

Swords Into Plowshares



John Flippou, left, drives a firefighting vehicle adapted from a Leopard 1 tank, while Travis Hensley, a senior at the Woodlands High School and a company intern, operates the spray nozzle on the tank during a demonstration of its capabilities in Houston Texas.

German Leopard tank changes into fire fighter machine.

It's been said that a leopard doesn't change its spots. But the Leopard 1, a 1960s era 55 ton German beast of a tank, may be the exception. If a local company is successful in rolling out surplus Leopards retrofitted for firefighting use, the Leopard 1 will blast gallons of water instead of ammo and bulldoze burning brush to battle forest fires instead of enemy artillery.

"Using a tank as a piece of fire-fighting equipment is a new concept that offers many benefits," said Chuck LaBounty, executive vice president of TEXOGATECH Technical Corporation, a South Montgomery County (Texas) company and provider of specialized health, safety and environmental products.

LaBounty's company formed a commercial partnership with two German companies, Krauss-Maffei/GLS and FA-ST, for the purpose of refurbishing and retrofitting military vehicles for commercial use.

He identified potential customers as major municipalities, industrial complexes - such as chemical and petrochemical plants - and woodland firefighting agencies.

The partnership demonstrated the tank's diverse firefighting capabilities recently to the U.S. Forest Service in the Angeles National Forest, north of Los Angeles, Calif.

The modified tank was shipped from Munich, Germany, to the Port of Houston, then trucked to California for the test performance. Additional demonstrations were held recently in Montgomery County for Houston Fire Department Chief Chris Connealy, the Texas Forestry Service and local municipalities. "The response has been very positive," LaBounty said. "In simple terms, the converted Leopard 1 tank is a track mounted chassis with a 5,000-gallon water reservoir built on top.

"It's a two-man operation, with a driver and foam equipment operator," he said.

The tank is 25 feet long and 11 feet wide and rises to feet off the ground. It weighs 35 tons without the full water load.

LaBounty says that despite its bulky mass, the tank is exceptionally maneuverable over all types of terrain and can clip down the highway on its tracks at 40 mph.

"Demonstrations prove it can perform a 50-degree vertical climb over mountainous land," LaBounty said. "And, because it has a soft foot (track mount) the weight is evenly distributed so the tank can maneuver through muddy conditions without sinking.

“Traditional fire trucks can't do this," he said "The tank has the capabilities of a bulldozer and, if necessary, can move a burning truck out of the way with a blade."

Perhaps its most unique piece of equipment is the anti-terrorism nuclear, biological and chemical air-ventilation protection system, which allows the tanks operators to breath safely inside the locked tank for an extended period of time.

The decommissioned tanks aren't proposed to replace traditional firefighting equipment, but could be used to augment existing items. "These tanks have a tremendous amount of value for commercial applications and would help limit the risk to property and life," LaBounty said.

“A reported 2,400 Leopard 1 tanks were produced between 1965 and 1981. While many countries are replacing their fleet of Leopard I tanks with the up-dated Leopard 2 vehicles, at least six NATO countries still are using the Leopard 1,” LaBounty said.

It takes about 90 days to modify the Leopard 1 with the firefighting package.

The cost of the tank would be equivalent in price to a large industrial firefighting apparatus, between \$500,000 and \$1.5 million, LaBounty estimated

The six-month wildfire season begins in late spring and LaBounty hopes the converted Leopard tanks will be battling blazes alongside traditional fire trucks.



(left) John Flippou puts on headphones prior to driving the tank through a firefighting demonstration. (right) A decommissioned Leopard 1 tank outfitted as a firefighting vehicle sprays a stream of water across a field at a simulated fire.