

Losing Our Way: The Disassociation of Reconnaissance and Security Organizations from Screen, Guard, and Cover Missions

Robert S. Cameron, Ph.D.



A 1st Cavalry Division vehicle commander peers through his binoculars as he searches for enemy activity 15 August 2004 during the fighting in Najaf, Iraq. The Soldiers of 1st Battalion, 5th Cavalry Regiment, used rubble for concealment of their Bradley Infantry Fighting Vehicles.

(Photo courtesy of the 1st Cavalry Division)

The traditional mission set of cavalry included reconnaissance and security, while the related contemporary doctrine underscored the symbiotic relationship between information collection and the active security screen, guard, and cover missions. In contrast, today cavalry remains associated with reconnaissance, but without the once clear linkage with the active security missions. Pervasive notions throughout the Army now relate reconnaissance organizations with surveillance, but those notions consider security largely in the context of the catchall phrase “area security,” with its force protection orientation. Despite the obvious relevance of area security to counterinsurgency (COIN), it cannot substitute for the ability to execute screen, guard, and cover missions in a fast-moving combined arms maneuver setting. The current absence of doctrinal clarity only obscures the importance

once attached to the performance of these missions by a properly trained and configured cavalry organization. Consequently, Cavalry’s ability to shape the battlefield and ensure freedom of maneuver for friendly forces is undermined.

In the Beginning

The basic doctrinal meaning of security has not changed since World War II. It “embraces all measures taken by a command to protect itself against any annoyance, surprise, observation, and interference by the enemy. The object of security is retention of freedom of action for the principal elements of the command involved.”¹

Historically, this outcome resulted from the execution of screen, guard, and cover missions by specially trained reconnaissance and security organizations. In a guard mission, the reconnaissance unit operates forward to provide an early warning and prevent an enemy force from coming within direct fire engagement range of the protected force. When employed in a cover mission, the reconnaissance and security unit operates as a tactically self-contained organization apart from the protected force. It develops the situation early and deceives, disorganizes, or destroys enemy forces encountered. Screen missions provide early warning of a hostile presence, block enemy reconnaissance probes, and impede threat attacks.

Security missions have experienced a doctrinal de-emphasis while simultaneously becoming disassociated with reconnaissance actions. The roots of this change stem from developments in the late 1990s. At that time, the fielding of new sensor technologies, the emergence of a digital network, and the fielding of the Long-Range Advance Scout Surveillance System (commonly known as LRAS3) combined to provide scouts significant capability enhancements, particularly the ability to collect and share information from afar. These improvements engendered a new contact paradigm in which scouts were to gain contact and develop the situation while remaining safely outside enemy direct fire engagement range.²

This concept proved attractive since it seemed to resolve the survivability concerns associated with the employment of the high mobility multipurpose wheeled vehicle in a tactical reconnaissance role. Under the new contact paradigm, scouts maneuvered undetected to identify hostile forces before direct contact occurred, and they shared information digitally with commanders, enabling the latter to maneuver with precision and engage the enemy at a time and place and in a manner of their choice. The paradigm did not require scouts to develop the situation through close contact with the enemy.³

The new contact paradigm shaped the employment and organizational principles of the reconnaissance, surveillance, and target acquisition (RSTA) squadron. This unit constituted the reconnaissance organization for the Stryker brigade combat team (BCT). The RSTA squadron possessed little combat capability and served primarily in an information collection role. This design



suited the Stryker brigade's orientation on small-scale contingencies, where the importance of understanding human terrain outweighed that of security missions against a conventional military threat.⁴ The RSTA squadron could establish a screen trace to cover the brigade's flank or rear. However, lacking combat power, it relied on friendly combat assets to cope with aggressive threats and to execute cover and guard missions. Instead, primary security missions associated with the squadron included convoy escort and area security.⁵

RSTA squadron concepts soon began to shape doctrine for all reconnaissance organizations. In 2002, a new field manual (FM) applied principles intended for the subordinate RSTA troop to the reconnaissance troop of the maneuver BCT.⁶ A platoon manual published the same year consolidated doctrine for the multiple reconnaissance and scout platoons then in existence. The result reflected the dominance of RSTA concepts. Reconnaissance was emphasized, but security reflected the passive screen, convoy escort, and general area security outlined for the RSTA squadron and troop.⁷

Conversely, doctrine for those organizations specifically designed to execute the full range of reconnaissance, security, and economy of force operations lapsed. The capstone doctrine for the armored cavalry regiment and the division cavalry squadron, for example, remained in FM 17-95, *Cavalry Operations*. The last version of this manual was published in 1996. Even the onset of overseas combat operations in 2001 failed to trigger updates to this manual.⁸

While detailed doctrinal guidance for the execution of traditional security missions languished, reconnaissance units went to war. The 2003 march to Baghdad quickly called into question the wisdom of the new contact paradigm.

