

ELSEVIER

APRIL 2008 VOLUME 4 ISSUE 4

# LAW OFFICER

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## STEEL WHEELS

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# The Desert BEAR

## Lenco's tactical vehicle provides safety for the Phoenix Police Department



Phoenix' BEAR features four-wheel-drive and is built on a Freightliner M2 commercial chassis. It has a gross vehicle weight rating (GVWR) of approximately 39,000 lbs., meaning it can transport more than 10,000 lbs. of gear, personnel, etc.

president, Len Light, there are nearly 500 BEAR tactical vehicles (and its little brother the BEARCAT) currently in service in more than 80 major cities throughout the United States. The BEAR is also being used by the U.S. State Department for convoy protection of embassy personnel.

Designed to carry up to 20 fully outfitted officers inside its rear compartment and outfitted with ballistic armor plating to defeat large-caliber rounds, the BEAR can be driven into the middle of a firefight to provide cover for officers. It also has an optional battering ram to breach buildings, and can be used to evacuate injured officers or civilians. According to Light, the vehicle weighs approximately 28,000 lbs. and uses six run-flat tires.

The vehicle purchased by the Phoenix SAU has the optional four-wheel-drive and is built on a Freightliner M2 commercial chassis. The powertrain features a 300-horsepower Caterpillar diesel engine coupled to an Allison Emergency Services Transmission. These features give the BEAR a gross vehicle weight rating (GVWR) of approximately 39,000 lbs., meaning the BEAR can transport more than 10,000 lbs. of gear, personnel, etc. to its required destination.

Without getting too specific, the BEAR is fully armored in multiple ways. Light provided numerous examples of vehicles hit with multiple rifle rounds during operational engagement without



**A**s we know, police agencies must constantly compete with other administrative departments for a finite amount of funding resources. The situation becomes more complicated when the cost of specialized equipment—especially large tactical apparatus—means expenditures of several hundreds of thousands of dollars.

In the fifth largest city in the U.S., with a population of more than 1.55 million people in 516 square miles, Phoenix's police department was fortunate to acquire homeland security funding to bolster its tactical capabilities. Although Phoenix has seen a decline in its overall crime rate, the city's close proximity to the U.S.-Mexico border means that crime extends beyond normal stabbings, shootings, robberies and burglaries. The influx of illegal-immigrant smuggling rings into the valley

has added a dangerous component. Illegal-immigrant kidnappings, drop houses and cross-border violence among smugglers has kept the department's special assignments unit (SAU) busy.

Combined with high-risk warrant services, barricaded subjects and agency assists, the need for a tactical vehicle capable of transporting numerous SAU officers, while providing exceptional tactical protection, was evident. The department was using military-surplus Peacekeeper Light Armored Vehicles (LAV) for SAU operations, but the size and configuration of the pickup-based tactical truck was limiting, and it needed a better solution.

### Enter the BEAR

The BEAR, originally developed in 1999 by Lenco Armored Vehicles in Pittsfield, Mass., has been continually upgraded and improved. According to Lenco's



The Phoenix Police Department's special-assignments unit had a need for a new tactical vehicle.

breaches or structural failures.

And the BEAR does more than just absorb punishment; it's also a platform to dish it out. Multiple gun portals line both sides of the truck, which can be used to return fire or discharge less-lethal weapons, such as gas canisters. On top, a rotating hatch door with a gun port can provide cover for a rooftop gunman.


#### **In the Field**

To get a close-up of this vehicle, I visited with Phoenix Police Department SAU Sergeant Christopher Luebkin and some of his team members in the department's tactical village at the Arizona Law Enforcement Academy.

In October 2007, the team acquired the BEAR for approximately \$305,000. According to Luebkin, the BEAR became immediately important. It was literally grabbed from the department's radio installation shop and used at an incident in which a subject was barricaded in a vehicle. Apparently, the

subject was en route to kill his girlfriend with a SKS assault rifle when he was intercepted and the tires of his truck were shot out. Luebkin says the department's two Peacekeeper LAVs were used to block the vehicle, and the BEAR was called in. He says the BEAR's armoring allowed them to get close to the suspect's vehicle and safely deploy gas canisters from one of the gun ports.

Since that incident, the vehicle has been used on numerous operations with great success. Luebkin says the BEAR has been a fantastic addition to SAU because it provides tactical options previously unavailable with the old Peacekeepers. The Peacekeepers, which are built on a one-ton Dodge truck chassis, were unreliable, cramped and did not give the team a concrete idea of its ballistic protection. The BEAR solved these issues.

