

# 27 COMMANDER FROM RAGS TO RICHES

The feature boat in this article is a “rags to riches Cinderella story” about a 27-foot Commander, and how it passed through the hands of several owners and an expert restoration shop before reaching its final glorious condition today. In the era of recycling plastic water bottles and milk containers, now plastic boats are also being recycled and this is a stunning example capable of living another lifetime.

Words by Paul Pletcher

The 27-foot fiberglass Commander model upon which our feature boat is based, was originally introduced very early into the Commander line-up in 1965, following the introduction of the first iconic 1964 38-foot Commander. It was strategically positioned to claim territory in the affordable family day cruiser market, featuring overnight capability and a lot of utility for a variety of boating styles. This was the time when Chris-Craft designers, engineers, production facilities, and top management were all gearing up to unleash a massive impact on the fiberglass boating world. If you’ve ever seen a copy of the internal Chris-Craft marketing and production plan for 1966, you will be stunned at the huge number of wood and fiberglass models listed, projections for new models, plans for model-year upgrades to various boats, some being phased out, and projections for the future. This 27-foot model was quickly followed by additional Commanders in 28, 30, 31, 35, 36, 41, 42, 45, 47, 55, and 60-foot lengths. The 27 remained in production for five years and Chris-Craft sold an amazing 535 of the hardtop

Commander models and another 195 of the Sports Express models, both sharing the same identical wetted hull with a variety of single and twin small block power options.

While the first 1964 38 Commander was a luxurious and expensive big water cruiser capable of withstanding three times the stresses of running at wide open throttle in six-foot seas, the 1965 27 was intended as a small affordable family day cruiser for smaller lakes and rivers. Included in the production numbers is an un-determined small number of open Sportsman style boats within the 1965 through 1969-time frame. The open “Sportsman” 27 Commander is so rare it’s not even mentioned in the great Mariners’ Museum book, *Chris-Craft, The Essential Guide*, by Jerry Conrad. It was essentially a special request “cabin delete option” to turn the hardtop Sports Express into a large open runabout. We have obtained some original Chris-Craft literature showing the open 27, and over the years we’ve seen a few of these coming up for sale, but they are extremely rare.



CCABC...There is no better group of technical/historical/owner/experts, and no better protection for the preservation of the Chris-Craft heritage.



From a size viewpoint, the 27 Commander fits into the early fiberglass line-up after the 19 and 23-foot Commanders and the 25-foot twin-engine Lancer that could have easily been sold as a Commander with a stroke of a pen. Those boats were built by the Corsair Sport Boat Division and they all had a deep-vee 24-degree deadrise inspired by the offshore racing (two-time World Champion) Jim Wynne and Walt Walters hulls and they were introduced a year after the 27 was already on the market. The hull on the 27 is more of a "big runabout style" bottom profile, making it fast and efficient on reasonably flat water but not intended for a heavy chop and bigger swells. Chris-Craft fiberglass boats of this era were all well-built and featured the same premium gelcoat, resin, polyester, and fiberglass lay-up construction techniques used on the entire Commander series.

Before we get into the details of our feature boat, I want to qualify my position on customization of Chris-Craft boats. In short, I generally don't like to see it because "originality is king." I know our club members represent the best-informed group of Chris-Craft enthusiasts in the world, and they own some of the most rare and expensive examples in the world. There is no better group of technical/historical/owner/experts, and no better protection for the preservation of the Chris-Craft heritage. Having qualified my position, I acknowledge there are some times when a custom upgrade does make sense, and it is most often acceptable on heavily worn fiberglass boats. I have seen some stunning examples of

fiberglass hulls being "brought back from the dead," including the larger Commander series, one outstanding aluminum Roamer, and numerous smaller boats. Now we can add this little 27 to the list.

For anyone contemplating something like this, beware; "the guy who does the customization is often the one who likes his work the best," and in some cases nobody else does.

On the fiberglass side, there are many durable bare hulls available, often acquired in a condition where the hull outlived one or two mechanical packages and it's essentially the only thing left that makes any sense to work with. Most of these have experienced mechanical and heavy wear issues, and then they end up being hauled out and set aside, more likely to be destroyed than to ever float again. Rather than see a hull with good structural integrity burned or crushed and put into the landfill, it's heartening to see them being rescued "if" the refurbishment is done with the proper respect for the boat. The ultimate life span of the Chris-Craft fiberglass hull has yet to be determined, because boats built in the 1960's are still in service with many showing virtually no deterioration of the basic polyester resin and fiberglass construction. As a result, these boats represent a solid foundation for a restoration/up-grade project. >>





Several years ago, a friend insisted on giving me a “free” 23 Lancer inboard (which I purchased for ten bucks for paperwork purposes); the hull had survived offshore salt water abuse off the coast of Maryland but the motor, transmission, interior and all other equipment didn’t survive. It was a free gutted hull that immediately cost me \$2,000 for a pre-owned 4-wheel trailer and the rest was, well, “expensive.” Because it was essentially a bare hull, it was a perfect candidate for a repowering with a custom interior with mahogany trim. Beware of the “free boat,” these recycling projects can be fun but they should only be approached with a well-funded budget and commitment to doing it right. There is no point in spending that kind of time and money on a project that ends up looking like it was done by a do-it-yourselfer.