Standoff information collection from light platforms proved unrealistic in a confused operational area, characterized by a series of movements to contact and the occurrence of sudden, sharp encounters with Iraqi conventional and paramilitary forces. Commanders questioned the validity of standoff reconnaissance and the doctrine it had spawned. Analysis of operations found that "commanders chose not to employ scouts and brigade reconnaissance troops in the role for which they were intended."⁹

Instead of RSTA concepts, they sought increased survivability and broadened capability for their reconnaissance organizations, particularly the ability to



Tanks and armored cavalry assault vehicles from the 11th Armored Cavalry Regiment form a defensive perimeter at a bridge site in Vietnam during 1970 operations in Cambodia. The distance between the vehicles was much less than armor doctrine stated because of the need for mutual support and to prevent infiltration.

(Department of the Army photo)

develop situations through close contact with enemy forces.¹⁰ In the 3rd Infantry Division, which led the Army's drive to the Iraqi capital, the cavalry squadron possessed this ability and performed well; the brigade reconnaissance troop and battalion scout platoons did not perform well—they struggled to execute their missions.

Events overcame these concerns. In 2004, the Army began its transition to a modular force structure better suited to sustaining a high tempo of unit deployments in a COIN environment. The overall number of BCTs increased, resourced partly through the elimination of the division cavalry squadron. In subsequent actions the Army converted the 2nd and 3rd Armored Cavalry Regiments into Stryker BCTs, thereby eliminating the last organizations with the organic tools, doctrinal underpinning, and specialized training to execute a broad range of reconnaissance and security operations.¹¹ The new reconnaissance squadrons of the modular BCTs possessed fewer capabilities and embraced the reconnaissance and surveillance orientation of the original RSTA squadrons.

Rise of the Battlefield Surveillance Brigade

The disappearance of the armored cavalry regiment and division cavalry squadron left command echelons above the brigade without a dedicated reconnaissance and security organization. The battlefield surveillance brigade (BFSB) became the de facto replacement for these units. Equipped with a variety of intelligence collection, assessment, and fusion capabilities, it was optimized to operate across a broad area, and over time, to develop a detailed depiction of hostile activity and networks—attributes suited to the operational environments of Iraq and Afghanistan.¹² The BFSB marked the culmination of a trend in reconnaissance and security organizations begun with the new contact paradigm and the RSTA squadron. The new unit incorporated similar organizational and operational concepts on a larger scale. Indeed, the brigade's initial designation as a RSTA brigade underscored these roots.

Consequently, the BFSB lacked the organic means to conduct screen, guard, and cover missions. It could not fight for information, it could not lead and protect friendly forces in a movement to contact situation,

and it could not ensure friendly forces freedom of maneuver without hostile interference. Its surveillance capabilities outstripped its reconnaissance capabilities, while the BFSB's minimal combat power made it dependent on other organizations to act on the intelligence it did obtain. Exclusive employment in COIN operations, however, cloaked its inability to operate in the presence of an aggressive threat or in a fast-moving combined arms maneuver operation.

In Afghanistan and Iraq, surveillance, force protection, and area security considerations outweighed the need for screen, guard, and cover missions. Hence, for over a decade organizations primarily oriented toward information collection—like the BFSB—thrived, and the prewar tilt toward reconnaissance and surveillance became a persistent doctrinal trend. The COIN-centric nature of operations in Iraq and Afghanistan expanded the doctrinal footprint of surveillance while diminishing that of traditional active security missions. Sustained COIN operations necessitated long-term monitoring of areas, activities, and people. As a result, reconnaissance and security organizations became associated with reconnaissance and surveillance.

This change in association was and still is promulgated throughout the Army via numerous sources, including U.S. Army Force Management Support Agency's Force Management System Web.¹³ This online source provides descriptions of unit organizations, equipment authorizations, and primary missions. It constitutes a quick reference for soldiers, providing basic information without requiring the user to navigate numerous publications. In nearly every instance, ground cavalry organizations are identified as reconnaissance and surveillance units. Yet surveillance is not security. Surveillance does not include the active measures inherent in security missions, which both shape and protect the brigade commander's ability to maneuver free from threat interference.

