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New device helping deputies

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By [JUSTINE GRIFFIN](#)

When St. Johns County deputies arrived at a hostage situation in a St. Augustine South neighborhood on Sept. 7, they brought with them a device that only two other law enforcement agencies in the nation possess.

Known as the Rook, the new piece of machinery with bulletproof armor, battering ram attachments and cameras, went into the house of an armed gunman instead of SWAT team members.

"We didn't become huge fans until we started using it and realized just how useful it is," said Sgt. Brian Canova with the St. Johns County Sheriff's Office SWAT team.

The Rook, made by International Defense through Ring Power, is a new Caterpillar-like tracked machine that law enforcement agencies use in hostage situations, crowd control and even disaster or emergency situations, said Chuck Drayton, manager at International Defense.

SJCSO is the third and most recent law enforcement agency to acquire the small tractor-like machine that is operated by a single person sitting inside it. The other two agencies are the Jacksonville Sheriff's Office and the Orange County Sheriff's Office in Orlando, according to Drayton.

"This machine helps officers do their jobs and saves lives," Drayton said. "And not only officers' lives, but victims, too. It helps them get to people in hostage situations safely and saves a tremendous amount of time."

It's been nearly four months since the sheriff's office began sending the Rook on all SWAT emergency calls, Canova said. The SWAT team has used it five times, he said, mainly to break down doors in barricaded suspect situations or to transport deputies safely in an area where someone is armed.

"When you see it in use you can really see how valuable it is," Canova said.

In the past, the sheriff's office purchased vehicles through the Defense Reutilization and Marketing Office, which places old military vehicles and machines in law enforcement agencies.

"The problem with DRMO is that the machines are usually very old and in poor condition," Canova said. "They become very expensive to upkeep."

Canova said they considered the Rook after attending a demonstration at Ring Power in St. Augustine.

"It was a huge plus that it's manufactured right here in the county," he said.

The Rook can cost anywhere from \$200,000 to \$450,000, depending on the amount and types of attachments, Drayton said. Law enforcement agencies can select attachments like battering rams, water cannons, pepper spray guns, platforms, a fork lift and a grappling bucket.

The Orange County Sheriff's Office has been using the Rook for SWAT-like calls for four years, said Lt. Cal Wacker, the SWAT commander for OCSO.

"The new model St. Johns has is a bit fancier than ours, but it still does the same job," Wacker said.

On average, Wacker said their Rook goes out on 25 emergency calls in the Orlando area a year.

Aside from using it as a shield for deputies and to break through doors or windows, the OCSO uses the Rook for crowd control and in emergency situations, such as after a bad storm, he said.

"The grappling bucket can shovel dirt or move debris and even tear off steel grates on windows without a problem," he said. "It's much easier to get to places and clear roads in the Rook than in bigger emergency vehicles."

Wacker said that deputies can stand on a platform and have the Rook raise it into the air to see above crowds during protests.

"It is definitely an asset to any SWAT team," Wacker said. "It keeps people from putting themselves in danger to get things done."

On the morning of Sept. 7, SWAT members used the Rook to safely transport a robot into the house with an armed gunman inside, Canova said. The Rook broke through the front door with a battering ram attachment.

"It goes beyond the normal tactical vehicle," Canova said. "We've really embraced it. It's a better way for us to serve the community."

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