The outbreak of the Korean War in June 1950 proved pivotal to the ongoing debate within the western camp about German remilitarization. Western leaders feared that the Soviet Union would exploit the diversion of American resources in order to shift the balance in Europe, either by directly attacking western Europe or by using East Germany’s People’s Police as a proxy force to occupy the Federal Republic. By September 1950, the United States was publicly and officially advocating West German rearmament within the context of the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO) alliance. The French prime minister, René Pleven, alarmed at the prospect of a remilitarized Federal Republic, countered with the suggestion of organizing a common European Defense Force, which would draw on German manpower without generating German national armed forces. Konrad Adenauer, the chancellor of the young Federal Republic, realized an opportunity was at hand. He was willing to push an unenthusiastic West German populace along the path to remilitarization in exchange for concessions in the area of German sovereignty. Adenauer established closer contact with a number of former high-ranking German officers, appointed Bundestag parliamentarian Theodor Blank as head of an office charged with coordinating security planning, and by January 1951 was negotiating with the Western powers about the desirability and feasibility of West German rearmament.

The deliberations and negotiations leading to West Germany’s accession to NATO (5 May 1955) and the creation of the Bundeswehr proved far more protracted and difficult than any of the participants envisioned in early 1951. Preparations for setting up West German naval forces proceeded at two levels. On the periphery, a team of former Kriegsmarine admirals assembled by the United States under the innocuous cover of a “Naval Historical Team” played a key role
in sounding out fellow Kriegsmarine veterans about their willingness to serve in a future West German navy. Additionally, the Americans and Germans founded two maritime organizations, the Labor Service Unit Bravo and the West German Seegrenzschutz, which enabled them to assemble boats, establish maritime facilities, and begin non-military nautical training while diplomats hashed out the details of Germany’s role in NATO and the establishment of a West German military.

The naval section of Amt Blank (“The Blank Office,” precursor to Germany’s Federal Defense Ministry and headed by Theodor Blank) and the German naval delegate to the Paris European Defense Community (EDC) negotiations stood at the center of the process leading up to the establishment of the Bundesmarine. These midlevel naval veterans received generous support, advice, and assistance from a variety of groups, with admirals from the Naval Historical Team Bremerhaven and a naval veterans group known as the Meisel Circle playing a particularly prominent role. The leaders of the Bundesmarine assumed their posts only in 1956 and 1957, but many had been engaged in planning for a new West German navy since the early 1950s.

The convergence of the materiel and manpower of the periphery with the leadership and planning of the center in 1955–56 enabled West Germany to organize naval forces rapidly once the diplomatic framework for the Bundesmarine had been established. The West German Bundesmarine showed none of the direct organizational continuity that characterized the shift from People’s Police-Sea to Volksmarine in East Germany, but the Bundesmarine owed much to the multiple maritime organizations that preceded it.

Gathering the Personnel, Vessels, and Infrastructure of a New West German Navy: The Naval Historical Team Bremerhaven, the Labor Service Unit Bravo, and the Seegrenzschutz

The innocuous sounding Naval Historical Team Bremerhaven illustrates how the U.S. Navy began to co-opt a select group of Kriegsmarine admirals even before negotiations about German rearmament had formally commenced. The Royal Navy, the U.S. Army, and the U.S. Navy had all sponsored a number of historical projects employing Kriegsmarine veterans during the post-war period and had recruited a small number of Kriegsmarine veterans to support their