

Hydrofoil Pioneers...

RODRIQUEZ CANTIERI NAVALI'S HISTORY

by Dott. Ing. Leopoldo Rodriquez

The history of [Rodriquez Cantieri Navali](#) has far-off origins, and one has to go back to 1887 to date the beginning of this long and variegated entrepreneurial event. In fact, that year Leopoldo Rodriquez set up a little naval repair workshop in the port of Messina. Therefore the Rodriquez enterprise is a little naval repair workshop in these years which operates in a strictly local circle.

In 1908 Messina was struck by an earthquake, and the upset of this unhappy event is countless. The town is almost destroyed and the population more than halved. And there is a lot of damage to the productive system too.

The year 1908 and its earthquake are the first real sharp changes of an environmental nature that the Rodriquez enterprise has to face in the course of its history. The war in 1915 which followed after a few years did not substantially change the yard's structure.

CARLO RODRIQUEZ

[Carlo Rodriquez](#), son of the shipyard's founder, is the author of the company's huge leap, being the bearer of true entrepreneurial values and at the same time innovatory around which the Rodriquez company culture will forge itself.

Endowed with a marked business acumen and exceptionally well disposed towards industrial relations, Carlo Rodriquez put at interest the years he spent abroad.

Now the leadership of the company is his. The disposition of the enterprise is still the original one created by his father, but Carlo Rodriquez has new ideas in mind and decision-making ability to implement them. In 1936 he carries out repair works to the Italian Navy's submarines. Rodriquez Shipyard is a real workshop equipped with simple tools and highly versatile working forces. The yard is destroyed by the first bombings, but Carlo Rodriquez rebuilds it immediately.

RAILWAY BUSINESS

Large numbers of railway wagons damaged by bombing lie on the railway station's blind tracks beside his sheds.

Carlo Rodriquez takes a courageous decision. Without receiving any orders he starts repairing the wagons, delivering them little by little to the Italian Railways. He therefore succeeds in getting a work order from the Italian Railways for the repair of railway wagons and cars damaged by bombing.

Now the workshop has plenty of orders and Rodriquez is forced to expand. So Rodriquez managed to get into the whirlpool of the favourable industrial economic situation caused by the war.

THE HYDROFOIL

The hydrofoil idea comes out one day when skimming through the *Domenica del Corriere*, the picture of a winged-boat flying over the water caught Carlo Rodriguez's eye. He wanted to know a little bit more about it.

Actually even at that time the hydrofoil was not an absolute novelty. Air Force General Engineer Forlanini was the first to build a stepped boat which had been tested on the Lake of Garda at the beginning of the century.

Interest towards the hydrofoil revived during the Second World War in Nazi Germany, when the German General Staff decided to design and build hydrofoils for war deployment.

Carlo Rodriguez convinced one of the designers of the hydrofoil, Naval Architect F. Lobau to move to Messina together with his family and work for him at the head of the technical department. At his side, together with another two German experts whom Mr. Lobau wanted with him, there were very few other Messinian technicians and Naval Architects. The PT-20, which was the name of the type under construction, was a 72-seat passenger-carrying hydrofoil.

FRECCIA DEL SOLE

The first plates started to be riveted in 1953, and the hydrofoil was launched in 1956. The waters of the Strait of Messina were now ploughed by what revealed itself to be a craft which would have led to a real revolution in fast water transportation.

THE ALISCAFI SHIPPING COMPANY

Carlo Rodriguez was maturing a decisive step. He would have not sold the hydrofoil to any ship owner. Rather he was looking for partners with whom he could establish a shipping company. The company would have bought the hydrofoil and operated it on a service between Messina and Reggio Calabria on the Italian mainland and Messina and Milazzo and the Eolian Islands.

The PT 20 *FRECCIA DEL SOLE* owned by the Aliscafi Shipping Company, Messina started to operate the world's first scheduled seagoing hydrofoil service in 1956 between Sicily and the Italian mainland.

In the meantime the Rodriguez Shipyard was about to initiate the construction of another two hydrofoils of the PT-20 type which would have completed the first batch of three which Carlo Rodriguez had planned to build. Also, a new 130-seat hydrofoil of the PT 50 type is built. Being much larger, this new craft allowed servicing new and longer sea routes.

New sea routes are established in the Gulf of Naples linking Naples to Capri, Ischia, Procida and others. The services proved outstandingly successful and additional hydrofoils of the larger size were added to the fleet which have, to date, carried millions and millions of passengers. As a matter of fact, the hydrofoil has come out of its initial pioneer stage making itself now known as a reality in the sea transportation world. The initial skepticism by all the ship owners which had followed the first steps of the project had now changed into a careful observation of the new craft and its possible development potentiality. The Aliscafi Shipping Company played a strong role in promoting the hydrofoil into the world market.

SECOND GENERATION HYDROFOILS -THE RHS SERIES

At the beginning of the 1970s, Carlo Rodriguez decides to play all his cards on the study of an electronic seakeeping system. The Rodriguez Shipyard decides to apply to Hamilton Standard, a big

American company specialising in the study and installation of electronic systems in various sectors like the aero-space sector, in which the company has already a considerable experience.

Re-designed surface-piercing "W" foils replaced the conventional Vee foils whilst hydraulically operated flaps, attached to the trailing edges of the bow and rear foils, are adjusted automatically by the electronic seakeeping system, for the damping of heave, pitch and roll motions in heavy seas.

