

Colm na Cora, the Garda patrol boat

Sgt Liam Grimes



Colm na Cora at Athlone

The function of the Garda patrol boat is to provide a high-visibility crime prevention capability on the Shannon Navigation and inland waterways generally.

Background

The Garda patrol boat was acquired after a working group was established by the Garda Commissioner in 1997. The working group recognised that the Shannon, an extensive waterway used by up to 10,000 boats annually, lacked a sufficient Garda presence, giving rise to concerns that the waterways may be used for criminal activity.

Following recommendations by the working group and a subsequent tender competition, a patrol boat, a Targa 31, was built by Botnia Marine in Finland and fitted out by their Irish and UK agents, Wessex Marine of Poole, Dorset, mainly to the specification of a similar patrol boat used by London Metropolitan Police. The Telecommunications Section of An Garda Síochána fitted the boat with the necessary communications, enabling the crew to communicate with any of the Garda stations and divisions along the Shannon, as well as Marine Rescue and any other boats which are on the river by way of VHF radio. The crew of the Garda boat monitor the emergency Channel 16 continuously while on duty but, being a non-designated resource, may not always be available to attend a call.

Specifications

Capable of a planing speed of 32 knots, the Garda boat should have a lead on most boats on the Shannon if required. (This speed is only to be used in exceptional circumstances and, even then, with a high regard for the safety of other boat users.)

Powered by twin Volvo 200hp diesel engines with dual electronic micro commanded controls. 800 litre fuel tank. 12 mile offshore patrol capability.

Helm indicator, steering compass, radar scanner, differential GPS, echo sounder, direction finder. Loudhailer, PA system, siren. Rear towing post. Stern recovery platform with opening transom. Two high-powered searchlights and two handheld searchlights. Firefighting and salvage capability. Downlink capability from Garda Air Support helicopter.

Garda Water Unit

The Garda boat is an integral part of the Garda Water Unit under the control of Superintendent Operational Support Unit, Garda Headquarters, which also includes the Garda Air Support, Mounted and Dog Units. The Water Unit also has a number of rigid inflatable patrol boats, which can be deployed anywhere in the state from either of its bases at Santry or Athlone. These RIBs are deployed on routine coastal/river patrols as well as in response to drowning accidents and incidents necessitating a diving operation, missing person search operations, searches under Drug and Larceny acts, policing problems or any other request for assistance from a local Superintendent to police a local event or operation.

The rotating crew of the Garda boat comprises two full-time members from the Santry or Athlone base and one part-time crew member drawn from the local Garda district when the boat is patrolling that area. These part-time members liaise regularly with the full-time members of the unit and identify areas or problems requiring attention in their Garda District. In this manner policing problems on the water are identified quickly and the boat is deployed to that area.

All of the Garda Water Unit (5 Sergeants, 13 Gardai and 16 part-time members) are highly trained in navigation skills, first aid and marine legislation, with most of the crew from the Santry base being qualified police divers.

Main areas of involvement

At its launch the Garda patrol boat was described by Commissioner Pat Byrne as a "patrol car on water" providing crime prevention, crime detection and other policing duties, in addition to involvement in target-specific operations and maintaining a police presence on the Shannon. These targets have largely been achieved.

During its first twelve months the patrol boat assisted local Garda units in the policing of a number of events and operations on the Shannon, including festivals and water-based activities at Carrick-on-Shannon, Lanesborough, Killaloe and Athlone. In August the unit provided a Garda escort to the flotilla of boats carrying Rose of Tralee contestants from Garrykennedy to Killaloe's new Kincora Marina.

The boat has also assisted local units in operations involving water-based searches for missing persons and also searches under the Misuse of Drugs and Larceny acts. During December 2000 and January and February 2001 we found our resources stretched with extended searches for three people missing in the Athlone area. All of the bodies were eventually recovered and we would like to take this opportunity to extend sympathy to the families of the deceased as well as offering thanks to the local diving units, fishermen, boat owners and

members of the local communities for their assistance and support during these and other operations.

