

AA ACTION HEROES

Special Operations Response Team: the name could have come straight from the pages of a spy novel, but it reflects civilian endeavour... and a dynamic addition to the AA's increasing repertoire

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CLAD IN A LURIDLY COLOURED DRY SUIT, STEEL TOE-CAP BOOTS, life jacket, diving gloves and a yellow helmet, this is no ordinary AA Patrol. Even his vehicle is singularly different. The bright yellow Land Rover 110 Defender rolls on its heavily lugged Goodyears as we swing out of the car park and away from the AA's operational headquarters at Oldbury in the West Midlands. We're on a shout and the HTC mobile screen scrolls into action with details of the emergency and route guidance.

when it comes to rescuing motorists, but modern employment law and increasingly extreme weather mean the AA requires better equipment and training to recover vehicles after storms, floods and snow. Staffed by volunteers from within, AA SORT can muster 85 members, including five women, all trained in RoSPA-certified 4x4 off-road driving, including winching, and by Rescue 3 (UK) as Swiftwater Rescue Technicians. A third of the volunteers are usually office based, with the balance being roadside Patrols.

John Brookes has worked for the AA for 14 years. By day he's a 48-year-old team leader in technical support, but when the maroons go up he becomes part of the AA's Special Operations Response Team (SORT). Yet despite the gung-ho name, the Land Rover's radio is tuned to Heart FM and the sound of The Carpenters...

This volunteering spirit keeps SORT cost-effective and its organisation nimble. There are only two permanent SORT members; John Seymour, National Manager, and Operations Manager Darron Burness. Organisation comes mainly from the AA's Operations Centre at Oldbury, but for major events it can set up a temporary rescue headquarters anywhere in the UK.

AA SORT is a go-anywhere, do almost anything section of the AA. Founded in 2008, it came about partly in response to a suggestion from a heroic Patrol who became ill after prolonged contact with flood water while rescuing motorists stranded in Tewkesbury in 2007. Even the most cursory perusal of the AA photo archives shows that AA Patrols have never lacked derring-do and initiative

Hardware? You can see for yourself. Bright yellow Land Rover 110 Defenders make up the team's strength, each as well-equipped as normal AA Patrol vehicles, but with the addition of front and rear winches, deep-water wading kits, kinetic ropes (for snatch-recovery) and the team's



< specialist gear; they're a bit snug inside. The Land Rovers are deployed across the country, but can be moved around quickly in response to changing conditions. Burness watches a fair bit of weather in his job. "We are a bit like storm chasers," he says. "I try to pre-deploy the vehicles when I see bad weather forecasts."

Not just BBC forecasts, either. Burness garners weather information via the internet and Twitter, where the team's account (@AASORT, launched a few months ago) is already a valuable source of information. "We also talk to other agencies about developing situations," he says. As a measure of the respect AA SORT commands, it has been added to the Home Office National Resilience Extranet, developed in response to the Pitt Review after the Tewkesbury floods. This is a secure web browser, which gives authorised parties access to the latest emergency data.

Emergencies? The AA SORT's battle honours read like a litany of some of the worst weather events of recent years, including the floods at Cockermouth, Cumbria, and many a snowbound road, not least the A57 and M25. Those yellow Defenders have also helped clear vehicles from

MATT MORGAN

ROAD TO RECOVERY The Special Operations Response Team operates in all weathers. Duties include everything from simple winch rescues to dealing with potentially life-threatening floods



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the frozen A417 in Birdlip Hill in Gloucestershire and winched vehicles clear of rising rivers and lakes around the UK.

"We love rain and snow," says John Brookes with a giggle, as we turn into a 1930s housing estate. It has been blowing a gale for more than 24 hours and the ground is soaking. A young telephone engineer's van has become marooned in mud after he pulled off the road to repair damaged phone lines. "Parking off-road is safer and doesn't obstruct traffic," he says, "but the ground is too wet. As soon as I drove on, I knew I was stuck."

Burness and Brookes assess the situation. It is clearly not a major incident, but the Land Rover's winch makes almost laughably light work of what could have been a messy and mildly hazardous job. The irony of the company that keeps the nation talking being rescued by the company that keeps it moving is not lost on any of us. "Thanks mate," yells the engineer as he roars off to fix someone else's phone.

So where has AA SORT had the most impact? Both men agree that every recovered vehicle is a small triumph, but they feel the team really came of age during the appalling Cockermouth floods of 2009.

