

Wings Around Britain

She didn't have to cross the Antarctic or the Pacific, but Polly Vacher says her latest record was her most challenging yet. By **Liz Moscrop** Photos by **Ian Lowe & Phil Stevens**

“I'm standing in the middle of the runway; aim for me!” yelled the controller through the driving rain at Inch airfield near Aberdeen. “Aim for the yellow jacket, I will get out of the way.” Although not all of Polly Vacher's landings were quite so dramatic, she says the record she set during her 'Wings around Britain' flight, was the most daunting yet.

Over two months, she landed at all the airfields in the UK Jeppesen VFR Manual to raise awareness of the charity Flying Scholarships for the Disabled (FSD). This meant 221 airfields, 19,000 nautical miles over 158 hours and 163 passengers, 96 of whom were disabled. It took 30 volunteers to support the effort. It did not help that this summer was the wettest on record, which meant Polly often visited up to nine airfields a day in order to meet the deadline. The longest flight was two and a half hours – frequently she took off and landed again almost immediately, with the average flight being just 35 minutes. And there were receptions at most

places, as well as the logistics of getting passengers in and out of the aircraft, invariably in the rain.

Because of the weather, Polly frequently had to divert and 'plan on the hoof,' which made the whole venture exhausting. She would finish each day by writing her diary and tallying up the money raised by sales of her book, often not hitting the pillow until 1am, with a 6am start the following day. Unsurprisingly she caught a heavy cold by the last week.

Why do it?

So what makes this remarkable woman go to the lengths she does for FSD? The scheme was set up to help disabled people rebuild their confidence by learning to fly. Each student completes a six-week residential course of training, which includes ground school, and up to 40 hours of dual and solo flying in the USA and South Africa. Says Polly: “It is so rewarding to be involved. I find the scholars' courage humbling and inspirational.”

This inspiration has led to impressive achievements. She was the first woman to fly solo over the North Pole in a single engine aircraft; the first woman to fly solo in Antarctica in an SEP; and the first person to fly solo around the world landing on all seven continents.

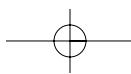
Throughout her online diary she tells how she is moved by the people she encounters: “I flew two young people with really bad cerebral palsy. The first one was David Brownlow, who cannot speak and can hardly move himself, but he and his parents, Pete and Helen had waited patiently at Deenethorpe in the cold and the wind. Pete lifted David into GN and we propped him up and strapped him in. He was giggling and laughing.” Later that day she picked up two more people. “Maurice Mann, a delightful 84 year old ex Mosquito pilot came with us. Maurice is partially blind and had to be helped into the aircraft, but he was smiling and laughing, as was Timmy (his grandson) although Timmy couldn't speak... As we approached Sywell the cloud base descended.

Top: Woodford welcome – from left, airfield manager David Higginbottom, Irene Falla, who lost both legs in an ETA bombing in Madrid, Polly Vacher, Sue Hanish, who lost a leg in the IRA bombing of Victoria Station, and Bob Meek, airfield ground support unit
Below: typical weather at Compton Abbas



Set free

Sue Hanisch became disabled in 1991 after the Victoria Station bombing. A former occupational therapist, she explains: “After the trauma of the event I did not know how to make the music start playing. I had an expectation that it should have been easier for me because of my job.” She stopped working. Her marriage broke down and she had a rotten few years trying to make sense of everything that had happened. The scholarship was a life changer. “The fact that someone donated £8,000 and believed in me when I didn't believe in myself – I was overwhelmed by that. After I got my PPL I was soaring above the desert on my own feeling completely set free and exhilarated. I felt cheek to cheek with God and felt that whatever has happened this is as good as it gets.” She subsequently took her proud father flying when he was terminally ill, and has scaled Mount Kilimanjaro. Today she works as a counsellor supporting people through recovery from post-traumatic stress disorders and addictions. She is also involved in the Forgiveness Project, a venture established to spark discussions on forgiveness.





