

Tank driver 'had beef' with phone towers

By Brenden Hills and Ellen ConnollyThe Sunday TelegraphJuly 15, 2007 01:00am

A FORMER Telstra worker allegedly stole a tank and used it to demolish six mobile phone towers as he led police on a wild two-hour rampage through western Sydney yesterday.

More than 20 police chased the tank but were powerless to stop it, retreating to a safe distance as the huge vehicle cut a path of destruction through six suburbs.

They could only watch as the driver, hanging out of the top at times, allegedly rammed the tank through fences and into six mobile phone towers, telecommunication relay sheds and an electrical substation.

The damage caused major disruptions to mobile phone services in Sydney's west yesterday.

The divorced father allegedly stole the 1967 Trojan armoured personnel carrier (APC) from his former workplace, A One Lift Truck Service, at Minchinbury.

His former boss, Greg Morris, said the man had a beef with mobile phone towers.

"He used to work for Telstra and told us he was going through a medical claim for his head injury. He said something about the radiation from the towers had caused it," Mr Morris said.

"He actually worked on the tank he stole, doing a lot of wiring and putting the engine in."

The drama began at 2am when the ex-British Army tank - complete with steel tracks and replica gun turret - was taken from a holding shed and headed straight for its first target: an electricity substation at Minchinbury.

The tank then allegedly rammed a police car as it drove from the Mount Druitt Hospital car park.

At its maximum speed of 52km/h per hour, it continued on through the suburbs of Mount Druitt, Dharruk, Emerton, Glendenning and Plumpton with 10 police vehicles in pursuit.

Several times police were forced to retreat when the driver allegedly swung the tank towards them.

He taunted police by leaning his head out the side window to wave at them.

The joyride ended at 4am when the vehicle stalled as the driver attempted to destroy a seventh mobile phone tower.

Police used capsicum spray to subdue the man, who was dragged head first from the tank

by officers.

Mr Morris said he bought the tank from the British military.

He restored the vehicle, which is valued at \$1 million, and he hires it out for weddings and for motor shows.

A colleague who would not be named said the man who stole the tank had a "vendetta" against phone towers.

"He told us he'd worked for a government agency where he had to work around the towers and got radiation poisoning."

"So he planned out a map of where the towers were that he wanted to destroy."

Mr Morris said he was "devastated" at the news.

'I can't believe it.'

Mr Morris described the man responsible for the carnage as a "quiet, well spoken" man.

He left in December but Mr Morris saw him often.

"We were mates, he'd call in for a chat and a few beers."

"The problem he's got is not with us. It's just that it's the tool he needed to do it."

The chase attracted a lot of attention with drivers following the tank.

"It's not something you see in Mount Druitt every day," William Errington, 26, said.

Another local resident expressed similar disbelief after being woken up by her partner to chase the tank.

"Mick said we were going to follow a tank and I thought yeah a fuel tanker. Then the thing drove past us," said Oakhurst resident "Ally".

Mount Druitt Chief Inspector Guy Habberly said the man had not been drinking and did not appear to be affected by drugs.

Yesterday John Robert Patterson, 45, of Dharruk, appeared in Parramatta Court charged with stealing the tank, dangerous driving and malicious damage.

He did not enter a plea or apply for bail and he was remanded to appear in Penrith Court tomorrow.

His defence lawyer Ivan Bertoia told the court that in a police interview his client "suggested he had the authority to behave in such a manner".

Magistrate Terry Forbes said there was a strong case to be made for the case to be dealt with under the Mental Health Act.