



## Novice solidiers battle around Britain

**THIRTEEN YOUNG SOLDIERS EMBARKED ON A BRAVE BID TO BECOME THE FIRST NOVICES TO CIRCUMNAVIGATE BRITAIN IN RIBS AGAINST ALL PREVAILING SEA CONDITIONS WITHOUT A SUPPORT VESSEL. THE TEAM MISSED OUT ON THE RECORD BECAUSE OF FUEL PROBLEMS AND TERRIBLE WEATHER IN AUGUST BUT THE COMMANDER OF EXERCISE RIGID LION IN AUGUST HAS PRONOUNCED THE OPERATION A SUCCESS. THE YOUNG SOLDIERS BATTLED AGAINST INJURY, STARRER AT THE EDINBURGH FESTIVAL AND EVEN MET A BOND STUNTWOMAN ALONG THE WAY. THE SPECIALLY-BUILT BOATS WERE ALSO USED FOR A SUCCESSFUL BID TO BREAK A RECORD WHEN THEY WERE TAKEN AROUND THE ISLE OF WIGHT BY A BLIND COXSWAIN. THE TEAMS HELPED THE ST DUNSTANS BLIND EX-SERVICEMEN'S CHARITY SET A WORLD ENDURO RECORD IN THE BLIND UNLIMITED CLASS.**

Major JD Winskill came up with the challenge for the team to circumnavigate England, Scotland and Wales, by day and by night, in all sea conditions and in all weathers in order to raise the profile of the Army and to encourage young people to consider service. Seven major companies, such as the Nationwide Building Society, provided the sponsorship and the boats were provided by Humber Inflatables of Hull. Based on their Ocean Pro 6.5m hull with different tubes configurations and extra reinforced transoms, the hybrid RIB gave high-speed performance without losing balance and stability. The

tubes were over-sized and made of black hypalon, each triple-skinned and straked along their full length to protect them from the battering they suffered.

The first passage to Falmouth passed uneventfully, but the luck of the team was soon to change. The plan for the next leg was for the boats to round Cornwall and Devon, reach Minehead in Somerset and head across the Bristol Channel to Wales. But the two experienced skippers decided to push North early. Major Winskill said: "It was a decision that was to haunt them for the remainder of the exercise. As the crews reached mid-Channel the conditions deteriorated rapidly. The weather on departure had been overcast and raining with force 3 to 4 occasionally gusting 5 predicted. As the boats reached mid-Channel this increased to 6 gusting 7 with occasional Gale force 8.

"The Ocean Pros leaped as if for their lives from wave crest to wave crest, with the confused seas coming at them from every angle. Crewmen fought for hand-holds and footing, while the skippers tried to maintain visual contact with each other. Although only 100m apart they did not see each other for some three hours. Almost inevitably injuries followed. Steve Board suffered a nasty facial injury as he fought to reach the radio to send a sitrep to the land team."

After nearly six hours making just 8 knots through the almost-mountainous seas, the boats entered the lee of the South Wales coast and the winds began to abate and they reached Neyland Marina near Milford Haven.

Maj Winskill said: "The buffeting suffered by the crews and the worsening Met predictions caused myself as OIC to cancel the next leg. I had to make sure safety came first above all else. It was not through cowardice that we made the decision to move by road but rather through good-sense, maturity and a desire to keep crewman safe."

Once at Liverpool the boats were displayed to the general public on their first public relations event, boosting crew morale and giving a chance for the boats to be checked. With a better weather forecast and the RIBs apparently

back in good condition, it was decided to run the boats the following day. They were launched early from the sands at New Brighton, giving the crews the chance to use their night vision goggles which worked perfectly with the Ghecko helmets.

But as the boats accelerated out past Blackpool, the skipper of Ocean Lion II became aware of a strong smell of fuel. He noticed a trickle of cloudy liquid seeping from the stern bilge drainage tap. On opening the vent to the bilge, neat petrol poured from the bilges into the stern well where it was ejected over board by the bilge pumps. The boats had possibly been over-filled and breathers were ejecting the extra fuel up and out into the hull. This was causing a huge fire risk, so the tanks were rapidly switched and the boat was forced to run on its 90-litre under-seat tank. This gave it the range to reach Maryport, north of Workington, before the exercise's land support Discoverys had to drag it out.

The boats were trailed into Glasgow City Centre for a PR stand before being taken through to Helensburgh for further investigation. The main tank of Ocean Lion II was drained and the boat was to run on the emergency tank, with its sister vessel carrying spare fuel. The boats left Glasgow and ran up the West coast toward the fishing village of Oban.

