

A keystone in the defence oceanography community

An obituary by CHRIS JENKINS

As a scientist at the Underwater Acoustics and Marine Geophysics Research Institute of the German Federal Armed Forces (FWG) Thomas Wever has left remarkable traces with his contributions to the international research community. Above all the organisation of a symposium called »The Ocean's Seafloor – One Bio-Geo System« was a gift to his colleagues. The results of this superb conference in October 2016 in Hannover are still resonating.

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Our colleague and friend Thomas Friedrich Wever passed away late in 2017. Thomas had a broad and constructive influence in his field, which was in the seabed sciences, marine hydrography, and defence oceanography. As an organiser and collaborator of many projects, he was a keystone in the defence oceanography community of his country.

Thomas was raised in Stuttgart, Baden-Württemberg, and Biedenkopf, North Hesse. He started his career in deep-earth geophysics with the University of Kiel, including a period researching in Cambridge, UK, and expeditions to Antarctica. In 1990 he joined the FWG (Forschungsanstalt der Bundeswehr für Wasserschall und Geophysik, Underwater Acoustics and Marine Geophysics Research Institute of the German Federal Armed Forces) to continue their marine geophysics/geotechnical programmes – particularly the problem of dealing with naval mines in the shifting and soft seafloor types of the European seas. The design of the field modules was very successful and was emulated overseas. Not only that, but under his direction FWG partnered in seabed/object experi-

ments around the USA. The amount of field test data he amassed and the quality of available German vessel and technical support convinced international and NATO partners to conduct large experiment programmes in the Baltic and North Sea. In Eckernförde, NATO (US and European) groups measured for the first time the physical behaviour of methane bubbles inside the seabed under tide and storm conditions. The result was absolutely important for sonar operations.

Thomas understood that field results depended on quite changeable factors: the equipment technology, the state of the sediment and biological complications. So his interest in Big-Data grew, to allow the field results to be used and extended – anywhere any time. He always took very seriously his service to submariners and the Navy. His advocacy of big data systems joined in an unusual way with his respect for the oceanographic naturalists of the early »Meteor« and »Gazelle« expeditions. He spent much time entering their results into the modern databases.

Thomas was a patron of young scientists and was notably supportive of women scientists, several of whom now hold important international positions. The student topics covered geotechnical probes, underwater communications, advanced sonar imaging, seagrass, object-burial statistics. Thomas sometimes exhibited biting scepticism on ideas, which is essential in science. And sometimes the equality issues and critical approaches did not endear him inside institutions.

Personally, Thomas suffered several bouts of severe sickness and had mystical explanations for that. He repaid his rescue from them by helping many others who were sick – with their legal struggles and tax returns. A typically practical direction to take.

One of the last science passions he had was in the necessary joining of studies in the physical (geologic) and the biological seabed. As a gift to the community he organised a superb conference of experts in the Herrenhausen Palace of Hanover in 2016 where new directions for integrated study were defined. The results are still resonating in the community.

Thomas is survived by his loving and admiring family, friends, students and colleagues. [↕](#)



Dr. Thomas Wever