

Cavalry Branch: a Redesignation for the 21st Century

by CPT Nathan A. Jennings

Armor Branch has become a conceptual anachronism. After a decade of infantry-centric wars in Southwest Asia, and a significant reduction in the M1 Abrams fleet due to modular restructuring, the massive tank corps of the Cold War no longer exists. In the place of sheer mechanized density, a new and more dynamic incarnation of America's mounted arm has assumed primacy, centered on the array of reconnaissance squadrons that now enjoy majority status in the armored community.

Given the depth and totality of this transformation, Armor Branch should embrace the heretofore unthinkable: it should redesignate as Cavalry Branch. Such a change would not only recognize the diversity of the current forms and functions of the force but also promote a more relevant and versatile mounted arm.

The ascendance of a Cavalry Branch, harkening back to the very origins of the U.S. Army, would move far beyond the symbolic. In terms of perception, the rebranding would cast aside Cold War connotations of mechanized mass that accompany traditional "Armor" and instead invoke the 21st Century adaptability that the historical notion of "Cavalry" offers. As suggested by CPT Ken Segelhorst in his 2012 essay in *ARMOR*, titled "Keeping the Sabers Sharp," the revitalized application of the historic cavalry spirit would invoke favorable connotations of the Western Frontier while revealing the branch's commitment to increased expeditionary capacity.¹ Furthermore, the change would align the branch's image with the reality of a current force structure that is primarily oriented toward the doctrinal domains of reconnaissance and security (R&S) operations.

In more substantive implications, a renaming would signify the armor and cavalry community's commitment to mounted dominance across all dimensions of ground combat. In this context, the branch would remain

institutionally attentive to the robust mechanized superiority advocated by authors BG David Haight, BG Paul Laughlin and CPT Kyle Bergner in their *ARMOR* article, "Armored Forces: Mobility, Protection and Precision Firepower Essential for Future," but also more accurately reflect the majority functions of its fleeter reconnaissance squadrons.² Not yielding to the false choice between professional biases toward either heavy or light postures, the entire armored corps would benefit from a renewed appreciation of the mutual importance between America's troopers and tankers.

This rebalancing would amount to nothing less than a reinterpretation of the mounted arm's cultural center, representing a dynamic broadening of emphasis across the branch. It would draw upon the most useful aspects of the organizational contest for the heart and soul of the armored community. By combining the rich heritage of the late division cavalry squadrons, legacy armor battalions and armored cavalry regiments (ACRs) with the more varied mounted branch of today, rebranding would unite the disparate wings of the entire community under a more accurate universal identity. While the remaining tank companies in combined-arms battalions (CABs) will always remain crucial to the vitality of the army's mounted arm, the larger proportion of cavalry troops across the array of infantry, battlefield surveillance, Stryker and armored brigades would finally achieve recognition for their status as the branch's fighting majority.

Cavalry Branch: already a reality

The argument for redesignation as Cavalry Branch is grounded not just in the theoretical but also the practical. As the composition of the branch is reevaluated, the assessment rapidly moves beyond realignment of organizational culture and finds deeper validation in the reality of the current force structure. In all but name, due to

the striking imbalance of quantities between tank companies and reconnaissance troops, America's mounted arm is a predominantly cavalry community already. Given this structural rationale, the renaming of an archaically defined Armor Branch can thus be evaluated along three lines of justification: the **physical form** of the force, the **predominant functions** of the force and the **storied cavalry tradition** that predates mechanization.

Force's physical form

The first consideration, which reflects upon the physical form of the mounted component across the various modularity levels of brigade combat teams (BCT), appreciates the vast gulf between quantities of tank companies and cavalry troops now in active service. It narrates in stark numbers the disparities between personnel and equipment associated with the M1 Abrams platforms, and the same associated with the proliferation of humvees, M1117 Stryker recce vehicles, M1128 Stryker Mobile Gun Systems (MGSs) and M3 Bradley Cavalry Fighting Vehicles (CFVs). While the first represents a distinct minority in the community, the latter assemblage indicate a far more versatile and multi-purpose capability across the cavalry majority.³

Beginning with the 20 infantry BCTs (IBCTs) in the Army, there is a like quantity of cavalry squadrons containing 40 motorized cavalry troops now operating in support of both airborne and rifle battalions. Lacking the formidable firepower, protection and mobility of mechanized platforms, these troopers nevertheless carry the ancient *esprit de corps* unique to cavalry's dynamism into the heart of the infantry arena, with an increased measure of expeditionary capacity.⁴ In an ocean of blue, their guidons stream red and white, and it must be remembered they are as vital to the future of the mounted branch as the mechanized legions of III Corps. As a pure component of 19Cs and 19Ds, the singularly R&S focus of the light squad-

rons figures prominently in the argument for a new Cavalry Branch.

