

PROFESSIONAL USER
AA SORT team



SPECIAL OPS

Back in 1905, the AA was conceived in a London restaurant and patrolmen worked only at weekends and on bikes. Nowadays, it is a sophisticated organisation that comes to the aid of motorists in all conditions. Assisting in rescues and saving lives is the job of a special fleet of AA SORT Land Rover Defenders

Words: Hils Everitt Photography: Hils Everitt, AA archive



Temperatures were below freezing, there was a feeling of snowfall in the murky air beneath the grey clouds amassed over a dark and gloomy west Kent. Inside the custard yellow Land Rover Defender 110 all was reasonably warm and cosy, until our pilot Iain Gillespie wound his window down so that he could get some reasonable elbow room. Suddenly a rush of icy air spat into the 110, sending shivers down the spine. Tucked behind the driver in a 110's rear seat is not always the best place to be, but suddenly it was even worse. "Sorry," shouted Iain, "but these bloomin' new Defenders have no room if you're even slightly over the average size of a small child. I need some blood in my arm!" he finished, laughing. He had a fair point, so there was no point in showing any resistance, just pull on another layer and keep scribbling away. It was, despite some excusable minor discomfort, actually a privilege to

be chauffeured around in the back of this Defender 110, which was a part of the magnificent AA SORT fleet. SORT – the fourth emergency service's Special Operations Response Team – has been making a big name for itself over the last few years, during some terribly harsh winters with heavy snow and ice and, all year round it seems, appalling floods sweeping the land from the West Country to Scotland. It was, in fact, the dreadful floods around Gloucestershire, and Tewkesbury in particular in 2007, which led to SORT being formed. And our esteemed driver and highly experienced SORT member played a huge part in that formation. "It was awful. There were no 4WD vehicles; this isn't right, we need to do something about it," explains Iain. And so the idea of a special team highly equipped to tackle serious floods, and, subsequently, drivers trapped in heavy snow or forced off-course by sheet ice, came about.

Above: As you would expect, the AA's Defender is fully equipped for all eventualities, including a tough, hard-working 9000lb winch - very handy for snowy ditch recoveries

Iain's fellow founders Darron Burness and John Seymour are the only full-time AA members of SORT, co-ordinating all the teams and Defenders wherever they need to be deployed throughout the country. Iain is very much a hands-on SORT member, out in the field, who attends regular AA 'shouts' in a conventional van when the elements are behaving themselves and the fleet of eight yellow 110s is not required. He has been with the AA since 2000, after working in Vauxhall dealerships for some years, and loves his job. Although conventional AA technicians work alone, the SORT guys form teams of two in the 110s and, today, Iain's partner was Ian Wills, a former forklift truck driver. He has only been in the AA four years and recently completed his intensive training; this snowy day in Kent was his first foray in a SORT 110. The SORT team is highly trained in RoSPA-certified 4x4 off-road driving, including winching, and Rescue 3 ►

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(UK) as Swiftwater Rescue Technicians. They are all volunteers, which means they don't get any extra money on top of their salaries from their normal AA patrol or desk jobs. In all there are 85 of them, including five women.

They enjoy a great relationship with the Met Office, taking information from them and providing vital feedback. Depending on the weather and conditions, they can be deployed anywhere in the country, regardless of where they are based. Iain and Ian are from Dorking in Surrey and Chatham in Kent, respectively, so they were local, but that could all change the next day.

As Iain is an 'old hand' at this, he is pretty experienced at taking the helm of 110s and is still a little sceptical on the 'new' Puma-engined Defender. "I still think I trusted our old 52-plate Td5 Defender more," he laughs, "There's so much tech in this TdCi that can go wrong, that I never feel as at home with it as I do the older models." Although he does admit that once, in heavy floods, the previous Td5 wasn't totally reliable. "It had a split breather pipe on the fuel tank and in the floods it cut out. We had to repair it in situ; that was entertaining," he smiles nodding his head in wistful remembrance.

