



## **A Brief History of Inflatable Boats & RIB's**

The inflatable boat that we recognise today is a recent development and has only been in its current form since the beginning of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. However, man has been using the principle of buoyancy aids derived from air being sealed in a 'bag', for thousands of years, in fact since man has sought to find ways to cross water and indeed many ancient graphics show our ancestors using inflated goat skins to cross water. In the 9<sup>th</sup> century BC Phoenician and Assyrian soldiers crossed water in this way and before them the Persians in the 4<sup>th</sup> century BC. It is also documented that Alexander sent explorers to navigate the upper Ganges using rafts floated on animal skins. Whilst coated animal skins were moderately effective, it is only in more recent times, with the development of suitable inflatable boat fabrics and adhesives, that we have been able to gain an appreciation of the buoyancy, stability, versatility and robustness of inflatable boats and inflatable structures.

The first major step forward in inflatable boat development came with the development of rubber coated fabrics which were driven by the airship industry, but a number of airship disasters curtailed the further development of the hydrogen filled airships. A French airship manufacturer Societe Zodiac made the decision to employ their skills in developing air-filled rubber boats and in 1934 developed a 2-seater inflatable kayak and then an inflatable catamaran; it didn't take long to attach a floor between the buoyancy tubes and the modern day Zodiac inflatable boat was born.

After the second World War inflatable boat development took a leap forward when new synthetic materials, neoprene and Hypalon were coated onto nylon fabrics and with the new generation of glues being made, inflatable boats were now able to cope with the harsh natural elements without becoming brittle, as natural rubber does, and impervious to salt, UV and petrochemicals.

Meanwhile, in the UK another airship manufacturer, RFD Company Ltd, recognised the potential cross-over from airships to inflatable boats. The founder of RFD, Reginald Foster Dagnall, used their coated fabric technology to develop inflatable boats, lifejackets and liferafts for military purposes. After World War I Mr Dagnall built an inflatable boat that he tested on Lake Wisely, near Guildford, England and impressed the British Air Ministry who recognised the potential for saving the lives of both seamen and airmen. RFD continued to develop inflatable boats, dinghies and liferafts for the military markets and many thousands of lives were saved by inflatables developed by Mr Dagnall and RFD. By 1959 the rescue services in the shape of the Royal National Lifeboat Institute (RNLI) and the discerning leisure user had recognised the sea-keeping benefits of the inflatable boat and RFD approached Zodiac to manufacture a version of a Zodiac inflatable boat, under licence. Also, by this time a number of European manufacturers (Semperit of Austria, La Nautique Sportiv of France) were making great strides in developing inflatable dinghies and kayaks for the leisure market. In the UK the Avon Rubber

Co Ltd recognised a market for inflatables as yacht tenders and C-Craft launched a sports focused inflatable boat.

As the popularity of inflatables grew and materials and manufacturing techniques further developed, boat users recognised the potential for combining the inherent buoyancy and stability of the inflatable boat with the speed of modern planing hulls. The RNLI were quick to appreciate the attributes of their inflatable boats but needed to increase the speed of their craft to get to those in need as soon as possible. The Headmaster at Atlantic College in Wales, Rear Admiral Desmond Hoare RN (retd) appreciated the inflatable boat for its inshore rescue qualities and the college is credited with conceiving, designing and constructing the first rigid inflatable boat or RIB and further developing the concept of the RIB before patenting the college's design in 1973. Atlantic College eventually transferred the rights to his design to the RNLI for just £1. The RNLI now manufacture their own RIB's and continue to recognise the critical role that Desmond and his college played in developing the RNLI's RIB's by naming their B Class RIB the Atlantic Inshore Lifeboat.

Manufacture of smaller inflatable dinghies, tenders and kayaks has moved into the mass production era, as heat-weld seamed pvc and vinyl materials have been developed, but there is also number of low volume customised RIB builders who continue to push the boundaries with larger and even more capable inflatable boats. The future for RIB's, inflatable boats and inflatable marine structures looks promising and the level of support for the owner and operator is now excellent.

[www.Ribstore.co.uk](http://www.Ribstore.co.uk) is a family owned business that supplies everything for the discerning owner and operator of inflatables, RIB's, dinghies, inflatable kayaks and inflatable liferafts. The Ribstore shop <http://www.ribstore.co.uk/shop/catalog/index.html> supply inflatable boat repair kits [http://www.ribstore.co.uk/shop/catalog/Tube-Patch-Repairs-orderby\\_0-p-1-c-9.html](http://www.ribstore.co.uk/shop/catalog/Tube-Patch-Repairs-orderby_0-p-1-c-9.html) , replacement inflation valves for most makes of inflatable boat including Avon and Zodiac [http://www.ribstore.co.uk/shop/catalog/Inflate-Deflate-Valves-Spares-orderby\\_0-p-1-c-18.html](http://www.ribstore.co.uk/shop/catalog/Inflate-Deflate-Valves-Spares-orderby_0-p-1-c-18.html) , in fact everything that owners and operators of RIBs and inflatables need to care and repair for their boats, dinghies, kayaks and inflatable liferaft.