The first hydrofoils of this new RHS series are built early in the 1970s. These vessels incorporate considerable improvements compared with the previous PT series. In fact, on account of the electronic system, these new vessels are more stable and comfortable compared with earlier hydrofoils. Moreover they proved to be well fitted for navigation on longer sea routes and under worse sea and weather conditions on account of these characteristics. So the hulls can be longer and of larger capacity than the previous ones.

Rodriquez had also commenced the construction of conventional coastal patrol boats in the Messina-based Shipyard whilst the design of a Rodriquez military patrol hydrofoil was ready on the drawing boards of the technical department.

The launching of the [RHS 160](#) in 1976 surely marked a productive success by Rodriquez Shipyard. The hydrofoil, more than 30 metres long and with a capacity of over 200 passengers in its standard configuration, was fit to face sea conditions which were first believed to be prohibitive for a hydrofoil.

3RD-GENERATION HYDROFOILS-THE M.E.C.SERIES

On the ground of the experience and exciting results with the RHS series, the technical department of Rodriquez Shipyard undertakes a series of studies on research and development which lead to the definition of a new product. The MEC (Maximum Efficiency Craft) series which adds the hydrostatic drive to the hydrofoil idea. This revolutionary propulsion system consisting of a set of hydraulic pumps coupled to a conventional diesel engine and a block of hydraulic motors placed on the foil in turn coupled to a propeller. This makes it possible to have a new foil configuration and a new layout of the spaces destined for passenger transportation.

The Rexroth company of the Mannesmann group cooperated in the hydrostatic drive project supplying all its know-how in the sector and establishing a mixed company with Rodriquez for the construction and sale of propulsors based on hydrostatic drive technology.

MONOHULLS

Side by side with the development of the hydrofoil system, at the end of the 1980s the Rodriquez Shipyard designs a series of monohull vessels which feature an unusual and revolutionary stabilising system. The series called Foil Assisted Monohull starts with the launch of the first unit in 1989. The 37-metre, 35-knot monohull accommodates 350 passengers. This concept materializes successfully in the 1990s with the construction of two additional 47-metre monohulls and construction starting on a 95-metre monohull in a mixed passenger/car ferry configuration with outstanding speed performance characteristics.

CATAMARANS

Production is additionally diversified with the resumption of a patented concept by the Rodriquez Shipyard in 1978 concerning multi-hulls such as catamarans.

In the 1990s, a busy technical department designs a 40-metre, 350-passenger catamaran of futuristic lines. With the latter offer, the Rodriquez Shipyard places itself as an aggregate supplier capable of

diversifying its offer in an articulated manner meeting with market and customer requirements in an optimal way.

[The foregoing is as presented, retaining the colorful expressions and interesting wording of Leopoldo Rodriquez. What is added, as follows, is an update on the reorganization that has taken place and the current status of Rodriquez Cantieri Navali. This information comes in part from several issues of [FAST FERRY INTERNATIONAL](#) and personal knowledge. - Editor]

Rodriquez Cantieri Navali has undergone a series of name changes. As Leopoldo states, up until the late 1960s the company was known as Leopoldo Rodriquez Shipyard. It was named after and by engineer Leopoldo's grandfather. As the plan was developing to build their own designs, recognition was made of the technical requirements of this effort and the engineering staff was expanded. As a consequence the company's name was changed to Cantiere Navaltecnica SpA. This name was retained until the mid 1970s when the RHS series hydrofoils started to be delivered and the name was again changed to Rodriquez Cantiere Navale SpA. As business expanded the company acquired additional shipyards and in 1987 the name was made plural, Rodriquez Cantieri Navali SpA.

Another name change that took place related to the operating subsidiary, initially formed and named Aliscafi Shipping Company in 1956 to operate *FRECCIA DEL SOLE* across the Strait of Messina. The scope of this shipping company's responsibilities increased to include not only the proofing and debugging of the first of each new design but also the operation of a number of Rodriquez-built hydrofoils on routes near Sicily and the Italian mainland. From this beginning the company became the source of training for new operators, helping with the introduction of new routes throughout the world. As a result in 1960 the name was changed to Aliscafi Societa di Navagazione Alto Velocita. This organization is now known worldwide by the abbreviated name Aliscafi SNAV. SNAV also deals in used Rodriquez hydrofoils and in arranging charters for commercial operators.

Starting with the shipyard in Messina, the shipyard operations of Rodriquez Cantieri Navali expanded over a period of time to include yards in Malta, Anzio, Varrazze, Pietra Ligure, and Naples. Recognizing the magnitude of the total operation, the family in 1987 formed a holding company, Rodriquez SpA. With this, Rodriquez Cantieri Navali went public and listed their shares on the Milan Stock Exchange. The managing office was then established in Rome. In 1991 60% of Rodriquez SpA was purchased by the Genoa based Gruppo Cameli. This shipping company had been established over seventy years prior to this time and since 1970 had been diversifying. With this event the Rodriquez Cantieri Navali shipyards were reduced to four. The Rodriquez family retained the Baglietto yard in Varazze and the yard in Anzio was sold.

As presently organized there are four main companies within Rodriquez SpA:

- Rodriquez Cantieri Navali SpA is responsible for the operation of the yards in Messina, Pietra Ligure, Malta, and Naples. They also manage Rodriquez Engineering;
- Aliscafi SNAV SpA is responsible for all fast ferry operations;
- Alimar SNAV is responsible for car ferry operations; and
- Navigazione Alta Italia SpA is a company within the shipping sector, chartering dry cargo ships, coordinating oil transportation ships.

And to think that all this began with a little 70-passenger hydrofoil built to run across the Strait of Messina.

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