

CAPTAIN F. SPIESS
AND THE GERMAN ATLANTIC
METEOR EXPEDITION
OF 1925–27

**CAPTAIN F. SPIESS
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METEOR EXPEDITION
OF 1925–27**

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Captain F. Spiess and the German Atlantic Meteor Expedition of 1925–27

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Contents

List of Figures	ix
Foreword	xix
Vorwort	xxi
1 Early Years of Fritz Spiess	1
2 Research Expedition	9
Background of the Final Construction of the <i>Meteor</i>	9
The President of the German Scientific Research Council	11
Alfred Merz	13
The Expedition Plan and its Scientific Rationale	16
3 Preparation for the Expedition	21
The Scientific Staff	21
The Naval Staff and Crew of the <i>Meteor</i>	24
The Ship and its Equipment	27
4 The Commissioning of the <i>Meteor</i>	37
Sea Trials	39
Preparations for the Pilot Expedition	40
The Pilot Expedition and its Outcomes	42
Modifications of the <i>Meteor</i> from Lessons Learned on the Pilot Expedition	51

5 Main Cruise with Fourteen Sections Across the South Atlantic	55
The Plan of the Main Expedition	55
The Voyage to Buenos Aires	57
Navigation on the <i>Meteor</i>	64
Echo Sounding on the <i>Meteor</i>	66
On to Buenos Aires	71
6 Section I Along 42°S	75
Return to Buenos Aires and the Disembarkation of Prof. Merz	83
Return to the Section Along 42°S	86
First Visit to Cape Town	90
Biological Study Aboard the <i>Meteor</i>	95
News of the Death of Alfred Merz	98
First Brazilian Port of Call	99
Back in Buenos Aires	101
7 Observations on Section III at 48.5°S	103
Visit to the Falkland Islands	104
Back to Section III	106
Geological Research on the <i>Meteor</i>	107
From the Meteor Reef to Cape Town	111
8 Section IV Along 34° and 33°S	115
Chemical Studies on the Meteor Expedition	117
From Rio Grande to Buenos Aires	118
The Southernmost and Longest Section V	120
Punta Arenas, Chile's Southernmost Port	124
Voyage through Tierra Del Fuego Channel	125
Deception Island our Southernmost Harbor	136
Grytviken Whaling Station	140
From South Georgia to Bouvet Island	145
9 Scientific Data Along Section V	149
Our Third Visit to Cape Town and Dockyard-Overhaul	150

‡ Contents	vii
10 Section VI at 15°S and Port Calls on the West African Coast	155
From Bahia das Tigres to St. Helena	158
St. Helena and on to the South American Coast	160
11 Section VII from Rio to Walvis Bay	169
Current Measurements at Anchor Stations	171
The Stranded British Ship <i>Cawdor Castle</i>	173
A Visit to Windhoek	175
12 Section VIII at 8°S	179
Evaporation Measurements	184
13 Section IX, Bahia to Pernambuco and Freetown, Sierra Leone	187
14 The Zigzag Profile X through Guinea and South Equatorial Currents	191
Measurements of Transparency Depth and Water Color	193
15 Section XI	195
Stereophotogrammetric Wave Photographs	199
Pernambuco	199
16 Section XII	203
Porto Grande Again after Two Years	206
17 Finishing Sections XIII and XIV	209
18 Section XIII	213
Para on the Amazonas	215
19 The Last Section XIV and the Journey Home	217
Precious Metal Analyses	219
From Cape Verde to Tenerife	219
After Two Years Again in Tenerife	220
Back Home	221

20 Scientific Data and Preliminary Results	225
Echo Soundings	225
The Oceanographic Data	228
Additional Observations	234
Biological Results	235
Meteorological Results	236
Expedition Summary	238
21 Captain Spiess Activities Following the German Atlantic Expedition	241
Public Interest in the Expedition after Landing in Wilhelmshaven	241
<i>Meteor</i> Again in the North Atlantic. The Interval Until the Summer of 1938	249
22 President of the German Marine Observatory (<i>Deutsche Seewarte</i>), Later Part of DHI, Today BSH	253
Militarization of the <i>Seewarte</i> , Enforced Conformity (<i>Gleichschaltung</i>)	257
Difficult Times During the Second World War, the Collapse of the <i>Seewarte</i> and the Formation of German Hydrographic Office (DHI) Under British Occupation	262
23 Retirement in Hamburg	267
Conflict Over Retirement Pension	267
The Cottage	268
Invitation by the Spanish Navy 1952	268
24 Family Ties	273
Acknowledgements	275