A second, and less known, form of light mounted maneuver is found in the cavalry squadrons of the battle-field surveillance brigades (BfSBs). Designed as a division- or corps-level R&S asset in a more economized 21st Century context, the Army's three existing BfSBs each contain a cavalry squadron with two motorized cavalry troops. Like the squadrons of the infantry BCTs, these organizations operate on humvee platforms while conducting light reconnaissance with unstabilized weapons systems. Also like the squadrons of the IBCTs, the BfSB cavalry march under traditional red-and-white guidons.⁵

The cavalry squadrons of the Stryker BCTs (SBCTs) offer the third organizational form where cavalry dominates Armor Branch's presence. Consisting of 24 cavalry troops across eight cavalry squadrons and eight brigades, with more MGS platoons supporting 24 infantry battalions, the cavalry component once again achieves majority status. While offering more firepower, protection and mobility than the humvees of the IBCTs and BfSBs, the Stryker platform provides an intermediate level of armored capability for the force. Also, these cavalry squadrons support their brigades by seamlessly integrating advanced collection technologies into their maneuver. In the Stryker infantry battalions, MGS platoons bring an increase in direct firepower that only the cannons of the armored corps can provide.⁶

The fourth and most dynamic components of the mounted arm are found in the armored BCTs (ABCTs). While the BfSBs and infantry and Stryker brigades field an imposing majority of cavalry troops and squadrons, the tank companies of the CABs arrive to upset the equation in the mechanized brigades alone. Distributed across 15 heavy brigades and six divisions, the Army maintains 30 CABs and 15 cavalry squadrons for a total of 60 tank companies and 45 mechanized cavalry troops.⁷ Though lacking expeditionary rapidity, these heavy legions remain unequaled in the application of precision destruction against ground threats while serving as America's ul-

timate deterrence in land warfare.

Armed with the venerable M1 Abrams on one hand, and a mix of M3 CFVs and humvees on the other, the ABCT represents the current mounted community's maximum fusion of firepower, protection and mobility. Within the organizational lineages of these heavy battalions and squadrons, the fighting spirit of the ACR, division cavalry and tank battalions live on, albeit in a reduced manifestation. In this category alone, the mechanized dimension – the tank companies – outnumber reconnaissance troops by a ratio of approximately 4:3. Given future prospects of reducing brigades while adding another CAB to each remaining ABCT, this ratio is expected to increase to 6:3.⁸

Despite the numerical superiority of the Abrams platform in the mechanized brigades, the total assessment of the mounted arm's composition definitively reverses the trend. Taking in account the aggregate quantities of 19-series company-level elements across the entire spectrum of combat brigades, the disparity between armor and cavalry is staggering: 60 tank companies to 115 cavalry troops. This disproportion results in a mounted arm that is weighted just 34 percent armor to 66 percent cavalry.⁹ Given this acute comparison, it is clear that Armor Branch has already transformed into Cavalry Branch. While the M1 Abrams remains conditionally pre-eminent in the heavy arena, the plethora of scout platforms across the combat and surveillance brigades drives the contrast home: the predominant form of our current force is cavalry, and the gold guidons of the tank companies are the minority.

