

Photo courtesy of Chris Maiorano,
Seminole County SO



Commentary:

IN DEFENSE OF ARMORED VEHICLES

By Mark Cannon

The tragic death of United States Park Ranger Margaret Anderson on New Year's Day, 2012 highlights one of the worst fears of the law enforcement medical community — a downed officer with potentially survivable injuries who cannot be reached to administer medical care. After being wounded, Ranger Anderson was able to call for help but fellow officers could not rescue her for more than 90 minutes due to the ongoing gun battle raging around her.

Back in 1997, the North Hollywood Bank robbery brought to the forefront the lack of resources available to law enforcement to launch an injured officer rescue in the face of a hostile environ-

ment. By late morning on that day, numerous civilians and law enforcement officers laid injured and trapped while the fiercest gun battle in United States law enforcement history raged around them for almost 45 minutes. One the most critical decisions made by officers on scene that day was to utilize a bank-owned armored car to rescue the injured caught in the crossfire. Several individuals had sustained life-threatening injuries that required emergent medical care to save their lives. Yet 15 years later, some in the general public still question whether life-saving armored vehicles should be afforded to our officers in the field.

Armored vehicles for law enforcement have been sparsely available through military surplus since the 1960s. Until 9/11, only a handful of armored vehicles specifically designed for the unique needs of law enforcement and rescue operations were in service, but since then, several companies have entered into the burgeoning market. Arguably, the Lenco armored vehicle company has emerged as one the leaders in the industry. The cost of these vehicles is significant, with prices ranging from \$200,000 to \$400,000. With the increased availability of Homeland Security grants after the terrorist acts of 9/11, hundreds of law enforcement agencies

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across the United States have been able to purchase law enforcement-specific armored vehicles.

The cost to the taxpayers combined with the current difficult economic landscape has led many citizens to question the need and fiscal responsibility associated with the purchase of these vehicles in their communities. It is not difficult to appreciate these concerns when school, social services and public works funding are continually being reduced to manage increasing budget deficits.

Almost every law enforcement agency in the country that has purchased an armored vehicle has encountered some negative publicity through town meetings or print, television and Internet media. Fortunately, the need analysis for armored vehicles in law enforcement is overwhelmingly clear. The examples of officer protection provided by armored vehicles can be found in almost every major city in North America. A vehicle's value as a secure platform for any rescue operation is also paramount. Countless lives have been saved by the presence of these vehicles in a time of unprecedented violence.

Criticism of such large expenditures of public funds will only continue to grow unless the law enforcement community becomes aggressively proactive in educating those they protect about the capabilities of these vehicles and the sequence of events associated with acute injuries, rescue time and the loss of life.

Unfortunately, a significant percentage of the general public forms their

perceptions and opinions of law enforcement operations from viewing fictional television shows or movies. Educating the public on factual historical data can benefit law enforcement agencies. The use of simulated reenactments of actual situations may make any local educational program more personal, realistic and informative. The events in Waco, Texas, the North Hollywood Bank robbery and Mount Rainier National Park all provide excellent history lessons about the reality of the world we live in.

It will never be known if Ranger Anderson would have survived if a timely rescue had occurred by her fellow law enforcement officers or if there had been

an armored vehicle with a trained tactical medic readily available. What we do know is the difference between life and death is often measured in seconds and we need to take advantage of those seconds to preserve the lives of the officers who serve and protect our communities. ■

About the author

Mark Cannon, MD is a cardiac anesthesiologist with an additional board certification in critical care medicine. He serves as a Level 1 reserve police officer for the Chula Vista Police Department in Chula Vista, California and is currently assigned to the patrol division and SWAT team. He is a graduate of the Los Angeles County Sheriff's Special Enforcement Bureau SWAT Academy.

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