List of Figures

- Fig. 1.** Seal of the German Imperial Admiralty after the foundation of the German *Reich* 1871. 2
- Fig. 2.** Cover of the naval diary by Cadet Fritz Spiess from His Majesty's Ship *Stosch* started in May 1900. 2
- Fig. 3.** Lifeboat and its equipment in detail including oars, rudder and a "flying" German Imperial Navy Ensign (*Kriegsflagge*). 3
- Fig. 4.** *Vorgeschirr* of a clipper in Spiess's diary from the *Stosch*. 4
- Fig. 5.** Hand-drawn main mast with details in Spiess's diary from the *Stosch* found in the *Militärarchiv* in Freiburg im Breisgau (2018). 5
- Fig. 6.** Chart of a training cruise from Kiel into the Kiel Bight, ca 1900. Fritz Spiess's ship *Stosch* visited Sonderburg (today part of Denmark), Glücksburg in the Flensburg Fjord and Hohwacht Bight east of the Kiel Fjord. The mirror shadow of the German naval engine in the lower right portion of the figure is from the image on the back of this figure which is shown in Fig. 3. 6
- Fig. 7.** "The first scientific leader and organizer of the "Meteor"-Expedition Prof. Merz". Handwritten legend by Captain Fritz Spiess on an image in the *Meteor* files passed down in the German Military Archive in Freiburg im Breisgau (June 2018). 15
- Fig. 8.** From their studies, Merz and Wüst discovered that the warmest water columns are not found at the equator but rather between 20 and 30° north and south in the subtropics. This seemed to contradict the popular view of the vertical circulation in Fig. 9 that argued that the warmest water should be found at the equator and the coldest in the Polar Regions. 17

Fig. 9. The prevailing pattern of vertical circulation in the Atlantic prior to the Meteor Expedition. Apparently an upwelling flow of cold water could not be proved by observations.	18
Fig. 10. North-south temperature section along approximately 30°W according to Merz-Wüst.	18
Fig. 11. North-South salinity (‰) section along approximately 30°W with the meridional circulation patterns according to Merz-Wüst.	18
Fig. 12. The plan of the Meteor Expedition as defined by Alfred Merz.	20
Fig. 13. Prof. Merz and the scientific staff (from left: Wüst, Reger, Wattenberg, Merz, Hentchel, Schumacher, Böhnecke, Pratje, Kuhlbrodt).	24
Fig. 14. The total <i>Meteor</i> Scientific and Naval Crew before departure.	25
Fig. 15. Captain Spiess and the scientific staff (from left: Meyer, Wattenberg, Wüst, Pratje, Spiess, Kuhlbrodt, Schumacher, Hentschel, Reger, Böhnecke).	26
Fig. 16. The <i>Meteor</i> before the pilot expedition.	28
Fig. 17. Side view and deck plan of the <i>Meteor</i> showing all of the decks.	29
Fig. 18. Large deck boats.	30
Fig. 19. Deep anchor winch and cable.	30
Fig. 20. Ekman repeating current meter.	31
Fig. 21. Main Serial Winch for Hydrographic Measurements.	32
Fig. 22. Commandant stateroom.	33
Fig. 23. Titration setup in the chemical lab.	33
Fig. 24. Chemical laboratory.	34
Fig. 25. Drawing room lab.	35
Fig. 26. Dr. Wüst and an assistant titrating in the tropics.	35
Fig. 27. Crates of equipment to be loaded on to the <i>Meteor</i> .	42
Fig. 28. The <i>Meteor</i> ship's band.	43
Fig. 29. Deep-sea anchor system schematic.	44
Fig. 30. Bow anchor station.	45

