



exercise RIGID LION

The planning for the event started in January 2002 when I decided to put a crew together and make a GB passage. Our initial intention had been to take part in RIB International's Round Ireland event in July 2002 but sadly due to political clearance being required for HM Forces personnel to land in the ROI we found ourselves precluded.

The aim of the event was simple. The Army team would attempt to circumnavigate GB 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 Army service.

RIBS

The boats themselves were provided by Humber Boats in Hull. They were designed to act as technical demonstrators for the MoD requirement and were based on their Ocean Pro 6.5m hull with different tubes configurations and extra reinforced transoms. This hybrid RIB would offer us the high-speed performance we required but not to the detriment of balance and stability. The tubes were over-sized, each triple skinned and straked along their full length.

The boats were finished off with NATO green hulls and top-sides with a single unit jockey seat/

coxswain's console and seating for 4 crew on a pair of double seats in the stern. The console contained the normal engine instrumentation and a Garmin 182 colour GPS Map chart plotter attached to the console slightly offset to allow both the coxswain and his navigator unhindered access to it. A swung compass was fixed centrally to the console to provide an alternative to the GPS plotter. Mounted alongside the GPS Map was an ICOM IC-M503 marine VHF Transceiver with an optional DSC M503 maritime unit.

Under the port crew seat a dry storage locker held the night vision equipment, rations and spare crew protective clothing. Under the

starboard seat, the wet locker would contain storage space for the spare Ficht RAM oil, crew helmets and non-perishable spares and stores.

For fuel, the boats had been fitted with a 150 litre internal under-floor steel tank with a further 90 litres contained under the coxswain seat.

The boats both had A frames fitted with a nav/steaming light, flare boxes and radar reflector all mounted securely.

ENGINES

The engines came courtesy of Jets Marivent of Wimborne, namely two of their new 2 stroke 135 V6 3.9 litre direct injection Ficht Ram engines. In return for their loan the team would provide a real time data link back to Dorset to give a read out on fuel consumption data and to verify their reliability predictions.

The exercise was split into three phases.



In late 2002, a team of 13 young, novice soldiers attempted to be the first military team ever to complete the circumnavigation of Britain without the assistance of a support vessel. Here is the true story of their adventure – a tale of challenges a-plenty. Stand to attention then, get your hair cut and polish your buttons, we're off – Army style!



Photos: Far Left: Spirits high. Top right: Underway. Above left: Mark Threadgold at the helm. Above right: At the helm running out of Poole Harbour. Left: The team! All the nice girls love a soldier!

Phase 1 was training with Phase 2 being the actual passage itself and the 3rd phase being our attempt at helping St Dunstons Blind Ex-Servicemen's Charity set a World Enduro Record in the Blind Unlimited Class.

The training period in Marchwood ran from 2 – 6 Aug. These were long days for both students and instructors alike. The RIBs were slipped each morning at 0730 and rarely left the water before 10pm. Every crewman covered the full Level 1 and Level 2 syllabus. The one on one student to instructor ratio allowed us to compress the courses into suitable time frames.

The boats and engine combinations readily began to really prove themselves. The Ocean Pros were incredibly quick to push their nose up and reach the plane. Once up and running their stability and rate of turn was exceptional. I have driven many RIBs of all makes in the past 20 years and have never yet felt something so well balanced beneath my feet. The helm became

highly responsive once the engine was trimmed out correctly and the semi-flat wake astern showed the chines along the hull to be working to their maximum.

The crews learned fast to use the good acceleration of the 135hp Ficht to their advantage. The power feed in was smooth for a 2 stroke and allowed the students to remain in total control even when accelerating hard. The engines were raised on their mounts during the training period which served to increase the max rev range to 5400 rpm at 37.1 knots. This performance was achieved when fully laden with 250 litres of fuel in the under-deck tanks, all spares and safety kit stowed and by now, 5 smiling young soldiers per boat.

THE STORY

The 7th Aug arrived and Phase 1 ended. As the boats left on their first leg I stood on the hard



Photos: Far Left: Running in formation. Right: Storming up the Thames, London. Bottom: The Humber displaying its full specification....see final page.



