

Recovery and Salvage Teams



History

In mid 1999, the English Government set up an organization tasked with recovering usable items from the ruins of London (jokingly referred to by some as “The Big Rubble”). This organization was to be called the “Recovery and Salvage Agency.”



Illustration 1: The difficulties experienced by the RSA teams is only hinted at in 1999 photo taken by a Britten-Norman Islander formerly belonging to His Majesty's Coastguard and taken into RAF service in October 1997. The photos were taken on behalf of the RSA. (MoD)

Top Items Still Listed as Not Recovered June 2011

1. The Imperial state Crown from the Crown Jewels. This was missing when RSA Team 31 recovered the remainder.
2. The Magna Carter “burnt copy” – known to have been removed from the British Library in early 1996.
3. The Rosetta Stone – missing after the convoy moving the most important treasures from the British Museum was attacked by looters. The Rosetta Stone has been photographed since but the location is unknown.
4. The Flood Tablet telling the story of Gilgamesh – also from the British Museum. Grainy photographs showing this in a warehouse have circulated showing it survived the looting.
5. The Sutton Hoo Helmet – a cheek guard from this has been recovered and intelligence suggests that the rest of the helmet is still intact in private hands somewhere in Reading.
6. Codex Forster – three of Leonardo da Vinci's notebooks bound together. This was stolen from the Victoria & Albert Museum in late October 1997.
7. Copy of the Bayeux Tapestry – from Reading Museum. With the destruction of the original this is now the only complete replica (the Canadian project at the University of Waterloo is however nearly complete). This went missing after being recovered by RSA Team 6 when it was ambushed. It was planned to display it alongside the Overlord Embroidery in the D-Day Museum in Portsmouth.
8. The State and Presidential seals of the Polish Republic. These were held by the Polish Government in Exile until they were stolen during a raid by Soviet Spetsnaz detachment SD452 in Mid 1997. The team was tracked down but neither of the two survivors knew the location it had been hidden in.

It is widely believed that there was also a secret list of items that are also missing but for which the search is not being broadcast for various reasons.

This was not a part of the military but instead a Civil Service section of the Home Office, responsible to the Home Secretary. In November 1999 the first teams were sent into London. Initial finds were surprisingly good, often using information from survivors who had come forward to government appeals. Initially the finds were aimed at recovering items on an urgent need basis but by mid 2000, teams were starting to be tasked with recovering important

cultural items (of which the most publicised has been partial recovery of the Crown Jewels by RSA Team 31).



Illustration 2: Unknown RSA team in training March 2001. Note the mixed items of dress and assorted weapons (including pump action shotgun). They seem well equipped with helmets. Home Office Archive

In early 2002 the Agency split into two parts, the RSA (London) and RSA (South), this was expanded in 2003 with the creation of RSA (Midlands) and in early 2005 by RSA (North). These parts were all still co-ordinated by the headquarters in Portsmouth until it moved to Reading in 2007. The Agency was cut back in 2008 when the reduced staff were reorganised into RSA(North) and RSA (South). The RSA was renamed as the Recovery Agency on 1st January 2009 and tasked only with recovering specific cultural and historic items that were still listed as missing. In 2012 the Agency was wound up and the functions absorbed into the main Home Office work.

Dress

No official dress was issued to the initial RSA teams. Most wore tough work clothing (often the older pattern of DPM, few wore 95 pattern as this was too thin), often with a DPM jacket over the top.

As it was a Civil Service Agency, teams did not wear rank. In June 2000 the RSA patch was issued to be worn on both arms (these were often unofficially modified to add the team number underneath). In 2005 a standard uniform was finally issued consisting of a dark blue set of combat trousers, “wooly-pully” and combat jacket. The RSA patch was changed to a blue backing (although green patches were common to at least 2007). Head dress was never formalised but early on DPM field caps or bush hats were common, after the blue uniform was issued, blue versions were common. Some teams acquired kevlar helmets and body armour, usually with DPM covers.



Organisation

Teams rotated through three roles, usually on a four weekly basis.

1. Active – these teams moved into designated areas of London (although teams had the authority to change their area of operations if they are following up on rumors). Small finds were collected by the teams, larger finds were recorded for follow up operations by Response Teams (if it was of particular importance then the team would hold in place until a Response Team could be dispatched).
2. Response – these teams often worked in pairs to create a double strength team (these pairings were usually fixed). These were tasked with leading convoys to active teams who had found a major cache. They were also used to extract teams in trouble.
3. Reserve – these teams would be conducting maintenance or training. They were available as back up response teams with 24 hours notice for exceptional finds.



Illustration 3: Team 13 composed of the survivors of Teams 42 and 62 in March 2000. Interestingly they all appear to be wearing a mix of climbing helmets of assorted types. Note the mix of civilian and military vehicles. Home Office Archive

Each team had a paper strength of 6-8 although some teams were 10 strong, especially when two teams went under strength and were amalgamated.

