Memories of RAF Marine Craft

Preface

The following account covers my period of service with the Royal Air Force from January 1954 until December 1958. Most of that time was spent in the Marine Craft Section of Coastal Command stationed at 1100MCU Alness in Ross-shire, Scotland

I was born and grew up in Southeast Cornwall in a small community just east of the fishing town of Looe. I lived literally a stone's throw from the beach and therefore was familiar with the sea, having my own rowing dinghy at the age of ten or so. Air-Sea Rescue launches were quite a frequent sight around the Cornish coast as I grew up; after the war there were a couple of narrow beamed Seaplane Tenders privately owned and in commercial use plying from Looe. I had been on these launches a few times and loved the speed and exhilaration of going to sea in them. It was probably inevitable that I would try to get into this service.

These are my personal memories of that time which is very dear to me. I hope the reader will share my enthusiasm for hard chine, high speed wooden craft on which I had the privilege to serve.

Royal Air Force.

I first went by train to Cardington, in Bedfordshire, the home of the famous airships and the tragedy of R101, the airship which caught fire and burned at its moorings before the war. I was assessed and kitted out before being sent to Hednesford in Staffordshire. There I did my basic training which consisted of miles and miles of marching, doing assault courses and training in the use of firearms and machine guns. I easily obtained my marksman and machine gun certificate; as I had been brought up with guns all my life it was second nature to me to shoot. We had to endure the gas chamber, routine tear-gas training and other soldierly pursuits. My arms were punctured by so many injections and inoculations I did not know what hit me! On the final week I contracted German measles and was sent to the sick bay so did not do the final passing

out parade as others did; I was not too unhappy about that! We were not allowed out of camp for the duration of our training so I had little idea of the area but knew it was called the Black Country because of all the coal mining in the vicinity.

We all went on leave before being posted to do our trade training. I had tried to get into the Air Sea Rescue service as I had seen the boats off the Cornish coast and liked the idea of going on them. The launches were fast and quite sea worthy; that appealed to me. Unfortunately there were no vacancies at that time so I went into Motor Transport to learn to be a mechanic with the hope that I could re-muster into ASR when a vacancy occurred. I was sent to RAF Weeton, near Blackpool in Lancashire to take a mechanics course which lasted about 20 weeks I think. At the end of the course we all went on leave again to await our next posting. To my amazement I was posted back to Weeton as staff, so back I went on the train again to Blackpool.

My work there was servicing and repairing the motor vehicles on camp. There were hundreds, as it was the training centre for all RAF drivers. There were small saloon cars, mostly Hillmans at that time which were used for the basic training of light vehicle drivers. They were very old fashioned cars, they still had cable brakes which were always going wrong. The next model to be introduced was the Standard Vanguard, a much bigger more powerful sophisticated car with modern lines and hydraulic brakes. Incidentally, the engine was almost the same as the one fitted to the Ferguson TE 20 tractor of that time. The Vanguards replaced the ageing Humber Super Snipes which were used as staff cars by officers and VIPs so the servicing had to be done carefully. There was also a heavy vehicle section in the huge hangar where I worked, they looked after the big lorries and trucks used for general transport and training of heavy transport drivers. They also looked after cranes and huge articulated trucks called Queen Marys; these were used to deliver aircraft and retrieve crashed planes.

It was a huge camp, about 10-15 miles from Blackpool. As it was a training centre for the whole of the motor transport section of the RAF, there were plenty of facilities there; a very large and well equipped Naafi where we could buy snack food and drinks, a large on-site hospital, library and training facilities for post graduate students.

Blackpool was quite an interesting place to be as there were so many things to do, shows to see on the piers and at the theatres. I developed a love of jazz and was able to see and hear all the current crop of British musicians going the rounds at that time; big bands, names like Johnny Dankworth, Ted Heath, singers like Vera Lynn, Cleo Lane, Ann Shelton, David Whitfield and Eddy Calvert, the man with the golden trumpet. Many of the singers and entertainers already were or who were later to became household names; for example Morecome and Wise, George Formby, Arthur Askey, Vic Oliver and many, many more. Every Saturday we would go either to a show or to the Tower or Winter Garden Ballrooms for the evening and back on the camp bus. Great fun for someone from a little corner of the world called Millandreath!

After a while, it may have been nearly a year, I received news that my application to join the Marine Branch was approved so I went to Plymouth, Devon to do a marine mechanics course. That was very welcome as it meant I could see something of my parents at the weekends. By this time I had bought a nearly new Norman motor cycle, with a modern Villiers 2 stroke engine, a machine which was totally reliable and with soft comfortable, rear suspension. I drove it from Blackpool to Bideford in one day, a long way on the roads in Britain in 1954. I travelled frequently between Plymouth and Bideford and back while on the course; I don't think the bike ever went wrong. I had a few spills on it in wet weather, but as I was well equipped with an American all leather flying jacket and trousers, a crash hat, goggles and gauntlets I didn't come to any harm.

At the end of the course I put in an application to be posted either to the Far East, for example Singapore, Malaya, Maldives, Hong Kong or somewhere exotic or to the Southwest of England, as there were bases at Falmouth, Fowey and Plymouth where I did my course. Someone must have had a sense of humour, as I was sent to the Northeast Coast of Scotland, to a little village of Alness in Ross-shire, way up north of Inverness!

The launches were actually anchored at Invergordon, about 10 miles north of Alness where we were billeted. Each day we would travel by RAF truck to the harbour where there was a pier, pier hut and basic facilities to tie up and attend to the launches. Invergordon had been a very important naval base and was still used by the Royal Navy from time to time; there were several deep

water jetties where their vessels could lie alongside. We had a smaller wharf and the use of a small walled harbour which almost dried out at low tide, but was suitable for the small ferry used to take us out to the launches moored in Cromarty Firth.

I should explain that the Marine Branch had been in existence for many years; I think it was first formed between WWI and WWII. It was recognized that there was a need to be able to service the newly emerging float plane and seaplane service operating from harbours around the south coast of Britain. When the Second World War began there was an instant need for rescue craft to pick up airmen who had been shot down or had ditched in the sea. The south coast again was the principle area of operation, in the English Channel in particular. This is what made the marine branch well known by the general public, as the personnel and launches involved did such a wonderful service at that time rescuing those in distress.