Doctrinal Confusion

These developments eroded Army cognizance of traditional security missions and disassociated them from specially trained reconnaissance and security organizations. Paradoxically, new doctrinal publications neither asserted a divestiture of screen, guard, and cover missions nor affirmed in a forthright manner their importance. In Army Doctrine Reference

Publication (ADRP) 3-0, *Unified Land Operations*, the basic principles governing Army operations were identified together with the six primary warfighting functions. Reconnaissance and surveillance became a task associated with the movement and maneuver warfighting function. Screen, guard, cover, and their related tasks found no coverage at all. Although the protection warfighting function alluded to security, the related task list included nothing more than basic force protection measures expected of all combatant forces.¹⁴

A related publication, ADRP 3-90, *Offense and Defense*, directly influenced every other manual associated with tactical tasks. Unfortunately, it encouraged the de-emphasis of traditional security doctrine. ADRP 3-90 noted the importance of security missions, correctly noting their value in providing early warning of hostile actions and sufficient time and maneuver space within which to react to enemy operations. It also identified screen, guard, and cover missions as effective

methods of achieving these objectives. Nevertheless, it cautioned commanders against the diversion of combat power to these tasks and reminded them that no BCT included screen, guard, and cover in its mission-essential task list (METL). Moreover, the manual did nothing to restore the broken linkage between reconnaissance and security operations.¹⁵

The subordinate manual FM 3-90-2, *Reconnaissance, Security, and Tactical Enabling Tasks, Volume 2*, published in 2013, addressed screen, guard, and cover missions. It provided guidance for the execution of these missions and outlined the underlying principles. Yet this manual, too, nullified this coverage with these statements: “All three types of Army brigade combat teams (BCTs)—armored, infantry, and Stryker—have conduct[ed] security operations as part of their METL. No BCT has the cover, guard, and screen security tasks as part of their [sic] Army METL.”¹⁶



Soldiers with 6th Squadron, 4th Cavalry Regiment, 3rd Brigade Combat Team, 1st Infantry Division, prepare to search Starkats village, Khowst province, Afghanistan, 2 April 2011.

(Photo by Pfc. Donald Watkins, Joint Combat Camera Afghanistan)

Taken together, these statements imply that security operations do not include screen, guard, and cover. Certainly, there is no association between these missions and cavalry organizations. Indeed, FM 3-20.96, *Reconnaissance and Cavalry Squadron*, highlighted the capability limitations of the cavalry squadrons of the modular BCTs, directing that the “squadrons of the BCTs and BFSB must focus their efforts and mission sets on reconnaissance.”¹⁷ Such doctrinal guidance marked a retreat from the once clear emphasis placed on the importance of a dedicated organization capable of providing reconnaissance and security for each offensive and defensive task required of ground forces.¹⁸

These recent doctrinal publications reflect experiences in Afghanistan and Iraq where area security and the protection of key facilities, individuals, and major travel arteries predominated. Hence, in the Army’s collective consciousness, security entailed area security, convoy escort, and route security. These missions were performed universally and did not mandate a specially trained organization. The publication of ADRP 3-90 and FM 3-90-2 confirmed this trend into doctrine. Security became the province of all units, regardless of their training, configuration, or METL.

BCT commanders and staffs are not prompted to think of their squadron as a reconnaissance and security organization that can and should be used to perform screen, guard, and cover tasks. That some commanders have, in fact, done so reflects knowledge of past practices. As this knowledge fades, BCT commanders will be less inclined to focus their cavalry squadrons on these tasks unless provoked by the immediate needs of their mission. Consequently, such tasks will not be performed, or combined arms battalions will perform them at the expense of BCT combat power.

With security missions considered a universal responsibility for all ground forces, information collection remained as the primary task of reconnaissance and security organizations that required specialized training. This change is noteworthy, since similar past efforts have not fared well. In World War II, mechanized cavalry doctrine also focused on the singular purpose of reconnaissance.¹⁹ This exclusive orientation did not survive contact with the operational realities of overseas deployment or field commander needs for security missions. Subsequent analysis of reconnaissance operations in World War II found security missions

to be common, while pure reconnaissance missions divorced from other mission types were exceptional.²⁰ Consequently, reconnaissance doctrine from the postwar era to the emergence of the RSTA squadron stressed reconnaissance and security, underscoring their interrelation and the importance of each.

Future Requirements and the Need for Change

Ironically, some doctrinal publications now under development will reaffirm the importance of screen, guard, and cover missions; the critical relationship between reconnaissance and security; and the inherent value of cavalry organizations properly trained and configured to do both.²¹ The Army needs to resolve the doctrinal ambivalence of the higher manuals, correct the descriptions of cavalry missions in Force Management System Web, and ensure coherent guidance for the execution of information collection and screen, guard, and cover from the overarching guidance in the senior manuals down to the detailed coverage provided in subordinate FMs and Army techniques publications. An emphasis on reconnaissance and security must once again replace reconnaissance and surveillance in doctrine, training, and mindset. Clarity of concept must replace doctrinal inconsistency to ensure the proper use of cavalry organizations.

