

# More cops use armored fleets as Americans amass arsenals

## Federal money, attacks on cops fuel trend for armored fleets for police

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The 1960s-era hunk of steel lumbered cautiously toward the Lake County home where a gunman had barricaded himself with a high-velocity rifle.

Inside the military-surplus vehicle, Sgt. Ralph McDuffie hugged his rifle when the gunfire exploded and indented — but didn't pierce — the armor just 3 inches from his helmet on that unforgettable day, Feb. 11, 2004.

Since then, the Cold War-era vehicle that protected McDuffie and other officers has been traded in for something even tougher — a bulletproof truck with a \$237,000 price tag — because the old vehicle couldn't stop armor-piercing rounds.

As Americans become better armed and attacks on officers increase, local law-enforcement agencies are responding by increasingly spending more on such armored vehicles as Lake County's new Lenco BearCat: an 18,000-pound truck that's impenetrable as the Man of Steel.

Experts say the increasing demand for high-tech, big-ticket items such as armored vehicles marks a shift from traditional community policing toward a military-style approach to protecting local communities.

The change will create a rift between the people and their police forces, said David Rittgers, a legal-policy analyst for the libertarian Cato Institute. But cops say the armament demonstrates how serious law enforcement is about ending the violence that threatens the public.

### Feds fund new armor

The tanklike vehicles, modified trucks, Humvees, tractors and other pieces of equipment are being purchased in large part with federal grants and stimulus money, officials said.

Law-enforcement agencies in Orange, Osceola, Seminole, Lake, Brevard, and Volusia have been awarded more than \$9 million in Department of Justice and Homeland Security grants since 2009 to update their equipment for policing purposes, government documents show.

Even small police departments have SWAT officers decked out in military fatigues, several pounds of body armor, helmets, night-vision scopes, robot cameras and high-powered rifles, as well as armored carriers.

Sheriff's offices and police departments across the region say these vehicles protect officers and allow them to resolve intense conflicts more quickly with few or no casualties.

Officials estimate the vehicles are called into action a few times a month to lure out holed-up shooters, rescue hostages, execute search warrants and even protect dignitaries.

"It's a cop toy until you are the one on the other side of the bullet," McDuffie said. "Then it's a lifesaver."

### **'America is not a combat zone'**

Jim Fisher, a former FBI agent and professor emeritus at Edinboro University of Pennsylvania, is concerned about what he sees as a militarization of local police departments.

"It's part of an overall trend toward equipping police the way we equip combat soldiers," Fisher said. "Our policemen and women are not at war. American is not a combat zone, and they are not fighting enemy combatants."

Fisher said local police justify acquiring the hardware to the public with fear-mongering and misleading accounts about crime.

"Violent crime in this country has been declining at the same time militarized policing has increased," he said. "There are trend lines going in opposite directions, and it doesn't make any sense."

FBI crime statistics have shown a steady decrease across all categories of crime for nearly a decade.

But law-enforcement officials say they are increasingly becoming the targets of criminals who won't hesitate to kill a cop, according to the Washington-based National Law Enforcement Officers Memorial Fund.

The nonprofit organization that tracks officer deaths reported a 37 percent increase in federal, state and local law-enforcement fatalities last year. Nine Florida officers — including Orange County Deputy Brandon Coates, gunned down during a traffic stop — were among them.

### **Might armor have saved deputy?**

Local officers said the equipment has been proved to save the lives of deputies in the most dangerous of situations.

"Having equipment like this would've helped give us a tactical advantage in 1998 when we lost a deputy," said Capt. Ed Allen of the Seminole County Sheriff's Office.

The Sheriff's Office had no armored vehicles when a gunman fatally shot Deputy Eugene Gregory while he was investigating threats the man had made against his landlord.

Another agency had to use its machine to recover the deputy's body after a 13-hour standoff in which the suspect fired 300 rounds of ammunition.

Soon after, Seminole officials rehabbed a military leftover to function as an armored personnel carrier.

With grant money, they recently purchased an armored van equipped with an elevating platform that deploys officers onto surfaces such as aircraft, trains and buses, as well as inside tall buildings with less exposure.

The Orange and Brevard County sheriff's offices and Orlando police each have armored BearCat trucks, made by a Massachusetts company called Lenco.

Company Sales Manager James Massery said it has sold about 20 of these vehicles to Florida agencies and more than 500 nationwide.

The Osceola County Sheriff's Office is looking to buy a BearCat soon, though its deputies have never been shot inside the 50-year-old tank they currently use to execute some search warrants, said Lt. Kevin McGinley.

"I think we are taking the extra step to avoid unnecessary injuries," McGinley said. "It's not a matter of intimidating people — it's about protecting deputies and the public."

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