



Feds subsidize Florida law enforcement's military equipment stockpile

By William Patrick
August 27, 2014

TALLAHASSEE, Fla. — From M-16 assault rifles to reconnaissance helicopters to electric golf carts, local law enforcement agencies in Florida have been stocking up on surplus military equipment for years.

At just pennies on the dollar, it's easy to understand why.

"My operating costs are so cheap it's ridiculous," John Coppola, chief pilot for the Brevard County Sheriff's Office, told Watchdog.org.

Coppola is in charge of purchasing decommissioned military equipment for BCSO, something the 35-year law enforcement veteran says he's been doing for almost 20 years.

"I run our air unit for almost nothing. If you saw our budget you'd laugh," Coppola said, aware of public blowback over military equipment use.

Watchdog.org contacted the sheriff's office after reviewing a federal database that indicated Brevard County, population 550,000, received 79 military helicopters through the federal government's 1033 program. That figure turned out to be inaccurate as it likely includes surplus helicopter parts and other equipment meant for a local Air Force base.

The sheriff's office has obtained, however, four helicopters, two M113 tracked armored personnel carriers (no longer in use), many of the county's allotted 395 assault rifles, two grenade launchers, and more within the past eight years. While cheap, such purchases are under increasing public scrutiny, particularly due to recent events in Ferguson, Mo.

Three of the BSCO's helicopters are OH-58 models, formerly used for observation and direct fire support. Now, they're used for law enforcement purposes in Brevard on both day and night shifts. The purchase price was only \$500 each, according to Coppola. A UH-1 helicopter, also known as a Huey, cost only \$2,000 and is reportedly used in rescue and firefighting operations.

As far as Coppola is concerned, he's saving taxpayers money.

"The only way I can do this is to do it through the (1033) program. Otherwise I'd have to go out and spend \$3 million dollars apiece for helicopters, plus insurance and all the parts to support them."

Coppola made the same point about M-16s. "Normally we would pay \$600 to \$700 for each of them. I think we paid about \$75 dollars (per M-16) just for the paperwork and the transfer fee."

"You're going to need the weapon anyway so why go out and buy a new one. We (taxpayers) already paid for it," he said.

For many, it's a compelling argument considering the implicit dangers involved in certain law enforcement activities. But not everyone buys the cheaper-is-better logic when it comes to arming cops with hardware intended for foreign battlefields.

"We know about the military industrial complex, but we have a secondary system too: the militarized police complex," said Trevor Burrus, research fellow at the libertarian Cato Institute's Center for Constitutional Studies, in a phone interview.

Burrus said the equipment cost savings act as a federal subsidy allowing local police to militarize. Normal budget constraints might otherwise prevent it.

"There's a spinning wheel of funding that produces a lot of military equipment, then gives that equipment to police departments. They get a great deal, but ultimately we shouldn't be funding that much military gear to begin with," he said.

"There's a lot of surplus military gear out there because we make an amazing amount of military gear," Burrus said.

It begs the question: Are we better off with heavily armed police?

Local law enforcement agencies in most of Florida's other 66 counties have taken advantage of the bargain-basement-priced surplus equipment. Only Broward, Glichrist, Taylor, Gulf and Union counties didn't receive military gear since 2006, according to federal records.

Leon County, encompassing the state capital, received 1,934 assault rifles, three helicopters and two Mine-Resistant Ambush Protected vehicles, or MRAPs, according to the data. Miami-Dade County, with 2.5 million residents, obtained 242 assault rifles, two helicopters, four MRAPS, five grenade launchers and two other armored vehicles.

Calhoun County, population 14,500, bought a helicopter for drug eradication and search and rescue purposes, a county sheriff's spokesperson said.

Watchdog.org contacted the Florida Department of Highway Safety and Motor Vehicles to inquire what security equipment the state highway patrol may have acquired, but our request for comment wasn't returned.

Coppola, who has a strong favorable view of purchasing military gear on the cheap, said much of what he buys has little to do with combat equipment.

Recently, he said he purchased three cases of rope for an officer training obstacle course, \$150 boots for prisoner work crews at just \$2 a pair, and an \$1,800 machine bearing for only \$10.

"Last week I picked up three electric carts called Gems through the 1033 program," he added.

When asked what the sheriff's office used the two M113 tracked armor vehicles for — now decommissioned and waiting for pickup — Coppola said to serve search warrants and for armed encounters.

"Do we really need a big gun? Not until we need it," he said. "You just don't know when it's your turn."