

Cavalry in the Future Fight: An Environment for Cavalry Forces

by MAJ Irvin W. Oliver

A force that can conduct reconnaissance and security operations has been missing from the Army since the elimination in recent years of true cavalry formations. In the future, the Army will again need forces that can conduct the types of operations that were the cavalry's bread and butter. The brigade combat team, the primary operational force of the Army, must be able to secure itself and fight for information while preserving combat power for decisive operations. To provide this capability, the redevelopment of cavalry units should be a central consideration to force planners.

The growing need for a force capable of conducting reconnaissance and security operations for the BCT creates a vacuum that a cavalry force most effectively fills. The increased capabilities and operational objectives of potential threat forces will drive the need for the Army to field and maintain significant cavalry forces in its operational headquarters. These threat forces, both conventional and asymmetric, will increase the need for ground reconnaissance and counter-reconnaissance and security operations, while the classic economy-of-force role of cavalry forces will extend the capacity of larger maneuver forces and provide a reserve force for the higher commander.

Third maneuver battalion

The operational level of war consists of sustained tactical operations oriented toward a common objective: the campaign. Within the Army, corps were the

echelons capable of conducting campaigns, as the requisite enabling capabilities were organic only at that level. Divisions, however, were central in campaign planning. With the shift to a brigade-centric organization, the Army has made many of those capabilities organic to the brigade. These capabilities include engineers, a variety of combat-support assets (intelligence, signal, military police and chemical) and logistics. This modular BCT lacks a third maneuver battalion, which is, arguably, its most significant weakness.

With the recent force-structure changes to the number of BCTs, the Army added a third maneuver battalion in addition to the armed reconnaissance squadron.¹ While this addresses a major shortfall of the modular BCT, it still leaves the BCT incapable of being the fulcrum for campaigns. The armed reconnaissance squadron is simply a reconnaissance organization. In doctrine and in practice, the armed reconnaissance squadron lacks the ability to conduct most security operations; it is unable to guard or cover for its parent BCT.² This requires the BCT to task a maneuver battalion, which drains its combat power for such operations.

Losing capabilities

As the Army faces a reduction in the number of Soldiers in its ranks, it becomes clearer that the Army – and the nation – will lose some of the capabilities it currently possesses. With the loss of the ability to conduct large-scale counterinsurgency operations and the United States' shift towards the Pacific Region, the Army must adapt and evolve to maintain relevancy. The three different BCT formations – infantry, Stryker and armored – need a cavalry capability that has not existed since 2005. In real terms, this means that the Army divested itself of the ability to conduct security operations using an economy of force.

The primary maneuver battalions of the infantry and heavy BCTs

must screen, guard and cover the BCT. In a conventional combat setting, this potentially degrades the maneuver battalions' ability to prepare for successive operations and may also result in a loss of forces. This says nothing of the need for counter-reconnaissance operations, which are arguably decisive in the contemporary environment. For the BCT to be capable of truly becoming the building block of campaigns, it must have a security capability that enables the main-force elements to sustain offensive and defensive operations.

Many conflate the terms reconnaissance and surveillance; they are not interchangeable, however. Reconnaissance is the active collection of information through various methods in terms of reconnaissance. Surveillance, however, is a more passive observation of the environment that may yield information and intelligence. The BCT must have the ability to collect intelligence in all environments and against all possible adversaries. The future force structure of the Army will be smaller, which will require its expeditionary BCTs to develop a detailed picture of the enemy force before decisive engagement.

Providing the BCT with the ability to aggressively conduct reconnaissance operations thus enables it to conserve the brigade's combat power while collecting a clearer picture of the enemy array, which then gives it the opportunity to choose the time and place of decisive engagement. Reconnaissance operations have traditionally been economy-of-force operations – focusing on subordinate units two levels smaller than the parent headquarters. To give the BCT the ability to seize or maintain the initiative, it must have a larger proportion of its combat power dedicated to reconnaissance operations.

Future threats

Future battlefields are likely to see an enemy's use of unmanned surveillance vehicles in the skies, lethal obstacles along likely avenues of approach and an enemy force with substantial communications capabilities. Detailed reconnaissance operations will be necessary to defeat lesser reconnaissance threats, identify disruptive obstacles before they achieve their purpose and neutralize the enemy's ability to reposition its forces based on updated informa-



tion. The need for a cavalry force becomes evident with consideration of likely future threat forces and the contemporary security environment.

Potential threat forces are likely to make deception and information-denial operations primary missions against the clear U.S. advantage in technical intelligence, surveillance and reconnaissance assets. Technical intelligence-collection efforts by the United States have been very effective in identifying and targeting high-value targets, making deception an essential task. Physical confirmation of intelligence will thus be a necessity for Army forces. The need to fight for information is unlikely to go away.

