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-feet-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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Sierra Rose sinks at Tahoe Keys Marina dock

The multi-million dollar yacht known as Sierra Rose is two-thirds submerged in water at its dock in Tahoe Keys Marina.



The Sierra Rose submerged in water at its dock in Tahoe Keys Marina. Photo/Anne Knowles

The South Lake Tahoe Police Department received a call at 4:01am Monday that the 85-foot luxury boat was sinking, according to an officer with the SLTPD's two-person unit marine unit who was at the marina in the afternoon to investigate the cause of the accident. The officer said no one was on board at the time and no one was hurt. No information was yet available on why the boat sank.

Mike B. Stewart of Reno, who is listed as a sales contact for the boat on its web site said he was at the marina working with a crane operator and could not talk when reached by phone. Another sales agent listed, Julio César Martinez of San Francisco, said he could not comment since he was unaware the boat had been damaged. Robert Spinnato, general manager at the marina, did not immediately return calls. A call to Lt. Dave Stevenson with SLTPD also was not immediately returned.

The Sierra Rose is a rental yacht, available for $2,000 a night, $12,000 a week or $40,000 for a month, according to its web site. The description says it sleeps a maximum of six in two staterooms each with king-sized beds and private bathrooms, and a crews' quarter. But it can hold 100 people for a summer event or 40 people in the winter when it's too

cold to utilize the upper deck. It also comes equipped with its own speed boat, an all-mahogany 20-foot Grand-Craft sport model runabout.

– Lake Tahoe News staff report

‘Do Not Drink’ in effect for Topaz Ranch Estates

A “Do Not Drink” order remains in effect in the Topaz Ranch Estates General Improvement District after a water line break and a well pump failure on July 8.

Currently the TRE GID is making repairs to one well and discontinued use of another well, which may have been a possible contamination source into the water system.

Results from a new set of tests taken today will not be known until Tuesday afternoon.

The TRE GID has contracted for a private potable water truck to make potable water service available to the community as of 6pm Monday. The truck will be available at the Topaz Ranch Estates Community Center, 3939 Carter Dr., Wellington, Nev. Homeowners will need to provide containers to fill water from the truck.

This order is in effect for water used for potential human consumption, such as drinking, cooking or brushing teeth. Other water uses, such as bathing, washing vehicles, or watering of residential lawns/plants, may continue as normal.

– Lake Tahoe News staff report

Six area construction sites cited for worker comp violations

Six citations were issued for workers' comp violations against firms doing construction in South Lake Tahoe as part of a statewide sweep of illegal construction sites in June.

The California Contractors State License Board, which conducted the operation in conjunction with the state Department of Insurance, Employment Development Department and county district attorneys' offices, is not releasing any names of the companies while investigations are ongoing. But of the 14 job sites in the Lake Tahoe-area that were checked, seven of them have some type of pending action, indicating that 50 percent of the randomly checked job sites were out of compliance with either state contracting, insurance, or labor laws, or a combination of state laws, Melanie Bedwell, a CSLB spokeswoman, told *Lake Tahoe News*.

In South Lake Tahoe, three investigations and audits were opened.

The statewide sweep targeted 133 contractors in 11 counties, where 104 enforcement actions were issued for failure to carry workers' compensation insurance, under-reporting the number of workers to obtain cheaper insurance premiums and to pay less payroll withholding tax, and cash payment to hide unregulated

practices.

“Participants in the state’s underground economy are harmful to everyone,” said CSLB Registrar Steve Sands in statement. “Anyone who neglects their responsibility to comply with state contracting, insurance, and payroll requirements drives up premiums. At the same time, legitimate licensed contractors struggle because illegal operators underbid them.”

– Lake Tahoe News staff report

Travelers want more flights that hurts the environment less

By Peter Myers, Reuters

Over 60 percent of people worldwide want to fly more by 2050, but almost all – 96 percent – believe aircraft need to be more environmentally efficient, according to a study from aircraft-maker Airbus.

With findings drawn from a 10,000-strong survey, the planemaker also consulted with 1.75 million people in 192 countries over a two-year period to better understand the public perception of air travel’s future.

Released three days before the Farnborough International Airshow, the study indicates that quieter aircraft are important (backed by 66 percent of respondents), while almost 40 percent felt the air-travel experience is increasingly

stressful.

Respondents' gripes included queues at passport control; slow check-in and baggage collection; sitting on the tarmac; and circling in holding patterns around airports.

"Capacity constraints are a sign of things to come unless the industry can work together to cut delays, and with aviation set to double in the next 15 years, that's what we're looking at," Airbus executive vice president, engineering Charles Champion said in a press statement.

Airbus, part of European aerospace group EADS (EAD.PA), carried out the research alongside development of a "Concept Plane" which illustrates what air transport could look like as early as 2030, though more likely by 2050.

Read the whole story

Placer County reports on General Plan

Placer County is having a community workshop on its Community/General Plan in the Tahoe basin July 11 at 6pm at the Tahoe City Public Utility District office, 221 Fairway Drive, Tahoe City.