Predominant function

A second justification for the ascendance of a Cavalry Branch, that of function, stems directly from the composition of the mounted component. As cavalry troops have assumed numerical majority in the force, the mission of R&S has correspondingly risen to the fore. In each of the IBCTs, BfSBs, SBCTs and ABCTs, cavalry squadrons are assigned doctrinal missions of conducting zone, area and route reconnaissance to shape their brigade's

maneuver. When required, and due to the unique mobility of the armored corps, these squadrons likewise conduct the historical cavalry missions of security, escort and, if need be, attack.¹⁰

The ultimate effect of this nearly branch-wide focus on reconnaissance, and the diversity of associated scout vehicles used to conduct it, is that the majority of 19A lieutenants will serve as scout-platoon leaders for their initial assignment. Unlike the Armor Branch of decades past, incoming generations of armor officers will primarily plan and execute R&S, while only a subsection of their peers will lead tank platoons. To be clear: most armor officers will spend their formative years as cavalymen and will never command tank formations. The existence of the Army Reconnaissance Course (ARC) – which is unique in instructing cavalry planning and tactics at the platoon level – underscores the Army's recognition of this reality.

This disparity in armor and cavalry leadership also extends into the ranks of armor captains. Based on the disproportionate availability of tank and cavalry commands for the immediate future, 66 percent of armor captains will command cavalry troops, while only 34 percent will lead tank companies. Also, though CABs currently outnumber cavalry squadrons 2-to-1 in ABCTs, command in the headquarters companies and troops of those battalions will result in parity since armor captains will compete with infantry and engineer captains for the former, but the latter is exclusively commanded by 19-series. This likelihood of cavalry service, in both line troops and headquarters troops, is again recognized at Fort Benning, GA. Like ARC, the Cavalry Leader's Course is provided to instruct R&S-centered troop-leading procedures to company-level cavalymen, while no comparable course exists exclusively for tankers.

The trend in disproportionate cavalry assignments, and therefore focus on R&S operations as opposed to combined-arms assault, continues into the ranks of the armor field-grade officers. Similar to the opportunities available to junior officers, the sheer numerical superiority of cavalry

squadrons over CABs defines the true nature of Armor Branch as cavalry. While all 45 squadrons are ostensibly allocated for assignment to 19-series majors and lieutenant colonels, only 28 CABs are available for the same.¹¹

Taking the disparity in key-development opportunities even further, the operations officer, executive officer and battalion-command billets in the CABs are shared with 11-series officers, thereby reducing further the quantity of O-5 armor officers that will ever command tanks. Like their lieutenants and captains, field-grade officers of the mounted arm are far more likely to seize red-and-white colors than to grasp the same for a CAB. The resulting career path, from commissioning to battalion-level command, reveals likely advancement based in cavalry-centric units focused functionally on R&S operations.

Storied cavalry tradition

The final justification for designation as a Cavalry Branch rests less on quantifiable metrics and more on history and tradition. While the culture of the Armor Branch essentially dates back to mechanization for World War II, the traditions of the U.S. Cavalry and its dragoon predecessors originated with

the nation's founding. Long before the dominance of the main battle tank, American cavalymen and dragoons provided increased mobility to the U.S. Army's campaigns. Throughout the Revolutionary War, the War of 1812, the Mexican-American War, the Civil War, the Spanish-American War and the multiplicity of Indian Wars, generations of horse soldiers prosecuted American wartime objectives with the cavalry's distinctive *esprit de corps*.

In light of this proud history, reactivation of a Cavalry Branch in the 21st Century signifies not a step away from the heart of the armored community but rather a return to the deepest and most enduring culture in American mounted warfare. This history and tradition is seen daily across the various BCTs as troopers hoist the same red-and-white guidons carried by their predecessors in previous centuries. It is reflected in the Stetsons worn proudly by cavalymen and cavalrywomen as they mark their unique status within the larger Army community. It is fulfilled annually in the rigors of spur rides and emphasized by earning golden spurs in combat. And finally, it is found in award ceremonies, where the honors of the Order of St. George are bestowed on those who achieve high levels of branch leadership.

These cherished traditions, harkening back to the founding of the United States, invite the mounted arm of the Army to once again embrace a Cavalry Branch. They connect the cavalymen and dragoons of the 18th and 19th centuries who conducted reconnaissance, security, escort and attacks on the Great Plains with the cavalry squadrons of the modern force who perform almost identical tactical tasks in a global arena. When combined with the tank corps' recent heritage in division cavalry and ACRs, and the ascendancy of cavalry squadrons across the Army's IBCTs, BfSBs, SBCTs and ABCTs over the past decade, a compelling justification for a reinvented Cavalry Branch shines forth.