Back to our 27-foot feature boat; I think everyone who sees it will agree it’s just beautiful and it shows no negative downsides for having gone through the experience. The design decisions were thoughtfully made, and the fit, finish, and overall craftsmanship are all excellent. The good news for the purists in our group is the fact that the boat was in poor condition when the conversion project began, the wood floors were rotted, and it had no motor or transmission, and it was well on the way to being sent to the landfill.

This 27 Commander was previously owned by a gentleman by the name of Frank Syoen. Frank admired the 30-foot Commander Sportsman which has a beautiful and serious deep-vee offshore hull, representing the only hull designed for Chris-Craft by famous naval architect, C. Ray Hunt, of which only 46 examples were ever built. Frank wanted one of those 30-footers but could not find one and eventually decided to modify his 27 Commander to resemble one. Interestingly, The Essential Guide does not list the 30 as a Commander, but we have Chris-Craft literature showing it being sold as a Commander, so this can be argued later. In any case, the 1976 30-foot Sportsman represents one of the nicest boats produced by Chris-Craft, featured in previous *Brass Bell* publications, and it’s certainly a fitting example to emulate.

Frank removed the hard top and totally gutted the cabin, installed a mahogany overlay at the transom, added a single 454 cubic inch displacement V8 and Borg Warner 72c Velvet Drive transmission, and removed the awkward looking metal side windshield frames in favor of an expertly crafted teak





## The workmanship and general impression of the whole boat looks like a piece of Danish modern furniture.

replacement. The boat was operational and, on the water, when Frank eventually found a 30 Tournament Commander and decided to sell the 27.

Then along came another gentleman and present owner, Kristian Nielsen; Kristian is a well-schooled Chicago-based product designer with a Danish heritage, and he is an avid Chris-Craft fan. Kristian liked the work Frank had done on the boat, and acquired it with the intent of making some additional improvements. The day after Kristian paid \$2600 to have the boat shipped from Detroit to Chicago, a thunderstorm damaged it lightly and it was sent to RCS Yacht Refinishers known for their high-end paintwork. Ryan Smith, owner of RCS, took one look at the boat and said it needed a color change away from the present "Sea Foam Green" and recommended the dark Flag Blue hull, with a white bottom with red and white boot stripe. Kristian agreed, and said "from that point we just kept going."

One of the first things one notices about the finished boat is the fact that everything just looks right. People frequently ask about it, thinking it is some

rare model of Chris-Craft they didn't know about, or maybe a new production model, and some confuse it with a 30-foot Hunt design because of the similar curvature of the windshield frame. The finely crafted steam bent teak is beautifully contoured into the lines of the boat. The metal front windshield that remained when Kristian acquired the boat was one of the first things he decided to change, by completing the conversion all in teak. The workmanship and general impression of the whole boat looks like a piece of Danish modern furniture.

Kristian and his wife, Jackie, get a lot of lookers; "we can't go anywhere without having people stopping to ask about it, it's a kick, we can be docked near some 100-foot boats or offshore racers with four big outboard motors, but people are over looking at our boat."

The Nielsen's use the boat for restaurant hopping and as a day cruising picnic boat, departing from the prestigious Belmont Harbor, located in the heart of the Lincoln Park, Chicago, and then cruising 4 miles to the "play pen," Navy Pier, sea walls, to drop a hook and spend the afternoon, and then cruise back. "Our longest trip was the entire length of the Detroit River, from Grosse Point to a Lake Erie destination in Ohio." The boat is propped to run 25 knots at a relaxed 3900 rpm.

This durable product from Chris-Craft has gone through a process of prior consumption, degradation, dormancy, restoration, sale/acquisition, >>



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resulting in a very attractive boat that can now serve for another lifetime. Customizations and major restorations like this are not without risk, because lots of money and time can be expended and positive results are not guaranteed. This project, however, resulted in a boat I am sure Chris-Craft would have loved to sell. It is beautifully done and it retains the classic look of the era. It should serve as an example to follow for future derelict rescue projects, because it respects the Chris-Craft marque, used an effective combination of good design sense, responsible restraint, exquisite craftsmanship and final finish. Thank you, Kristian and Jackie, for sharing your special boat with the Chris-Craft Antique Boat Club. 🇺🇸



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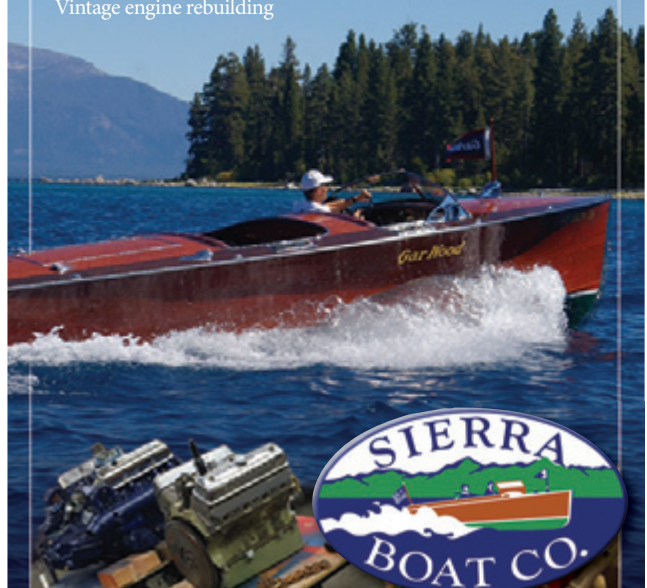


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