'We have a storm overhead,' the controller said, and I had to do a low level circuit to get in. Timmy's Mum arrived at the same time. 'We have driven like crazy to get here,' she laughed, soaking wet with bedraggled hair. Her laugh was infectious and her wonderfully vibrant and sunny personality as she supported 'Grandad' and her severely disabled son was just so uplifting. How can I ever grumble about my silly cold? How can I grumble about anything when someone with seemingly so many problems can be so cheerful and positive?"

Gatwick and Heathrow

There were other several priceless experiences on the trip – including landing at two of London's major airports. Says Polly: "Heathrow and Gatwick made me proud to be British. I flew in late at night with Mandy Pantall, my husband and Philip Whiteman (editor of *Flyer* magazine) as guests. We were offered a 2220Z (11.20pm) slot for Gatwick and 2305Z for Heathrow (five past midnight)." Her diary details the chord her flight struck with the aviation community: "It was very exciting. 'Monarch (can't remember the number) – you will be delayed – there is a charity flight light aircraft,' the controller said. 'What's the charity?' the pilot said. 'Flying Scholarships for the Disabled,' I said as quickly as possible, whilst negotiating the ILS. We landed on this enormous runway and a surge of excitement filled the whole cockpit. As I took off the Monarch pilot said 'Good luck for the rest of them.'"

They were passed to Heathrow and vectored onto runway 09L. Polly says: "I decided to savour the moment and instead of flying the ILS at 130 kts as at Gatwick where they were still very busy, I throttled back to 100 kts and put one stage of flap down and just enjoyed every moment... 'I shall never see anything like that again in my life,' exclaimed Mandy.

Above: Polly with Hurricane and Spitfire of the Battle of Britain Memorial Flight
Right: to the ends of the earth - Polly on the apron on the island of Scatsa



Mandy is such an enthusiast. She is the epitome of what FSD is about. She injured her spinal cord in a riding accident and although she can walk short distances with crutches, she is in constant pain. What an example. Her courage is very humbling."

Red Arrows, Eurofighter and BBMF

Polly also did some formation flying with the Battle of Britain Memorial Flight (BBMF), the Eurofighter and the Red Arrows. On 6th July she flew with the BBMF from Coningsby to Wickenby alongside a Hurricane and Spitfire. The following day she took a photographer with her and had to be at a certain point at exactly 0843 to formate with the Red Arrows. Once airborne she couldn't see the team. She writes: "My heart began to beat faster. Would I be able to be in the right place at the right time? 'GN are you holding North of Wickenby?'

the controller asked. 'Affirm,' I replied. Then I heard Red 1 'G-FRGN do you read?' 'Affirm – shall I do another orbit?' 'Negative – start your run in now – we have you sighted.' My heart missed a beat. 'They are coming up on your right,' Phil shouted and before I knew it there they all were slightly below and alongside me. It was so, so exciting...I was shivering with excitement as I came in to land. I felt the adrenaline drain away and I couldn't stop shaking. I couldn't believe that I had actually flown with the Reds."

Although WAB was designed to raise awareness rather than funds for FSD, several people and organisations made donations, including two new scholarships from Oasis Hong Kong Airlines. For more information email: info@toreachforthesky.org.uk, telephone: 0870 8001942. Website: www.toreachforthesky.org.uk. Address: Sue Whitby, FSD, Douglas Bader House, Horcott Hill, Fairford, Glos GL7 4RB ■

Getting Martine back again

Martine Wright lost her legs in the 7/7 tube bombings and spent 10 months in hospital learning to walk again. She explains what happened when she received her scholarship: "I was still in treatment and only just got out of hospital then suddenly I was going to South Africa." Martine describes what FSD has meant to her. "Although it is about flying, it's also about something deeper – giving something back to someone who has been through a massively traumatic experience. It made me realise what had happened wasn't the end of the world. People didn't survive the attack. I now grasp every opportunity I can to achieve whatever I can." She adds: "I got so much from that trip – more than flying. I realised I was still Martine Wright and I could deliver things." Today she has decided to change careers and will do something to help others who have had similar experiences. She is about to get married and will be jumping out of a plane in early September to raise funds for FSD. If you'd like to sponsor her, the URL is www.toreachforthesky.org.uk and you can donate directly online.

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