

The Atlantic Wire

Local Police Departments' Favorite War Machines

[Adam Clark Estes](#) 3,968 Views Dec 5, 2011

News of the little-known Pentagon program that practically gave away \$500 Million worth of retired military equipment to local police departments last year prompts the question: What the heck are cops actually doing with tanks and grenade launchers? As Benjamin Carlson's [new report on the growing "1033 program" in *The Daily*](#) makes clear, the heavy artillery is not for routine traffic stops. With nearly \$500 Million worth of equipment in 2011 versus only just \$212 Million last year -- this does not count the [billions doled out to local police in federal grant money for anti-terrorism efforts](#). The Department of Defense's rapid expansion of 1033 coincides with a spike in SWAT team activity, suggesting that the increasingly militaristic capabilities of local law enforcement agencies are actually representative of increasingly militaristic police operations. By now we're all familiar with the pepper-spraying cop epidemic at crackdowns against Occupy protests nationwide. Does *The Daily's* report about 1033 also mean we may soon get to know tank-driving cops and a grenade-launching cops? Frighteningly, it might, so we made a list.

Tanks

The past few years have seen a proliferation of bulletproof, assault rifle-ready, tear-gas launching armored personal carriers. The most common model is the Lenco BearCat, and based on the company's promotional video, the thing is pure rock and roll. The BearCat goes off-road, carries half a dozen soldiers and destroys entire walls with a single blow from its front-mounted battering ram. Last month, a Minnesota county sheriff used \$237,000 in federal grant money to buy a BearCat and recently used it "to retrieve a kidnapping victim. "We negotiated the release of the victim, who went immediately into the BearCat and they were able to retrieve her safely," the sheriff told *The Daily*. "Previously, we would have pulled up in a van, which would not have protected anybody or anything." More than basic protection, however, some local officers suggest that the use of tank-like armored vehicles make for a good intimidation tactic. "If somebody looks out and sees a Ford Crown Victoria sitting out there, they may not take you very seriously, but if they look out the window and see this thing sitting there, they're going to know you're serious," a Virginia county sheriff [told his local paper](#) in October. It is pretty scary-looking. "But it's actually become a community relations tool," said the SWAT commander in Erie, Pennsylvania. "It's an ice breaker, like a firetruck when they take it to parades."

Grenade Launchers

The colloquial name "grenade launcher" can be a little bit misleading. The Pentagon's given away a lot of these weapons to local police departments, but the most common use is not to hurl hand grenades but to launch less-than-lethal objects. It was this kind of projectile that fractured the skull of Scott Olsen, the Iraq War veteran who [ended up in critical condition](#) after being hit in the head with a rubber bullet or tear gas canister during an Occupy Oakland crackdown. The more mundane use-case scenario for local law enforcement agencies would be to force suspects out of a hiding place. A Cedar Rapids Special Response team [recently justified](#) the purchase of five grenade launchers with a story about using a Vietnam War-era "gas gun" to drive a burglary suspect out of a house. Cedar Rapids police captain Steve O'Konek told the local newspaper that the military tools just work. "Some of the technology the military has used has proven to be very successful and great tools for us," O'Konek said. "Anytime we can avert a confrontation with somebody, we'd just as soon do that."

Drones

Ok, now we're getting into pretty scary territory. Earlier this year, the sheriff's department in Montgomery County, Texas, in [attracted national attention and concerns from privacy advocates](#) when it purchased a \$250,000 Shadowhawk drone equipped with night vision capabilities and, potentially, a grenade launcher. Local officials pacified concerned citizens by explaining that the drone would be used in missing persons cases where aerial surveillance would come in handy and the small size of the drone would evade detection, in the case of kidnappings. Some sound predictably concerned about the grenade launcher detail. "If the Shadowhawk proves itself during law enforcement missions, it could only be a matter of time before a lethal payload is introduced for drone use on U.S. soil," [imagines](#) a blogger at Glenn Beck's news site The Blaze. "Police drone operators back in the station could then be making life or death decisions with the click of a button." Indeed, the Shadowhawk looks like it could do some serious damage, according to this promotional video from its manufacturer, Vanguard Defense Industries:

M-16s

Strangely, the military's use of assault rifles seems almost commonplace in the context of much more advanced equipment likes tanks. *The Daily's* report would suggest that a trend perhaps started with an M-16 and graduated up to a grenade-launching drone. Pointing to an incident earlier this year, when a SWAT team accidentally shot a grandfather of 12, Carson reports on how the weapons come to influence the law enforcement:

"It's kind of had a corrupting influence on the culture of policing in America," the Cato Institute's Lynch told *The Daily*. "The dynamic is that you have some officer go to the chief and say, people in next county have [military equipment], if we don't take it some other city will. Then they acquire the equipment, they create a paramilitary unit, and everything seems fine."

As the number of SWAT raids has ballooned from a few thousand per year in the 1980s to 50,000 per year in the 2000s, the risks of such tragedies occurring rises.