



FLOOD DEFENDERS

When the AA set up a specialist unit to deal with flooded roads, it was clear only one type of vehicle would do for the motoring organisation's Special Operations Response Team

Words: Jonathan Craymer Pictures: Jonathan Craymer & AA



JUST TYPICAL. The day *LRM* is set to drop in for a chat with the guys (and girl!) in the nerve centre of the AA's hard-working SORT (Special Operations Response Team) unit a second wave of flooding hits the UK, causing no end of problems for already beleaguered residents in the West Country, and now stranding scores of drivers to the north of London.

It's all over the news as we drive towards Oldbury in the West Midlands under black skies and rain like the wake of the QE2. Sodden Britain just can't take any more water today, and places like Aylesbury and Hemel Hempstead have woken up to rising waters and a shed-load of motorists in trouble. Added to that the village of Moorland in Somerset has just been cut off overnight, and the Chairman of the Environment Agency, Lord Smith, is due to put his head in the lion's mouth by visiting the worst-hit areas.

Darron Burness, the SORT team's Operations Manager, has phoned to warn us en route we might not get much time with him the way things are, but we tell him we'll take our chances to get our story.

It's only just after 10am, yet since midnight the AA has answered calls from 213 stricken motorists whose problems are water-related, of which no less than 93 are stuck up to their wheel nuts.

"Have you got yourself wet at all...?" One of the coordinators, Paul Bradley, talks calmly to a mum stranded in floods north of London, in a 4x4 but with an asthmatic daughter on her way to school, possibly without a spare inhaler. No pressure. A SORT Land Rover has been dispatched to help with the vehicle recovery, meanwhile a standard patrol vehicle has been sent to the scene to get mum and daughter out, but is now stuck in traffic. Paul continues to talk to the woman, reassuring her that help is on its way.

"Unfortunately these days people don't expect to have short trips to the shops or school, which account for the bulk of journeys, interrupted by the elements – and they've forgotten or have never known what precautions to take in case the worst happens," says Darron. "It would only take 10 minutes to put a few essentials in the boot like a blanket, warm clothing, any medical supplies they might

Below:
Paul Bradley
and Darron
Burness

need, plus water and food. It's not a bad idea to carry the kind of self-heating meal camping shops sell. But modern cars are so well-insulated and become such an extension of the home. We often answer calls from drivers who've just nipped down to the shops in their slippers!"

In rare moments of quiet, Darron and the rest of the control room team could almost be mistaken for any fleet control, as they respond to red icons popping up on the busy computer screens in front of them. But this is no fleet of white vans, doing online deliveries. People's lives could be on the line.

"We're far more concerned about the people than the vehicles, which often surprises members when we arrive to help them in floods, snow or mud," he says. "Our priority is to get them to safety, while keeping ourselves safe. Retrieving their vehicle comes second, especially in the dark or other poor conditions. A vehicle which has already been damaged by floodwater will still be there next morning, when we can see clearly what needs to be done."

Back in 2008, faced with the fact that major flooding in the UK was becoming a sad fact of life, as evidenced by the water damage in Gloucester and Tewkesbury the year before, the AA took the decision to set up the SORT unit, often simply referred to as the flood relief team.

The AA's participation in the aftermath of the major flooding at Cockermouth in 2009 further cemented the decision that, as part of its chosen 'Fourth Emergency Service' role, the organisation really needed such a team.

Last Christmas and the start of 2014 has seen the unit in action a record number of times. Between December 1 and February 2 this year the SORT team and its fellow AA patrols dealt with 757 flood-stranded vehicles, and 3057 water-related breakdowns.

"We've seen an increase this time round in 4x4s getting stuck in water. That's probably because people were off over Christmas and a lot of owners wanted to have a play in the floods which were so highly publicised. But what you can't see, even in a 4x4, is whether the road itself is still there, or where the side of the road is and where the ditch starts.

"The message we want to get over is that flood water is



"What you can't see is where the side of the road is and where the ditch starts"



“An incredible 27 per cent of drivers said they'd drive through moving flood water”

dangerous and is best avoided whether on foot or in the best 4x4 in the world. Apart from road surfaces which have been literally washed away and unseen hazards like missing manhole covers, the water itself may contain up to 30 nasty diseases as it's so often mixed with raw sewage, so any vehicle which has been in contact with flood water really needs to be decontaminated.”