Fig. 31. <i>Meteor</i> after refit following the pilot expedition.	47
Fig. 32. Participants in pilot expedition. Front row from left: Pretje, Reger, Bender, Merz, Ekman Spiess, Hentschel, Siburg; back row from left: Recum, Kuhlbrodt, Kraft, Loewe, Nirdorff, Böhnecke, Landrod, Schumacher, Lowisch, Wattenberg, Ahlmann.	47
Fig. 33. Filling a weather balloon.	48
Fig. 34. Launching a balloon.	49
Fig. 35. Instrument carried aloft by the weather balloons.	49
Fig. 36. Measuring solar radiation.	50
Fig. 37. Rain gauges.	50
Fig. 38. Sleeping in hammocks on deck.	51
Fig. 39. <i>Meteor</i> schematic after refit.	53
Fig. 40. Echo sounding station.	53
Fig. 41. <i>Meteor</i> leaving Wilhelmshaven on the main expedition.	57
Fig. 42. Beginning of the text of the old folk song “Must I, then? Must I, then? From the town must I, then?” (Source: https://www.lieder-archiv.de/).	58
Fig. 43. Range finding.	60
Fig. 44. Areological cannon.	61
Fig. 45. Kite launching.	62
Fig. 46. Kite flying.	63
Fig. 47. Measuring the sun’s angle for navigation.	64
Fig. 48. Calculation of surface current from daily position displacement.	66
Fig. 49. Behm echo sounder.	68
Fig. 50. Echo sounders schematic.	69
Fig. 51. Preparing for the festivities to cross the equator.	72
Fig. 52. Neptune and Amphitrite.	73
Fig. 53. Crew baptism after crossing the equator.	73
Fig. 54. Hydrographic winch with sample bottle on wire.	76

Fig. 55. Crewman attaching a sampling bottle to the hydrographic wire.	77
Fig. 56. Hydrographic winch with sample bottles.	77
Fig. 57. Reversing thermometers.	80
Fig. 58. Drawing a sample.	81
Fig. 59. Winch with large sampling bottle.	82
Fig. 60. Chlorine titration in the lab.	83
Fig. 61. Sampling bottles and a reversing thermometer.	85
Fig. 62. High wire angle in bad weather.	87
Fig. 63. An albatross follows the <i>Meteor</i> .	89
Fig. 64. <i>Meteor</i> in a hurricane.	89
Fig. 65. Table Mountain viewed from Robben Island.	91
Fig. 66. <i>Meteor</i> enters Cape Town harbor.	92
Fig. 67. <i>Meteor</i> in Cape Town harbor.	92
Fig. 68. Letter of appreciation from the Governor General (Militärarchiv Freiburg/Breisgau).	93
Fig. 69. Lucas Winch.	97
Fig. 70. Close-net retrieval.	97
Fig. 71. Prof. Hentschel standing on the large net.	98
Fig. 72. Bridge connecting Santa Catarina to the mainland.	100
Fig. 73. Decorations on the body of Prof. Merz.	101
Fig. 74. Grave of signalman Wunsch.	102
Fig. 75. Penguins on the Falkland Islands.	105
Fig. 76. A solitary penguin.	105
Fig. 77. Sea Lions going in the water.	106
Fig. 78. Tube corer.	108
Fig. 79. Sailor with glass core tubes.	109
Fig. 80. Modified coring tube.	110

‡ List of Figures	xiii
Fig. 81. Table Bay and Cape Town.	112
Fig. 82. University of Stellenbosch.	113
Fig. 83. Signalman Dittmar working in the chemical lab.	118
Fig. 84. Farewell in Rio Grande.	119
Fig. 85. Sacks of coal on the deck.	121
Fig. 86. The <i>Meteor</i> and the <i>Berlin</i> .	122
Fig. 87. White dolphins.	123
Fig. 88. The Admiral from Punta Arenas visits the <i>Meteor</i> .	125
Fig. 89. The <i>Porvenir</i> .	126
Fig. 90. <i>Meteor</i> in the Beagle Channel.	128
Fig. 91. Romanche glacier in the Beagle channel, January 1926 (photo: Nixdorf on board <i>Meteor</i>).	128
Fig. 92. Romanche glacier in the Beagle channel, 2005 (https://upload.wikimedia.org/wikipedia/commons/d/d5/BeagleChannelGlacier.jpg).	129
Fig. 93. <i>Meteor</i> passing Cape Horn on January 21, 1926 at 6:25 pm painted by F.H. Nieder in 1977 (Courtesy <i>Leistelle Meteor</i> Hamburg, N. Jakobi).	130
Fig. 94. Research Vessel <i>Meteor</i> (II) under the command of Captain Walter Feldmann in front of Cape Hope, Drake Passage, December 1980. The nice weather condition is obvious and similar to <i>Meteor's</i> (I) visit in January 1926 (photo <i>Meteor</i> (II) by author W. Zenk). The pilot ladder in the middle was used by cruise participants to enter the rubber boat.	130
Fig. 95. R/V <i>Meteor</i> (II) in front of Cape Horn seen from the rubber boat cruising between the Pacific to the Atlantic Oceans, December 1980 (photo W. Zenk).	131
Fig. 96. Stern of R/V <i>Meteor</i> (II) south of Cape Horn in December 1980. The weather was extremely calm and friendly after the ship had crossed Drake Passage. Chief scientist Bernt Zeitzschel demonstrates the dividing line between Pacific (left, west) and Atlantic Oceans (photo W. Zenk).	131
Fig. 97. <i>Meteor</i> under full sail.	132
Fig. 98. The first iceberg.	133
Fig. 99. Norwegian Whaleship <i>Bjerk</i> .	135