In 1954 a film was made called “The Sea Shall Not Have Them”; incidentally, that was the official motto of the Marine Craft Section. It starred many of the then current British film stars including Michael Redgrave, Dirk Bogarde, Anthony Steel, Nigel Patrick and many other well known names. The story was about the rescue of the crew of a downed aircraft close to the enemy shore. It was a good yarn with plenty of shots of launches and an overview of life in the RAF Air Sea Rescue Service during the war. (“Douggie” Davidson, one of the crew of our boat, the 2679, was a deckhand in the film and had some interesting stories about the making of it). However, let’s get back to reality!

There had been many various launches designed and built; the older marine craft personnel talked with fond memories of the “Whalebacks” in particular, but these had all been phased out by the time I joined the Marine Branch of the service in 1955. On my arrival in Scotland there were two high speed launches at the base, correctly known as Rescue, Target Towing Launches or RTTL’s.

The Marine Branch had gone through a massive reduction in craft and personnel after the end of the war. There remained virtually only the Pinnaces, the Range Safety Launches, Marine Tenders and of course the RTTL’s. I will confine my comments mostly on the latter as they were the ones on which I

served much of the time. We also had an RSL at all times at Alness, it was mainly used as a ferry to and from the moorings, together with a Marine Tender. I will mention these briefly later.

The Sunderlands and other seaplanes had almost all gone, as had many of the specialist craft used to refuel or to provide landing area lighting for them.

The last Sunderland visiting RAF Alness

The High Speeed Launches or RTTL's as they were later called, were built by the British Power Boat Company in either Hythe in Hampshire or Bridport in Dorset, so they were known in the trade as the "Hants and Dorsets". A total of 90 were built between 1942 to 1946; RTTL 2552 being the first and RTTL 2746 being the last from those yards. They were numbered as they entered service, the lowest numbers being the first. (Sailors in the RAF, Beardow, 1993, Patrick Stephens Ltd/Haynes Publishing).

All RTTL's had very prominent numbers on the bows and stern The two launches in service at Alness were HMAFV 2679 and HMAFV 2744. It light of

the above, it follows then that 2744 possibly may not have seen active service, as it was one of the last made in a BPBC yard.

The launch on which I was crew, the 2679, still had the blanked-off gun turrets on the superstructure. It was built during the war and definitely saw active service, as there is a photographic record of 2679 being used in the rescue of the crew of another RAF launch, HSL 2706 which had been erroneously attacked by the U.S Air Force and set on fire in March 1944. Furthermore, 2679 was involved (and also photographed), in the rescue of crew from a Flying Fortress later the same month. (Sailors in the RAF, Beardow, 1993, Patrick Stephens Ltd/Haynes Publishing).

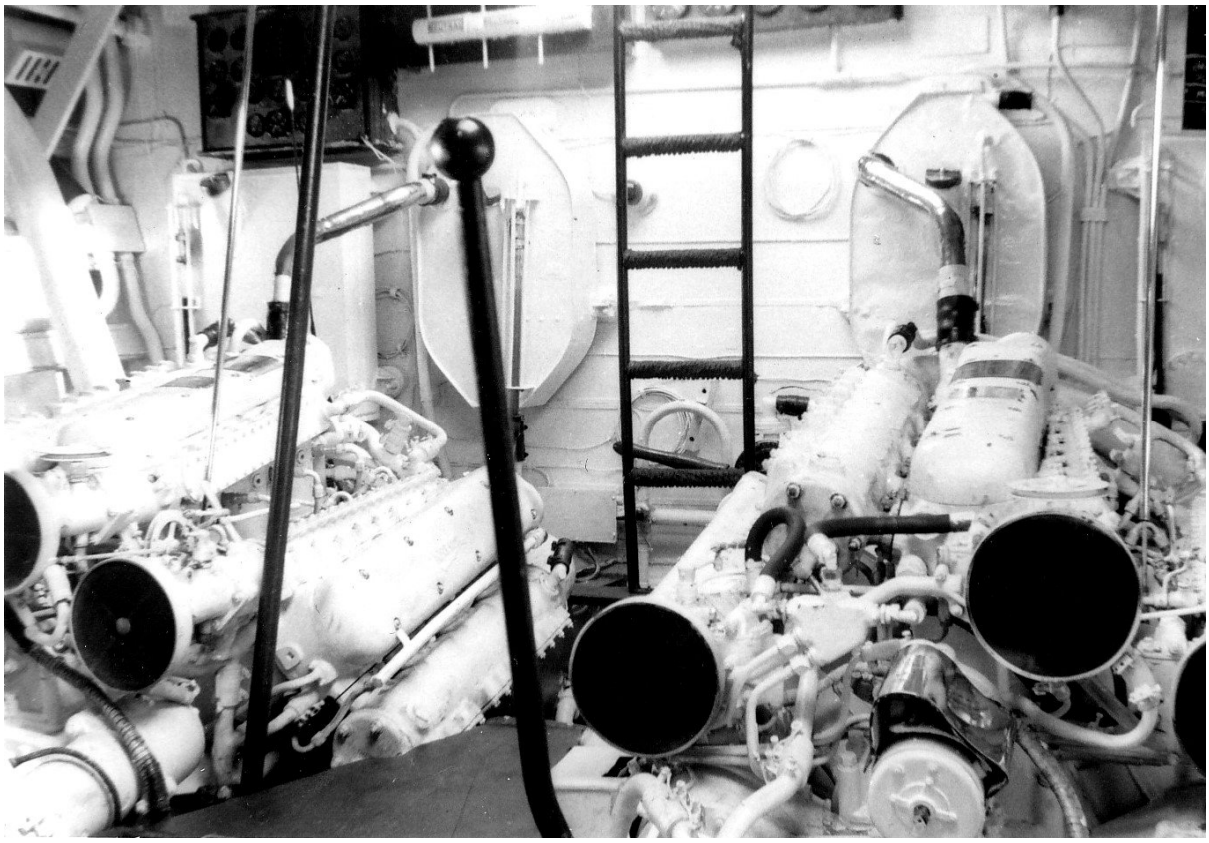
All the Hants and Dorsets were powered by three Napier Sea Lion marinised aircraft engines, originally manufactured and patented back about 1912 and then called Napier Lions. A brass plate on one of the engine camshaft covers listed many of the patents going back to those origins... The history of the engines was impressive, being used to set the Land Speed Record in Malcolm Campbell's Blue Bird IV and VII and Henry Segrave's Golden Arrow in the period 1927-1931. They were also fitted into various regular passenger aircraft and also in floatplanes which won the Schneider Trophy several times prior to WW11. The most famous floatplane was the Supermarine Swift, designed by RJ Mitchell which was the predecessor of the legendary Spitfire, also designed by RJ Mitchell.