Darron shakes his head at the results of a survey carried out jointly by the Environment Agency and the AA back in November. Of more than 21,000 AA members questioned, an incredible 27 per cent said they'd happily drive through moving floodwater deeper than 30cm, which is enough to move a car. Yet the advice from the two organisations is not to enter floodwater that's moving at all, or if the water's stationary, no more than 10cm deep.

As it happened, the AA already had some Defender 110s, which it was about to replace as they'd come to the end of their normal working lives. However fate intervened in the form of a patrolman's upset stomach. Iain Gillespie was on patrol in Tewkesbury during the floods in 2007 and had been affected by the polluted water – and knew the Land Rovers' height and ground clearance made them ideal for keeping crews above the level of the water.

“He went to see Steve Dewey, Director of Road Operations, and said ‘Look we need to keep these vehicles – they're our best asset’. Steve in turn went to John Seymour, who'd been appointed National Manager of SORT, who made it happen and the Defenders were kept on,” says Darron.

“So the original fleet of Defender 110s has recently been augmented with a number of similar 60-plate vehicles. The only difference being that the older vehicles were all single cab, whereas the newer vehicles have crew cabs, making it easier to carry stranded motorists to safety.”

The next question was – what equipment to carry? Obviously pulling vehicles out of trouble is one of the chief tasks, so all the vehicles carry power winches, special kinetic rope (similar to a

Above:
AA SORT
team
members
hone their
off-road
skills

large bungee cord, like that used by the military), a strop (for wrapping round trees for extra purchase, a practice known as belaying), a snatch block, a tow pole and tow straps. The kit also includes items like a decontamination kit for the reasons given previously.

There's a large drawer under the load-bay floor, able to act occasionally as a work bench, while holding tool-kits.

To left and right are lockers containing spare oils and other essential items for both rescue work and maintaining the vehicles. All is highly standardised, so any patrolman who's part of the 92-strong team can jump into any SORT Land Rover and know exactly where everything is. All the Defenders have snorkels, though Darron points out these are really designed to cope with sand, not water. Another useful fitment is a Britpart-supplied gas strut fitted to many rear doors, making them easier to open – often at awkward angles with the weight of the spare wheel bolted on.

One of the essential items carried is made of the same stuff as bullet-proof vests – Kevlar – to wrap around and give protection from vehicle airbags, which if they go off at the wrong time may ironically (for a life-saving device) cause injury to vehicle occupants or AA crew members, or at least get in the way. The airbag protectors are left in place for 15 minutes, after which it's assumed the bags' electronics will have given up the ghost.

Two of the vehicles are fitted with HD CCTV cameras, allowing recording of flood scenes, and the beaming of live images to both the SORT control room and the many other agencies the team often works with. Darron explains: “This means we can monitor roads around major problem areas, freeing the main emergency services to do their jobs better. That's the piece of the jigsaw where we often fit in.”

Some of the images you see here were taken by the AA's 110s and beamed back, which gave us, while sitting in the control room, a vivid sense of being there at the sharp end.

Amazingly there's no central workshop to maintain these vehicles. All maintenance work is done by the crews themselves



Above:
HD CCTV atop two
of the vehicles
relays driver's eye
view to control



by the road-side, which isn't as daft as it might sound, since these guys are patrolmen used to working with cars whizzing past their rear ends. The high incidence of flooding in the past week has necessitated a lot of oil changes in front and rear axles, as well as bearing greasing on all Defenders.

“These vehicles are probably in water more time than they're out of it and being Land Rovers they require a lot of maintaining, but they pay back the level of care and attention they receive, many times over. But then no vehicle is really designed to operate in water all the time, which takes its toll. Polluted ‘fresh’ water is bad enough, but sea water – which we often encounter these days – is even worse.

“However Land Rovers are so versatile, and their no-nonsense, made-for-the-job nature makes them easier to look after than other makes and models. For instance in the Cumbrian floods, we were able to decontaminate our vehicles using firehoses!”

What's carried on the vehicles is only part of the kit – the rest of it's worn by the crews. They don dry suits, buoyancy aids and protective clothing for all flood work, and always travel in pairs. “One can wade in front where necessary, to make sure the road's still there, or act as banksman,” Darron explains.