Fig. 100. Processing a whale on the side of a whale processing ship.	137
Fig. 101. <i>Meteor</i> in harbor on Deception Island.	139
Fig. 102. <i>Meteor</i> in harbor on Grytviken Island.	141
Fig. 103. Sea elephants on the beach.	142
Fig. 104. Sea lions complaining when disturbed.	142
Fig. 105. <i>Meteor</i> in Moltke Harbor, South Georgia Island.	144
Fig. 106. North side of Bouvet Island.	146
Fig. 107. <i>Meteor</i> in dry dock in Cape Town.	151
Fig. 108. Negro coal stokers on the <i>Meteor</i> .	152
Fig. 109. The monkey Hannes.	152
Fig. 110. Captain Spiess and Dr. Böhnecke in the middle with Hannes.	153
Fig. 111. Reception at the Swakopmund rail station.	157
Fig. 112. Shark caught by the <i>Meteor's</i> crew.	159
Fig. 113. Napoleon's living quarters on St. Helena.	161
Fig. 114. Ladder Hill on St. Helena.	161
Fig. 115. Reception of the <i>Meteor</i> near Itaiai.	164
Fig. 116. <i>Meteor</i> in the harbor of Rio de Janeiro.	165
Fig. 117. Reception of the diplomatic and science authorities in Rio.	166
Fig. 118. Captain Spiess and Lt. Captain Rodriguez.	167
Fig. 119. Reception at the university.	167
Fig. 120. The Merz-Ekman current meter.	172
Fig. 121. <i>Meteor's</i> first try at towing.	174
Fig. 122. Windhoek.	176
Fig. 123. Reception of the <i>Meteor's</i> personnel in Windhoek.	176
Fig. 124. Chart with all tracks of the <i>Meteor</i> in the vicinity of Lüderitz and Walvis Bays after Spiess's book "The Meteor Expedition". The northwesterly loop (August 11–14, 1926) documents the unscheduled return of the ship shortly after clearance in Walvis Bay.	180

‡ List of Figures	xv
Fig. 125. Bahia de Todo dos Santos.	183
Fig. 126. Brazilian fishing boats.	186
Fig. 127. Fish market in Freetown.	190
Fig. 128. Mission station in Fernando Poo.	195
Fig. 129. Atlantic echo sounding depths.	197
Fig. 130. German cruiser <i>Emden</i> .	198
Fig. 131. Prof. Defant.	200
Fig. 132. Depth sounding around the western Cape Verde Islands (excerpt). Note how sparse soundings were before the observation from the <i>Meteor</i> on the shown track lines became available.	206
Fig. 133. <i>Meteor</i> leaving Para.	218
Fig. 134. Alexander von Humbolt's home in Tenerife.	221
Fig. 135. <i>Meteor</i> arriving home.	222
Fig. 136. Welcome reception at home.	223
Fig. 137. <i>Meteor</i> medal 1 st class. The case is covered with red cloth. (courtesy Fellow of the Royal Geographical Society G.M. Stein, http://www.antarctic-circle.org/medals.htm).	223
Fig. 138. E-W bottom topography from the <i>Meteor</i> (top) and older data (middle) along the track in the bottom panel.	226
Fig. 139. A series of zonal cross sections along a line following the Mid-Atlantic Ridge.	227
Fig. 140. 3D map of <i>Meteor's</i> echo sounding of Atlantic bottom topography.	228
Fig. 141. Data on example section II.	229
Fig. 142. Temperature and salinity sections VII.	231
Fig. 143. North-south salinity sections for the west and east of the Atlantic.	232
Fig. 144. Meridional sections synthesized from <i>Meteor</i> and older data.	233
Fig. 145. Plankton concentrations at the surface of the Atlantic.	235
Fig. 146. Map of balloon and kite profiles.	236

