Two police officers remove the police Special Response Team robot from a van before using it in a December standoff at a Reulet Avenue motel.

Disabled robot Herbie getting new lease on life

By MELISSA MOORE

Little Herbie’s coming back better than ever.

The Police Department’s hazardous duty robot was shot and disabled during a recent police standoff with Ronald Gorenflo, who spent more than 30 hours holed up in an East Washington Street house.

Gorenflo allegedly shot the robot Jan. 14 after it had taken him cigarettes and made a second trip to take him a cellular phone, police spokesman Cpl. Don Kelly said.

“He was not being used in an offensive or aggressive manner,” Kelly said.

The damaged robot stayed in the front yard of the house until a Special Response Team raid the next day.

Kelly said that only the robot’s power source was damaged in the shooting. For less than $300, it’s being repaired and somewhat improved.

The shooting was the first time it’s been damaged in the “hundreds of times” it’s been used.

“It was just a very lucky shot,” Kelly said.

The department bought Little Herbie in August 1997 for just over $41,000.

We would prefer ... not to say exactly what it is capable of.

— Cpl. Don Kelly, police spokesman

It is named in honor of retired Lt. Herb Ginn, who headed the department’s Explosives Division, Kelly said.

Little Herbie’s main function is to cruise up to suspicious packages or bombs and handle them so that real police officers don’t have to, Kelly said.

(The Advocate/Baton Rouge, La.)

The robot is tethered to a controller operated by an officer at a safe distance. When the robot approaches a package or enters a room, the officer can see what’s around it via a remote video hookup, Kelly said.

“His primary purpose in life is to be used in hazardous situations to minimize the danger to our officers and canines,” Kelly said.

The Gorenflo incident is a perfect example of why Little Herbie is worth the money the department paid for him, Kelly said.

Without the robot, an officer probably would have had to get close enough to the house to deliver the cigarettes and phone.

In another standoff in December, Little Herbie was sent into a hotel room to see if the suspect was dead, wounded or just “playing possum,” Kelly said.

But it was too dark for it to send video back to the officer.

Shortly after Little Herbie’s entry into the room, officers discovered the man had committed suicide.

Police are extremely secretive about Little Herbie’s capabilities, and so are his manufacturers.

Little Herbie comes from Remote Inc. in Oak Ridge, Tenn.

The company’s Web site at http://www.remotec-andros.com shows several models of robot, but the page on the site that show the available Special Weapons and Tactics accessories is protected by password.

Kelly said the robot model the Police Department bought can be equipped to do a variety of things, including picking up a package and shaking it to see if it explodes or X-raying the package to give police a better idea of what’s inside.

“It can be capable of defending itself,” Kelly said, explaining that it could be equipped to use pepper spray or chemical spray or fire guns, under the control of the officer operating the robot.

Kelly wouldn’t say which of the available add-ons the department has bought.

“We would prefer ... not to say exactly what it is capable of,” he said.

Little Herbie is pretty agile, Kelly said.

It has wheels and can rise up to look over obstacles when necessary.

Kelly said the robot didn’t cost much more than the $30,000 the department spends to outfit a patrol car.

“This will last a lot longer than the average patrol car,” he said. “It’s a good investment.”