

VOLVOS AND IDEAL WINDLASSES: RUGGED, RELIABLE, AND WELL SUPPORTED

While my wife-to-be and I were still dating, she purchased what I would eventually come to revere as a venerable mechanical classic, a Volvo 240. And not just any Volvo 240, this was the final model year for this line, the Classic. It even had a number on the dashboard denoting it as 950 of 1,600 built that year. Some would say it represents the last of the best, most rugged, most reliable Volvos. I'm no Volvo aficionado so I can't speak to past or subsequent models; however, I've come to know this one very well, having undertaken a variety of maintenance tasks from timing belts and exhaust system replacement to transmission seal and crankcase ventilation service.

Long ago I purchased a factory service manual; actually it's a reprint from an outstanding company called Bentley Publishers (www.bentleypublishers.com). I've purchased one of these, if not the original factory version, for every car and truck I've ever owned, my only lament is they don't offer the same for boats or marine engines. Needless to say, the value of accurate information in the form of a well-written service manual can never be overestimated. Furthermore, while it's old, 18 years and counting and nearly 200,000 miles, I can purchase parts for my Classic 240 at any Volvo dealer or from a variety of aftermarket sources. The car is almost ridiculously easy to work on, easy to take apart, easy to put back together, and it's as close as a civilian can get to owning a tank. Both of my children learned to drive in this car, a testament in and of itself to the car's bulletproof qualities. My son seemed to revel in driving through especially deep, especially muddy puddles, and on at least one occasion buried the car up to its axles in a muddy field.

Although taking care of the family cars (there is a boat connection here,



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Top: Cliffe Raymond, Ideal's proprietor, turns another manufacturer's wildcat on an Ideal lathe. Not many businesses offer service like this anymore. Above: Most of the parts Ideal uses have remained unchanged for decades. These chain pipe covers are sublime in their old-world beauty.

hang on) is nothing new, anyone who has done it on a regular basis knows that there's a vast disparity between the designs of vehicle mechanical systems. Some are easy to work on and seem to be laid out with service in mind, while others are, well, let's just say they are the source of frustration, angst, seemingly unnecessary expense, and much colorful profanity.

While this is beginning to sound like an "ode to my Volvo," relax, it's not; my real intent is to point out the value of a product's service friendliness and support. No matter how good a gadget or appliance may look, no matter how impressive the claims or ads from manufacturers, no matter how many new products or versions of these products they may offer or release at every boat show, it all comes back to service, support, and continuity. Responsiveness to problems and

availability of replacement parts (technical support and ease of service, in other words) are often the most important arbiters of a product's quality and user friendliness.

A few years ago I encountered the inverse of the Volvo phenomenon. While working on a customer's windlass I was chagrined to discover that in spite of the fact that it was only 4 years old—young in boat years and younger still where windlasses are concerned—a key part was no longer available. When I spoke with an employee at the factory he offered to take my name and number so that if and when they received enough requests for the part, making it economical to machine it, they would contact me. I asked how

long that might take and was told there was no way to tell but it could be a year, and as such, I might be better off buying a new windlass. While I was disturbed by this episode, I wasn't especially surprised; I've encountered it before in the marine industry on several occasions.

Now That's Ideal

The unavailability of the windlass part made its mark on me. For that and other reasons I'm especially sensitive to both the ruggedness of windlasses—an essential piece of cruising gear if ever there was one—and the support from their manufacturers. Quite a few years ago I came across what I affectionately refer to as the Volvo 240 of windlasses, those made by the Ideal Windlass Company of East Greenwich, Rhode Island (www.idealwindlass.com). If you haven't heard of them, I'm not surprised,

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they are a small family business with an even smaller advertising budget. Their product, on the other hand, is big, both literally and figuratively. They make windlasses for everything from small sailboats to tugboats, many of which are custom. I've worked with the proprietors, Cliffe and Betsy Raymond, for years and have come to appreciate their no-nonsense, no-flash, no-hype approach toward making *and maintaining* windlasses large and small. I had the pleasure of visiting their facility last year. It's located in a nondescript, old brick building that you could easily pass if you weren't paying attention (I did). The grounds weren't manicured, the sign was in need of replacement, and the roof leaked (it's since been replaced). The office looked as if it hadn't been decorated since the '60s, but in some

ways that's comforting to us baby boomers. Cliffe is a military history buff and had a picture of George Patton next to his desk. The real gem of Ideal is the machine shop; there were windlasses and windlass parts everywhere, old and new, most of which were bronze. When I walked in Cliffe was machining a wildcat himself. I looked at it, and knowing Ideal products pretty well, was surprised that it was unfamiliar.

"A new model?" I asked.

"No," Cliffe responded. "Another manufacturer's, I'm repairing it for a customer."

OK, how many windlass manufacturers will do that, I wondered. In fact, Ideal only rarely releases new products. Primarily they stick to what they do and know best, building bulletproof windlasses, and equally as important, they support

them very well and it's what they have been doing since 1936. I've sent 35-year-old windlasses to Ideal to be fully rebuilt and never heard a word from them until the refit unit was unloaded off the delivery truck back at my shop. I asked Cliffe about some feature a competitor had introduced and he said, "I don't know, I don't follow what others are doing much, I just build and service our windlasses."

In some circles that might be deemed backward, but in this case I found it refreshing. Cliffe is a consummate professional who builds a topflight product, looking over his shoulder just isn't his style. In all the years I've dealt with Cliffe he's never said to me, "Sorry, that part's no longer available." These are the sweetest words I've never heard.

—Steve D'Antonio 





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