"That was very scary," says Brookes, "partly because it all happened so quickly. When that first bridge collapsed and the police officer lost his life, I think it brought home to everyone just how dangerous it was."

With local roads undulating through flood water, the police asked AA SORT to recover drowning cars hidden in the dips. It was difficult, treacherous work and they earned the respect of the emergency services by

getting stuck in. But the team knows its limitations and Burness has turned down requests for help when he knew his team's training didn't go far enough.

"Knowing what you can't do is just as important as knowing what you can," he says. "It's not about just mucking in and using your initiative, but having the right training and kit. Neither do we want people to think we're trying to do the job of the fire or ambulance services. We're not - we're just part of the jigsaw."

And which job has been the most fun? "That would be Glastonbury," says Burness. "I even got to meet Lily Allen - but not for long because someone got their vehicle stuck and I had to go." AA SORT is just part of a range of services provided by the AA at festivals such as Glastonbury, Leeds and Reading, where the mud can be as memorable as the music. A dedicated AA rescue number is printed on cards handed out to festival-goers.

But surely not everyone stuck at Glastonbury, or in Cockermouth for that matter, is an AA Member? Where's the overall benefit here? Burness admits the service is partially altruistic, but the sheer number of AA Members means that some are bound to be caught up in almost any natural disaster, and AA SORT is there to look after them. It's like the RAF Search and Rescue service, whose primary purpose is to rescue downed pilots but spends most of its time assisting members of the public. It helps AA SORT's cause that its costs are relatively low for the profile it brings. "With almost everyone on the team having a day job we can keep our costs really low," says Burness. "The team supplements our Patrol force but goes out only when it's needed. However, this does enable

BADGE OVER TROUBLED WATERS
 The AA can rescue you, but there might be no need if you heed the seasonal tips at theAA.com/motoring_advice
 You can also watch a series of videos at youtube.com/user/theAAPatrol

SCAN THIS PAGE FOR MORE FROM THE AA PATROLMAN OF THE YEAR. CHECK OUT PAGE 5 FOR MORE DETAILS



Advice? I wouldn't drive past signs that say 'road closed' in floods

< us to provide a service that no other motoring organisation can offer. We have a profile and tell a story that nobody else can match."

Indeed with countryside and water leisure pursuits so popular, AA SORT's fully equipped rescue vehicles and crews bring back-up and peace of mind to Members; as they say, tide and time wait for no man, nor parked vehicle. But with all their experience, is there anything that Burness and Brookes want to pass on to the motoring public about how not to get stuck in the first place?

"I wouldn't be driving past signs that say 'ROAD CLOSED' in floods," says Brookes with a grimace, as he recounts the motorists who came to grief in Cockermouth after doing just that, often at the cost of their vehicle and very nearly their lives.

"It would also be nice if people read their car's manual," adds Burness, citing those who call out the AA because they're stuck in snow but haven't even engaged their car's four-

wheel-drive system. "Or those who want to go out and buy a newspaper in a blizzard," he says. "We attend those incidents, of course, but in most cases we'll take them a paper rather than get them going again and put them at risk of getting stuck on treacherous roads."

Brookes adds: "There are times when you really make a difference. On a snowy A57 one December, there were lots of people stuck and we were first on scene to help the emergency services get around. There were diabetics, old folk and young children needing specialist assistance."

Dry suits and steel toe-cap boots are not the world's most effective thermal barriers and, after spending some time in a freezing river, it's a relief to return to the Defender to thaw out. The chunky tyres provide a backing beat as Heart FM plays Bon Jovi all the way back to Oldbury.

Those stranded Glastonbury folk must have been delighted to see these big yellow Land Rovers... But I wonder what they made of the music?



ADVICE FOR RAINY DAYS

- » Driving fast through puddles can be risky if 'aquaplaning' tyres lose contact with the road. Hold the steering lightly in the straight-ahead position and lift off the throttle until the tyres grip again.
- » Avoid splashing cyclists or pedestrians. You can get a hefty fine and up to nine penalty points for inconsiderate driving.
- » Avoid deep water. A car's air intake is often low down at the front (check yours) and even a tiny amount of water sucked into the engine can wreck it. If you are sure it is safe to proceed, allow any oncoming traffic to pass first, then drive slowly and steadily to avoid creating a bow wave but using a low gear and high revs to prevent water entering the exhaust. Don't be tempted to cross fast-moving water; cars are buoyant and you could be swept away.
- » Broken down in the rain? Don't prop the bonnet open while you wait for the AA. Wet engines are harder to start!