Fig. 147. Maximum and average atmospheric profiles.	237
Fig. 148. Route and stations of the <i>Meteor</i> by F. Spiess.	239
Fig. 149. <i>Konteradmiral</i> Spiess was nominated as Honorable Member of Hanseatic University Hamburg in combination with the Golden Coin of Honor.	244
Fig. 150. Sale prospectus of Capt. Spiess's book on the <i>Deutsche Atlantische Expedition</i> (DAE) with several favorable reviews published in 1928, 376 pages. Soft and hard cover editions were available on sale for 15.30 and 18.00 <i>Reich</i> marks.	247
Fig. 151. Bottom sampler from the German Atlantic Expedition on <i>Meteor</i> at sea and on display in the Marine Museum in Berlin ca. 1928.	248
Fig. 152. First location of the Institute for Marine Sciences (<i>Institut für Meereskunde</i>) in Kiel, Hohenbergstrasse 2 after its re-foundation in 1946 (Photo W. Zenk, 2018). The first director was Prof. Wüst, a participant of the DAE.	248
Fig. 153. A collection of all post-DAE <i>Meteor</i> cruises in the northern North Atlantic Ocean. Published by Capt. Spiess in <i>Deutsche Hydrographische Zeitschrift</i> , 3 (1, 2) in 1950.	251
Fig. 154. Upper: New north-bound cruise in the North Atlantic in co-operation between the Institute for Marine Sciences in Berlin and the German Navy echoed in the media (Military Archive Freiburg/Breisgau, Germany). Lower: The <i>Meteor</i> after refit for later research cruises in the North Atlantic. The sails were removed and a diesel engine was installed. The original etching was signed by Lieutenant Commander Hain (see last line in Fig. 153).	252
Fig. 155. The German Marine Observatory in about 1878 seen northward from the river Elbe with one of its jetties in the foreground. The signal mast towered over the hanseatic harbor reaching all in- and outbound naval traffic with storm prediction. The depicted Sailors' Home hosted the <i>Seewarte</i> from 1868 until 1881, the year of Capt. Spiess's birth (Ann. Rep. Seewarte, 1878, Library GEOMAR Kiel).	254
Fig. 156. The then new mighty castle-like building of the German Marine Observatory in about 1885 north of the river Elbe on the <i>Stintfang</i> knoll. Reminders of the former rampart construction are indicated by the steep slopes in the foreground (courtesy by <i>Freie und Hansestadt Hamburg, Amt Staatsarchiv</i> , 720-1\343-1\00002345).	255

- Fig. 157.** View from the river Elbe at the *Landungsbrücke* Pier. In the center the BSH building is shown, to the left the Meteorological Observatory DWD. (Photo W. Zenk, 2018). 255
- Fig. 158.** Portrait of Captain Fritz Spiess after his active military service (Photo *Deutsche Allgemeine Zeitung*, August 8, 1934). 257
- Fig. 159.** Inauguration ceremony of *Konteradmiral* Dr. h.c. F. Spiess as President of the German Marine Observatory in Hamburg. The candidate sits enthroned under the Swastika (covered by the authors). To the right and the left flags of the German Air Force and the Navy were decorated. They symbolized the dual leadership of both ministries over the *Seewarte*. 258
- Fig. 160.** Finalization of Captain Spiess's status as a soldier of the German *Wehrmacht*. 263
- Fig. 161.** Spiess's certificate of discharge, his thumb print and his preliminary exemption certificate form the British occupants dated April 16, 1946. 264
- Fig. 162.** The President of the *Seewarte* wrote an application letter to the R.A.F. asking for enough work space in his smaller cottage (Fig. 163). 269
- Fig. 163.** Two contemporary images of Fritz Spiess's homes in Hamburg Blankenese. *Strandweg* 84 (left, August 15, 1934–April 1, 1938), *Elbchaussee* 45 (1939–1951), *Elbchaussee* 542 (right, 1952–1959). Both locations at *Elbchaussee* are identical. House numbers were re-arranged in the early 1950es. His widow's name disappeared in the Hamburg telephone directory after 1962 (Photos Gerd Wegner, 2017). 270
- Fig. 164.** Invitation to two presentations of Capt. Spiess about the *Meteor* and results of the German Atlantic Expedition from December 1952. 270
- Fig. 165.** Newspaper report about the presentations by Capt. Spiess in Madrid, December 1952 (Military Archive Freiburg/Breisgau, Germany). A radio interview for *Radio Nacional* appeared in *La Vanguardia*, the first newspaper of Barcelona. 271
- Fig. 166.** Gravestone of Fritz and Hertha Spiess (Photo Gerd Wegner, 2017). 274