*One big advantage:* Its size. At more than 30 feet long, 10 feet tall and 8 feet wide, the vehicle literally creates a wall of cover wherever it 



**All BEARs carry dual air-conditioning systems, a welcome feature in Phoenix. It can carry up to 20 fully outfitted officers inside its rear compartment.**

goes. This allows officers to maneuver close to a situation under the protection of the BEAR's armor.

*Another benefit:* The BEAR's interior is cavernous compared to the Peacekeeper. The Peacekeepers can transport only a handful of officers in a seated position that makes ingress and egress difficult. Leubkin says the BEAR can transport two squads, approximately 20 fully-outfitted SAU officers, and still make deployment easy. If a faster deployment is needed, or if additional officers are added, hand and foot rails line both sides of the vehicle's exterior, increasing capacity. Leubkin says the added capacity has been extremely valuable to safely transporting and deploying SAU officers during critical incidents.

#### **Heavy Duty Exterior**

Grab a door on the BEAR, and you'll have no doubt that it's a heavy-duty vehicle. The vehicle has two front doors, a side door and two rear doors you can prop open and lock with spring-loaded pins. Moving any of them requires concentration.

According to Lenco's Light, the BEAR is resistant to grenades, mine blasts, IEDs and RPGs. It can also be outfitted with additional underbody blast shielding. In this case, overkill



can be a good thing; Luebkien says the BEAR's ballistic protection and multiple gun ports translate into more tactical options and safer operations.

#### **Bonus Features**

The BEAR used by Phoenix also features a front-mounted winch, remote-controlled rooftop spotlights and a rear-facing camera with a video screen incorporated into the rearview mirror. Electronics-wise, the BEAR's console is pretty straightforward with the usual radio, siren and lightbar controls, and various lighting switches. All BEARs come with air brakes, power steering and a driver's seat with suspension.

According to Lenco, other popular



The rear-view mirror features a video screen linked to a rear-facing camera.

options include the front-mounted battering ram, infrared cameras, roof light bars, radiation protection packages, explosive gas detection systems and on-board SCBA to allow personnel to breathe clean, compressed air in hazardous situations.

Importantly, all BEARs carry dual air-conditioning systems, something Phoenix's previous Peacekeepers lacked entirely. Phoenix Specialty Vehicle Detail driver Officer John Robinson told me the only way to get air in the Peacekeeper during the hot Arizona summer was to open the front windshield vents—allowing 115-degree F air inside a steel container of a truck. Not fun. Add fully outfitted SAU officers, and things became downright miserable. So, the simple addition of air conditioning has been a godsend in this hot part of the country.


Robinson also says the BEAR has significantly better front-window visibility, which was a problem in the Peacekeepers. The BEAR's windshield is large and provides a great view of the roadway ahead. Robinson also showed me an intercom system that allows the driver to communicate with individuals outside the vehicle without opening any doors and compromising ballistic safety.

As for driving the BEAR, Robinson says the vehicle can cruise at freeway speeds without issues, doesn't overheat and drives like a Cadillac. He says the BEAR's size makes it less maneuverable than the smaller Peacekeeper, but the overwhelming advantages in other areas more than make up for it.

#### VENDOR INFO

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#### Conclusion

Is there anything the Phoenix SAU would change about its BEAR? According to Luebkin and SAU Lieutenant Gregory Carnicle, field use with the BEAR has determined that given the choice again, they would have most likely opted for the battering ram and chosen a different color. Carnicle points out that the white color selected by the SAU wasn't the best tactical choice. Luebkin agrees, adding that a neutral or black color scheme would better prevent officers from being silhouetted when outside the vehicle. Otherwise, they have nothing but positive comments to say about the BEAR and its capabilities.

After spending an afternoon with the Phoenix SAU and their BEAR, I've decided it's one vehicle I would want around when things go bad. **LOM**

**JP MOLNAR** is a former state trooper and has taught EVOC since 1991 for various agencies. He has also raced cars for 24-plus years and has taught at numerous high-performance racing schools.

*Special thanks to Phoenix SAU Officer Matt Eyrich, Sergeant Joel Tranter, Sergeant Chris Luebkin, Lieutenant Gregory Carnicle, Commander Robert Handy and the enthusiastic, professional group of SAU officers at the Phoenix Police Department for their time and for sharing their BEAR.*