

La Crosse County's BearCat proves itself in standoff

La Crosse County's armored BearCat vehicle showed battle wounds Friday after being hit by fire during an armed standoff the day before in rural Richland County that drew law enforcement from at least six counties.

Robert Bayliss, 60, ended up surrendering late Thursday afternoon at his home about 2 miles south of Viola, but not before he had exchanged 500 rounds of ammo with authorities and aimed an estimated 15 homemade explosives at three armored sheriff's vehicles.

The standoff came after Bayliss fired on Richland County deputies Monday as they tried to serve him with a lawsuit seeking to evict him for failure to pay \$5,647 in delinquent property taxes and interest dating back to 2001, Richland County officials said. The county took ownership of the property last November.

Authorities called in extra personnel and planned eight hours Wednesday for what was expected to be a showdown Thursday when they tried to arrest Bayliss on attempted homicide charges.

What resulted was the worst firefight in Wisconsin history, law enforcement officials said Friday.

It also was the first serious attack on any of the five armored vehicles Gov. Jim Doyle placed throughout the state in August 2005. Some La Crosse County residents at the time criticized the \$180,000 BearCat as unnecessary and a sign of excessive spending.

But law enforcement officials Friday credited the vehicles — the others were from Dane and Eau Claire counties — with helping end Thursday's standoff without serious injury.

"Without these, we have no idea what we could have done or how long it would have lasted," La Crosse County Chief Deputy Jeff Wolf said. "... we would have had very limited options without it."

La Crosse County Sgt. John Zimmerman drove the BearCat in the clashes with Bayliss. He called it one of the most frightening situations of his life and something he hopes he never has to do again.

But the vehicles performed as officials knew they would, taking shots from a high-powered weapon at close range while everyone inside remained safe, he said.

Zimmerman's vehicle carried eight armed officers from La Crosse, Vernon and Richland counties. Using a bullhorn, they told Bayliss they weren't there to hurt him and encouraged him to come out peacefully and deal with his legal problems in court, Wolf said.

Bayliss instead opened fire with a high-powered rifle from a second-story window, pelting the BearCat's hood, windshield and roof.

When two shots shattered the passenger's side of the windshield, though they did not penetrate the glass, Zimmerman decided they had to flee.

After regrouping from a safe distance, officials sent in all three BearCats, this time shooting at Bayliss to provide enough cover that one could get close enough to fire tear gas into the home, Wolf said.

Bayliss fired back, hitting all three vehicle, and also threw about 15 military-style grenades, damaging one BearCat.

Still, the armored vehicles were able to get tear gas into the home. A fire broke out inside a short time later, forcing Bayliss to come out. Officers fired non-lethal beanbags to subdue Bayliss, then took him into custody, Wolf said.

La Crosse County Sheriff Steve Helgeson said the vehicle's damage still is being assessed and he expects Richland County to pay for repairs.

Bayliss is in the Richland County Jail, and expected to face multiple charges including several counts of attempted homicide, Wolf said.