The aero engines were at one time discarded by the RAF but the British Power Boat Company of Hythe bought up lots of these engines, marinised them and then fitted them into their craft designed for and sold to the newly formed Air-Sea Rescue Service craft in the 1930's and 1940's.This was common knowledge and told to mechanics and fitters as they attended courses, but it is also mentioned in Keith Beardow's excellent book, "Sailors in the RAF", which describes in great detail the history of the Marine Craft Section of the Royal Air Force during the 1930' s and 1940's and beyond.

The all-aluminium Napier engines had 12 cylinders arranged in a 'broad arrowhead' or W configuration, which meant that there were four cylinders in 3 banks with 60 degrees between each bank. The engines were rated at about 550 horse power each. They had two magnetos, with two spark plugs per

cylinder. The cooling system was by separate fresh water/glycol mixture which in turn was cooled by a sea water inter-cooler. The sea water was discharged into the exhaust system to cool it; they were started by electric starter motor. The engine was coupled to a marine ahead and astern gearbox operated by hand by the engine room crew, instructions to the crew telegraphed from the wheel house by the skipper/coxswain. It was quite a feat to have to put three engines into astern by oneself in the event of a panic emergency, usually when the coxswain approached the wharf too fast! If the launch ran into anything it was always deemed the fault of the engine room staff for not giving the cox "three asterns" quickly enough; never the fault of the maniacs in the wheelhouse! There was a great deal of rivalry between the deck crew and engine room staff. The former were called MBC's, (motor boat crew) and the latter (incorrectly) called grease monkeys! The crew, usually about 8 personnel, consisted of a skipper (who was a commissioned officer), a coxswain (usually a sergeant), three MBC deck crew, a marine fitter and a marine mechanic in the engine room and a wireless operator.

The starting procedure was quite complex; there was no means of choking the engine when it was cold other than by holding a 'table tennis bat' in front of the three flame traps, one on each of the triple carburettors. This was quite a contortion for one man who had to manually control a rotary switch on the instrument panel for the starter and magnetos at the same time. The engines would cough and splutter, back-firing through the flame traps before eventually starting; the smell of the smoke, raw and partly burned fuel was awful.



Engine room of 2659 showing 2 of the 3 Napiers

The Cromarty firth was a very exposed stretch of water in some winds and the sea often became extremely rough. It was often very difficult getting to and from the vessels on moorings by the Marine Tender; an open 24 foot craft with two compartments with an inboard Ford V8 between. The engine was very capable of propelling the boat quite fast when it was running well but it was a difficult, unreliable engine, again a marinised version of a normal car engine as fitted to the Ford Pilot of that period. It was almost impossible to start in the cold weather, and temperamental in the wet, moist conditions through the autumn and winter months. We often had to rely on a civilian ferryman called Ted; he ran on old, old boat across from Invergordon to Cromarty, a long way down towards the mouth of the firth. His boat was fitted with a true marine engine, probably a Kelvin. It always worked in spite of appearing to be tied together with string and wire!

The deck crew often had a very difficult and highly dangerous job to moor up and unmoor in the strong and frequent gale force winds. Nobody ever got badly hurt to my knowledge but there were some near misses. The launches were very prone to windage, as they had such a large superstructure. Being a

hard chine design of wooden construction, they had no keel and therefore little actually in the water; the only way the boat could be steered was when the engines were actually in gear and thrusting water against the triple rudders. Once the vessel got side on to the wind it just blew away!

I often think about the lack of safety on board; none of us ever wore lifejackets, had we done so we would have probably drowned anyway as the design of the ones we had was so old fashioned. The design had changed since the war, they still had one kapok pocket on each side of the neck, tied with a tape under the arms. There was a hole in the centre through which went the head. I have heard that people who had to jump into the water wearing one of those lifejackets often had their necks broken on impact with the water!

Our duties consisted of being available at short notice to go to sea in the event of an emergency, to attend to a crashed aircraft or similar crisis. To enable that to happen we always had a crew ready and waiting. In the pier hut near the wharf there were two crew members on pier duty to watch the vessels on moorings and to monitor the radio in case a “crash call” came through. If that happened the rest of the crew came from the camp at Alness to go to sea.

Most of the time we had to be available to join in with training exercises in conjunction with RAF Kinloss, on the other of the Moray Firth. It was a large Coastal Command aerodrome where pilots and crew were trained in search and rescue, but mostly surveillance of the coastline against enemy submarines and ships. This involved joint operations with the aircraft over the sea where we towed targets to simulate a submarine. Aircraft would home in on the target which was towed about 600 yards behind us and the aircrew would attempt to drop small bombs to straddle the target, thus “destroy the enemy”. Many of these exercises were carried out at night so the pilots had to rely on instrument flying to find us. The aircraft used at that time were either RAF Shackletons or Neptunes.

Neptune aircraft on bombing run

It was quite fun at first but after hours and hours of slowly traversing the Moray Firth in the early hours of the morning, it became a bit tedious to say the least. If the weather was calm it was OK but in rough winter weather it could be most uncomfortable. We would keep warm with endless cups of tea and coffee, tins of self-heating soup, bacon, eggs and beans, toast and biscuits ad lib. It was the job of one of the deckhands to produce all this food in a tiny galley with a two burner paraffin stove. When it was rough it was very difficult to stand down below, let alone prepare food in such cramped and sickly conditions; the smell of the fuel alone was enough to turn all but the toughest stomachs!

