'SWAT Robots' Soon To Protect First Responders

Clarke Canfield, Associated Press

SANFORD, Maine (AP) — A Maine company that's developed high-tech tanks for the military and Hollywood has a new contraption — a ballistic police shield that sits atop a miniature, remote-controlled tank-like vehicle made to protect first responders.

Twin brothers Mike and Geoff Howe said Thursday the "SWAT robot" keeps SWAT teams and other first responders safe while approaching buildings during potentially dangerous standoffs or confronting armed suspects. It also can shield police and the public from explosive devices, like the ones set off Monday during the Boston Marathon, killing three people and injuring more than 170.

The company, Howe and Howe Technologies Inc. of Waterboro, developed the machine with Massachusetts State Police. It was going to be unveiled in Boston this week, but after the bombings, it was introduced instead at the Sanford Police Department on Thursday.

Sanford Police Chief Thomas Connolly, who heads a regional tactical police squad that has trained with the device, said the robot can be a valuable tool for police in dangerous situations.

"It can provide police with a huge tactical advantage," he said.

Police nationwide regularly find themselves dealing with standoffs and kidnappings.

Last week, a heavily armed man held firefighters hostage for hours in his suburban Atlanta home before the Gwinnett County Police SWAT team stormed the house and killed the gunman. No firefighters were hurt.

Gwinnett County Cpl. Jake Smith said the SWAT robot looks like it would be useful as a safe way to approach a barricaded person. But he didn't know how cost-effective the $98,000 price tag would be.

Robots are nothing new in law enforcement.

Bomb squads use remote-controlled robots to locate and defuse explosive devices. Camera-equipped robots are used for surveillance to keep officers out of harm's way.

Police have been known to use robots with articulated arms to lift police shields in front of windows of houses to shield officers from gunshots fired from inside the home, said Corey Luby, of the National Tactical Officers Association, a Doylestown, Pa., organization representing patrol and special operations officers. Police also use armored vehicles as shields to get close when hostages are being held or a suspect

is barricaded inside a structure, he said.

But the SWAT robot, dubbed the "SWAT Bot," is the first robotic device Luby has seen that's designed for specifically for ballistic shield purposes.

"It's another life-saving tool," Luby said. "I'd rather see a robot get hurt than a person."

A team of officers from the Southern Maine Response Team tactical squad demonstrated in a mock drill Thursday how the robot works, with six officers walking behind the mobile bulletproof shield while approaching someone playing the role of an armed suspect.

The machine also has attachments that allow it to knock down doors or drag away cars.

The technology behind the robot is the same used for the company's unmanned tanks used by the U.S. Army and its remote-controlled firefighting robots. It recently built a tank that's featured in "G.I. Joe," a movie starring Dwayne Johnson and Bruce Willis.

No one has bought a SWAT robot yet. But it also has been tested by members of the Massachusetts State Police and the Portland Police Department.

"We need them to tell us what's right and what's wrong," Mike Howe said of the agencies.

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