

Tahoe Douglas bomb squad robot deactivates danger

By Susan Wood

GLENBROOK – When a suspicious package turns up, the Tahoe Douglas fire agency brings out the big guns in its arsenal of tools.

In the Glenbrook station stands a robot weighing 500 pounds, spanning 3 feet, standing 4-foot-high, with a reach twice that length and gun barrels pointed – ready for action. But the irony is, she appeared to have the push-button humanity we'd all wish to tap into during a crisis.

Her gender is really a mystery and the naming will come from a contest at the South Lake Tahoe Fire Fest slated for the fall. Jim Antti, a captain with the department and commander of the bomb squad unit, said they get asked that all the time about her name.



Capt. Jim Antti proves training is a never ending component of being part of the Tahoe

Douglas bomb squad.

Photos/Susan Wood

She is capable of dragging out a 200-pound person or device. She can also turn on a dime to position herself in compact spaces, Antti indicated as he pushed the toggle switches on the control panel handling the robot through a computer signal.

Forget Star Trek. Remotec's \$88,000 wonder bought with federal grant funds goes where no public safety official wants to go. She'll go in with her highly trained bomb squad technicians, whether a bomb or just a suspicious package is pinpointed. Weapons of mass destruction are also listed as possible front-line response calls.

"Those are 12-gauge shotguns," Antti said, pointing to two steely barrels on the robot.

It suddenly became apparent what she's capable of doing – blowing up a bomb, of course when it's safe to do so. The "safety" label written in red on the radio-controlled panel was on for good housekeeping, as she prepared to maneuver up a ramp from the back of the half fire truck, half cloak-and-dagger-type hideaway priced at \$320,000.

It's been an up-and-down ride for the robot and the men of the Tahoe Douglas Explosive Ordinance Disposal team formed 15 years ago, although a more informal collective of bomb squad unit has existed for a few decades.

Today's contemporary unit trains and trains and trains for an average of two to three calls a month. But those calls are often serious, even on the responses to hazardous materials. For that, the robot can sniff out the chemical danger with a sensory device attached to her torso. She can also see – with five cameras on board. She comes equipped with a speaker that is used when she is accompanied by a technician needing to

share information. She can walk up stairs and even travel over Lake Tahoe snow just by popping her wheels off.

“She’s designed to go over anything,” Antti said, while pushing buttons. “It’s like a big video game.”

Still, there are no fun and games in these calls. The unit – with its truck a cross between a studio set for the “Jetsons” and “24” – was dispatched to two calls of explosive devices set this spring in South Lake Tahoe.

Tahoe Douglas crews were on hand for one of the region’s worst crimes when a bomb ripped through the second-floor offices of Harveys casino three decades ago. The technicians trained to handle suspected bombs spent more than 30 hours on the device before it blew up.

In April 1995, the unit went to Oklahoma City where a federal building was blown to pieces in the worst domestic terrorism cases in our nation’s history. Even after the fact, the scene requires skilled technicians to maneuver through the rubble.

Then, the 9/11 terrorist attacks hit the nation six years later, and the calls of suspicious devices flourished, along with the funds from U.S. Homeland Security.

“We had a spike of calls after 9/11,” Antti said, adding the Nevada fire department in Douglas County doesn’t mind. “There’s only seven of us, so we depend on the public to recognize a bad situation.”

The Tahoe Douglas unit is one of four specialty divisions in Nevada, covering an area from its base county west to South Lake Tahoe and east to Carson City including the Nevada Legislature with assistance for the state Capitol Police force.

The unit – which collectively spans five decades of experience – joins forces with the ATF and FBI on cases. It assists and

trains inside and out in various terrains alongside the other Nevada units on a regular basis. Complacency from fielding a lack of calls is something the unit battles.

“This is why we train,” the fire captain said.

Occasionally, the tactical squad has made the trek to train with forces in Israel where bomb handling may be considered a way of life.

The world is a dangerous place – with bomb recipes easy to get and easy to make for those with warped personalities and the drive to do damage.

“The Internet has certainly not done us any favors,” the commander said, firing up the van’s generator. “Now you can go on the Internet and find out how to make anything. But what you don’t know is whether the person (online) knows what they’re talking about.”

The suspects are charged with felonies.

The selection process for the bomb squad is lengthy, demanding and not for the faint of heart. For one thing, making the unit means being able to wear a 100-pound suit with a ballistic vest and steel plates. This costs \$28,000. The helmet, complete with a defroster and radio, runs \$10,000.

“Twenty, 30 minutes of work time in a bomb suit, and you’re done,” Antti said.

All the equipment is nicely tucked into closets and compartments in the van. Up front is a fire truck. In back, the van resembles living quarters, with a microwave, coffee maker and refrigerator in case it’s a long call. Two computer screens inside and one outside the truck show the progress of the robot. Floodlights on the back are there to guide the machine.

“We need to be self-contained for a few days,” Antti said.

For undercover cases or those demanding a 4-wheel drive vehicle, Tahoe Douglas fire parks a pickup version of the full van in the Carson Valley.

The unit with van and robot make public appearances, including its annual pilgrimage to the local school's Drug Store Project to give youngsters an up-close-and-personal view of public safety resources.

"I have been asked many times why do we need a bomb squad up here at the lake. It is easy to see that we have a strategic location advantage, that we can respond down to the valley and assist for incidents, and we protect one of the world's natural resources along with the casinos at Stateline," said Eric Guevin, Tahoe Douglas Fire Protection District spokesman.

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