



ARMED FORCES RACE CHALLENGE 2014

With RAF personnel away on deployments, Logistical problems for the Navy and some associate members doing an endurance race at Snetterton, the



Dom Benfell's Lotus

grid at Oulton Park was always going to be a quieter event. The plan had been to bolster the grid with competitors from the CNC Heads Sports/Saloon Championship (Who were initially over-subscribed). Returning for the first time this year, Sqn Ldr Darren Howe, Sgt Dom Benfell (RAF) and Trevor Hancock (RAFMSA), were using this session as a warm up for the Birkett 6 hour relay later in

the month.

With an early start on the Saturday morning, most competitors decided that arriving Friday would allow for an easy set-up, with a bit of socializing, before a restful night sleep. Unfortunately the weather had other ideas. Blowing a gale and poring with rain it was anything but quiet. Saturday morning the weather was wet, but the wind had died down and the rain reduced to a light drizzle. Those that chose to travel through the night had some horrendous road conditions to contend with. Luckily the forecast for Saturday was for the weather to steadily improvement throughout the day.

With it still raining the competitors headed to the assembly area. For the practice session the track was still wet but drying. Also the plan for the reserve drivers to join never materialized, as it would appear that their grid had reduced to a size that allowed all drivers to compete in the proper races.



Series leader Adam Twine during practice

Released from the assembly the first few laps were very tentative until the level of grip had been assessed. Chris Camp (BAMA) managed to beat the rush and was first out on track, and for the most part somehow stayed



Darren Howe on his way to pole

there, finally claiming 4th, his best grid position yet in the AFRC. Series leader SAC Adam Twine (RAF) was looking to put in a steady performance, one to maintain the series lead as his main rival Billy Fletcher was away at Snetterton, the other to complete two races and loose his novice cross. Cpl Daz Smee (Army) in his Honda Integra was trying hard to catch Darren Howe's Golf, but despite an electrical fault disabling his

lights; Darren was just too quick, taking pole by 2.044 seconds, followed by Daz in second and Trevor Hancock in the Peugeot 206 GTI third. Cpl Steward Ross-Cumming (Army) was having problems getting the Focus RS's power down in the slippery conditions.



The RS proves to be a handful in the wet

Back in the paddock Darren Howe traced the electrical fault to a burnt out switch which was by-passed. Worryingly for Stewart, the RS seemed to be requiring more coolant than expected. Dom Benfell was complaining that the Lotus was like trying to drive on ice, with massive understeer. Luckily for Dom, Silverstone tyre suppliers were there to relieve him of a few hundred pounds in exchange for a nice new set of Falken tyres which would see the Lotus back to full health. By midday the sun was out and the track drying nicely.

Oulton Park has a strange set-up where you have to do a whole lap from the assembly area to the grid, then do a warm up lap followed by the start, so when someone took a flying start too early it did take everyone by surprise. Luckily the driver soon realised, what had happened, backed off the speed and allowed everyone else to catch up. Darren Howe was in a strange position; this was his first pole-position, so there were no other cars in front of him.

Not the best start for Darren, as the Honda Integra of Daz got a flyer and was clear by the first corner. The now well handling Lotus of Dom got a good start and he was soon in a battle with Chris in the Lexus. Positions ebbed and flowed and while trying to get back past Dom going through Old Hall corner Chris put a wheel (or two) on the grass, pirouetted and gently kissed the tyre wall on the other side of the track. Thinking that he had just got away with it, he



Not the best line through Old Hall

looked up to see that the RAFMSA photographers had been there to capture it in its full glory. Unfortunately for Stewart, on lap 4 something let go in RS engine and the coolant system ended up spewing out, his race weekend was run. Darren was trying hard to catch Daz, but after a few laps the Golf was making some alarming noise and having backed off to assess what was happening, it was too late now to try to attack and so he finished 2nd, he had managed the fastest lap time though.

Race two was the last of the day. Having checked the Lexus, the only damage being to Chris's pride and a couple of tie-wraps holding on the front bumper, all but Stewart formed for race two. Darren managed a far better start and kept with the mighty Honda until the VTEC kicked in and then all he could do was follow.



Daz Smeed on his way to a double win

It wasn't to be Chris's weekend, just when he thought that he had got the better of Dom in the Lotus the belt driving the power steering pump let go, and was last seen flying out the bonnet vent at Mach 10.

As the belt also drove the supercharger Chris would now have been quicker lapping on a Segway, so he called it a day. Again Daz took the win ahead of Darren. Trevor had managed a solid days racing taking third in both races, but proved to himself that he wasn't yet recovered enough to drive in an endurance race like the Birkett 6 hour Relay.



Trevor in full flow through Old Hall

So had it been worthwhile, yes.

Even though there was a small grid, with many of the faster competitors missing, it meant some of the others could see what it was like to be a front runner. Two pole starts for Darren, a double win for Daz and the required number of finishes for Adam to be able to remove his novice 'Biffer' cross. At the time of writing the final results are yet to be confirmed, but it's a close call between Adam and Daz as to who will win the inaugural Armed Forces Race Challenge.

Roll on 2015

Pictures by Nick and Mark Rogers

**** Stop Press ****

The provisional results have just been posted on The RAFMSA Forum and it would appear (Subject to confirmation) that after his extraordinary drives at Oulton Park and taking into account dropped scores, Daz Smee has overhauled both Billy and Adam and has taken the overall lead of the AFRC for 2014.