

Armored vehicles, humvees, body armor, sniper rifles being deployed by local police

By: JAMES SHEA | TriCities.com



ANDRE TEAGUE/BRISTOL HERALD COURIER - After being disrupted by a water jet, the suspicious suitcase is examined by the Bristol bomb robot, Frank the Tank, in February 2012.

Armored vehicles. Humvees. Body armor. Sniper rifles. This heavy-duty equipment that for years has been used on the battlefield is now being deployed by local law enforcement.

The federal government has made it possible. Since the 2001 terrorist attacks, Tennessee has received \$153 million in Homeland Security funds, while Virginia has received \$207 million, according to a study by the Center for Investigative Reporting. While some of the money has been used to purchase radios and computers, much has brought high-tech hardware to local law enforcement agencies.

The Bristol Virginia Police Department obtained a nearly \$300,000 armored vehicle called a BearCat, and the Bristol Tennessee Police Department received a \$122,000 robot that is used in bomb detection through Homeland Security grants.

Both pieces of equipment were used in an incident last year in Sullivan County during which a botched police standoff ended with a family's home being destroyed.

At the same time the federal government has awarded Homeland Security grants, local law enforcement agencies have received surplus military equipment through a program called the 1033 Surplus Property Program. The U.S. military has sent guns, body armor, helicopters and tanks to law enforcement agencies across the country at virtually no cost.

Local law enforcement officials defend the federal government's role in equipping their agencies. Sullivan County Sheriff's Office Capt. Jeff Cassidy said the Homeland Security grants have been vital in recent years.

"It's been extremely important, especially with the economy down and our budget being the same [for several years]," he said.

Sullivan County has received boats, computers, radios and other equipment through Homeland Security grants. It also acquired 14 M-14s, a long-range rifle that has been used in everything from the Korean War to the conflict in Afghanistan, through the 1033 program in 2009.

"They were brand new and still in the packaging," Cassidy said.

He said the guns have never been put into service by deputies during a law enforcement activity, but the department is glad they are available.

There has been some criticism of what has been called the "militarization of local law enforcement." Some opponents say local law enforcement agencies have changed from the days of Barney Fife, the beloved deputy portrayed by Don Knotts on "The Andy Griffith Show." There is concern that increased guns and armor have transformed the culture of law enforcement and can lead to an excessive use of force.

"It's kind of had a corrupting influence on the culture of policing in America," Cato Institute Director Tim Lynch said in a recently published interview. "The trend

toward militarization was well under way before 9/11, but it's the federal policy of making surplus military equipment available almost for free that has poured fuel on this fire."

Norm Stamper, the retired police chief of Seattle and author of "Breaking Rank," is concerned about the changing culture among law enforcement agencies. He said there are times when high-powered guns and armored vehicles are needed, but he is worried that it fosters an "us" versus "them" mentality, something that should be on a battlefield and not part of a local community.

"Soldiers follow orders, and police officers make decisions," Stamper said. "These are life and death decisions. ...When we foster this military, paramilitary mentality we are just reinforcing an officers' mentality. They have been implicitly licensed that whenever we suit up we are out to face the enemy."

After the Civil War, the U.S. passed the Posse Comitatus Act. The law ended the occupation of the South, but also established a separation between military and civil law enforcement. The boundaries blurred in the 1980s, when then-President Ronald Reagan used the military in drug intervention cases.

Stamper said that trend has continued since 9/11 and Homeland Security grants and military surplus equipment have played a role.

"It suggests to me a large trend in U.S. law enforcement," he said. "It is the use of military equipment and military tactics and a lot of that comes from the billions of dollars from Homeland Security."

Local law enforcement officials defend the need for heavy equipment. They cite the case last year in nearby Buchanan County, where a lone gunman shot four sheriff's deputies, killing two. He was armed with an assault rifle and shot at the deputies from a rock outcrop.

The sheriff's department says a BearCat could have been used to rescue the officers after they were shot.

Washington County Sheriff's Office Major Jack Davidson said his officers should have the best equipment available. In an era when many criminals are heavily armed, law enforcement should have enough equipment to remain safe, he added.

"You don't want to put officers in harm's way," Davidson said.

Cassidy said he remembers an incident 10 years ago when a man fired at .22 rifle at deputies, who had pistols but could not hit the shooter. Cassidy had an AR-15 rifle, a military-style weapon, and used the gun from long range to shoot the man.

"We can't really be too equipped if something happens," Cassidy said, adding, "Being armed is better. We don't want them to have the edge."



ANDRE TEAGUE/BRISTOL HERALD COURIER - The Bristol Virginia SWAT team arrives in their armored car as other officers take positions during a standoff last year.