Another of our duties was to have to standby at a prescribed position at sea for what was called the Queen's Flight. When Her Majesty or one of the Royal Family overflew the Moray Firth we had to be out there ready to rescue anyone who crashed into the sea. Of course it never happened; it was always a source of speculation whether we bowed before or after we plucked Her Majesty from the "oggin", (or briny, as most people called the sea)! On one

occasion the skipper decided he had had enough, so instead of being on station at sea we were actually tied up at Nigg Pier, opposite Cromarty and enjoying a few beers at Nigg Hotel. The skipper and crew would have been beheaded if the Royals had found out!

There was intense rivalry between the crews of the two launches too. Inevitably one of the boats would be unserviceable from time to time and it was always a constant battle to cope with the other crew if our boat was out of action. The vessels had to be slipped and anti-fouled quite frequently. An engine also only had a short service life of 360 running hours I think, and had to be removed then even if it was running well. I had one centre engine which was performing really well at the end of its 360 hours; I applied for two 10% extensions but eventually it had to go. The one replacing it was a dreadful engine and I had constant trouble with it! Normally though, once it had been logged nearing that number of hours the engine hatch had to come off and the time-expired engine lifted out by Coles crane, either at the wharf in Invergordon or in the huge maintenance hangar at Alness. All through the life of each engine, every running hour had to be recorded in a log book. Apart from that there were always little things going wrong which resulted in the launch being "U/S". The boats were constantly having to be painted too, either inside or out or both, so that put it out of action for a while. The crew of the working boat would make remarks to the out of service launch crew like "still sitting on baked bean tins out there again", or something similar!

I should mention the duties of the engine-room crew. We had to maintain a continual watch on the engines and instrument panel, all the time checking that the engines did not overheat. In practice it meant the fitter and mechanic each taking turns to do a shift, usually half an hour on and the same period off. We sat in a chair just ahead of the centre engine and aft of the two wing engines. The noise was so loud that we could not hear our own voice no matter how hard we shouted or even whistled. Communication was either by a system of sign language we developed or by writing on a message pad. At the end of a watch we were almost deaf for a while before going back into the din for the next watch. We had issued to us "defenders ear, for the use of"; small rubber plugs, one for each ear canal. They were useless and usually fell into

the bilges almost immediately. No wonder years later most of us have a hearing impairment!

Common problems we had to check were that the cooling systems worked properly. The engines were each cooled by a glycol mixture in a closed system which was in turn cooled by seawater via a heat exchanger tucked away under the floor boards. The seawater then discharged into the exhaust jackets and finally into the exhaust itself. I had another problem with one engine constantly losing oil pressure. It was caused by foreign material choking up one of the filters which had to be cleaned repeatedly every few minutes. I had no idea why this stuff had formed, it looked just like black coffee grounds. Eventually I removed one of the camshaft covers to reveal a disgusting mess, rust everywhere; the valve springs looked like a farm implement left out in the weather for ten years. It eventuated that the oil cooler had leaked sea water into the oil which rusted everything ferrous. The engine had to be changed, there was no way to halt the rust.

There were two commissioned officers on strength, one was the Commanding Officer of the 50 odd men on camp, the other officer was available to skipper the launch when necessary. I don't remember how it worked exactly but the C/O would reluctantly skipper the duty launch; I got the impression that he was not very happy to do so, it was not by choice! The first C/O I had while I was there was from Bristol. His hobby was duck shooting in the mud and reed flats around the firth. I went with him sometimes; we would stand up to our waists in freezing water waiting for the ducks to fly in. He had decoy ducks and duck whistle and really got quite serious about it but I don't remember either of us getting much luck. The best part was going to his house afterwards for a "wee dram" to warm us up!

The second C/O was an older, timid man, who was probably near retiring age when he came to Alness. He hated the boats and complained bitterly about having to go to sea, always verbalizing his doubts about whether the "machinery would keep going", especially in bad weather.

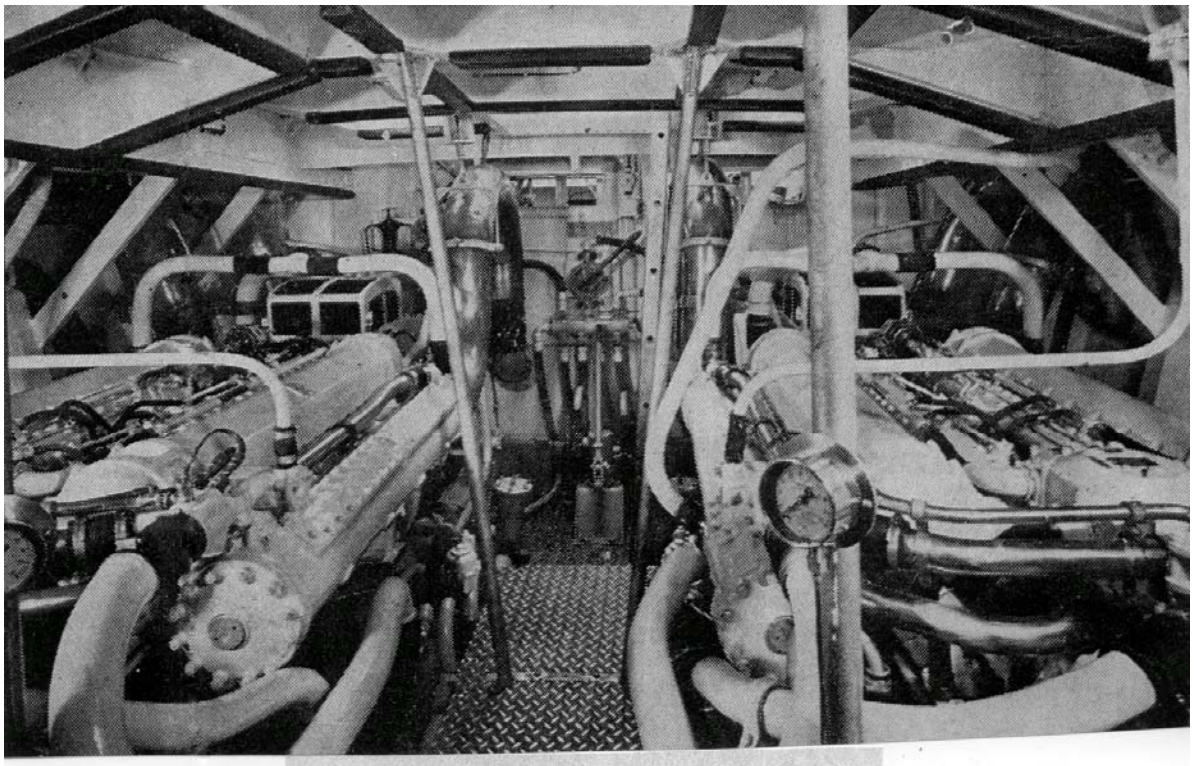
The highlight of my career in Alness was that I was chosen to go with an officer by train to Southampton to ferry the latest and fastest brand spanking new Mark 2 Target Towing Launch, HMAFV 2757, from there to Invergordon, up the