Foreword

Many of today's readers will be fascinated by the exciting story of the German oceanographic Meteor-Expedition from 1925 to 1927. The story of its captain and initiator, along with the details of the preparation and execution of this expedition are very interesting even today. This two and one-half year expedition in the Atlantic Ocean was carried out at a time of extreme financial hardship in Germany. One primary motivation was to be able to send a German naval vessel to foreign ports, something that was prohibited at the end of the First World War. Captain Spiess, among others, realized that this would be an opportunity to demonstrate the abilities of the German Navy and also of German oceanographic science. The data collected during this expedition continue to be used even today, particularly in defining the mean state of the Atlantic Ocean. One year after the completion of the expedition Captain Spiess published a popular book entitled "*Die Meteor-Fahrt*". This book was widely distributed in Germany and provided a vision of life on a crowded navy vessel and also demonstrated the difficulties associated with collecting oceanographic measurements in rough ocean conditions. Published in German the story of the Meteor Expedition has become fairly hard to obtain in Germany. An English translation by W. Emery was published in 1985 and a thousand copies distributed to oceanographic scientists at no cost as the publication was funded by the U.S. National Science Foundation.

The continued interest in this record breaking expedition has motivated us to write another version of the expedition story, in English which makes it available to a much wider audience. We quickly realized that a lot of the story is directly related to Captain Spiess, which he failed to point out as the author of the original story of the expedition. This includes his rise through

the ranks of the German Navy and his later career as the director of the German Marine Observatory (*Deutsche Seewarte*) in Hamburg during the turbulent times between 1934 and 1945. All of our sources demonstrate that he was promoted to “*Konteradmiral*” (one-star admiral) and given a honorary PhD from the Christian Albrechts University in Kiel, Germany. We further discovered that Captain Spiess was not a formal member of the Nazi Party (N.S.D.A.P.), which was surprising seeing his rather high position as president of the *Deutsche Seewarte* (German Marine Observatory). Apparently, he stood apart from the Nazi Party, which is something he had to prove legally later in life when the Hamburg Senate tried to reduce his pension claiming that he had been a member of the Nazi Party.

We would like to dedicate this book to our friend and colleague Professor Gerold Siedler, who often referred to the earlier results of the original Meteor Expedition. Both authors shared a research cruise in the Atlantic with him on a later research vessel also named *Meteor*. Here we all learned the value of the original Meteor Expedition. We also dedicate the book to our families.

Boulder CO and Kiel, September 2018, William J. Emery, Walter Zenk

Vorwort

Die spannende Geschichte der Meteor-Expedition 1925/27, ihres Kommandanten, ihrer Vorbereitung und Durchführung, fasziniert bis heute zahlreiche Leser. 2½ Jahre dauerte die Forschungsreise in den Südatlantik, wo das militärische Forschungs- und Vermessungsschiff unter der Leitung von Kapitän Fritz Spiess meereskundliche Beobachtungen durchgeführt hat. Die gewonnenen Daten gelten bis heute als Bezugswerte, wenn es um langfristige Änderungen im Ozean geht. Ein Jahr nach Rückkehr der Meteor veröffentlichte der Kapitän ein umfangreiches populäres Buch mit dem Titel: "Die Meteor-Fahrt". Dieses Werk fand in Deutschland eine weite Verbreitung und vermittelte zahlreichen meeresfernen Lesern einen tiefen Einblick in das Leben auf engstem Raum eines Marineschiffes und von meereskundlichen Arbeiten unter oft schwierigen Bedingungen auf Hoher See. Das Buch in deutscher Sprache hat sich zu einer bibliographischen Rarität entwickelt. Die englische Übersetzung von W. Emery wurde in einer Auflage von tausend Stück 1985 gedruckt. Sie wurde von der National Science Foundation, Washington DC, an ozeanographische Fachkollegen kostenlos verteilt.