U.S. technical ISR efforts have been highly effective against HVTs in the Afghanistan/Pakistan border region, the Arabian Peninsula and the Horn of Africa. Success against small targets allows the logical assumption that gains against larger conventional targets will be similarly advantageous. Unmanned aerial vehicles, which can conduct both surveillance and strike missions, have been central to recent counter-terrorism operations from Yemen to Pakistan. These successes follow the 2006 death of Abu Musab al-Zarqawi in Iraq, where a UAV was the observer for the 500-pound bomb that killed Zarqawi.³

Unmanned aerial surveillance operations have also helped neutralize al-Shabab in the Horn of Africa.⁴ Future

adversaries recognize the capabilities of U.S. aerial surveillance platforms, and mitigating such a technical advantage will be central to any strategy. Pursuit of such a military strategy will place a greater burden of intelligence collection on ground forces, especially at the tactical level of operations. Satellite intelligence collection may not be as vulnerable as UAVs, so deception will be critical against all forms of technical ISR.

States with anti-satellite capabilities are likely to try to destroy U.S. satellites, while states and non-state actors without such a capability will rely heavily on deception. Some countries have already demonstrated an anti-satellite missile capability and, in the event of conflict with a major state, the destruction or neutralizing of U.S. satellite-based ISR systems is another likely action.⁵ Modern U.S. warfighting relies heavily on these space-based systems, and such reliance is clear to the world. Technology will continue to proliferate at ever-increasing rates, which means tomorrow's enemy may have a comparable capability. Consider Israel's use of UAVs as a path the United States may follow.

The Israeli Defense Force pioneered the use of UAVs in the early 1980s. IDF success with the use of UAVs has led to their enemies employing UAVs in increasing numbers against Israel. Hezbollah used UAVs against the IDF during their 2006 war, which for a va-

riety of reasons – including Hezbollah's material capabilities – saw Israel fight to a draw. Hezbollah used Iranian-provided UAVs as an ISR platform similar to Israeli and American drones. This suggests that potential U.S. adversaries will both neutralize U.S. ISR assets and employ their own against U.S. forces. Deception operations may be quite elaborate, which will make aggressive ground reconnaissance critical before commitment to a course of action.

Reconnaissance operations will be decisive for an Army organized at the brigade level for expeditionary operations. Because BCTs are ideally self-contained combat forces, the inherent expectation is that they will be capable of sustaining operations for extended periods of time. In a smaller Army, each BCT will need to be able to dominate a larger area of operations than they are expected to today. In the event of a crisis, deployed BCTs will likely need to seize and maintain the initiative while awaiting reinforcement. A cavalry force will aid the BCT in doing so. Protracted force deployments leading to large field armies may not arrive in a timely manner, which places the onus on initial forces. Political constraints may also limit the deployment of requested forces. Army BCTs, therefore, must be capable and flexible from their introduction in theater to mission completion.

Future deployment scenarios are more likely to look like they have over the last decade – smaller initial forces arriving in lieu of a large Desert Storm-style buildup. This means that BCTs are likely to be the central actors at the operational level



of war, conducting campaigns with limited external support. For the BCT to prevail at the operational level, any of its endeavors must see it maintain the initiative and momentum of its operations.⁶

Smaller initial force deployments are likely in a political environment that seeks to limit U.S. involvement or due to force constraints. This is a trend likely to continue as the Army reduces its ranks. This is nothing new to the Army, as small force deployments have been relatively commonplace over the last generation of U.S. military operations. Beyond the small force deployments of Afghanistan in 2001-2002 and Iraq in 2003, there is more precedent for this in Somalia and the Balkans.⁷ Such deployments place a premium on cavalry forces that are capable of providing both area security and reconnaissance prior to, or in the absence of, the introduction of additional forces.

Deployed forces must be able to secure themselves as an economy of force while also gaining information. Reconnaissance forces will be central to developing the battlefield picture before decisive engagement occurs. Forces entering decisive engagements without a clear operational awareness risk disruption of theater operations. For example, the discovery of the Fedayeen Saddam during the initial combat operations during Operation Iraqi Freedom highlights the utility of cavalry forces.

The paramilitary guerrilla forces of the Fedayeen Saddam took U.S. forces by surprise, but strategic intelligence assets made their existence known. Of the two remaining corps-level cavalry forces, the 2nd and 3rd Cavalry Regiments, neither served as the vanguard for V Corps' drive north, and V Corps had not planned on fighting these paramilitary forces.⁸ Essentially, the divisions attacking under V Corps had only their organic division cavalry squadrons to fight for information for them. The division cavalry squadrons, like the 3rd Infantry Division's 3-7 Cavalry, found themselves in ambushes or being surprised by Iraqi forces. This enabled the divisions to preserve combat power, but it slowed or halted movement due to the temporary loss of their reconnaissance and security capability.⁹ Cavalry units at each echelon from the corps to the brigade may have enabled an even faster tempo, forcing Saddam Hussein's Fedayeen to react to an even more dynamic situation. In the future, forces that conduct operations without such a capability are likely to find themselves at a serious disadvantage.