east coast of England and Scotland. The officer was to skipper the boat on the trip; he was a very keen smart chap, very easy to get along with, an ex-merchant seaman I think. The launch was 68 feet long and fitted with two Rolls Royce marinised Griffon engines, the aircraft engines fitted to Shackletons and a development of the engines fitted to the last of the Spitfire fighters. The other big difference was that they were coupled to an oil-operated Mathway gearbox, which meant that the ahead and astern was controlled by the coxswain directly from the wheelhouse; no more blaming the engine room staff for slow responses in an emergency! The launch was capable of about 40 knots in good weather.

I had never seen one of these twin-engined craft before, nor had I any knowledge of the Griffon engines. They were a V12 configuration with supercharger, rated at about 1500 horse power and started by cartridge starter motor. The cartridges were huge, like overgrown shotgun shells without the buckshot, they made a very loud bang when they were discharged, with clouds of smoke! The engines ran on high octane aviation petrol, the five on-board tanks held a total of 2200 gallons; I think the consumption was between 60 to 80 gallons an hour at cruising speed.

The object of my being on board there was that I would work alongside the ferry crew assigned to deliver the boat; by the time we reached Invergordon I had to take over the responsibility of running it from then on! Talk about a fast learning curve! They were totally different to the Napier Sea Lions I had been used to and were very complicated. The starting procedure was extremely complex and if incorrectly followed, the chance of the engine starting was very slight. In fact one type of error could result in permanent damage to the supercharger. After a while though I became used to the engines and was fairly confident I could start each with one cartridge, although I never thought of trying to start both engines simultaneously

Those mechanics able to do that were called “one shot wonders” in the trade! It was many, many years later that I learned that the starting cartridges we had to use were incorrect for that type of starter; there had been a huge mistake by someone in authority somewhere along the line! (Sailors in the RAF, Beardow, 1993, Patrick Stephens Ltd/Haynes Publishing).



(Below) The Rolls-Royce Griffon 1,450 h.p. engines which give the launch a speed in excess of 40 knots.

Once, when I was off duty the boat was called out and a duty crew rounded up. The fitter assigned to be on duty tried repeatedly to start the engines and completely failed. In desperation I was sent for, fortunately I was still on camp, so I went to the boat to start it. The engines were completely flooded with fuel, the starter motors hot and black from having been fired so many times. I followed the procedure to de-flood the engines and I finally got them started, much to the annoyance of the rest of the crew who would have preferred to stay ashore and have the night off!

We worked with American trainee pilots stationed at RAF Kinloss, they were flying Neptunes. On a night bombing exercise the aircraft could not find us, we were ages trailing the target without any contact from the 'Yanks'. All of a sudden the night sky was filled with a massive amount of flares, they were falling down all around us; we were so afraid that we could go up in a huge ball of flame with all that fuel on board; if one of the flares had down through the open engine room hatch we probably would have been doomed!

On two occasions we went to The Shetland Islands, to the principal town of Lerwick. The purpose of the visits was to celebrate the Battle of Britain

weekend there, to show the RAF flag and generally join in the special day. We were hosted by the RAF Association in Lerwick; the organizer was a Cornishman, Nick Carter. We enjoyed amazing hospitality from all the local people, we opened the launch up for the public to visit, took them out on board for “trips around the bay”, went to functions which they organized and met up in the local hotel for drinks in the evenings. I went up in successive years, once with 2679 and once with the new launch 2757. The latter was a huge success as it was such a fast and very impressive launch.

On the first trip with the ’79, the return voyage was horrific. Just after leaving the island, we passed Sumburgh Head and the lighthouse heading south. The sea was pretty lumpy and the wind was obviously increasing. Very soon afterwards we were heading straight into a southerly gale, the waves increased quickly and it was evident we were going to have a hard time. As the waves continued to get higher the troughs between became deeper and deeper. As the bow plunged into the steep waves the boat seemed to stop momentarily and shudder right throughout its length; the waves passed under the craft and lifted the stern out of the water, causing the engines to race as the propellers thrashed the air; the engines dropped dramatically in RPM when they were again put under load as the props dug back into the sea.

The Pentland Firth is notorious for bad seas as a result of the strong currents passing up the west and east coasts of Britain and converging there. By the time we had reached this area I had succumbed to sea-sickness. I wedged myself between the port and starboard engines, lifted the bilge boards and was violently sick for ages until only bile was left to regurgitate. Seasickness is awful, all I wanted to do was crawl into a corner and die! As I slowly improved I hung on to the ladder from the engine room to the deck, my feet on the bottom rung with my head in the cold air.