Above: You have to admit - it certainly looks the business!

Below: Iain Gillespie, joint founder of AA SORT; they don't come more experienced

So, not only do the SORT guys have to repair all manner of vehicles in their normal routine, they are required to sort out their own Defenders from time to time, but then, we all know that is an occupational hazard when you're a Land Rover driver. Iain has yet to experience life in the tough lane with the 110s and is thoroughly looking forward to it. "Being part of the SORT team is fantastic, and I got my first real taste of it this morning," he grinned appreciatively. Before we met, the guys had to do a full winching job tugging a wayward car out of a snowy ditch. It wasn't a complicated job, but nevertheless a small taste of things to come for Iain.

We met at Shoreham station where the guys were coming to the aid of a chap whose van had got stuck on a snowy country road a few miles away. He had walked a fair way out to a snow-free main road where his wife picked him up to meet the SORT boys. He joined us in the 110 and we set off to rescue his van. The country road was narrow and very snowy and icy. Iain was in his element. "I love it when we get to drive difficult, winding country roads, it's what these vehicles were built for." Of course, the 110 didn't bat an eyelid, shod in a set of 235/85 R16 Goodyear Wrangler MT/R M+S rubber with Durawall sides.

We finally reached the stricken, plain white VW TDI Caddy Van. The guys got the tow strap out from the back of the



110, hooked it up and off we went with Ian at the wheel of the Caddy. Before the 110 pulls away Ian hoots his 110 horn to let Ian know he's ready, then Ian toots back to say 'ready when you are' and off they go. The road was quite steep, which was why the VW was never going to make it, but the 110 pulled it up the snowy slope with ease. Well, that was until a rather unhelpful, local council lorry approached us head on. It filled the road with about an inch gap either side. The occupants were throwing sand on the road with a shovel from the loadbed – we wondered about the effectiveness of this operation (!) – and seeing us just threw their hands up as if to say 'sorry, we ain't going backwards any time soon...'

The net effect of a short interchange was that Ian had to reverse the Caddy back down the hill to a small layby we had passed as Ian reversed the 110 down carefully maintaining enough of a distance to keep the tow strap taut to keep the VW on an even keel in case it got stuck again. For these guys it was a piece of cake, although the council lorry made rather heavy weather of getting past us. Back on the road we ventured up the hill again, hoping for no more interruptions, to a ploughed trunk road and sent the very grateful Caddy owner on his merry way.

While waiting for the next shout to appear on the dash-mounted HTC mobile's screen, our 110 pulled into a parking area so the guys could warm up with a cuppa and a biscuit. It was a good opportunity to have a nose inside the rear of the yellow Defender. As well as standard AA Patrol repair kit, there is lighting equipment, tow straps, including kinetic rope for snatch recoveries, snow socks, deepwater wading outfits, including dry suit and steel toe-capped boots, depth poles, rear Warn 9000lb winch with plasma



rope that mounts onto the detachable tow ball, decontamination kit, what is termed 'Self and Casualty Welfare' kit and a water-heating system. "We can make a hot drink for drivers who are waiting for us to recover their vehicle; and it's useful for a cuppa for us, too," explains Ian.

As far as the mods to the SORT 110s are concerned, they were prepared by our old friends at Nene Overland. They came from Solihull already fitted with snorkels, then Kevin Mackman and the Nene team sprayed them AA yellow, fitted Goldfish front winches (ideal for resistance to water ingress) with isolator switch; front/rear axle, gearbox/transfer box and fuel tank breather pipes to the top of the snorkel; keyless running so that the SORT member could be outside while the engine ran and it couldn't be stolen; and Anderson connectors at the rear to power the winch and use for jump starting from rear or front.

Above: Modded and painted by Nene Overland, the 110 made light work of pulling stranded Caddy up a treacherous hill

Below: It's not always about snow - our recent wet weather has seen the AA SORT team regularly doing a bit of wading...