Maj Winskill said: "The weather had slightly improved and I could sense morale rising once more. This was to prove a little premature."



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An alarm sounded and the engine had to be shut down. It was found that the fuel had been contaminated with sea water. Team engineer Steve Board changed a fuel filter and reset the alarms before the boats were ready to run again. The team left Oban in the morning on the fifth day of the exercise under fabulous blue skies. The passage took them through the sheltered waters of the Minch before they passed under the Skye Bridge and the Kyle Of Lochalsh before swinging east into Loch Broom and the fishing village of Ullapool. The team camped alongside the boats there before once again setting sail the following morning, but as soon as the boats passed Cape Wrath they would be totally exposed and unsupported because their land support vehicles could not reach the water's edge.

But Ocean Lion I started to show the same fuel contamination symptoms as her sister vessel had shown a few days previous. It was decided that Ocean Lion I would also have to run on her spares fuel supply - but the vessels did not have enough spare fuel for both to reach Inverness safely.

Maj Winskill said: "I was not prepared to let one boat run alone and hence with huge feelings of regret we elected to turn back out in the Minch and retrace our steps to Ullapool. The land team were contacted and they arranged to slip the boats again in Ullapool." The team drove to Inverness but no solution could be found to the fuel problems until the planned stop at Edinburgh.

The team arrived in Edinburgh on 14 Aug where they spent the day in the middle of the World famous Fringe Festival. The boats were placed in Princes Street and over the next few hours were seen by over 40,000 people as they thronged along the City's major thoroughfare. During the night crewmen from the two boats drove to Glasgow to collect spare fuel cans to augment those already carried as spare on the boats. The boats were therefore able to leave Edinburgh and race south to Hull in slight to moderate seas at 25 to 29 knots.

But on the run into the Humber Estuary Rfn Sunderland of the Royal Green Jackets was flung from his crewman's seat and thumped his head against the rear of the coxswains seat. Despite his helmet taking the major brunt of the impact he was left groggy and with little idea of what was going on around him.

The 16th August was to see the boats running up the Thames at full throttle in front of a ship full of people embarked on HMS Belfast. The Imperial War Museum had donated the WWII warship for us to launch our Power Boat record attempt to the Press on behalf of the St Dunstons Blind Ex Servicemen's Charity. There was even the chance for Mark Threadgold, the coxswain for the record attempt, to meet the current two-litre European Powerboat Champion and Bond Stunt Woman Sarah Donohue. Sarah drove a powerboat for the opening sequence of the Bond film "The World Is Not Enough".

On the morning of the 17th the



RIBs commenced their final run to Southampton and the finish line at Marchwood. The passage passed Dover and into the Channel was clear. After a quick re-fuel in Brighton Marina they finally crossed the start/finish line at 1502hrs under clear blue skies, some 247 hours and 2 minutes since leaving on the 7th. The team were welcomed by RFA Sir Bedivere, RFA Sir Galahad and the new Ro-Ro Sea Crusader. The boats were then readied for the record attempt.

Maj Winskill said: "The two RIBs were skippered by Sapper Steve Board and myself. Steve and Mark had been training for this for over 3 months in the gym at Aldershot as well as on the water at Minley and in the Solent. They had learned to be able to communicate almost by ESP during their training sessions and this would be a skill that they would need to maximise if they were to control the RIB at

full throttle. The distance selected was the Round IOW, some 57.54nm which Mark would have to drive flat out if he was to stand any chance of setting a credible record.

"The skippers elected to travel anti-clockwise due to prevailing wind and tide. Conditions were perfect. The skies were clear of any cloud and the deep blue of the Solent was ripped apart by the bows of the boats as they matched each other knot for knot.

"The intention to run the engines trimmed out and at 4000rpm was rapidly abandoned. My rev counter failed to drop below 5000rpm for the entire duration. Watching a coxswain driving a RIB at 36 knots without being able to see even the difference between light and dark was nothing short of miraculous.

"The swell rose slightly and the record boat found itself clear of the water on more than a dozen

occasions. Yet still Mark and Steve continued to power their way on, with Steve informing Mark of course and throttle corrections every two seconds or so.

"As he crossed the finish line the cheer was incredible. With the ship's foghorn blaring and those spectators thronging her sides waving bunting and flags, the RIB flashed across the marker. Steve instructed to Mark to decelerate, the record was his."

Maj Winskill said: "The event did not achieve the Round Britain passage that I had planned and hoped for. It did however achieve the aim of raising the profile of the Army and encouraging those members of the public of suitable age to Army service. The crewmen enjoying a well-earned leave. They were a great team.

"The boats were shown off at the Southampton Boatshow, crewed by the record team.



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