Most members of the team are trained and certified as Swiftwater Rescue Technicians (SRTs). In other words they have expertise in search and rescue in flood conditions, enabling them to become part of co-ordinated multi-agency response exercises alongside local police, fire and rescue services, the Highways Agency and others. The teaching is carried out by the same people who train the RNLI and many fire service teams. The two-man crews also undergo 4x4 training with RoSPA including off-road operations, and they receive training from the AA's own DriveTech team. Most of the SORT responders are volunteers with normal day jobs in the AA: 22 are indoor staff, while 68 are patrol personnel. Occasionally as ultimate controller, Darron relocates to where the need is greatest. For instance on January 3 this year he was based at Devon and Somerset Fire service HQ in Exeter despatching SORT's resources from there.



In October 2012 the team also helped Dyfed-Powys police search in the Machynlleth area for missing toddler April Jones, in what later tragically turned into a murder enquiry. “This was both upsetting, yet heartening seeing the huge response from the community who helped in the hunt. We were pleased to be able to help the police and other emergency services.”

In addition to the operational crews, the SORT team includes two qualified Water and Flood Incident Managers (WFIMs) - Darron himself and Ian Hemstock - responsible for managing the AA's response to major flooding incidents as part of a local or national incident command structure.

Darron added: “To help us meet the yearly training requirements, we now have our own agency Swiftwater and flood Rescue Technician Instructor (SRTI) to provide continuation training to the team between their three-yearly SRT re-certification courses.

“The position of AA SORT within the flood response arena moved on considerably during 2013. The team now has a seat on the Wales Inland Water and Flood Rescue Group and the CFOA (Chief Fire Officers' Association) Water Rescue Group. Our place within these bodies gives us a voice on behalf of the motorist, in water rescue decision-making at the highest level.”

The SORT team takes part in a number of multi-agency exercises to ensure it can work in a co-ordinated and efficient manner with a whole range of other professionals at the drop of a patrolman's cap. One such practice run was Exercise Berwyn in April 2013 alongside all the emergency services and other responders including HM Coastguard, Natural Resources Wales, Gwynedd County Council, RAF Search and Rescue, Mountain Rescue and the RNLI.

Last November the motoring organisation partnered with the Environment Agency to launch a dual-branded ‘floods destroy, be prepared’ campaign.

“It's amazing how we've moved on in the time we've been operating,” says John Seymour, National Manager for the SORT team. “Our strategy has been to provide an operational capability that can't be matched by our competitors and positions the AA as a professional responder in the water rescue arena.”

SORT's work includes attending many festivals and shows staged throughout the year, where as we all know temporary car parks on grass can quickly resemble a ploughing contest gone wrong, after just a little rain. Trying to think of everything, the team even has its own meteorologist, Matt Hugo, who

LINKS

FURTHER INFO on the AA's SORT team
www.theaa.com/motoring_advice/aasort.html

The Environment Agency's flood alert service
www.environment-agency.gov.uk/homeandleisure/floods/31618.aspx

DON'T TRY this at home (or anywhere else!) - £100,000 Bentley up to its windows in flood water.
www.youtube.com/watch?v=jTNrcYipjQE

provides bespoke weather forecasting, and of course to keep fully up to date, the team has its own weather blog too.

How did Darron become operations manager? “I've no idea to be honest!” he grins. “I was one of the original 25 members of the team and suppose I was just in the wrong place at the wrong time.”

He's still smiling, despite this morning's chaotic road conditions. “I love it. It's a challenge. You never know what you're going to wake up to each morning, and the job's never boring. I'd been with the AA 23 years, started as an apprentice in the workshops, became a patrol, then managed teams of patrols.”

The day before our visit, the AA had issued a press release calling for a review of flood road signage, while warning drivers of the penalties for ignoring them. “Part of the problem is that road-closed signs aren't always completely understood,” says Darron. “Some people may think they're just advisory, as they look like temporary signs similar to those often seen at roadworks.

“But ignoring a traffic sign is an offence carrying a £50 fine, or a £100 fine and three points if it's deemed to have been careless driving. Three-quarters of cars that get stuck are written off, as it only takes a tiny amount of ingested water to wreck an engine, and insurers could reject any flood damage claim if they thought the owner could have avoided the problem in the first place.”

Nevertheless he sees the funny side of one lady in Buckinghamshire's reaction to a road closed sign. “She told our patrol that she didn't think the sign applied, as it was only on one side of the road - so she drove round it!”