

INTRODUCTION

Volume 5 covers the craft of the Airborne Lifeboats and Inflatable Dinghies types and as such might be viewed as a slight diversion from the RAF Marine Craft Class Directory. It has thus been divided into two parts - part 1 Airborne Lifeboats and part 2 Inflatable Dinghies. It was intended to include airborne lifeboat types in Volume 4, however, with the amount of information, it was not possible due to space constraints. The opportunity has been taken to expand the respective sections on each type of airborne lifeboat to give full details of construction and use along with development. Additionally, sections have been included on craft of similar types built for the Fleet Air Arm and also for the USAAF. Furthermore, after visits to the PRO and the RAF Museum at Stafford where additional information was extracted, additional sections on prototypes, trials and development and associated craft have been included in this volume.

Why include Inflatable Dinghies?. The airborne lifeboats, by their very nature, were dropped from aircraft, and in most cases to assist ditched airmen that were adrift in their aircraft dinghies. Some explanation would have sufficed, but it is thought that more in depth details of design, development and construction was required to supplement the associated development of airborne lifeboats. Airborne lifeboats were devised from observations of inflatable dinghies, and indeed the inflatable dinghy in the form of the air dropped Lindholme Gear was the eventual demise of the airborne lifeboat. RAF Marine Craft also carried inflatable dinghies, and two types of Marine Craft were designed to carry airborne lifeboats - both for the same purpose.

If a connection were needed the following summarises the ASR in the Mediterranean during WWII. No 283 Squadron received its first three airborne lifeboats in May 1944 but the first operational drop did not take place until 22nd July, and it was not a success. A Spitfire pilot was forced to bale out over the sea south-east of Malta. A Warwick aircraft dropped a Lindholme rescue gear and the ditched pilot was able to transfer himself to a larger dinghy. Time passed on, but another Warwick arrived, dropped flares and a further Warwick dropped an airborne lifeboat. The boat was released but the equipment failed and boat smashed to pieces in the water. The ditched pilot was subsequently rescued by an RAF High Speed Launch. In another incident, another Spitfire pilot ditched and although he managed to get into his "K" type dinghy, he was blown rapidly inshore but was located by an ASR Walrus amphibian aircraft. The sea was rough and the Walrus sprang a leak on alighting and both rescuer and rescued had to take to their "M" type dinghy. They were all soon picked up by a RAF High Speed Launch.

As the contents of this volume are inextricably linked to aircraft, it follows that several views are of aircraft carrying the equipment - there are not too many photographs available of airborne lifeboats on their own. Thus most photos taken were for the manuals which showed the craft in preparation for shipping, or of trials when the boats were photographed either under parachutes or just in the water. Help in tracking down photos has, as ever, come from Ken Hunter and Donald Smith, but the references listed also were a source for many, along with the respective Air Publications (APs) or RAF manuals. Full use of the Internet and several web sites has added a few unusual photographs. The format of this Volume is consequently slightly different, but the drawings, photos and listings follow the theme of the previous volumes 1 through 4.

This volume is not intended to be a re-write of the main reference "Rescue From The Skies", however the facts therein have been used, along with a lot of confirmation and additional detailed information from files at the PRO, some of which were used by the author of the aforementioned book. The volume concentrates more on the construction and development of the craft and leaves the details of the rescues etc as further reading, which is recommended, in "Rescue From The Skies" by Stephen Brewster Daniels. Additional further reading is recommended in the book "Fly for their Lives" by John Chartres.

The sourcing of drawings for all of the types in this volume was simple, but only after I had tracked down copies of the relevant Air Publications. Even so, several had to be amended to present them in a form for inclusion in the compilation, and a few had to be completely redrawn due to the originals being in such bad condition.

Although the subject has a very narrow interest, it has been most fascinating to explore and research, and although many will be more interested in the true RAF Marine Craft, it was necessary, for completeness, to cover the craft represented in this volume.

Volume 5 completes all the Classes of RAF Marine Craft, ie those built specifically for the RAF, however Volume 6 returns to Marine Craft and is intended to cover craft which grouped together could be termed as "Miscellaneous", but includes all those transferred from other countries services, those requisitioned and those locally acquired, all of which were pressed into service, mainly during WWII. Details of the various auxiliary craft will also be included.