Photos: Left: Colours to the fore. Bottom left: Press call! Bottom: Fly past.



at Marchwood and watched them scream off down Southampton water, chased by their own rooster tails. The training was now complete and the crews would need to put to sea in order to test their new found skills.

The passage was uneventful enough with the boats arriving at the entrance to Falmouth marina at 1700. They were then slipped at the Yacht Club before being trailed to RNAS Culdrose.

Well rested, the crews launched the RIBs on the morning of the 8th and made their way round Land's End before turning north for the first time.

The passage plan was for the boats to reach Minehead before heading across the Bristol Channel, but the two experienced skippers decided to push North early. 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 at

the 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 confused seas coming at them from every angle caused the crew to scabble for hand holds and a footing, whilst the skippers tried to maintain visual contact with each other. Although only 100m apart they did not see each other for some 3 hours. Almost inevitably injuries followed. Steve Board for instance suffered a nasty facial injury as he fought to reach the radio to send a message to the land team. I could only sit and listen on the VHF as the boat crews spoke to each other in curt tones and raised voices - the noise of the seas threatening to drown out their communications.

After nearly six hours making just 8 knots through the near mountainous seas, the boats entered the lee of the South Wales coast with the wind at last abating. The RIBs then pulled

into Neyland Marina near Milford Haven to meet with their somewhat concerned land team. On arrival at the marina the boats were hailed by a 9m RIB - its visiting coxswain inquired where they had come from. They answered, "Falmouth", to which his incredulous reply about sanity and sense cannot be repeated here.

The 9th Aug saw the boats travel to Liverpool upon their trailers. The buffeting suffered by the crews and the worsening Met predictions caused me as OIC to cancel the next leg. I had to make sure safety came first above all else. Additionally one of the boats needed a little attention to the stern which was completed overnight by a team from Humber.

With the Met promising better conditions and with the RIBs apparently back to full spec the decision was taken to run the boats the following day. Consequently the morning of the 10th Aug saw the teams launching on the sand at New Brighton and leaving the Mersey bound

for Glasgow.

Due to the early hour, this was an ideal opportunity to use the Night Vision Goggles which worked perfectly with the Gecko helmets. As a result we were able to run at full throttle in total darkness, the prows of the boats dancing under a slight swell and the Evinrude outboards on full song at 5300 rpm.

As the boats accelerated past Blackpool, the skipper of Lion II became aware of a strong smell of fuel. Closer inspection revealed 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. It was possible that the boats had been over-filled and that the breathers were now ejecting the extra fuel up and out into the hull. Nevertheless, the situation was causing a huge fire risk, so, to ensure the crews safety, tanks were switched to allow the boat to run on its 90 litre under seat tank. This gave the craft the range to reach Maryport, north of Workington, before the land support Land Rovers finally dragged it out.

That night, every crewman worked hard to find a solution to the fuel issue. It was decided to drain the main tank into the waste oil bins in an eco-friendly manner. However, the boat would now need to run on its emergency under-seat tanks which would need continual refilling if the range was to be maximised. The risk of using the under floor tank was assessed as simply being too high. The over filling issue may have easily caused sea water to ingress through the breathers and, of course, when mixed with the remaining fuel stocks, would undoubtedly cause contamination. Any contaminated fuel sucked into the engines would in turn wreck

the Evinrude outboard and destroy any chance of getting both boats round Britain.

The boats left Glasgow on 11th Aug and ran up the West coast toward the fishing village of Oban. Ocean Lion I was now running on full fuel load carrying spare supplies for the limited Ocean Lion II.

With no warning, Ocean Lion II began to suffer from an intermittent engine warning light on the console. This then became a terminal audible alarm that required the crew to shut the engine down immediately. Nevertheless, it proved a valuable self test for the engine and diagnostics system showing it to be 100% accurate. After a brief investigation and interrogation of the ECU it was discovered that the fuel had indeed been contaminated with sea water. The team engineer then solved the matter by changing a fuel filter and resetting the alarms before the boats were ready to run again.

