

Protesters wheel out their big guns

Massive police presence stops eBay tank from gatecrashing arms fair...

'Excuse me, sir. Please stop this tank.' The tight-lipped face of a Met police officer peers through the hatch. We can't move forward, even if we want to – the road is blocked by five police vans and what appears to be the entire Met riot squad. It's not an auspicious start to a day that began, rather surreally, a few hours ago in a knacker's yard off the A12, with a Saracen MK1 armoured personnel carrier and a group of hijackers.

The hijackers in question are the Space Hijackers, a group of anarcho-pranksters whose activities include protests against everything from globalisation to a lack of public benches. This year, their target is the biannual Defence Systems & Equipment International (DSEi) arms fair, at the ExCel Centre in Canary Wharf, where dealers from more than 56 countries come to salivate over the relative killing power of Exocet missiles, machine guns, cluster bombs and – until last week – leg irons (which were banned from the event on its opening day).

Which brings us back to the tank. The plan is to drive the vehicle (which was bought on eBay for £5,000 and has been stored in a lock-up in Bromley-by-Bow) to the fair and 'auction' it off at the gates.

We'll play the dealers at their own game,' says Agent Bristly Pioneer, the tank's driver (like all good subversives, the hijackers prefer to use their secret agent



Battle stations Agent Hardcastle leads the unusual protest

Agent PA, on the back seat. 'I thought about it and said "Yes – the fair should not be taking place." People who live nearby don't even know about it. That's disgusting. But I'm apprehensive.'

We console ourselves with the fact that the tank (which was made in 1952 and last saw service in Belfast) is no Tinkertoy: in addition to the cannon, it's equipped with six (admittedly empty) smoke-dischargers; and if the tyres come under fire, the wheels apparently just keep turning.

Bristly revs the engine, the stench of petrol fills the vehicle and the sound system, which blasts out via the cannon, is cranked up. The opening bars of 'The A-Team' theme tune blare out, the gates are flung open and we rumble forward, not so much Desert Storm as Desert Tortoise. We get about 50 yards when we're brought to an abrupt halt by the aforementioned police presence. They stare stonily in at us. We serenade them with some Frank Sinatra. Unmoved, they demand to see our documents and insist on checking the tank's roadworthiness. We pile out. The

eye, I do indeed spy another tank. It's huge, it's white and it's, rather gracefully, manoeuvring itself across a mini-roundabout. 'Follow that tank!' I shout to the cabby.

When we finally catch up with the beast (apparently hired from Tanksalot.com, a firm that, mind-bogglingly, loans tanks for weddings) the Hijackers are staging a spoof auction of the vehicle at the fair's entrance. Limousines flash past us as bemused arms execs stare out. A frenzy of bidding ensues ('I bid my first-born.' 'What's your postcode?' 'Baghdad.' 'Okay, so the bid stands at £12.') The tank is finally sold for 'a fistful of dollars'. It's all highly entertaining. Not that you'd know it from the three-man-thick barrier of police officers who are penning us in, and who remain resolutely grim-faced. Across the road stretches another line of coppers. On a mound nearby, 20 black-clad 'bicycle cops' sit watching us silently.

Perhaps they're just doing their job, and using the £4 million of taxpayers' money spent on policing the event to protect us from the bunch of thugs selling their wares inside. But as we leave the party and head to the nearest station, we can't help but note: there's a certain

The photographer and I jump into a cab, shouting: 'Follow that tank!'

game is up. But the Hijackers have one more trick up their sleeves.

'We have another tank! It's heading to the fair. So let's join it!' announces Bristly through a megaphone. Then it all goes a bit Keystone Cops. The Hijackers ditch the decoy tank and charge off towards the fair, with the police hot on their heels.

The *Time Out* photographer and I jump in a cab and follow. Suddenly, out of the corner of my



Surprisingly, there were no takers



Anarchy in the ExCel (well, near it)

names). In his suit and Aviator sunglasses, Bristly is hoping to be mistaken for a South African arms dealer. Sadly, the pink fluffy dice hanging from the tank's cannon might just give the game away.

Nine of us are now crammed into the tank; it's hot, and tensions are rising. It's a bit like being in a khaki-coloured baked-bean tin. 'My mum asked if I really needed to do this,' says a nervous looking



'Have you got a licence for that tank?'

delicious irony about the police blockading a tank to prevent it entering an arms fair.

Rebecca 'Tank Girl' Taylor Photography: Elisabeth Blanchet The Hijackers are now skint. To contribute to their coffers you can buy a Hijacker T-shirt at www.spacehijackers.co.uk

ARMS FAIR SHOPPING LIST

CVF aircraft carrier: £3.9 billion.
Tomahawk Cruise missile: £900,000.
MH-47 Chinook helicopter: £34 million.
Uzi sub-machine Gun: £2,500.
Chemical toilet: £50.