

AA goes 'beyond the call of duty'

Cumbria evokes images of soaring mountains, peaceful lakes and the quintessentially English image of sheep grazing lazily on hill pastures. But for the emergency responders, including the AA's Special Operations Response Team (AA SORT), Cumbria last November was very different. The unprecedented rainfall, in an area already saturated, wrought havoc in the towns, villages and valleys across the county.

The AA deployed its specialist team on 18 November, in response to the weather warnings, so was in place ready for the full force of the weather and its effects on the following morning. The team uses Land Rovers with specialist recovery equipment, crewed by certified Swiftwater Rescue Technicians trained to undertake vehicle recovery in flood zones.



A592 Pooley Bridge to Glenridding, by Ullswater.

The team was based initially in Kendal where, thanks to the hospitality of the Premier Inn, they set up a temporary control centre. Under direction from Police Silver Command, two vehicles were dispatched from Ambleside along the A591 to Grasmere and A593 to Skelwith Bridge to identify and assist motorists who were stranded between floods. Two further vehicles spent the day dealing with stranded motorists in the Ullswater and Windermere areas.



A592 Pooley Bridge to Glenridding.

Vehicle removal

Over the next couple of days, as the flood waters rose then receded, the team moved a unit to Cockermouth and assisted with removing some of the vehicles which had flooded and floated in the High Street, including one which had ended up through the window of Lloyds TSB. One of the AA SORT technicians, Andy Smith from Basingstoke, Hampshire, remarked, "Personally, I'd not experienced a live flood zone like that before, but the training we'd been given really came into its own. It was hard seeing people whose homes and livelihoods had been so utterly destroyed, but rewarding to be able to help them in some small way."

The AA team is equipped to deal specifically with vehicle recovery in floods and snow. John Seymour, the AA's Special Operations Manager, commented, "What this team enables us to do is to combine the AA's expertise in dealing with vehicles with a professional and competent ability to operate in a flood zone. That enabled us to keep operating in Cumbria when many other local and national vehicle recovery services had to withdraw."

Snow response

No sooner had the floods in Cumbria dissipated than the snow began to fall across the UK and the nation ground almost to a halt. Seymour adds, "The beauty of the SORT team is that we can deploy to wherever we are needed, whether it's floods, or snow, or the mud that often accompanies summer shows and festivals when the traditional rain arrives."

The team saw action during December and January as far north as Scotland, into Wales, and across England. In north London, one crew was involved in an impromptu rescue of a different kind. An elderly lady fell on the ice and, it later turned out, had broken her leg in two places. The emergency services were having great difficulty in moving around, and it took the ambulance nearly an hour to reach her. The two AA patrols, Steve Dickinson and Richard Payne, stayed with her and lay one each side of her to keep her warm, while keeping her calm and alert. A family member wrote to the AA, "I hate to think what may have happened if Steve and Richard hadn't been there, and I can't thank you all enough from the bottom of my heart for your care and concern. Far beyond the call of duty."

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