Extreme Brightwork Part II

Days 7-10: Up to now, it's been all preparation, which is easily 90% of the job. Because this piece will be exposed to a lot of activity in the cockpit, I chose to finish it with Sikkens Cetol® instead of regular varnish. Cetol is softer than regular varnish, so it's less likely to chip. I've also found its high UV resistance makes it well-suited to horizontal surfaces, such as handrails and coamings. I still use regular varnish on vertical surfaces, such as Righting Moment's companionway stiles and dropboards, but it's mostly to prove I can do it.

Application, whether Cetol or regular varnish, is a matter of following the instructions on the can. Whether to use foam or a high-end bristle brush is a matter of heated debate amongst the pros. Irregular surfaces are best done with a brush, but a foam brush is fine for regular surfaces, especially for the thicker varnishes, such as Cetol, because it gives you more control over the thickness of the coating.

For Cetol, I go with the four-coat option, where you rub the finish down with a Nylon pad between coats to improve adhesion. After rubbing down, I clean with a little thinner and a tack cloth. The same process applies to regular varnish, but you'll need up to eight coats, thinning the earlier coats as directed, to achieve an equivalent level of UV protection.

The technique for applying either Cetol or regular varnish (I'll use the generic "varnish" here) is to apply a layer of consistent thickness. I use the "lay it on, lay it off" technique I learned painting the radio shack in the Coast Guard. Lay it on one with or two strokes across the grain and then lay it off by slowly drawing (not brushing back and forth) the varnish with the grain toward the "new (dry) work," alternating sides of the brush and then finishing off into the "old (wet) work." This technique avoids pulls (varnish too thin), laps (varnish overlapping between the new and old work), or "holidays" (no varnish). When working outside, I varnish early in the morning so I can look across the surface in low-angle light to check for such defects. It also tends to be less breezy in the morning, so there's less dust about, too. When working in my basement, I shine a hand-held light across the surface to check for defects.

Days 11-12 (Optional): If you stop with the basic Cetol, you'll have a nice satin surface, but if you want a reflective, more varnish-like, surface, apply two coats of Cetol Gloss, again rubbing with a Nylon pad between coats. Here's the piece in its final form, with it in its original state for comparison.

I've found that properly applied Cetol or varnish will last many seasons. For maintenance, the key is prevention during the season. I carry a jar of Cetol aboard to touch-up any dings, including those on varnished pieces, so water doesn't get into the wood. Annual maintenance for either Cetol or varnish is rubbing with the Nylon pad and one or two coats, depending on the condition of the finish. Eventually, however, the oil in the teak, water getting in through fittings, seams, or dings, and the sun will take their toll, at which time it's best to strip the finish and start over.

If you want a good book on this subject, I recommend Rebecca J. Wittman's Brightwork: The Art of Finishing Wood (International Marine Publishing, 1990, ISBN 0-87742-984-7). Technical matters aside, Ms. Wittman shares my take that finishing brightwork is an art form and, like others that require focus and attention to detail, is good therapy.