Das bis heute andauernde Interesse an dem Meteor-Thema hat uns bewogen, eine Neuauflage in Englisch zu diskutieren. Schnell stellte sich heraus, dass viele Details in der Geschichte der historischen Meteor mit seinem Kapitän Spiess in seinem Buch nicht behandelt wurden bzw. noch nicht beschrieben werden konnten. Dazu zählen die frühen Jahre des Fähnrichs Fritz Spiess und seine Karriere als Präsident der Deutsche Seewarte in Hamburg in turbulenten Zeiten zwischen 1934 und dem Kriegsende 1945. Alle uns zugänglichen Quellen zeigen, dass der nach der Meteor-Reise zum Konteradmiral beförderte Dr. h.c. Fritz Spiess kein eingeschriebenes Mitglied der Nazi-Partei N.S.D.A.P. war. Dies ist insofern erstaunlich, da er eine leitende Vorbildfunktion in der Seewarte bekleidete. Offensichtlich stand er dem Hitler-Regime innerlich fern, was er gerichtlich nach dem Krieg im Streit mit dem Hamburger Senat um seine Pensionsansprüche eindeutig und abschließend klären lassen konnte.

Wir widmen unser Buch unserem Kollegen und Freund Professor Gerold Siedler, der in seiner wissenschaftlichen Arbeit häufig Bezug auf den einmaligen historischen Datenschatz der Deutschen Atlantischen Expedition 1925–27 genommen hat. Wir haben zusammen mit ihm auf der neuen Meteor spannende hydrographische Forschungsarbeiten im Atlantischen Ozean erleben dürfen. Dabei haben wir gelernt, die wissenschaftlichen Ergebnisse der ersten Meteor-Fahrt und seines Kapitäns in besonderer Weise zu würdigen.

Wir bedanken uns bei unseren Familien, die uns bei der Recherche in Archiven und beim Schreiben des Buchs tatkräftig unterstützt haben. Ihnen widmen wir den Band ebenso.

Boulder CO und Kiel im September 2018, William J. Emery, Walter Zenk

1



Early Years of Fritz Spiess

Friedrich August Spiess (in German: *Spieß*) was born in Wiesbaden, Hessen, Germany on October 28, 1881. After his birth Fritz Spiess was baptized a protestant. From 1886–1890 he attended the elementary school (*Volksschule*) in Wiesbaden. Subsequently he became a student at the humanistic *Gymnasium* when he was eleven. He worked towards *Abitur*, a prerequisite to enter university in Germany, finally receiving the highest rating of “*sehr gut*” (very good) in April 1900. We can assume that Spiess already learned English and French in school and in his early years afterwards. Much later he took Spanish lessons in order to give lectures on the Meteor Expedition in Spanish speaking countries. All three languages he used in his scientific and diplomatic correspondence and lessons.

He had always been interested in traveling and seeing the world and a career in the German Navy seemed like a good way to fulfill these aspirations. Thus, instead of enrolling in a university he decided to join the German Imperial Navy who enrolled him in their officers training program. He became a Sea Cadet on April 7, 1900. We found Spiess’s diary (*Tagebuch*, Fig. 2) written on his training ship the *Fregattenkreuzer Stosch* during the months, May 22, 1900 – March 18, 1902, hidden in formerly secret archives. Admiral Albrecht von Stosch (1818–1896), for whom the ship was named was the first Imperial Admiral from 1872–1883. His seal is shown in Fig. 1.



Fig. 1. Seal of the German Imperial Admiralty after the foundation of the German Reich 1871.

The naval novice cadet Spiess carefully recorded naval constructions and cruise plans as essential parts of his education as cadet (Figs. 2–6).

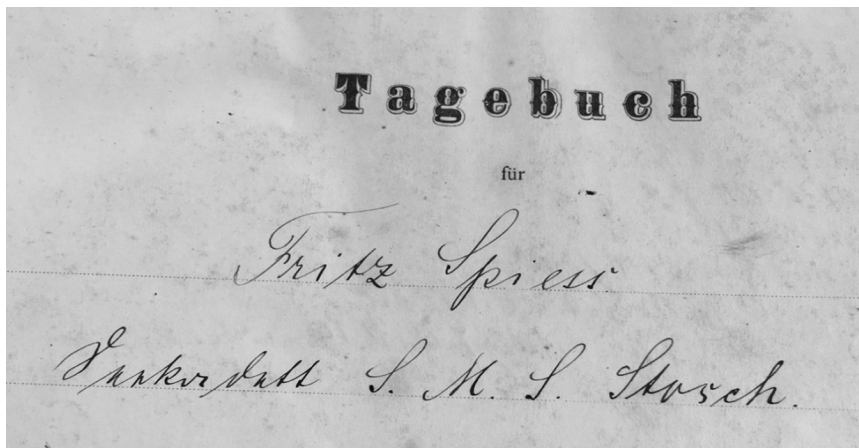


Fig. 2. Cover of the naval diary by Cadet Fritz Spiess from His Majesty's Ship *Stosch* started in May 1900.