The team left Oban in the morning of the 12th of August under fabulous blue skies. The passage took them up to the sheltered waters of the Minch, via the Skye Bridge and the Kyle Of Lochalsh before swinging east into Loch Broom and the fishing village of Ullapool. The RIBs were continually buzzed overhead here by gulls and escorted both alongside and underneath by pods of Porpoise. As they skipped along, Common and Grey Seal looked up almost absent mindedly from their sun loungers before wobbling down the rocks to slip away under water and escape this encroachment into their kingdom.

The team camped alongside the boats in Ullapool before once again 'setting sail' the following morning. This time we were to attempt the passage I had the greatest respect for and was most concerned about. Up until this point the various problems had been solved

because the vehicles could get easy access down to the water's edge. As soon as the boats turned passed Cape Wrath they would be totally exposed and unsupported.

The sea conditions were slight to moderate as the teams left the shelter offered by the Isles of Harris and Lewis and headed out once again into northern waters. Sadly and almost immediately though Ocean Lion I started to show the same fuel contamination symptoms as her sister vessel had shown a few days previously. Unsure of the state of play, the boats pulled into a sandy bay near Scourie to evaluate the severity of the problem and take stock. It was decided that as they didn't know how much of the main under floor tank may have been contaminated it therefore couldn't risk being used. Hence, Ocean Lion I would also now have to run on her spare fuel supply. As only enough had been loaded for Lion II there wasn't enough for both boats to get to Inverness safely. I was not prepared to let one boat run alone and hence with huge feelings of regret elected to turn back out in the Minch in order to retrace the course back to Ullapool. The land team were next contacted and subsequently arranged to slip the boats again back in Ullapool.

The team elected to move by land across the Highlands to its capital, Inverness where work began apace on evaluating and seeking solutions to the fuel issue that now plagued both boats. Unfortunately no solution could be found until the team arrived at Bosuns Locker in South Queensferry, Edinburgh where Mark Beely and Jackie Kennedy of Jets-Marivent had arranged to meet us. It was hoped that their combined experience and special tools from the Evinrude dealership in Edinburgh could provide a solution to the problem. It was still believed that



the overfilling four days previous had allowed water to ingress into the main tanks. Sadly there was no way after leaving Faslane of draining the tanks and cleaning any residue out – this would have to wait until Edinburgh.

The team arrived in Edinburgh as planned on 14 Aug where they spent the day enjoying the distant strains 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 had driven back across to Glasgow to collect spare fuel cans to augment those already carried as spare on the boats. These suitably fixed, the boats left Edinburgh on the morning of the 15th Aug and headed south for Hull. With better Met and slight to moderate seas the RIBs were able to make 25-30 knots as they raced south.

The meeting point at the end of the 15th was the Humber Bridge itself. However, once again fate was against us. 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 coxswain's seat. Despite his helmet taking the major brunt of the impact the soft tissue injury left him groggy and with little perception of what was going on around him. The skipper wisely brought the RIB to a stop and assisted by the crew from Ocean Lion I managed to make

this young soldier comfortable enough to allow them to make a passage for Kilnsea near Spurn Point. The press missed their photo opportunity but the decision to look after the crewman was the correct one and was supported by both skippers and myself as overall exercise commander.

The 16th August saw the boats running from Hull to London where we had arranged permission for the boats to run up the Thames at full throttle to our next RV, HMS Belfast.

The Imperial War Museum had donated the WWII warship in order for us to launch our Power Boat record attempt to local and regional press and media on behalf of the St Dunstan's Blind Ex Servicemen's Charity.

On cue at 1345 hrs the boats came thumping up the river escorted by the Tower Of London RNLi Tiger Class lifeboat.

The boats remained on the Thames for the rest of the day being admired by VIP and members of the General Public alike before being taken down to Putney where they were slipped at the London Rowing Club.

On the morning of the 17th the RIBs commenced their final run to Southampton and the finish line at Marchwood. They made the Channel in good time and after a quick refuel in Brighton marina they finally crossed the start/finish line at 1502hrs, some 247 hours and 11 minutes since leaving on the 7th.

With phase 2 complete the team spent most of the evening and late into the night prepping

the RIBs for their final flourish, a very special record attempt.