Moving the branch forward

A revamped branch for the mounted community would unite the disparate wings of the mounted arm with a new focus on versatility and relevance while maintaining a reduced version of the tank force. Yet these changes are not enough. To elevate the armored force under the current system to a higher level of effectiveness, further change is required. As a closing salvo, the following paragraphs suggest several points of improvement that would enhance the competency of any future



Figure 1. Cavalry tradition is commemorated as troopers from 1st Cavalry Division's Horse Cavalry Detachment charge across Noel Field during the activation ceremony of the division's 4th Brigade Combat Team at Fort Bliss, Texas, Oct. 20, 2005. (Photo by SPC Paula Taylor)

Armor Branch or Cavalry Branch.

First, the Army must address the much-criticized deficiencies in the cavalry squadrons of the ABCTs. With a dearth of both firepower and protection, and an anemic allocation of crewmen and scouts in humvees and CFVs, the squadron is suited only for moderately contested R&S operations. It cannot fight for information, nor execute its mission in the face of robust armored resistance. To remedy this flaw, the Army should restructure cavalry troops with a 2/2 slant of tank and CFV platoons. With retention of their tracked mortars, these troops would offer the brigade a measure of the fighting capacity once fielded by the ACRs.¹²

The cavalry squadrons of the IBCTs offer a second organizational structure that requires scrutiny. Given the Army's intent to add a third rifle battalion to the light brigades, these cavalry squadrons should replace their 11-series dismounted reconnaissance troop with a third 19-series motorized cavalry troop. This increase in motorized mobility, in addition to the retention of a robust dismounted infantry platoon as a squadron-level asset, would allow each squadron to symmetrically align their shaping functions with the three maneuver battalions while still using their specialized platoon for deep insertion. If need be, any of the cavalry troops could also be dismounted to increase long-range insertion capacity for the BCT. The BfSBs should likewise adopt this restructuring to allow increased ground mobility for R&S efforts at division and corps echelons.¹³

Third, the Army should address the increasing issue of infantry lieutenant colonels and command sergeants major leading reconnaissance squadrons populated primarily by 19-series Soldiers. While the competency of 11-series field-grade officers and senior noncommissioned officers to lead cavalry organizations is not in doubt – and indeed, this author served under a magnificent infantry squadron commander and command sergeant major who enthusiastically embraced the cavalry culture – the fact remains that for every infantryman who accepts a cavalry command, a cavalryman goes

without. Short of addressing this misplacement, Armor Branch should lobby strenuously for a commensurate share of rifle battalion commands for Ranger-qualified armor officers.

Fourth, cavalry-squadron command teams should continue to embrace the role of “chief of reconnaissance” for their respective BCTs. The mounted community cannot allow itself to become narrowly focused on single-dimensional methods of ground reconnaissance. Instead, it must seek to integrate and administer the entire panoply of brigade-level intelligence-collection efforts and thereby emerge as the habitual leader of any R&S task force. In addition to this effort, Armor Branch should seek to permanently augment each cavalry squadron with an organic military-intelligence platoon to enhance collection capacity internal to the squadron.¹⁴

Fifth, and finally, a slight change in perception must be applied not just to the branch writ large but also to the tank platoons and companies that allow the fullest measure of dominance in ground warfare. As the branch moves increasingly toward a motorized posture due to economy-of-cost measures imposed from national leaders, the tank corps should be raised to elite status within the mounted community. As a critical minority in the force, often operating without the mentorship of 19-series O-5s and E-9s in CABs, only Armor Branch's best and brightest should be allowed to crew the main battle tank. In this manner, let lieutenants and captains at the maneuver courses compete for these elite assignments. Let tanker boots be worn as a mark of selectivity, and finally, consider allowing tankers to own the singular right to wear the black beret as they did in ages past.

The discussion over the institutional center of the Armor Branch will not end with this article. It is offered as a modest proposal to contribute to the ongoing discussion over the future of the armored corps. Yet the implementation of these improvements, in addition to a shift in cultural and organizational emphasis toward cavalry versatility, is necessary to align the American mounted arm with the demands of the post-Iraq and Afghanistan

operating environment. In pursuit of this objective, the redesignation of Armor Branch to Cavalry Branch would offer both a symbolic and substantive move toward achieving that objective.