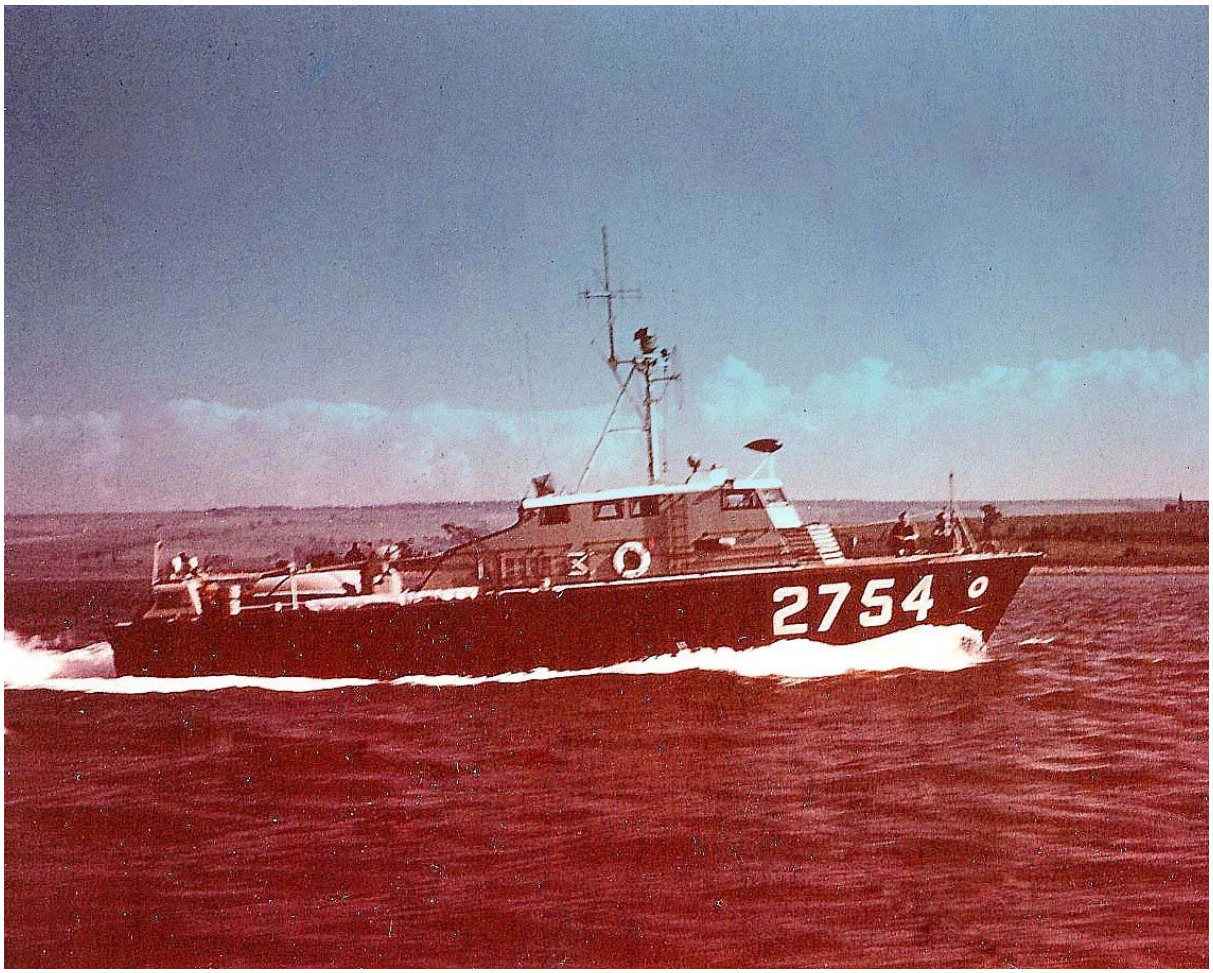
Eventually the sickness passed and I went up to the wheelhouse to join the rest of the crew huddled there; it was too rough down below for anyone. One by one the crew members had been or were also being affected; it was like a relay race. As soon as one of the crew recovered he took the wheel to keep the vessel on course; there was no demarcation between deckhand or engine-room staff, anyone who could steered the boat. It went on like this for hours. We passed Fair Isle but nobody knew whether the island was on the port or

starboard side of us! It was extremely dark and quite frightening. Fortunately the engines kept going steadily at 1200-1400 RPM, it was too rough to go any faster. Finally after what seemed a very long time we turned through the familiar Sutors headlands into the relatively quiet waters of Cromarty Firth, and moored up, absolutely exhausted! We were extremely thankful for the strength of the Hants and Dorset hull, now confident that it could pretty much endure anything the sea could throw at us; only the endurance of the crew was the weakest link.

Sometime during the period I was stationed in Scotland I was sent to RAF Mountbatten, Plymouth again; this time to do a course on the Rolls Royce Griffon engines. I have no record of when that happened but it was Course No 3, lasting several months. It was rather strange, after having been the sole operator of the launch and responsible for all maintenance on board, to be then sent to learn how to do it seemed odd! Rather like shutting the door after the horse had bolted. However it was extremely useful, I benefitted from being the only person on the course who had any previous experience of the new Mark 2 with those engines. While at Mountbatten I had to go on a Queens Birthday Parade on Plymouth Hoe, and a long laborious march around the city waterfront. We had to carry rifles, but nobody knew the command to change the rifle from one shoulder to the other; we marched all morning with the stupid thing on one shoulder. All the other soldiers and sailors on parade kept swapping their rifles from one shoulder to another in perfect unison, while we ached and ached!

Queen’s Birthday Parade, Plymouth Hoe

As the Mark 2’s were so new there were teething troubles. I don’t know how many were in service by then but I suspect very few. The Vosper-built hull had been around for a while but fitted with the standard Napier engines, three of them squeezed into an engine room originally designed for two much more powerful Griffons. This was an interim measure while the Griffon engines were perfected I suspect. That version was designated a Mark 1A and was a very unsatisfactory slow, cumbersome vessel.



A Mark IA

I was the unwitting victim of one of the teething problems on 2757. On idle, when the craft was under way at its slowest speed, the engines ran extremely rich. That caused clouds of black exhaust to billow from the stern. Once the speed was increased the engines ran normally, quite cleanly. We went out on exercise on one night when the sea was like glass, not a breath of wind; very unusual for the north of Scotland. We had been target towing all night, the time came to reel in the target at the end of the exercise and return to base. As usual, the Ford winch engine in the winch bay at the extreme stern of the boat would not start. I was crouching over the thing for ages while the main engines were idling, trying everything I knew to start it. Eventually I got it going and began to reel in the target, 600 yards of wire had to be guided onto the winch drum. By this time I was feeling groggy with the fumes which seemed to billow over and into the winch locker well.