The Army team arrived on the quayside for 0430 on the 18th where the RIBs were slipped and inspected by John Puddifoot, Chairman of the RYA Powerboat Racing Committee. Many representatives from the sponsors as well as workers from the charity arrived to see challenger, Mark Threadgold off. The Commanding Officer of 17 Port and Maritime Regiment had granted permission for both a Landing Craft Vehicle and Personnel (LCVP) as well as a Ramped Craft Logistics (RCL) to be used to carry press teams, media and well-wishers into the Solent.

Steve Board and Mark Threadgold 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 around Isle of Wight, some 57.54nm which Mark would have to drive flat out if he was to stand any chance of setting a credible record.

At 0805 both boats accelerated away from the start line which lay between the Royal Yacht Squadron on Cowes and the South Bramble Buoy. The skippers electing to travel anticlockwise due to prevailing wind and tide.

It must be stressed that Mark cannot see anything. He cannot even differentiate between light and dark. To watch him driving a RIB at 36 knots was nothing short of miraculous. The Ocean Pro lived up to their name as the Needles flashed past in a white blur. The chase helicopter overhead hovered just 50m off the starboard side of the record boat. Whilst all this occurred the coxswain did not even flinch. The half-way point was reached in under an hour.

With St Catherine's point easily passed, the RIBs raced on for the next turn mark where they would head north then west for the run into the finish. By now the swell had risen slightly and the record boat found itself clear of the water on more than a dozen occasions. Yet Mark and Steve continued to power their way on, with Steve informing Mark of course and throttle corrections every 2 seconds or so.

At 0950 the finish line was crossed to a huge cheer from those embarked on the RCL. As the RIB streaked across the marker Steve instructed Mark to decelerate. The record was his!

It was with some regret that the front-end 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. My thanks to all who strove so hard to make 'Operation Rigid Lion' the memorable success it most truly was.

Major JD Winskill Ex Commander

Photos: Top left: Neck and neck. Bottom left: Offshore leg, mid challenge. Right: Passing under Tower Bridge, London.

information

Humber Ocean Pro 6.5m RIB

This craft supplied to the MoD for the Round Britain Challenge was the very successful Ocean Pro 6.5m. A RIB that has done exceedingly well for Humber proving popular with a whole range of clients desirous of a well priced offshore craft. The hull to this boat had its beginnings over 30 years ago but its design still remains one of the very best on the market today. Soft riding, quick to plane and very stable at speed, the Ocean Pro takes some beating as respects handling. These boats offer the traditional look and possess a seaman-like appearance. Coupled to the latest Ficht 2-stroke technology, this model offers sporting outboard performance ably coupled to rough weather suitability.

Items fitted to Rigid Lion Boats:-

- One-man Extreme jockey console c/w additional grab rails
- 2 x 2-man seat module c/w rear grab loops and under side storage
- Raised bow locker c/w extra strength polycarbon access hatch
- 150 litre s/steel under deck fuel tank c/w ISO fuel lines
- Fuel shut off valve, water separator, fuel filter, electronic sender & 12v fuel gauge
- 91 litre heavy duty plastic reserve tank c/w 12v fuel gauge & change over switch
- Triple outer strake protection (4" flat strake above & below D strake)
- Pressure relief valves - Double skin tube tops and underside protection
- Fabric hand loops - Paddles and holders
- Toe straps - 5 pair - Upgrade to hydraulic steering
- Sampson post at bow - Self-righting frame c/w navigation lights
- Twin flood lights, dry box and brackets
- Waterproof fuse box, 6 way - Switch panel, 6 way
- Second battery & isolator c/w change over charging facility
- Search light, waterproof - Towing points mounted at bow & stern
- 2 x Lifting points - Forward deck and transom cleats
- Rear deck securing bolts - Silva compass
- Bilge pump, automatic & manual transom mounted bilge
- Bilge pump, manual - Silva compass - Firdel blipper
- Fire extinguisher - Lifeguard rescue quoit and line
- Icom 503 VHF radio c/w DSC, flush mounted c/w antenna
- Evinrude Ficht E135FPX extra long shaft motor c/w stainless propeller

Package Price £24,895.00 inc. vat.

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