This argument holds true even when accounting for the expected BCT reconfiguration over the next four years. While the disproportionate reduction across the Army between IBCTs and ABCTs will result in a net increase in CABs and decrease in cavalry squadrons, ultimately bringing parity at 36 apiece, the differential at the company level will remain weighted in favor of a cavalry emphasis. Even when accounting for the addition of a third CAB to each of the remaining 12 ABCTs, cavalry troops will still outnumber tank companies 91 to 72 Army-wide. Considering the previous reduction of the tank corps, this more balanced percentage differential of 56 to 44 should be celebrated by the mounted arm as an increase to the branch's effectiveness and versatility.¹⁵

Given the immediacy of the challenges facing the armor and cavalry force, the way ahead must be decisive yet balanced. Finding effective moderation between the tank-centric corps of the past and an increasingly expeditionary force of the future will emerge crucial to sustaining American primacy in mounted warfare. Furthermore, justification for a reinvention of the mounted arm as a cavalry-centric community is already inherent in the form, functions and traditions of the R&S squadrons that now define most of the 19-series formations across the constellation of IBCTs, BfSBs, SBCTs and ABCTs. For the mounted arm of the 21st Century, it is time to recognize and embrace this reality; for the tankers and troopers of the modern armored corps, it is time to accept the ascendance of an official Cavalry Branch.

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KS, and Baghdad, Iraq (deployed 2006-2007); and 19D Cavalry Scout, 2-2 Armored Cavalry Regiment (Light), Fort Polk, LA. His military schooling includes Air Assault, Airborne, Maneuver Officer Basic Course, Maneuver Officer Advanced Course and CLC. CPT Jennings holds a bachelor's of arts degree in history from Northwestern State University of Louisiana and a master's of arts degree in history from the University of Texas at Austin.

Notes

¹ Segelhorst, Ken CPT, "Keeping the Sabers Sharp: Maintaining Relevance in the Modern Era," *ARMOR*, November-December 2012.

² Haight, David BG, Laughlin, Paul BG and Bergner, Kyle CPT, "Armored Forces: Mobility, Protection and Precision Firepower Essential for Future," *ARMOR*, November-December 2012.

³ Field Manual 3-90.6, *Brigade Combat Team*, September 2010.

⁴ Field Manual 3-20.96, *Reconnaissance and Cavalry Squadron*, March 2010.

⁵ Field Manual 3-55.1, *Battlefield Surveillance Brigade (BfSB)*, June 2010.

⁶ Field Manual 3-20.96; Field Manual 3-20.16, *Mobile Gun System Platoon*, February 2013.

⁷ Field Manual 3-90.5, *The Combined Arms Battalion*, April 2008; Field Manual 3-20.96.

⁸ http://www.army.mil/article/106373/Brigade_combat_teams_cut_at_10_posts_will_help_other_BCTs_grow/.

⁹ Field Manual 3-90.6; U.S. Army organization, <http://www.army.mil/info/organization/>.

¹⁰ Field Manual 3-20.96; Training Circular 3-20.96, *Reconnaissance and Cavalry Squadron Collective Task Publication*, May 2012.

¹¹ Field Manual 3-90.6; U.S. Army organization, <http://www.army.mil/info/organization/>.

¹² Broadwater, Jeff LTC, "Reorganizing the Recon Squadron to Enhance Heavy Brigade Combat Team Capabilities," *ARMOR*, September-October 2007; Pinheiro, Cole CPT, "The Armored Cavalry Regiment:

Battle Proven and Future Primed," *ARMOR*, June-August 2010.

¹³ Field Manual 3-20.96.

¹⁴ Flood, Bryan K. LTC, Hayes, James A. MAJ, and Cook, Forrest MAJ, "IBCT's Reconnaissance Squadron," *ARMOR*, March-April 2011.

¹⁵ http://www.army.mil/article/106373/Brigade_combat_teams_cut_at_10_posts_will_help_other_BCTs_grow/.

Acronym Quick-Scan

ABCT – armored brigade combat team

ACR – armored cavalry regiment

ARC – Army Reconnaissance Course

BCT – brigade combat team

BfSB – battlefield surveillance brigade

CAB – combined-arms battalion

CFV – Cavalry Fighting Vehicle

IBCT – infantry brigade combat team

MGS – Mobile Gun System

R&S – reconnaissance and security

SBCT – Stryker brigade combat team