The Army’s shift in orientation from the COIN-only focus of the last decade toward a broader range of warfighting capabilities and potential operational environments make such clarity imperative. Efforts to regain core competencies in every branch are under way, and the combat training centers are hosting training rotations necessitating combined arms maneuver and mastery of the related skill sets. The learning curve has proven steep for units that have completed decisive action training environment rotations, often reflecting a general incomprehension of basic reconnaissance and security principles. Fixing doctrinal inconsistencies related to security missions would facilitate the force’s comprehension of those missions, enable more effective training, and ensure that related concept development would properly reflect cavalry’s reconnaissance and security role.

Such corrective measures are critical to the successful development of the reconnaissance and security BCT. In 2012, division and corps commanders reached

a consensus regarding the inability of the BFSB to satisfy their reconnaissance and security requirements.²² They sought a combined arms organization capable of obtaining and evaluating information through direct interaction with a threat or civilian populace, possessing the means to fight for it if necessary. Its security role was summarized as “to provide early warning, identify opportunities, and prevent premature deployment of main body formations.”²³ In essence, these Army leaders sought a more robust organization capable of operations in a complicated and chaotic battlefield environment against a variety of threats.

The crafting of an effective reconnaissance and security brigade organization provides the stimulus and justification for restoring traditional security missions to reconnaissance doctrine. The planned brigades are intended to operate as part of early entry and forcible entry operations. Unlike the BFSB, they will possess combat power combined with information collection and assessment capabilities. They are intended to operate forward and in close proximity to hostile forces, achieving their objectives through combat if necessary.

The new brigade must be imbued with the mindset and experiences of a cavalry organization. To achieve this and leverage fully their capabilities requires coherent doctrine that restores the clear linkage between security and reconnaissance missions. The two are not mutually exclusive, but interwoven. Reconnaissance by its nature provides information and early warning of threats to help prevent the parent force from being surprised, a point expressed in manuals such as FM 17-97: “Reconnaissance keeps the follow-on force from being surprised or interrupted, and protects it against losing soldiers and equipment on the way to the objective.”²⁴ Indeed, “even during security missions that involve fighting the enemy, the scouts’ primary task remains gathering information.”²⁵ This relationship flows naturally from the forward and mobile presence of cavalry on the battlefield.

For the planned reconnaissance and security brigades, doctrine must provide the guidance for active screen, guard, and cover missions. These missions must become part of the unit METLs and become central to their training. Continuing to ignore such missions or lump them into the general categories of area security and force protection will hamstring the new organizations before they are fielded, with a concomitant

impact on cavalry squadrons and the new standard scout platoons. Units will be called on to execute these missions with or without doctrinal coverage. The difference is that a reconnaissance and security unit with no experience, understanding, or training in screen, guard, and cover missions will do so at a considerable cost in men, materiel, and time.

Alternately, scouts will simply not perform these security missions, endangering themselves and their parent organizations. The first decisive action training environment rotation conducted at the National Training Center in March 2012 included the execution of an offensive mission by an armored BCT. The unit’s reconnaissance squadron ably supported this operation, but upon its conclusion failed to transition into a security mission. The opposing force exploited the absence of a screen line and related active security measures to inflict heavy losses on the BCT and its tactical operations center. Analysis of this defeat underscored the critical linkage between reconnaissance and security:

Reconnaissance squadrons must set conditions for future operations. There is no rest for the weary. The squadron, although significantly fatigued following the reconnaissance phase of the ABCT [armored brigade combat team] operation, should have transitioned immediately to provide security for the ABCT, allowing the rest of the brigade to prepare for future operations.²⁶

The Army currently retains soldiers of all ranks with experience and knowledge of how to execute screen, guard, and cover missions. This knowledge base will not remain in the Army indefinitely, but it can be tapped now to end the doctrinal dispersion of security. A doctrinal reset is necessary to ensure that time-proven cavalry missions and principles are retained and readily accessible to every commander, staff officer, noncommissioned officer, and soldier without undertaking an exhaustive literature search.

Conversely, surveillance needs to return to its proper role as a subordinate, enabling function. These measures will ensure that reconnaissance and security organizations possess the doctrinal tools necessary to achieve success on the next battlefield and avoid self-inflicted capability failure before the first shot of the next conflict is fired.

Scouts out!

Robert Cameron is the Armor Branch historian assigned to the Armor School at Fort Benning, Georgia. He holds a Ph.D. in military history from Temple University and a B.A. in history and economics from Binghamton University. He is the author of over ten articles and three books related to mounted maneuver operations.

NOTES

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