcomed by the Hildebrandt family on their arrival in Napier in November 1934.**

**Back row, left to right:** Alex Dawson, George Hugo Hildebrandt. **Middle row:** Günther Schramm, George Dibbern, Beatrix (Trixie) Kenneally Dawson, Frances Kenneally Hildebrandt, Wilhelm Hugo Hildebrandt, Bruce Dawson and Neil Dawson (sons of Beatrix and Alex).

Their sturdy masts and rigging and generally solid appearance made them distinctive in a scene of picturesque activity. Their speed also proved rather a revelation to many yachtsmen who were present. Carrying full sail, both yachts had their lee rails well down and covered a lot of ground in manoeuvring before the start."

Despite the 44 hours *Te Rapunga* lost when she unexpectedly began to take on water, and put into Russell for repairs, she was the first to arrive in Melbourne, on the 27th December. With the 17 hours handicap she had to concede to *Ngataki*, she was not declared winner of the race till 7 o'clock the following morning. *Ngataki* finally made port around midnight of the 28th. There followed days of celebration; and then the decision to race to the Royal Hobart Regatta. On the afternoon of January 22nd this second contest began casually with a boisterous departure from the bar, some time around 6:30, when both yachts, amidst cheers and reluctant farewells, started out on the 800 kilometre race across the Bass Strait.

*Te Rapunga's* arrival in Hobart on January 28th provided reason enough for the celebrations to begin. *Ngataki's* arrival three days later was reason for them to continue. Responding to a toast at the Regatta Luncheon, in the presence of Tasmanian celebrities, George said that he brought greetings, not only from his own country, but also from every country, which he had passed on his voyaging. He added that the sea had no boundaries, that the sailor knew neither creed, colour nor nationality, and he hoped that his visit to Hobart might do a little to weld together the people of different countries in a true friendship. Dibbern's role in life had begun to take shape.

*Ngataki* redeemed her pride in winning the regatta races in Hobart. Both Wary and Dibbern

were interviewed on the radio. While George by now felt comfortable, this was a new experience for Johnny, which he later described in his book *South Sea Vagabonds*. Both were in demand as guest speakers. A month later, however, *Te Rapunga* pulled herself away from all the attention of Hobart and headed back to New Zealand. No sooner did she make port than Günther raced off to marry Muriel, with whom he settled in Tasmania.

George now had to face his own future. The idea of being a bridge of friendship, which had first come to mind while he stood at Mother Rangi's graveside and which he had begun to implement during the months in Australia, now became his mission. *Te Rapunga* would become a boat of friendship offering would-be sailors the opportunity to visit faraway places and to meet people of different cultures, to become good will ambassadors of sorts - and to have a good time in the process. *This* was the way to break down barriers: on an individual level.

That summer of 1935, Dibbern assembled a new crew for an extended cruise of friendship to wherever the spirit would lead them. This time when he invited Eileen Morris to join, she did not hesitate for a moment. She had had plenty of time to consider her reasons for refusing in the first place, to, as she would later write, "sort out [her] sense of values." Going on the trip was far more important to her than worrying about the opinions of people who judged her by surface evidence only. She did not intend to be told what to do for the rest of her life. She would leap into the unknown.

The other new crewmembers were Roy Murdock, a young journalist who quit his job at the Poverty Bay *Herald* Gisborne and Maurice Black,



**THE AKARANA YACHT CLUB**  
(INCORPORATED)

**TRANS-TASMAN YACHT RACE**  
(In connection with Melbourne Centenary Celebrations)

**Entry Form**

(To be signed by the Owner or his Representative),

The Secretary,  
Akarana Yacht Club (Inc.),  
11 Wynyard Street,  
Devonport, Auckland, N.Z.

Please enter the yacht Te Rapunga owner  
George J. Dibbern for the Trans-Tasman Race, in  
connection with the Melbourne Centenary Celebrations. Her  
distinguishing flag is German, her rig is Ketch  
and her rating is \_\_\_\_\_

And I agree to be bound by the International Racing Rules  
and those of the National Authority under which this race is sailed.

Signed this 6<sup>th</sup> day of July, 1934.

OWNER'S NAME George J. Dibbern  
CLUB Vielos Jodels Yachtclub Kielburg  
and Santa Barbara Yacht Club California  
ADDRESS \_\_\_\_\_  
c/o Hildebrandt  
Napier

SIGNATURE George J. Dibbern

All Entries must be accompanied by Entrance Fee of £1.  
W. A. URE,  
Hon. Secretary.

