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INSIDE THIS ISSUE:

- DEFENDER ● DISCOVERY
- FREELANDER ● MILITARY
- RANGE ROVER
- SERIES I, II, III



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● **21st CENTURY III:** IMPROVE YOURS FOR STREET AND OFF-ROAD

Dutch master expands off-road academy

Clutch of new Defenders for Camel Trophy veteran's Ardennes operation

CAMEL TROPHY veteran Raoul Jacobs has bought eight new Defender Td5s for his famous off-road academy in the Ardennes region of Belgium.

Amsterdam-based Raoul represented Holland in the 1989 Amazon event – reputed to be the toughest Camel Trophy of the lot. But he survived and opened Off-Road Adventures in 1993.

Ten years on, it's the biggest off-road operation in the Benelux countries, employing five full-time staff and 50 freelance instructors.

"I'm very proud of our team," says Raoul, 40. "I started this company with the idea to enjoy every

day of my life and I still do. My instructors are real adventurers – outdoor people, four-wheel-drive enthusiasts and Land Rover freaks. They're the best.

"I've been hooked on Defenders ever since the Camel Trophy. It changed my life and I decided to make that experience accessible for everybody. That means really tough off-road driving."

The site in the beautiful Ardennes is set in dense forest, with steep hills and plenty of mud. The company also operates sites in Holland. Customers include the Dutch police, fire services and army, all of whom come for 4x4 training.



Fully kitted-out Defenders have to earn their keep

Despite all that off-roading, Raoul still harbours a dream. "It's to drive the Paris-Dakar," he says. "And one day I will do it."

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Another Ardennes adventure gets under way



PHOTOGRAPHS: ANDREW DUSMAN



What a grueller!

Charity comp safari proves a tough test

The wry smile on the face of the man trudging toward us said it all. He'd spent all winter preparing his Land Rover for the first speed event of the year, then hit an unexpected tree stump after just a few seconds. Helmet tucked under his arm, he headed for the pits.

Within minutes, the roar of V8s from the other side of the woods told us the course was clear and my wife Helena and I settled down in the small clearing to await the first of the remaining 37 vehicles.

The army training ground at Mereworth Woods, Kent, comprises fast gravel and

tarmac tracks, joined by a few deeply rutted channels between the trees. It makes for very challenging terrain.

Tony Howland, clerk of the course, again came up with a very special comp safari. In doing so, he and the Southern Rover Owners' Club (SROC) helped raise thousands of pounds for the Kent Air Ambulance organisation. Tony makes his living as a traffic cop, so he knows just how valuable their service is.

All nine of the four-mile laps would count in the results, so there was no taking it easy first time round. Of course, the inevitable

happened: too fast on unfamiliar ground leads to early casualties – three retirements after just two laps, three more on the next.

Among the survivors, a pattern began to emerge. SROC's Howard Leat, last year's winner, performed consistent sub-11-minute laps behind the wheel of his V8 special. Southern Counties Off Roader Richard Gore, winner in 2001, gained momentum after early experimental circuits in his diesel Bowler. Anglian ROC's Colin Jamieson in his V8 Land Rover buggy had slotted himself neatly between the two.

By day's end, the toll on vehicles had grown. Just 17 of the 38 starters completed their ninth lap at racing speed, the rest either retiring or hobbling around, taking a "max" rather than admitting defeat.

Howard held on to receive – once again – the trophy from Keith Eatwell, representing the main sponsor, Dutton Forshaw. Colin Jamieson took the runner-up prize and Richard Gore, despite a badly cooked diesel, hung on to third spot. Andy Norris was first in class A and Chris Smeeth, partnered by Jenny Tanton-Brown, had bounced their way round in a respectable time to claim the Leaf-sprung Trophy. The Diesel Cup went to Vid Matimong.



ABOVE: winner Howard Leat (left) with Keith Eatwell
LEFT: Dade Webster of the SROC