There is also a mobile CCTV unit that can record weather conditions for their records and the Met Office and live recoveries when necessary. As Nene helped out, so did another old friend of ours, Selwyn Kendrick of the AWDC and mastermind of Hill Rallies and the BORC. Selwyn has trained all the SORT team in their 4x4 off-road driving skills at Clyro near Hay on Wye in Herefordshire. "He is a brilliant trainer," says Ian. (We have a further feature on the AA Drivetech training operations with Selwyn in next month's issue – Ed.)

Hot drink consumed, and after a sample of the onboard catering, i.e. a pack of sausages and beans heated in a plastic pack, we received a shout from the HTC. It was near Otford and appeared to be a vehicle stuck in a muddy ditch. The 110 fired up and off we went into the traffic, until the shout suddenly disappeared. "Sometimes you find that they sort themselves out, perhaps a friendly local farmer came along in a tractor. Oh well, I was looking forward to another winch recovery," said Ian, sadly. Shame indeed.

All seemed to go a bit quiet, so we drove along until Ian phoned HQ to say they were willing to take on any job, regardless of its severity to help out as everybody seemed to be coping OK with the snow and ice in Kent and Surrey at that moment. So the lovely, friendly lady on the other end sent us westwards to help a large van stuck on a muddy grassy verge. Along the way Ian regaled us of tales of his charity drive from New York to LA along Route 66, visits to France as a part of ARC Europe helping British tourists who have broken down and the traumas of rescuing Community Support Officers in Taunton floods when the Fire Brigade and Police needed a hand.

SORT's jobs aren't restricted to terrible weather disasters and bad conditions. The teams also attend major rock and pop festivals such as ►



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the Isle of Wight, Reading and Glastonbury, where they get to rub shoulders with the top stars. "The Isle of Wight this year was ridiculous," laughs Iain. "It was a right mess and we couldn't get off the island for two days after the event! It was very boggy. The main problem, apart from the boggy, is lost keys. They leave their keys in their tent and then can't find their tent again, or it gets pinched. Also flat batteries are a problem. We love it,

because the atmosphere is superb and everyone is happy."

They are also happy to see bright yellow Land Rovers. "The Land Rover gives off an image of toughness as well as helpfulness and people expect and like it," suggests Iain. The SORT fleet is also personalised, each one being named after a fish; ours was called 'Bream'. "It started because John Cleese did the TV adverts for us and he was in 'A Fish Called Wanda!'" continues Iain.

Below: Some things just never change - motorists will always get stuck, and where possible, the AA will always be there to offer a helpful tow!

We arrived on the outskirts of Slough to pull a van off a grassy verge and then off to a large removal van stuck on another grassy verge outside the new house. The snatch rope came out as the van was deeply bedded in and it took all the 110's power to haul it out. While Iain was unhitching the rope, he took a look at the tyres. Two were actually fraying! He asked the driver had he checked his tyres recently? The driver took one look and sucked his teeth and shook his head. "I'll go straight to Kwik Fit and sort it now," he promised. Iain and Ian weren't so sure. "That is the main problem these days. People just don't look after their tyres. These were very dangerous and especially in this weather," Iain sighed, and they both shook their heads. They were also totally illegal. They can only advise, and hope people listen.

As we headed back east towards Kent, it got dark and snowy again and all was quiet. Iain and Ian were waiting to hear where they might be deployed the next day. There was potential in the West Country as the weather was expected to be bad, so an extra night in a motel beckoned. It would be another long day in the custard yellow 110 and the guys wouldn't necessarily be teamed up together. But wherever they ended up they would be helping people with good humour and excellent skills. We owe them and their distinctive Defenders a great deal. We just hope you don't encounter one anytime soon, as it means you're not driving your 4x4 in the freezing and severe weather as well as these guys... **4x4**