(NZ Herald, 10 December 1934, courtesy Robin Elliott, Auckland)

**Registration of Te Rapunga for the Trans-Tasman Race, 1934. Dibbern and Schramm had been made honorary members of the Santa Barbara Yacht Club in California (1933) as they were of the Akarana Yacht Club in Auckland.**

#### BELOW:

**While Dibbern handed out photographic reproductions to spread his message, the original, which was notarised, served as his passport and actually did come to be recognised by officials from the late 1940's onward.**

also of Gisborne, who gave up his position at the Agricultural Department there. The movements of Dibbern and *Te Rapunga* were still of interest to New Zealanders and when it was reported that a young Napier woman was going to sail on a yacht with three men, none of whom was a husband nor father nor brother nor even a cousin, the outcry was immediate.

While most people who knew Eileen were supportive, many citizens of Napier were appalled. Nasty letters were sent to her home. George, too, received letters suggesting he be horsewhipped and driven from the country for leading an innocent girl astray. He insisted that a hall be rented in Napier, and on the evening of July 29th, he appeared with Eileen before an audience, to clear the air, to show his sincerity and to explain his mission of freedom and friendship, to explain that the decision to join the crew had been Eileen's alone and that having reached the age of 21, she had been handed the key to her own life - the decision was hers to make.

*Te Rapunga* left Auckland on August 18, 1935. During the time she was away from New Zealand, she became the vessel of friendship that George Dibbern had envisioned. She acquired a new flag he designed representing his philosophy of friendship and the right of each person to evolve according to his or her individuality. The manuscript for what would become *Quest* was dictated and typed. A notarized passport of his own creation,

**Passport**  
**George John Dibbern**

I, George John Dibbern, through long years in different countries and sincere friendship with many people in many lands feel my place to be outside of nationality, a citizen of the world and a friend of all peoples.

I recognize the divine origin of all nations and therefore their value in being as they are, respect their laws, and feel my existence solely as a bridge of good fellowship between them.

This is why, on my own ship I fly my own flag, why I have my own passport and so place myself without other protection under the goodwill of the world.





Born: 26 March '89  
Town: Kiel  
Country: Germany  
Profession: Writer  
Eyes: Blue  
Hair: Gray  
Height: 5ft 9ins.  
Weight: 140 lbs.

Signature  
George John Dibbern

Subscribed and sworn to before me  
this 31<sup>st</sup> day of May 1940  
Notary Public in and for the County of San Francisco, State of California  
Antonius M. Engelhardt  
MY COMMISSION EXPIRES JAN. 31, 1942

Courtesy: Valentine Miller, Carmel



declaring himself a Citizen of the World, replaced Dibbern's expired German passport. Since Maurice Black had returned to New Zealand well before *Te Rapunga* arrived in Canada, and as Roy Murdock left the sailing life and settled to become assistant editor of *The Daily Colonist* in Victoria, British Columbia, it was only George and Eileen who returned to New Zealand and, after six and a half years of roaming, sailed unannounced into Napier that stormy afternoon of January 24, 1941.

"With Nazi Master, Girl as Crew, Ship blithely enters NZ Port" screamed one newspaper headline. The authorities did not quite know how to handle Dibbern's flag and passport. They undoubtedly would have been more understanding in peacetime. While there was no evidence of spy activity ( *Te Rapunga* had neither motor nor radio) the public reaction was such that they felt they had no choice. As David McGill points out in *The Guardians at the Gate*, the ketch *Te Rapunga* was the first New Zealand port seizure of the war. Two weeks later George Dibbern was back on Somes Island where he remained till the internment camp was closed on October 10, 1945. It was during this time that Dibbern's book *Quest* (W.W. Norton, N.Y., 1941 and John Lane, London, 1941) was released attracting the attention of the American author, Henry Miller, whose correspondence and

friendship with George began while Dibbern was still an internee. *Te Rapunga* spent the duration of the war in Napier. It was December 1946 before George Dibbern (who throughout the years of separation kept in touch with his family in Germany) was granted full freedom to sail again - which he did with Eileen Morris.

*The Dannevirke Heritage Project, supported by the Gallery of History, have a 22 page summary of George Dibbern's adventures. For further information write to the Gallery of History, Dannevirke or visit [www.geocities.com/dannevirke/history](http://www.geocities.com/dannevirke/history)*

**George Dibbern and crewmember Eileen Morris from Napier aboard *Te Rapunga* in Seattle, July 1939.**