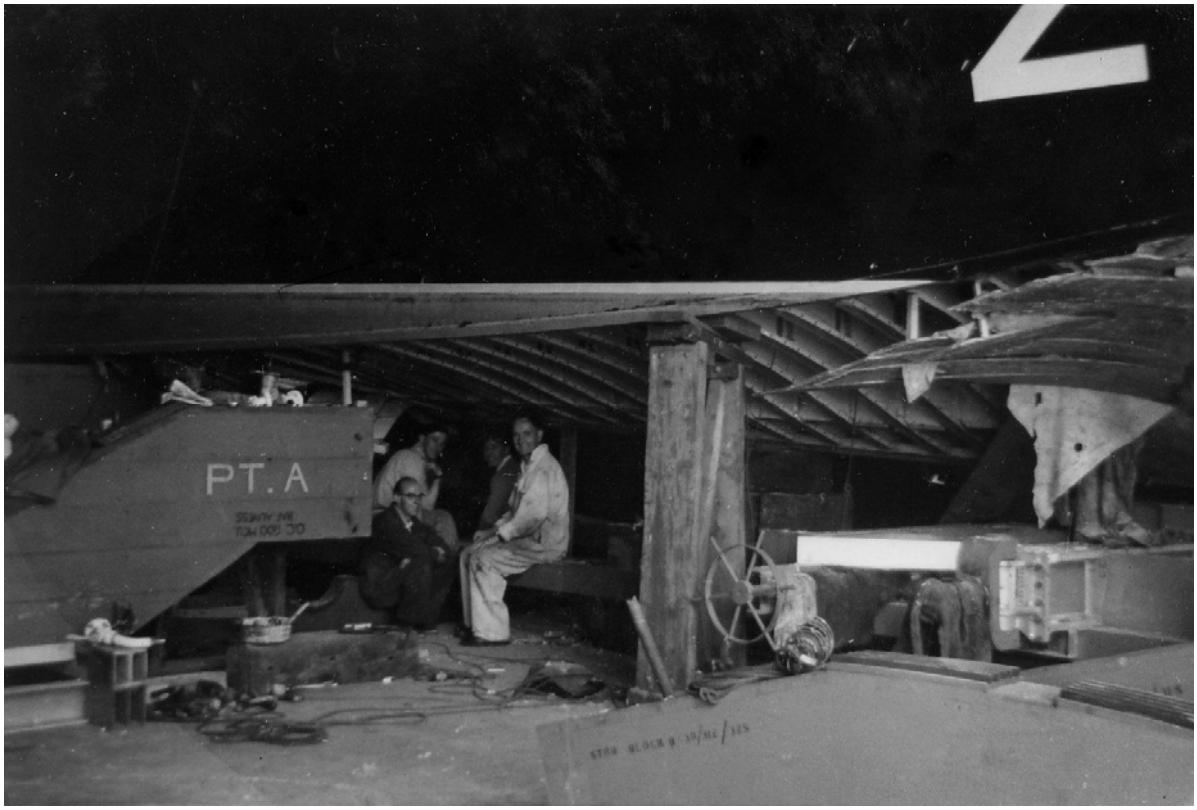
The target was nearing the transom of the boat when I must have had a blackout. The target crashed into the transom, stalling the winch engine and wrecked the target; a wooden skid with metal scoops to throw up a couple of plumes of water when towed. I eventually untangled the wreckage and staggered up to the bridge to tell the skipper that the target was in but damaged. I then proceeded to pass out on the bridge! The next thing I remember was waking up in the sickbay down below with a couple of concerned crew watching over me. The skipper radioed to base and when we arrived, there was a civilian doctor waiting on the jetty at 3.30 am to give me a medical checkup. He concluded that I was suffering from carbon monoxide poisoning, but that I would recover quickly after rest.

As a result of that incident Rolls Royce sent a couple of technicians up to Invergordon to adjust the fuel system to cure the problem, so it must have been taken quite seriously by the RAF.

Another major problem was realized when we set off on an exercise in extremely rough weather. I am not sure of the details but for some reason we were at sea for a long time in heavy weather. The skipper kept the vessel at quite high speed during this time, when things started to go wrong. Equipment on the bulkheads (walls) started to fall off with the constant pounding as the craft climbed up huge waves and then crashed into the trough between them. There was a “G meter” in the wheel house and the reading on it showed forces of 5 G’s affecting the hull. Then we noticed that we were taking on water, the loose bilge boards began to float; when we pulled them up it was evident we had a major leak in the hull. We had to abort the mission and head for home with all pumps running. After a long time we got back safely to the pier and tied up. It was evident that the vessel could not be left on moorings overnight so a crew stayed on board alongside the pier to keep the pumps running and monitor the situation.

The next day it was decided that the craft had to be slipped at Alness in the maintenance hangar. That was a major exercise as all the fuel had to be removed and the vessel towed up to be put on a cradle and pulled out of the water. Once that was done it was inspected to find that major damage to some frames had occurred. As a result a team of boatwrights from the builders, Vospers of Southampton, were sent up to make a thorough examination of the

hull and begin repairs. I had to remove all the fuel tanks as the damage was under the fuel tank bay. That involved getting a Coles crane truck from RAF Kinloss to lift the huge tanks out. Eventually, after the boatwrights had removed the double diagonal skin under them it was found that seventeen frames had broken, including some under the sick bay too.



Vospers boatwrights repairing hull damage

At the same time Vosper's men decided to modify the hull slightly by adding long wooden wedges, each probably four feet long, under the width of the hull, above the propellers. The thinking behind the plan was that the modification would lift the stern of the craft when on the plane so that the vessel would sit much flatter on the water, thus becoming faster and more fuel efficient. All of these repairs took a long time, in the middle of which I decided to take some leave. On my return the vessel was ready for sea again and a series of speed trials in Cromarty firth was undertaken to assess the value of the modification. Photographs of the craft taken at various engine speeds were taken to see at which point the boat got on the plane and that information was

compared to its previous and original performance. I was fortunate enough to be given one of those original photos. The final result was given the seal of approval, presumably future craft would be built to that plan.

