

## Menacing BEAR to protect officers

Sgt. Mike Radford and his fellow SWAT team members said they enjoyed their cross-country drive in their new truck.

The ride was a little bumpy, but what could they expect from the Stanislaus County Sheriff's Department's new armored vehicle: a menacing, black, 25,000-pound truck.

"It's built for safety, not for comfort," he said. "(Other drivers) either slowed down to take a look or had a double-take. No one really knows what it is, but they're all amazed by it."

Radford, a supervisor on the sheriff's Special Weapons And Tactics team, and his travel partners were returning from the Massachusetts factory where the \$270,000 vehicle was built.

The Lenco ballistic engineered armored response vehicle, or the BEAR, is the latest addition to the department's fleet. It's the SWAT team's first specially designed armored truck, and it frees the department from having to borrow a truck from nearby law enforcement agencies.

The cities of Hughson, Patterson, Riverbank and Waterford pitched in a combined \$100,000. The Stanislaus County Board of Supervisors appropriated the rest.

The vehicle was designed for the sheriff's 15-member SWAT team. For years, the team rode in modified armored money trucks. But those couldn't withstand repeated automatic gunfire, would break down and failed to meet emissions standards.

"We would sometimes show up late, or they would just cancel our response and call in another SWAT team," Radford said. "It wasn't just that we wanted to buy a loud, new, cool-looking vehicle."

The sheriff's SWAT team borrowed BEAR trucks from the Modesto and Ceres police departments to approach barri-



The Stanislaus Sheriff's Department S.W.A.T. Team received this new tactical vehicle--a Lenco BEAR, purchased with the help of the Stanislaus County Board of Supervisors. (Brian Ramsay/The Modesto Bee)

caded homes or serve high-risk search warrants. Now, there's no need to borrow a truck, or deal with mechanical and safety uncertainties, Radford said.

Builders at Lenco's factory spent about five months taking apart a Freightliner big rig and adding ballistic armor.

Now, the BEAR sits in the Sheriff's Department parking lot, ready for use in critical circumstances such as hostage situations, rescuing officers caught in the line of fire, serving high-risk search warrants and apprehending heavily armed suspects.

It usually takes about 45 minutes to arrive at the scene after the truck is fully loaded with equipment and personnel, Radford said.

The BEAR, which is becoming the industry standard for SWAT teams, has proven to be a crucial training tool, Radford said. "You're only as proficient as the equipment that you train with," Radford said. "We're going to get to know this vehicle inside and out."

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## Stanislaus SWAT team buys \$270,000 armored vehicle

The sheriff's SWAT team has used it to serve a high-risk search warrant, and the team participated in terrorist-scenario regional training in Alameda County.

The BEAR's tactical features turn the heads of SWAT team members. And Radford said the vehicle serves as a psychological deterrent for heavily armed suspects.

"When this large, black, loud truck shows up in front of your home with the lights and siren on, you might not want to take a chance," Radford said. "The goal is to end an incident peacefully, that's all we want."

The Ceres and Modesto police departments are the only other agencies in Stanislaus County that own BEARs.

Ceres Police Chief Art de Werk said having the same vehicle makes it easy for officers to borrow a truck, and it allows agencies to train together.

Ceres police purchased a BEAR a few months after Andres Raya, an AWOL Marine, gunned down Sgt. Howard Stevenson and wounded officer Sam Ryno in January 2005.

The Ceres police SWAT team also rode in a less-than-safe modified armored money truck, de Werk said.

The truck purchase was part of de Werk's push to revamp his department so that officers can face heavily armed criminals. De Werk said it is unfortunate that police officers have to be equipped in such a "military fashion."

"You didn't have that many assaultive, dangerous situations before," de Werk said. "It now seems to happen every couple of weeks."

Nevertheless, de Werk said, a SWAT truck is a vehicle that needs to be available at all times. He said letting other agencies borrow the truck, free of charge, is part of the close working relationship among SWAT teams.

Turlock police SWAT officers borrowed the Ceres truck on Sept. 29, when a woman was shot at Donnelly Park, followed by a five-hour standoff with her estranged boyfriend before officers negotiated his surrender.

About loaning the BEAR, de Werk said "that's OK with us, because we deal with the same criminals. These criminals don't honor jurisdiction lines."

The Modesto Police Department asks other SWAT teams to answer questions on a threat-assessment form before another agency can borrow its BEAR, said spokesman Sgt. Craig Gundlach. Modesto police need to know who is inside the home, whether there are weapons inside and other crucial information.

"If you need some equipment, we will support you," Gundlach said. "We've just got to follow our policy."

Modesto police could look to other agencies for a loaner if necessary, said Capt. Michael Zahr, who served on the Modesto police SWAT team for 20 years.

He said having three BEARs is a benefit to the entire county because they keep the public and SWAT team members safe.

"You can approach any place in this vehicle, even if they have rifles inside," Zahr said. "It's a much safer way to do this kind of work."