Placer County staff has formed four Plan Area Teams, which include public members. The areas are West Shore Plan Area, which includes Homewood, Sunnyside and Tahoma; Greater Tahoe City Plan Area, which includes Tahoe City, Lake Forest, Dollar Hill and the Tahoe City Gateway; North Tahoe West Plan Area, which includes Carnelian Bay and Tahoe Vista; and North Tahoe

East Plan Area, which includes Kings Beach and Stateline.

The workshop is for developing zoning, development standards, and design guidelines for each area.

A town hall meeting to provide a report on the update of its general plan is scheduled for 6pm July 19 at the Granlibakken Conference Center & Lodge in Tahoe City.

The county will also provide a status report of the Community Plan update process to the Board of Supervisors at their July meeting, which will be at the Resort at Squaw Creek July 23-24.

Tahoe City nursery takes gardening to new heights

By Debbie Arrington, Sacramento Bee

TAHOE CITY – Leslie Hyche learned quickly that gardening at high elevations means being prepared for just about anything.

Snow in June? Plan on it. Unexpected windstorm? Keep everything tied down. Deer with the munchies? Persuade them to move on to another outdoor buffet.

“At first, I thought that gardening up here was very unusual,” she said. “It’s nothing like Davis, where I went to school. But then I realized, most of the country deals with the same stuff we do. They get snow, too. That helped me look at gardening here in a different way.”

Hyche is co-owner of Tahoe Tree Co. and McBride’s Nursery, a Sierra fixture and go-to source for high-elevation gardening.

Hyche also wrote the book “High Altitude Gardening,” which is no longer in print.

“The biggest challenge is the weather,” she said. “Not just snow, but the unpredictability.”

Read the whole story

Missing volunteer found near Wrights Lake

By Michelle Ponto, News 10

A Shingle Springs man is found alive after being missing for more than 24 hours near Wrights Lake.

El Dorado County Search and Rescue teams searched for 65-year old Chris Chaloupka, the missing U.S. Forest Service volunteer Saturday and Sunday before locating him shortly before 9pm Sunday.

El Dorado County Sheriff’s Deputy Matt Cathey told News10 that a team heard a whistle in a distance and then brought in a search dog who located him. Once found he was said to be sitting up and talking but that he was unable to walk his own.

Cathey told News Ten a Calstar rescue helicopter used night vision goggles to land near the injured man’s location where he was then taken to a hospital to be checked out.

Read the whole story

2010 sewage spill may cost NTPUD $232,100

By Kathryn Reed

North Tahoe Public Utility District may have to pay a penalty in excess of $200,000 for allowing approximately 129,500 gallons of raw sewage to reach Lake Tahoe.

The sewage spill occurred Dec. 19, 2010, during a heavy snowstorm. The power went out on the main line and then the generator ran out of gas. No alarms were installed to let officials know the generator was not functioning properly.

By the time the ordeal was over, 500 gallons of sewage had filled a basement and surrounded the home in the Dollar Point area; while the bulk of the untreated sewage went into Lake Tahoe.

The Lahontan Water Quality Control Board is meeting July 12, with the fine on the agenda.

Doug Smith with Lahontan told *Lake Tahoe News* that NTPUD is "pointing the finger at one of their contractors."

He added, though, that the permit is in NTPUD's name, so it's the district's responsibility to follow the Porter Cologne Act, Lahontan's basin plan and the state permit.

"The permit requires they keep sewage in the pipe however they can make that happen," Smith said.

With the event occurring in winter, it did not impact any recreation activities. No one from the public complained, either.

However, the spill impacted lake clarity.

From the administrative civil liability attachment B, it says, “By contributing to the lake’s overall nutrient load, it is reasonable to expect that the discharge also contributed to the degradation of clarity and color within Lake Tahoe as a whole, though the amount of degradation is not likely discernible due to the small added nutrient load compared to the lake’s annual nutrient loading from all other sources.”

Lahontan has recorded nine sewage spills from NTPUD of varying degrees from December 2007 through June 8, 2012.

The board on Thursday will decide if any penalty should be imposed and the amount. NTPUD will make its case and the public is allowed to comment, too.

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Note:

The meeting is July 12, 8:30am, 971 Silver Dollar Ave., South Lake Tahoe.

Tahoe Tails – Adoptable Pets in South Lake Tahoe

Cassie is a beautiful long-haired gray cat who has been at the shelter for several weeks now. She is friendly and affectionate, and may have been overlooked because of all the

kittens (most of them have been adopted) or maybe because her fur is so lush. Cassie is a nice cat who would love to get back into a real home as soon as possible.



Cassie is spayed, microchipped, and vaccinated. She is at the El Dorado County Animal Services shelter in Meyers, along with many other dogs and cats who are waiting for their new homes. Go online to see photos and description of all pets at the shelter.

Call (530) 573.7925 for directions, hours, and other information on adopting a pet.

For spay-neuter assistance for South Tahoe residents, go online.