

## Police with military gear gives pause

By Rhonda Cook February 24, 2013

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ATLANTA — The southeast Georgia town of Bloomingdale is tiny but well armed.

Metro Atlanta police departments and sheriff's offices have armored trucks and personnel carriers in their arsenals.

And the Carroll County Sheriff's Office has in its possession four grenade launchers should there be a need to send canisters of tear gas or bean bags into a volatile situation.

All donated surplus military equipment is available to law enforcement agencies nationwide — large and small.

Some people are upset that there are local law enforcement agencies armed with such weapons of war. But the agencies that got the guns, armored vehicles and grenade launchers say it sends a message to would-be criminals: Officers "are armed to meet any threat," so criminals should just stay away, said Bloomingdale Police Chief Roy Pike.

"Having the equipment precludes having to use it," Pike said. "In the 20 years I've been here, we haven't had to use deadly force against anybody."

From the so-called 1033 program operated by a U.S. Department of Defense unit, Pike's department of 13 officers acquired a grenade launcher for shooting tear gas, two M14 single-shot semi-automatic rifles and two M16 military-style rifles converted to semi-automatic from automatic.

The Defense Department established the 1033 program in the late 1990s to provide state and local law enforcement agencies with weapons, helicopters, armored vehicles, body armor, night-vision equipment, surveillance equipment and protective gear.

It also provides such things as surplus .45-caliber handguns and first-aid supplies.

Several local law enforcement officials said if their agencies had to buy the stuff, they'd just do without most of it. But since it's donated, they find a place for it.

There is no cost to local taxpayers since they've already paid for the equipment with their federal taxes.

According to the most recent inventory by the Georgia Department of Public Safety, \$200 million in surplus military equipment and weapons is in the hands of 600 Georgia law enforcement agencies, large and small.

Some say it's an example of the militarization of police departments.

"I think military-grade weapons should be restricted to just that, the military. If local police run into a situation where someone is using those types of weapons, then call in the National Guard," said LaShanda Hardin, who lives in Clayton County.

The Cato Institute, a Washington-based think tank that promotes individual liberty and limited government, believes the military surplus program should be shut down, said Tim Lynch, director of the criminal justice project.

"When this equipment is given away, police departments start saying, 'Let's grab it.'" And once the equipment is in the hands of law enforcement, "we have militarized units going into the community in situations where they aren't warranted," Lynch said.

“This is one of the most alarming trends in American policing,” Lynch continued. “We used to call them peace officers and they would treat people ... with more respect and civility. We’re getting away from that. We’re getting into these military tactics and mind-set that the people they (police) come into contact with are the enemy ... and part of this is the militarized units in police departments.”

According to state records, the Georgia Department of Corrections has one armored truck and the state Department of Homeland Security has seven armored vehicles.

State records also show agencies that have benefited from the program include:

The Waycross Police Department, which has two armored personnel carriers and 16 M15 rifles.

The Cartersville Police Department, which has an armored personnel carrier and 17 M14 rifles.

The Doraville Police Department, which has an armored personnel carrier.

Newnan PD, which has an armored personnel carrier, 15 M16s and 12 M14s.

Clayton County PD, which has a helicopter, an armored truck, 11 M16s and five M14s.

Cobb County PD, which has an armored truck, 106 M16s and eight M14s. Cobb also has a second armored vehicle, which it bought using federal grant funds.

Other agencies with armored trucks include the Sandy Springs and Pelham police departments and the Gordon, Morgan, Oconee, Pickens and Walton county sheriffs offices.

According to state records, the U.S. Department of Defense has put the value of the armored personnel carriers at almost \$245,000 each and the armored trucks at \$65,000 each. State records did not assign a value to the rifles or the grenade launchers.

The agencies who have them say they save lives, and there is a waiting list of agencies that want armored vehicles as well as weapons.

“It gives the ... SWAT guys a protection to where they can get closer to the folks shooting at them,” said Don Sherrod, director of excess property for the Georgia Department of Public Safety, which oversees the program for the DOD. “When you pull up in something ... and the bullets start bouncing off, they (criminals) give up.” Cobb County Police Department SWAT uses its two armored vehicles to extricate people from a “hot zone” or to get officers closer to a “volatile situation.” But regardless of what law

enforcement officials contend, Kimberly Binns, a multimedia designer who lives in Decatur, is alarmed by what military-grade firepower could mean for law-abiding citizens.

“I do not see the need for police departments to have such an extended arsenal,” she said.

Candace Garrett Daly, a Cobb County homemaker, is equally unnerved.

“What are we headed to?” Garrett asked. “Whatever it is seems to be already in motion at a breakneck speed. The police are preparing for an enemy. My question is, ‘Who is the enemy?’”

Atlanta Journal-Constitution data specialist Kelly Guckian and staff writer Ernie Suggs contributed to this article.

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