One year later on April 19, 1901 he was promoted to Officer Candidate. From May 22, 1900 – March 18, 1901 he attended the *Marine Schule* in Kiel. In April 1902 he passed his *Offizier-Hauptexamen* in Kiel, again with the highest ranking “*sehr gut*”. In 1903 he qualified to be a *Leutnant zur See* (Ensign) in the German Navy. The “*zur See*” was added to this rank to distinguish it from similar ranks in other German military units. On March 21, 1905 he was promoted to *Oberleutnant zur See*, which was the highest lieutenant rank in the German Navy.

In the winter 1905/06 he was detailed to take a hydrographic survey course and one year later he took classes in meteorology, oceanography, astronomy and earth magnetism at the German Marine Observatory (*Deutsche Seewarte*) in Hamburg. He was also trained in stereo-photogrammetry by

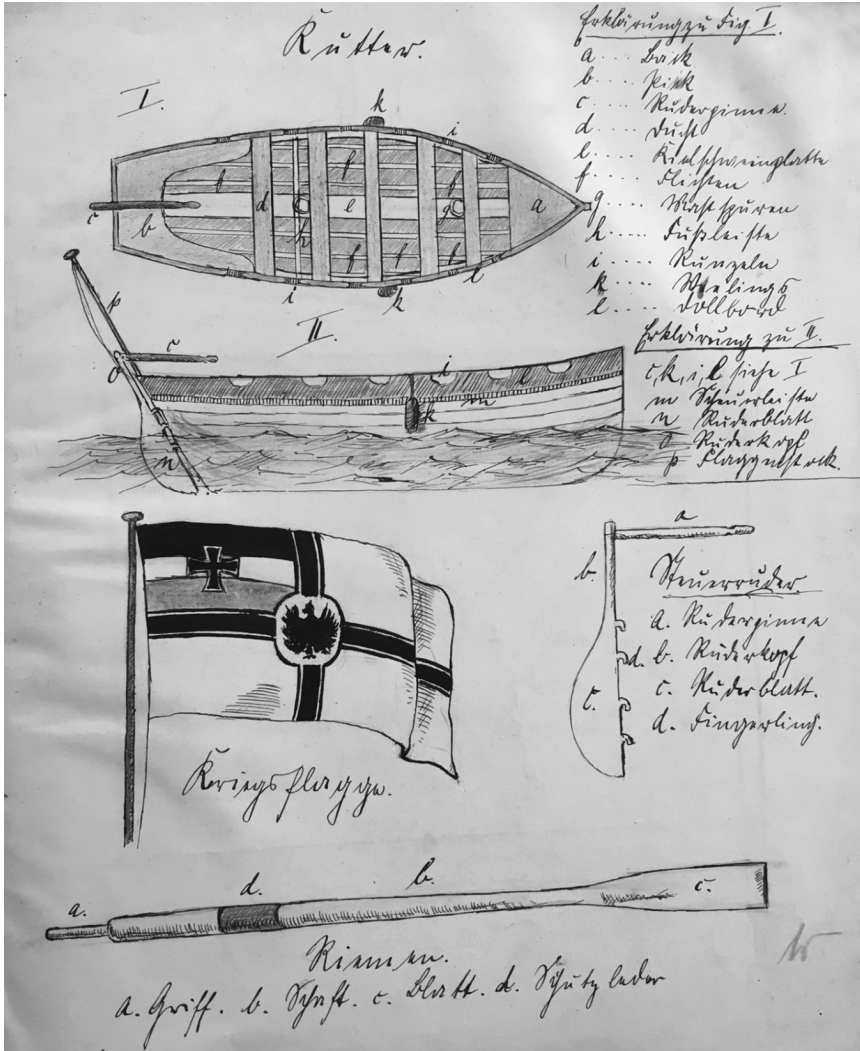


Fig. 3. Lifeboat and its equipment in detail including oars, rudder and a “flying” German Imperial Navy Ensign (*Kriegsflagge*).

the Carl Zeiss Corporation in Jena, at the time the leading firm in precision optics in Germany. Today, a number of often difficult to read handwritten letters of those years from a private correspondence between Spiess and his mother can be found in the German Military Archive under code N167/8/1907/1908.

Five years later his promotion on March 22, 1910 moved him into the rank of captain and he became *Kapitänleutnant*, the lowest rank in the