

The NZ Open Heli Champs

Contributed by Rachael Butler

On 10th April, the 6th annual NZ Open Helicopter Championship was held at Whitianga Airfield in conjunction with the Whitianga Festival of Speed. The event is run by Roy Crane of North Shore Helicopter Training along with an organising committee that this year included Tony Johnson (a past manager for the British team at the World Helicopter Championships and also an organiser for the British Helicopter Championship events). Tony now resides in NZ and was a key to the event's success this year, through writing new rules and scoring templates and managing the event on the day. Rachael Butler, an Instructor with Ardmore Helicopters participated in the event and contributed this report from a competitor's viewpoint.

PERHAPS THE first thing to make clear to readers and potential new participants is that the Heli Champs is not a competition for New Zealand's top pilots (although we would all like to think we were). People who are pre-PPLs right through to pilots with several thousand hours enter and although you get some very competitive teams, mostly it's just a fun day out for all.

This year 12 teams from around the North Island entered with aircraft that included a couple of H300s, H500, R22s, a handful of R44s, a couple of Jet Rangers and two home built Safaris. The day started with an 8am formation flight around Whitianga led by, of all things, a plane (Beaver) and the Auckland Rescue helicopter. From the view we had at the back of the 'formation' it was lucky points weren't being awarded for this flight. The formation flight was followed by a pilot briefing where all pilots and their navigators/co-pilots huddled around the Master Clock setting their watches to the second. It was important that all watches were exactly right because there were harsh penalties for every second you were either early or late for each event.

Navigation Under Pressure

At 9.05 the first team was due at the Navigation exercise Preparation Line but unfortunately for them (and fortunately for us - recall I said that some teams were competitive) they were late. On this exercise we were handed an envelope precisely five minutes before our allocated takeoff time. The envelope contained a section of a 1:250,000 chart and a list of tasks to complete within a certain time. Timing was everything. For example if you were more than three minutes late back to the finish line you lost all your points for the exercise. The tasks included finding several grid references and answering questions

at each grid reference. For example, what type of business is located at grid reference xxx or what is the colour of the house at grid reference xxx. Although this may



Opening bottles with an opener attached to the skid proved near to impossible for anyone who hadn't already been practising at home.



Precision Flying required that one chain (attached to the skids) remained off the ground and the other stayed on the ground, while traversing a marked course.

sound easy, trust me when I say that when you have only five minutes to read the instructions, have a minor 'domestic' with your pilot/co-pilot regarding how to plot a grid reference and then have to find them all whilst at the same time 'discussing' the accuracy of the flying versus the course plotting, the exercise isn't as easy as it first appears. By the way, GPS units were not allowed.

One of the points to find on the NavEx was Matarangi airfield where we picked up three bags of rice and a bowling skittle

attached to a rope. Once back at Whitianga we had to drop the rice bombs into barrels while maintaining forward flight and at a height no lower than 15metres (this is where the larger helicopters were at a disadvantage because the larger downwash blew the rice bombs away - well, that was my excuse for missing the barrels and I'm sticking to it!). The reason for the bowling skittle? - The final part of the Navex involved lowering the skittle into a so called 'Dog House' - a 30cm square hole. Once again heavy penalties were incurred if you missed the dog house or let the skittle touch the sides of the box.

The Bottle Opener

While teams compared notes about the Nav exercise and whether the business at a given grid reference was a sewage treatment plant or dairy farm, the next event (which was optional) involved opening bottles of beer with a bottle opener attached to the skid. This event takes some real precision flying and a steady hand, which is not that easy when you have the TV cameras filming you. While this was going on we enjoyed a lunch of ham and chicken sandwiches, as well as soup and drinks that were kindly put on by Bill Beard of Avsure.

Precision Flying

The next event was Precision Flying. This involved two chains being attached to the skids - one 2m long and the other 3m long. The objective was to fly around a course (comprised of a square with a 1 metre corridor) keeping the long chain within the corridor and in contact with the ground, but ensuring the short chain remained off the ground. While doing this we also had to make a couple of 360 degree turns, one clockwise and the other anti clockwise (get the directions wrong and you lost points). This was a timed event and once again harsh penalties were incurred if you were either too fast

or too slow. As with the other events there appeared to be two schools of thought on how to approach it. One was "who cares if it looks pretty, lets just get to the finish line on time so we don't get time penalties" so these guys flew the course strictly to time, and if the long chain got anywhere near the ground then that was just a bonus. The other school of thought was "let's go for accuracy".

Here's a tip for any of you thinking about competing next year - you lose more points in time penalties than anything else, so the teams that flew accurately by keeping the long chain in contact with the ground within the 1m corridor and did their 360 turns in the right direction didn't get many points because they all took too long. Next year I'm not going to care quite so much about what the long and short chains are doing and whether my turns are clockwise, anticlockwise or in fact done at all; I'm switching to the "who cares if it looks pretty, lets just get to the finish line on time" group.

The Slalom

The third compulsory event was the Slalom. Once again we were glad we weren't the first team to go as it gave us a chance to get some tips from the first teams through the course. This event involved lifting a bucket of water (attached to the co-pilot) and manoeuvring it through, around and into a series of obstacles. The goal was to pass the bucket through all the obstacles without knocking any of them over and placing it onto a bullseye painted on a table. The tricky part about this event is that the pilot can't see where the bucket is in relation to the obstacles and is solely reliant on the co-pilot telling him/her where to position the helicopter. The team with the least time penalties, the most obstacles still

standing and the most water left in the bucket won.

The fourth and final event was the Fender. This involved a boat fender attached to a rope (once again attached to the co-pilot whose arms were getting a bit tired by this stage). The rope had three marks on it and the goal was to place the fender into one barrel, the co-pilot then extended rope to the next mark while instructing the pilot on how much to climb before re-positioning to place the fender into the next barrel etc. This event was also a good communication test as, just like the Slalom, the fender was not visible from the pilot's side.

The winners

While the points were being tallied we all enjoyed refreshments and started scheming on how we could win next year. Congratulations to the overall event winner who was Alan Coubray and Glen Mulcahy flying a Safari. Second place went to Mike Southward and Rachel Erikson flying a R22 and third were John Carter and Russell Pemberton in a R44. Mike Southward also took out the bottle opening competition with a NZ record of 8 bottles in 5 minutes. (Mike kindly supplied a lot of the equipment for the event and quite possibly acquired some useful practice in using it first!). Our Ardmore Helicopters teams claimed fifth, sixth and seventh places.

The Heli Champs is a great event and I

thoroughly recommend it. It is a chance to meet pilots from around the country and do things that you wouldn't normally get to do. A big thank you to Roy Crane, Tony Johnson, Hamish Macleod and Simon Tompkins for organising and running the event. Ardmore Helicopters will definitely be back next year.



Passing through an obstacle on the slalom event. The bucket of water is 'steered' by the co-pilot.



Buckets also had to be passed through this gate. Points are deducted for lost time and spilled water.



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