Using technology against us

Given a combination of technology proliferation, the use of unorthodox human intelligence collectors and the growing imperative of information superiority, threat forces are likely to conduct aggressive reconnaissance operations against U.S. land forces. This will make counter-reconnaissance another decisive operation, and the security operations that cavalry forces historically perform are central to defeating these efforts. Technology proliferation makes reconnaissance easier for conventional and asymmetric threats to collect intelligence on U.S. forces. Night vision, advances in global navigation and mobile communications all serve to make threat reconnaissance more effective and more lethal when combined with conventional fires or indirect guerrilla fires.

Recent wars around the world have proven this to be true. Hezbollah and Hamas have used modern technology against the IDF, and U.S. forces in Afghanistan and Iraq have found this technology on the battlefield in use against them. The genie of technology is not returning to the bottle, and the Army should recognize the decreased likelihood of having technological supremacy against future enemies. The use of off-the-shelf technology like cellphones, the Internet and civilian Global Positioning System systems may neutralize many of the United States' advantages in technology.¹⁰ This technology will aid future threats fighting the United States and this makes security operations during all forms of operations even more important.

Looking at the future from a reconnaissance perspective, finding the enemy will get even harder than it already is. Future battlefields are likely to center in or near urban population centers that have a major civilian population, which will make identifying human-intelligence collection more challenging. Machine-centric intelligence assets will be useful but will have significant limitations. The judgment, experience and intuitive abilities of the human being have yet to be replicated in a machine. Identifying who an enemy fighter is out of a crowd of people will be a more common task. Having more reconnaissance forces will enable Army formations to provide information and analysis to the higher commander – providing not just a picture, but also an interpretation.

On the security side of this issue, other actors – both states and non-state – are

improving their reconnaissance capabilities. This, including the wider use of technology, means that counter-reconnaissance may be decisive in the future. Non-state actors are increasing the use of unmanned drones, information technology and the using civilian populations to hide, which facilitates reconnaissance against conventional forces. For example, Hezbollah employed UAVs against Israel in 2006, and their use has not only increased within Western military forces, but also among guerrilla and irregular forces.

This is a capability that should be of greater concern for the United States. Like other technologies in use today, it makes sense to expect an enemy to employ UAVs with similar capabilities as American UAVs – including night and thermal vision and to also use them as a weapons platform. Hezbollah's UAVs may have even been equipped with explosives and night-vision capabilities.¹¹

In Iraq, insurgents have even seized U.S. UAVs, possibly for use against U.S. forces.¹² It is not a stretch of the imagination to envision guerrilla forces collecting intelligence or conducting strikes using off-the-shelf products adapted for their use as well as co-opting captured Western UAVs. Keeping in mind the human reconnaissance such non-state actors use extensively, security operations like counter-reconnaissance take on even greater importance. States are also worth noting when looking at the importance of more reconnaissance forces in the BCT.

Several countries that may influence the international landscape are in the midst of defense buildups, which suggests that modern conventional threat forces will have more capabilities than those the United States has faced over the last 10 years. One need only to look at recent reports of several large countries moving to modernize their armies, and an emphasis on ISR is one of the main improvements these countries are focusing on.¹³ If the United States were to face one of these countries, the reconnaissance fight would almost predict success or failure. Coupled with the ability to counter U.S. technology, it seems to make sense to invest in additional reconnaissance capability within the BCT.

Current Army forces will need more reconnaissance assets to best orient combat forces for successful engagement. Because of the decisiveness of reconnaissance and counter-reconnaissance operations, forces with these tasks must no longer be economy-of-force considerations. With the brigade formation being the focal point of an expedition-

ary Army, the Army should resource its centerpiece with capabilities, preserve the power and multiply the force of the BCT. As the Army restores the third maneuver battalion to the BCT, it would do well to equip the BCT with more than a reconnaissance capability.

The BCT's ability to conduct security and economy-of-force operations, in addition to more in-depth reconnaissance operations, will enable it to be successful in an operational sense; it will be able to successfully campaign and maintain the momentum of its own efforts. Forces that arrive in the early phases of a contingency will be better organized to act as more than just a placeholder and, in some situations in a joint/combined environment, the need for a larger force may not be necessary. A real Cavalry force has been absent for far too long, and this is an operational risk the U.S. Army should no longer assume.



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Notes

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ACRONYM QUICK-SCAN

BCT – brigade combat team
HVT – high-value targets
IDF – Israeli Defense Forces
ISR – intelligence, surveillance and reconnaissance
UAV – unmanned aerial vehicles