In June the patrol boat visited Dublin to assist North Central and South Central Garda Divisions there for the policing of the Dublin Port Docklands Festival. The crew were well received for the two weeks of the festival, which attracted large crowds along both north and south quays for most of the events.

Legislation

I would like to point out that the vast majority of people using the Shannon Navigation have been found to be extremely law-abiding and a lot of minor incidents were dealt with by way of caution. However some more serious incidents involving theft of boats and marine equipment were detected and were dealt with under the Larceny Act through the courts in the usual manner. We have also investigated some reports of criminal damage to property and reports of public order offences occurring at a small number of the harbours and marinas along the Shannon.

The misuse of jetskis or PWCs also brought a lot of complaints from other users of the waterways and we will be looking at this area more closely in the coming year.

The introduction of the **Merchant Shipping Act 2000 Regulations** in July gave the unit the necessary authority to investigate and prosecute breaches of the act relating to careless or dangerous navigation of powercraft and a number of incidents are currently under investigation. The unit also has a role in the enforcement of the **Merchant Shipping Act 1992** relating to passenger vessels and have regularly inspected these vessels on the Shannon to ensure that Department of the Marine requirements are being adhered to.

The crews of the boat are continuously on the lookout for signs of pollution and discharge of effluent on the waterways and have received instruction from Fishery Board officers in the taking of samples for analysis under the **Water Pollution Act 1977**.

Thousands of visiting and local anglers occupy the Shannon system annually in pursuit of their sport and the past year has been no exception. Again the vast majority are law-abiding but we have received complaints of some visiting anglers flouting the laws in relation to pike fishing. An Garda Síochána has extensive powers under the **Fisheries Consolidation Act 1959** regarding the boarding of vessels suspected of being in contravention of the Act and have done so on many occasions over the last 12 months. No major infringements were detected but a number of cautions were issued to mainly foreign anglers. The Water Unit work in association with the Shannon Regional Fisheries Board in relation to these infringements and also monitor the eel fishing carried out under licence from the Fishery Board.

During Spring 2001 special byelaws were introduced for the control of foot and mouth disease, relating to anglers entering land to gain access to fishery areas. The unit were successful in preventing any major infringement of these byelaws during the period of their infringement. The unit also patrolled the Ballyconnell Canal in Co Cavan and Carlingford Lough in Co Louth as part of the foot and mouth prevention strategy.

The patrol boat patrolled Lough Ree in the days leading up to the opening of the duck-shooting season on 1 September. It also began a patrol at 5.00am on that day. The crew have offered advice to a number of wildfowlers in relation to Section 36 of the **Wildlife Act 1976** relating to hunting from a boat being driven by an outboard engine and in relation to Section 30 of the same Act relating to hunting on the foreshore of any inland waters. The unit also work in association with the conservation ranger for the Lough Ree area and look forward to developing contact and working with other conservation rangers during the coming year.

Crews have also become acquainted with the various archaeological and heritage sites along the Shannon and, in doing so, have become aware of a number of larcenies and disturbances to these sites over the years. With this in mind the unit were in contact with the Irish Antiquities section of the National Museum and received instruction relating to the implementation and enforcement of the ***National Monuments Acts 1930–1994***.

Conclusion

In conclusion I would like to say that it has been a successful first year for the Garda patrol boat and its crew. We have succeeded in visiting almost all parts of the Shannon Navigation including the newly opened sections of the Boyle River and the River Suck and hope to extend our patrols in the near future.

We have enjoyed tremendous support from all IWAI members we have met along the way and look forward to developing even more contacts in the coming year. In particular I would like to thank the members of the Lough Derg Branch who kindly presented us with their plaque during their annual rally at Mountshannon, which coincided with one of our patrols.

The boat crew share the concerns of all IWAI members relating to proper boat behaviour and would like to point out that our aims are not to spoil anyone's fun but to make the waterways a safe and secure environment for all to enjoy.

The Garda Confidential Telephone Number is 1800 589 589.



Sgt Liam Grimes at the helm
of Colm na Cora