

RENK America Moving to Become Second Builder of Ship Propulsion Bull Gears for U.S. Navy Ships



RENK is positioning itself to offer to provide the main gearboxes for the Navy's proposed FF(X) frigate, a development of the Coast Guard's Legend-class national security cutter. (U.S. Navy)

By Richard R. Burgess, Senior Editor

ARLINGTON, Va. – A 120-year-old American manufacturing company now owned by a German firm is positioning itself to return to building main gearboxes for new U.S. Navy ships as a Tier 1 supplier.

RENK Group AG bought Cincinnati Gearing Systems of Cincinnati, Ohio last year, which made the main reduction gear sets for the two fast combat support ships (AOEs) and the Kaiser-class

fleet replenishment oilers three decades ago. Now called RENK America Marine and Industry (RAMI), RAMI is part of the global RENK Group's Marine and Industry division.

RENK Germany provided the main gear boxes for the Coast Guard's Legend-class national security cutters and is providing the main gear boxes for the Heritage-class offshore patrol cutters.

"Right now, for the big gear boxes – on aircraft carriers, cruisers, destroyers – there's really only one supplier in America," said Thom Burke, president of RENK America Marine and Industry (RAMI), in an interview with Seapower. "RENK's big idea was to use Cincinnati Gear's legacy experience in gearboxes to get back into bringing the Navy a second supplier. I was brought in to pivot us harder towards Navy business."

During his Navy career, Burke commanded two ships, including a nuclear-powered aircraft carrier.

RAMI has approximately 120 employees who "grind the gears, make all the components, assemble the components, [and] test the assemblies." Burke said.

Since supplying gear boxes to the AOE's and T-AO's 25 or 30 years ago, "we fell out of the ability to make the big, giant bull gears that drive those main reduction gear sets," he said. "RENK is making investments in the company to prepare us to do that so that we can compete on frigate, destroyer, battleship, cruiser, whatever that next ship is going to be for the Navy.

Noting that the Navy is planning on building new frigates based on the Legend-class national security cutters, Burke said that "we're [RENK] the incumbent for those vessels, so we're preparing to grow ourselves up to be able to make frigates for the Navy if they so choose to do that."

RAMI has been asked for a price quote for the proposed frigate Flight 1 design and is "trying to figure out ways to make those gearboxes here in America, here in Cincinnati, instead of Germany."

Burke said that Cincinnati and now RENK products are on every destroyer in the U.S. Navy right now."

The company also builds equipment for Textron's LCAC 100-class of Ship-to-Shore Connectors and components for sustaining the Ohio-class submarines and for equipping the new Columbia-class submarines.

"There's plenty going on now, and there's plenty potential for the future," Burke said, noting that RAMI wanted "to be able to offer the Navy a robust capability."

Asked about RAMI's workforce and the current industry-wide workforce challenges, Burke said, "We have been very aggressively trying to grow the workforce ... [and] get a second shift. ... "We're filling out that second shift now."

He said RAMI has hired 15 workers over the last six months.

"I'm trying to grow my own," he said. "So far we've made a lot of progress, but it's a continuing challenge for sure."

RAMI has a partnership with a local high school and community college and is leveraging the Navy Talent Pipeline Program and the Accelerated Training in Defense Manufacturing (ATDM) Program in Denville, Virginia, which is "specifically designed to help adult learners earn the skills necessary to make an immediate impact in the submarine industrial base (SIB)," the ATDM website said.