

THE 63ft GENERAL SERVICE PINNACE

THE WORKHORSE OF THE MARINE CRAFT SECTION

When I first saw a 63ft Pinnace, it came as a bit of a culture shock. An immaculate 43ft RSL had just snarled away from the Marine Dock at Mount Batten, with one untrained, green as grass young airman on board, heading out to the trot of mooring buoys. As we passed a couple of graceful, dashing, RTTLs, my heart leapt, but alas, we swept passed them. The RSL came about and gently ran along side another boat. I looked in aw. She was the strangest looking RAF craft that I had ever seen, and even had guardrails stretched around her deck. "High Speed Launches don't have rails" I thought, nor did the recruiting posters show a launch with such a huge metal mast and derrick. "Okay lads" I said, "The joke is over, where's my boat?" ... "No joke son, you were detailed to Pinnace 1381, and here you are", and with a cheery wave they were off !

I stood bewildered on deck as she rolled in the wash from the departing RSL and was rudely wakened from my daydream by the wheelhouse door crashing open and deckhand grabbing me round the shoulders and pulling me into the wheelhouse. "Don't hang about on deck my old son, if they spot you from the hut, they'll only find us something to do". He took me below and into the smoke filled forecabin where three other chaps were knocking back pint pots of coffee, in between playing dominoes. Introductions over, I was given a mug of their finest, as they colourfully educated me as to the life of a "Webfoot".

It was very cosy in that small triangular space, grandly referred to as "The crew's Quarters", eight foot long, by eight foot at the widest part and five at the narrowest. It slept four, two on the seat cushions and two in pipe cots. Meals were taken at a small triangular table, with drop down leaves. A metal ladder led up to a hatch on the foredeck, obstructing the tiny floor space even more. Adjacent on the starboard side was the crew's W.C complete with Baby Blake sea toilet, and stainless steel washbasin. On the port side was a tiny galley, fitted with a Taylor paraffin two burner stove, complete with oven, and a plastic sink with hand pump supplying fresh water. Little did I know then, that these were to be my living quarters for many years to come.

Thank goodness, that first impressions are often mis-interpreted. This strange looking craft was to grow on me during my service in the Marine Section. The Pinnace was top prove a trust workhorse, a superb seaboat in capable hands, and a far friendlier craft than the faster, larger TTLs to serve aboard. They were out and out working boats, designed to efficiently carry out a variety of tasks. These ranged from Wet Winching with helicopters, Torpedo Recovery, Moorings laying and inspection, Target Towing, and indeed anything else that could be dreamt up by our Lords and Masters.

The Pinnace was a seaman's boat, being the only RAF launch to be fitted with a real teak ship's wheel, complete with brass capped king spoke. Pinnace crews worked hard, often living aboard for three to four weeks at a stretch, and thinking little of making long, sometimes rough winter passages, crashing up and down the North Sea. In as much as they were excellent seaboats, they were still hard chine craft, and consequently very uncomfortable for their crews. Inevitably, living in these cramped conditions, clothes stank of stale paraffin and diesel fuel, and the crew's breath carried a strong aroma of raw onions. (Cheese and onion sandwiches were the staple diet of MBCs). Seven was the full compliment for a Pinnace crew, made up as, Skipper, Coxswain, Fitter, W/Operator, and three deckhands.

I was soon to learn that those guardrails (which on first sight seemed so out of character) were a necessity, and often a saviour when struggling aft on a black winter's night to read the log. They were not the encumbrance I had first thought as the after ones could be dropped, in order to facilitate getting weapons and dinghies aboard.

The Pinnace was the hardest working boat in the RAF fleet, and the very fact that some were, until very recently, carrying out their designed duties, almost half a century after they were built, is surely staunch testimony for both builders and boats. In fact, as the RAF Marine Branch closed these were the ONLY wooden RAF launches in their original condition, still working. Indeed two of the craft soldiered on until the very end, only being beaten as the last craft in RAF service by two of their replacement RTTL Mk 3 craft.