In addition there was an intelligence unit (established in June 2000) which was initially tasked with interrogating prisoners and refugees to locate possible caches. Established with help from the Joint Services Interrogation Wing, this gradually expanded its role to undertake covert missions to actively search out information.

Vehicles

Almost all teams were issued Land Rovers, usually on a scale of 2-3 per team. Usually these were soft top (at most one in each team was hard top as these could not carry cargo as well). Many were civilian vehicles repainted into a military style. All vehicles ran on alcohol fuels, petrol being too scarce to be used. From 2006 gradually teams started to return to petrol or diesel. All vehicles were also fitted with a winch to extract themselves or a team member from difficulties. Many were issued with trailers.



Illustration 4: Land Rovers of RSA Team 23 in March 2002. The driver Harry "Homer" Simpson appears to wearing his beret from his service in REME 1994-2001. Private collection of Harry Simpson

Response teams had access to Bedford RL 4 ton trucks (supplemented by other trucks both civilian and military). These often had an L4A4 Bren on the roof AA MG mount. At least one Response Team was always issued Stalwarts for the amphibious capability for operations near the River Thames.

The vehicles can often be the best way to identify RSA from military. RSA vehicles had no special insignia unless painted on by the individual teams. They carry however civilian license plates not military pattern i.e. white front and yellow rear in the format of three letters, one to three numbers and a letter identifier for the year in black (military plates were white on black in the format of two numbers, two letters, two numbers).

Armament

Teams were issued with a mix of small arms, a typical team of 8 had 3 x L9A1 Browning High Power pistols (drivers), 3 x L2A3 Sterling SMGs and 2 rifles (any of L1A1 SLR, L85A1, L85A2, L85A3, Sterling 7.62, Sterling 5.56 or L47 series Kalashnikovs). Shotguns often replaced the rifles or SMGs. Occasionally a team carried a sniper rifle, squad automatic (often L4A4 or .303 Mark II or III Brens) or a belt feed MG. Heavier weapons were VERY rare but the rapid response teams were temporarily issued a Carl Gustav, M2 HMG or the occasional LAW when required.



Personalities

Margaret Gardner the future government minister served in RSA Team 22 from 2005 until it was disbanded. She was

Illustration 5: Margaret Gardner in 2023. Photo courtesy of Grantham

responsible for leading the team that recovered the last known copy of the Gutenberg Bible in the UK. She published a fictionalized account of her life in her first novel “Rescue Rovers” in 2018. The lead character of the novel Juliet Killroy went on to feature in a series of spy novels over the next decade.

Carl Ingham was the team leader of RSA Team 62 who was instrumental in the eventual tracking down of the Soviet SD452. He lead his team in pursuit while radioing for help. In a number of firefights he lost most of his team but kept the speznatz team in contact until help arrived three days later. Retiring in 2008 he published an account of this and his post-retirement five year search for the Polish Republic's seals in the book “The Polish Seals.” This was filmed in 2023 as “Hunting



Illustration 6: Kevin Link as Carl Ingham, carrying an L1A1 with team members with another L1A1 (John Trevor as Jason Oliver) and bizarrely an MP34 SMG (Faye Walters as Danni McKaye), in reality they carried an L2A3, Lee Enfield No4 and 7.62 Sterling respectively.

the Seals” starring Kevin Link (himself an ex-RSA Team 9 member from 2008 until it was closed down).

Edward Frasier, OBE was the former head of the RSA from its founding to closure. Responding to his political masters he moved the Agency from being an organization aiming to recover items to help rebuild the UK to an organization recovering cultural and historic treasures. He has been accused of not placing enough emphasis on recovering art (in particular paintings), his standard response to this was that these had such a low survival rate. He died of a heart attack in 2014. His widow Martha has provided much material for this article.

Appendix 1: Character Creation

Version 1.0

Entry 6+ British only

Coolness under fire -1

CRM or PST 20 SCR ½ cost WVD 20 INT ½ cost

Version 2.0

British only

Initial term (war term only):

- Rifle or pistol 1
- Wheeled vehicle 1
- Interrogation 1
- Scrounging 1

Subsequent terms (only in campaigns set later)

4 levels chosen from:

- Rifle
- Pistol
- Wheeled vehicle
- Scrounging
- Observation
- Interrogation
- Computer

The RSA Medal

While the RSA was not a military organisation members with three years service were entitled to a medal. This was also awarded posthumously where the qualifying period was waived and to all serving members when the agency was dissolved.

The medal bore the King's head on the front and a ruined skyline on the reverse with a tree symbolising regrowth behind it. The ribbon was grey to symbolise the ashes with a single green central stripe for regrowth. In the order of precedence it is worn after gallantry and campaign medals but before long service medals (it follows the medals of the voluntary aid societies).