

BRITISH WOMEN PILOTS' ASSOCIATION LTD



Award citation for Annabel Cook – Chairwoman's Challenge winner 2012

Just as an RAF navigator doesn't just only do navigation, neither did Annabel to a fair extent, but that's very far from denigrating her role...

The competition was the "Round Britain Rally", which is run by the British Microlight Aircraft Association (BMAA), and is essentially a 3-day orienteering competition around the UK in microlight aeroplanes. Competitors were given a list of 70 waypoints and were free to choose their own routes, selection of points, and strategy. Each waypoint carried 100 points; then you add up the score, adjust for any penalties, multiply by 100, and divide by the aeroplane's Vne in mph in order to get each aircraft's final score.

It is extremely tough, and very prestigious. Annabel and I won the "flexwing" and "flexwing gold" classes. This is to say that without using GPS we got a higher score than any other crew in this aircraft class, ie flexwings (we were beaten by two three-axis aeroplanes who didn't use GPS, and a few who did). This year may have been the toughest year ever by all accounts – of 25 entrants, 14 started and only 11 finished, including us.

Had the weather been good, then it might be fair to say that I could have done it on my own and Annabel would have been to some extent a passenger. However, as we competed routinely in moderate to severe turbulence, marginal VFR conditions, and for part of the competition were forced to operate down to about 600 ft agl in rain for prolonged periods, teamwork and pooling of our human resources became paramount. On numerous occasions having the two of us there allowed us to locate waypoints correctly, handle the aeroplane on the ground, and fine tune our navigation. Frankly, I'd have struggled to do it at all solo, in these conditions. All navigation was map, compass and stopwatch, and Annabel sat in the rear seat, using maps strapped between my shoulders, whilst also photographing the waypoints.

We'd planned and trained for this over a fair period of time - allowing us to build up a team that we hoped could achieve at the standard we did. Doubtless other teams (and a couple of single occupant aircraft), had also trained hard, but we clearly got it right, since we scored more than double what any other flexwing achieved.

In our training and the actual event we went through lost/recovery procedures several times. This was fairly inevitable in a 50 knot aeroplane flying in unpredictable 30+ knot winds! We did two diversions, had two comms failures (battery powered intercoms were not designed for seven hours flying per day), and saw some truly awful weather. For example, one refuelling stop required Annabel to create an instant ad-hoc handling team of three people just to keep the aeroplane still whilst I re-fuelled it; then we agreed our route onwards. The point I hope I'm making here is that we functioned as a real team, in very arduous flying conditions which led to less than half the entrants finishing the event, and we got it all consistently right.

Dr Guy Gratton