

Dangerous jobs made safer

County gets armored personnel carrier

A sniper pinned down five law enforcement officers with a barrage from a high-powered rifle one night last year on Smiley Road. One officer was shot and another was in a precarious position with bullets smashing all the way through the squad car he was using for cover. Several other officers risked their lives pushing another squad car up to rescue them. It was one of the most dangerous situations law enforcement officers have faced in recent years, officials agree.

Denton County's (Texas) new armored personnel carrier is designed to protect officers who need to go into gunfire in situations like that. But it's also designed for use in drug raids and SWAT team assignments. "It will drive through fences," said Sheriff's Capt. Jeff Wawro. "It has a winch on the front to pull down barricades, and tires that keep going even if a bullet penetrates them. This is a vehicle that is going to make our jobs a lot safer."

The Lenco Bearcat Tactical Armored Response and Rescue Vehicle cost \$209,000, but it didn't cost Denton County taxpayers a cent. Wawro and Deputy Bryan Wilkinson drove the armored vehicle home from Pittsfield, Mass., this week. The Denton County Sheriff's Office used a Homeland Security grant to pay for the vehicle.

County officials preferred that Wawro personally hand over a check that large, and he needed to perform a check on the vehicle before the county received it. So the two men flew there and drove it home. Even with the diesel engine's 11-mile-per-gallon mileage, the trip saved the county money. "I figured it up, and we saved about \$5,000 on shipping costs, even with the fuel and airline tickets," sheriff's spokesman Tom Reedy said.

SWAT team officers checked out the new vehicle with excitement Thursday after Wawro drove up in it. It features gun portholes along both sides and in back and a rotating turret in the roof. The roof is constructed for sure footing and can be used as a platform. "If we need to get in a second story and there's a balcony, we can just walk right in," Wawro said.

The vehicle is protected by 2-1/2 inch thick bulletproof glass and a half-inch of steel armor all around. Even the floor is armored, with an eye towards the booby traps some



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Denton County Texas Sheriff's Deputies Shawn Clary, left, and Cliff Couch stand by the county's new armored SWAT personnel carrier Thursday. Money from a Homeland Security grant paid for the \$209,000 Lenco Bearcat Tactical Armored Response and Rescue Vehicle.

drug dealers like to place around their heavily fortified places of illicit business.

Recently, sheriff's officers had to penetrate two fences and strongly fortified doors at a drug house they were raiding. The armored vehicle would have made shorter, safer work of that, Wawro said.

The vehicle will comfortably seat 10 inside and there are handholds for SWAT officers to hold on in situations where they need to ride outside the truck. Wawro said the SWAT and narcotics teams and officers in the Special Crimes Unit would use it heavily. "But it is available to any law enforcement agency in the county or surrounding area," he said.

This is the only such vehicle in Denton County. Dallas has two armored personnel carriers, and Carrollton and Arlington each have one, Wawro said. "This isn't just our vehicle," he said. "We want to make it available to other agencies. It opens a lot of other tactics we can use to more safely do our jobs."