Official photo of speed trial after modifications

During my stay in Scotland I joined a local rugby club, the Ross-shire and Sutherland Rugby Club. It sounded very grand but in fact I think I must have been the fifteenth person in the north of Scotland able to kick an oval ball! Most of the guys were hard drinking farmers who only played the game for the booze up afterwards. Fortunately I was “rescued” by one of the players, a kind person who could see the dangers of where this could have lead me. I was only about 19 years old at the time and could have gone in the wrong direction; many of the young Scots in the area were badly addicted to alcohol. It soon became apparent that it was better for me to leave the club and take up a more suitable pastime.

Perhaps I should explain that at that time everyone of a certain age had to do two years national service. It was a government scheme to engage and train

young men in military service and designed to boost the numbers of trained personnel in the event of another war. I would have had to be enlisted but chose to volunteer for 5 years instead of doing the 2 years national service. This enabled me to learn a trade in the RAF instead of just being drafted into wherever they wanted me. I felt this would be a waste of two years, goodness knows where or what I would have been doing had I not volunteered.

Two of the new arrivals at Alness were Peter Ramsey and Steve Wood, both national servicemen. They both became deckhands on the boats; a very cherished trade and fortunate for them to be put into that job. They and I became great friends for the duration of their stay in Scotland and in the years to come. Steve was an avid jazz fan and "played" a broom like a clarinet every time he heard any jazz music.

Pete, Steve and I went on a camping trip to the Isle of Skye on the west coast. Pete had a Wolseley 4/50, a lovely quality car. How he afforded to run it on a national serviceman's pay I shall never know, but he was very astute. We had a great time, got stuck on a coastal path and had to be towed out by tractor once, but other than that we had no other dramas. The countryside on the west coast was amazing. We climbed Ben Nevis, the highest mountain in Britain, which sounds quite impressive but there is actually a footpath all the way up, no climbing involved!

Life at Alness was quiet as there was little to do there. There was a weekly dance in the Invergordon village hall, an old fashioned event by Blackpool standards. All the girls would line one wall of the hall while the music played until one of the boys felt brave, (or drunk) enough to ask someone to dance. The local Scots didn't much care for the RAF boys as we were looked upon as intruders, rather like the Americans when they came to England in WWII.

There was only a little discipline at the camp compared to the bigger stations. We occasionally got caught doing something wrong, perhaps having an untidy hut or something trivial. The punishment we all hated was having either to do "coal, coke and ashes" or "fatigues". The former meant we had to take coal and coke, (not the bottled variety), to every hut and collect the ashes or garbage, then be on sentry duty all night around the compound where the coal

and coke was stored to prevent stealing. Fatigues were less ominous, usually we had to peel potatoes or do some other menial tasks around the camp.

I struggled with some aspects of discipline. Once I led a protest about the camp food which was so awful. The cook in charge had no interest or imagination to make the food palatable, he produced the same repetitive menu week after week; goodness knows how often we had bangers, beans and mash for our main meal! It came to a head when I turned my plate of food upside down on the wooden table and stormed out, encouraging others to do the same, which they all did. It was not long before I was up in front of the C.O, charged with leading a mutiny! He demanded to know what it was all about and why I took this action. When I explained the position, he was very supportive and quite soon the cook was posted elsewhere and a new "chef" arrived to take his place. The food improved immediately! I was fortunate though because mutiny is a very serious charge.

I had another similar experience when later I was sent to RAF Mountbatten to do a Rolls Royce course. There were eight of us on the course and it was decreed that we march from one area of the camp in an orderly manner. I was the senior rank which meant I had to form the men up into marching order and salute any officer I saw on behalf of the men whom I had to instruct to "eyes right". We looked so silly in this formation of three in the first row, one in the second row and three in the third row, with me stuck out on the side to do all the saluting. I told the men to slip quietly away, one at a time so it did not look so obvious that we should have been together. Of course I got caught and again charged with mutiny! However I had a very understanding officer who agreed with me and let me off as long as I did however do as I was told and march the men around as ordered. Again, very lucky!

Back at Alness, if we were off duty, Sundays were days of lying in bed till late, doing washing and ironing, having a game of darts or snooker in the canteen or working on our private vehicles. I was still using the Norman motor bike for daily use but I also bought a Matchless 350cc which had been in a severe crash. The front was totally wrecked, but I managed to find some second hand front forks and rebuilt it. It was very fast and quite exhilarating to ride; in those days the roads were very quiet, not much traffic around so it was reasonably safe. I later sold that and bought a Triumph 500 which had been used with a sidecar;

the sidecar had been removed but the rear wheel sprocket was original. That resulted in a very low geared bike, capable of going up most steep hills in top gear and the acceleration was amazing.

My first car was a 1940 Morris Eight convertible. It had been repainted I think and looked quite respectable. It gave me the freedom to go out of camp in relative comfort; a motor cycle in a Scottish winter was not the best form of transport! I also bought an Austin A70 Hereford pick-up, or utility, to restore. It had a big engine by British standards and was very powerful when compared to the Morris. It needed a great deal of work to bring it up to some kind of reasonable standard so I rubbed it down to almost bare metal and resprayed it myself; the quality of the finish was not as good as a professional would do but I was pleased with the result. I sold both of these to buy a fairly modern Standard 8, a very basic saloon, not at all successful as a commercial model and soon replaced by a bigger version with a higher specification, the Standard 10. But I kept the Standard 8 for quite a while, actually drove it down to Devon once from Alness; a very long trip!

During the last year or so I was promoted to the exalted rank of Corporal, as a result my pay went up to eight pounds a week! My 5 year contract came to an end in November 1958, I was sent to RAF Cardington again, this time to receive my “de-mob” suit. We were given the choice of getting a set of civilian clothes as a departing gift; I wish I hadn’t bothered as the clothes were terrible! I had heard jokes about how poor they were but had no idea they could be so bad. The suit was a brown woollen thing and the mackintosh looked like something out of a 1930’s Humphrey Bogart movie! I was supposed to receive 4 years pay for being a reservist, but as soon as I completed my contract, they moved the goalposts and decided to cancel that part of the deal. Bureaucracy wins again!

Cheers, Brian Mutton.

27th September 2009