

FLOOD SWEAT & WEIRS

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Words and Photographs by Richard Streeton



'ALTRUISM' IS a word you hear less and less these days. Its exact definition is 'the practice of unselfish concern for, or the devotion to, the welfare of others; essentially the complete opposite of the word 'egoism'. I think if you had to sum it up in car terms, it would be like an old Series III in Russet Brown meeting a brand new BMW M3 in metallic orange: humility versus ego.

Only last month I saw a football match between Manchester City and Bayern Munich where one of the City players actually refused to take to the field and play football for a reported salary of over £150,000 per week. It's simply unfathomable to imagine a scenario like that in the real world, and for the most of us, half of that salary on an annual basis would be pretty magnificent.

When we're bombarded with stories of uppity celebrities, bankers grumbling at million-pound bonuses and footballers not kicking a leather bag around for £150,000 a week, it's easy to forget that altruistic organisations do exist. But as you'd expect, they're the true epitome of the word 'selfless'. They're not flashy or brash in what they do; their self-sacrificing nature means they often go unnoticed.

More often than not, and bearing in mind I am a tad biased, Land Rovers groups still display this wonderful trait often sacrificing their time and energy for the good of others. The South Lakes Search and Rescue Group based in Barrow is one of these groups. Their story contains two essential ingredients: hearts of gold and a quality old Land

EXERCISE ONE: TRAPPED BY THE BRIDGE

THE FIRST exercise the team performed simulated a flood situation whereby a person may have been washed from the bank and swept down river, finally stopping themselves at a bridge or a weir.

In this scenario, the team's rescue raft plays a huge role as Richard told me: When we got this rescue raft, it was all because of a man from Windermere who wanted to

do something for the local community. He set up a car boot sale and a boat jumble and the team helped out. He managed to buy us a brand new £1,500 rescue raft which is a top quality piece of equipment."

Once the team had got the raft in the water, it was a case of positioning it using ropes on the bridge. The team pulled the raft to the victim and then safely back again in the pouring rain.



Rover. I met with them last month to tag along on a full swiftwater training day and quickly found out that they were introduced to the Land Rover way of life through a truly philanthropic chain of events, all beginning in 2009 after the dreadful Cumbria floods.

Richard Nicholls, co-founder of SLSAR and a proud Cumbrian living in Barrow, was a former military man having served for nine years. On his discharge, he joined an inshore rescue team based in Ulverston, however it was after 2009 that the locals, and the whole of the nation, saw the need for a dedicated regional swiftwater rescue team in the south lakes area.

Richard said: "Back at the start there were five of us. We'd already set up a series of Community First Response teams whereby we gave rural communities the power to deal with emergency situations. But we knew what was needed was a swiftwater rescue team. Between November and March, we have a huge amount of canoeists on these rivers and then the Cockermouth floods took place in 2009 (see box on page 48) and we all decided that next year we'd be ready with a targeted team."

As Richard put it himself, starting an emergency response unit from scratch was the equivalent of starting up at Everest – the team needed training, equipment, organisation and most importantly, a vehicle.

However, as you might imagine, the start-up months are always the hardest and budgets were tight. Resources were needed, and fast.

"We knew how much it would cost to put a team in place," said Richard. "To be a swiftwater

technician you have to go on countless specific courses which are extremely expensive. It's all run by an organisation called Rescue 3. You have to be certified by them to be able to go into some of these incidents. Then there's first aid training on top of that."

With members falling into place and targets identified, there's no doubting the group's fantastic enthusiasm, but when the prices of well-sorted Defenders are pushing £10,000, the project may have been dead and buried before it had even started. But, as ever, the Land Rover God in all his infinite wisdom bestowed a gift upon Richard and his team, and it was good.

A vehicle had come up for sale courtesy of the Bay Search and Rescue team, based in Flookburgh.

Richard explained: "The Land Rover became available very early on when we were just getting to grips with the financial start-up but an opportunity like that doesn't come up very often and we simply could not say no to it. It was their old vehicle and the salty lifestyle had caused a lot of rot and rust. It's a 1986 3.5 litre V8 and we paid £800 for it. The great thing is that they got it from Penrith Mountain Rescue and it's spent its whole life rescuing people, which is quite something."

scraping off the salt

A great many Land Rover enthusiasts would have been rubbing their hands together at this stage. A 'relatively' solid Land Rover, with a well serviced and maintained V8. It's not a bad starting point. The trouble the South Lakes group had was that none of them were particularly *au fait* with working

EXERCISE TWO: STUCK IN WHITEWATER

THE SECOND location (opposite page) was the scene of a fatality as a canoeist sadly drowned as he was pinned against a rock by the tremendous force of the River Leven.

"That's why we train here," explained Richard as the crews and medics unfortunately could only watch as the man died.

Now the team send a victim through under the bridge and then attempt to safely cross the fast flowing section of water using their rescue raft. This exercise requires a lot of rope coordination as the force

of the current is constantly trying to send the raft where it wants. The purpose of the ropes are to hold the raft in position and slowly ease it into the current, and finally over to the victim.

The team stayed at this location for some time, practicing and re-practicing the drill. The water was way up on the day, but according to Richard, it's been as high as the bridge. For the incredible footage of this, head to YouTube and search for 'Whitewater Hotel, Backbarrow'. It gives you some idea of the colossal mass of water.



EXERCISE THREE: RIVERBANK RESCUE



FOR EXERCISE three, the Land Rover was called into action. A lot of the team's work is concentrated on river banks and through muddy fields making the Land Rover an essential rescue tool.

For this drill the team would simulate a scenario that is all too common in a flood situation: people getting washed away due to the force of the current.

First off, the team practiced their rope throws out to the passing victims. Secondly, a rope was tied to the rear Nato hitch of the Defender and the other end laid across the river and tied to a tree on the other side.

The team on the banks would then issue the call 'swimmer, raise your arms'. As the person is swept into the rope, their arms catch it and they can hang on until the team can send a technician out to them.

