



Figure 1. A Cavalry scout from 6th Squadron, 1st U.S. Cavalry, uses his sensors to observe the enemy at the National Training Center in May 2015. (Photo courtesy of Cobra Observer/Controller Team, NTC)

The Stryker Brigade Combat Team Cavalry Squadron in Decisive Action

by LTC Mark H. Hoovestol

The brigade combat team (BCT) Cavalry squadron has been exclusively used as an economy-of-force infantry battalion during our conflicts in Iraq and Afghanistan. It is now time to start some serious discussion about bringing Cavalry back into its traditional role. In this article, I will highlight the various Cavalry operations 6th Squadron, 1st Cavalry, 1st Armored Division, was asked to perform during National Training Center (NTC) Rotation 15-08 and provide some recommendations to improve the Stryker brigade combat team (SBCT) Cavalry squadron's organization.

NTC Rotation 15-08 successfully pitted an SBCT, task-organized with one combined-arms battalion and two Stryker rifle battalions, against the NTC's contemporary-operating-environment force. This rotation was the first in recent years to transition from reception, staging, onward-movement and integration (RSOI) directly into combat operations without a series of situational-training exercises prior to the "force-on-force" portion of the rotation.

The Ready First BCT from 1st Armored Division transitioned from a contested RSOI directly into a movement-to-contact mission against the enemy. As in previous decisive-action (DA) rotations, the Cavalry squadron's success had a direct correlation on the BCT's success. The numbers illustrate the unit's success; 6th Cav, through more than 300 consecutive hours of Cavalry operations, provided intelligence to support the BCT's operations with more than 70-percent accurate reporting of the enemy situation.

Current Cavalry doctrine¹ provides a sound template for Cavalry operations in support of DA, but particular attention must be paid to the fundamentals of security and reconnaissance during training. The current organization of the SBCT Cavalry squadron requires some changes to perform its missions of reconnaissance, security and Cavalry operations to properly allow for its fight for intelligence.

Cavalry operations

Throughout NTC Rotation 15-08, 6-1 Cav was constantly on the move. Understanding the types of operations a Cavalry squadron can accomplish is key to its success. Cavalry performs reconnaissance to answer higher headquarters' priority intelligence requirements, provide security to protect the force or give it time to prepare for operations. This is what I term "Cavalry operations." These operations, clearly identified in Cavalry doctrine,² include raids, attacks and defensive operations for limited duration and limited scope to enable BCT future operations. Often, the mere presence of the squadron forward reduces the enemy's options and forces him to make a decision.

During the initial movement-to-contact mission, the squadron – task-organized with an infantry company and a tank company-team – gained and maintained contact with the enemy disruption zone. Taking the initiative from the enemy by seizing key terrain became a theme throughout the rotation. For example, following the brigade's defense of the Central Corridor, the Cavalry squadron was ordered to seize the key terrain of the Brown-Debnam Pass complex, taking options away from the enemy. The squadron was relieved by an infantry battalion, allowing it to continue reconnaissance to identify the enemy's defensive positions in support of the BCT attack.

Understanding all types of missions that Cavalry can perform if properly task-organized gives the BCT options and provides freedom of maneuver, allowing regeneration of combat power.

Improvements

As discussed, the SBCT Cavalry squadron, unlike Cavalry squadrons in the infantry brigade combat team (IBCT) or armored brigade combat team (ABCT), lacks firepower. Equipped with Stryker recon vehicles and limited in firepower to the Javelin (portable anti-tank (AT) weapon), M2 .50-caliber machinegun and Mk-19 40mm-grenade machinegun, the squadron requires some changes to its organization to achieve the missions outlined previously and those required of it in DA operations. One solution to this shortfall is task-organization based on mission, enemy and terrain. During NTC Rotation 15-08, the squadron at different times was task-organized with a multitude of combat forces: a tank company-team, an anti-tank guided-missile platoon and a Stryker rifle infantry company.

While dynamically receiving attachments are part of the nature of the Cavalry, permanently organizing a force that can fight for intelligence would allow the squadron to train for its mission. As the SBCT continues reorganizing its modified table of organization and equipment, the consolidation of the Mobile Gun System (MGS) into the AT company gives that company six platoons: three AT and three MGS. Task-organizing three of these platoons – either MGS or AT, depending on mission and enemy – to the Cavalry troops would enable hunter-killer teams in the Cavalry squadron. Removing three of the six platoons would still allow the AT company, with three platoons of either MGS or AT, flexibility to serve as the brigade reserve force or to provide firepower for the BCT's main-effort battalion.



Figure 2. Stryker Cavalry elements from 6th Squadron, 1st U.S. Cavalry, conduct link-up and recon handover with task-force scouts from 2-5 Cavalry at NTC in May 2015. The 2-5 Cav scouts are mounted on M3 Bradleys. (Photo courtesy of Cobra Observer/Controller Team, NTC)

Material options for improving the SBCT squadron's firepower are readily available and need to be fielded at the earliest opportunity. The Remote Weapon System-Javelin (RWS-J) is an available upgrade that mounts the Javelin AT weapon into the RWS, giving mobility to this lethal weapon system. Adding this to our reconnaissance platforms would provide a significant upgrade to our ability to fight for information. Uppunning the Stryker, or at least some of them, to the 30mm turreted Stryker would also meet this requirement. Even converting two of the six Strykers in each scout platoon would provide a much-needed upgrade. This effort is already underway in Europe in 2nd Cavalry Regiment.³



Figure 3. A prototype Stryker vehicle with 30mm-gun turret. (Photo courtesy of General Dynamics)

As proven during NTC Rotation 15-08, the SBCT Cavalry squadron, if properly task-organized, can accomplish its mission against a mechanized/Armor threat. Our recently published Cavalry doctrine – Field Manual (FM) 3-98 and FM 3-20-96 – provides templates for planning, synchronizing and executing Cavalry operations that provide the BCT with freedom of maneuver. It is time to make a commitment to enabling our Cavalry squadrons, particularly those in the SBCTs, to fight for information. To do this, we need to properly task-organize them with assets that already exist in the BCT, and eventually we need to provide them with some materiel solutions.

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Notes

¹ FM 3-98, *Reconnaissance and Security Operations*, July 2015, http://armypubs.army.mil/doctrine/DR_pubs/dr_a/pdf/fm3_98.pdf.

² FM 3-20.96, *Reconnaissance and Cavalry Squadron*, March 2010, https://armypubs.us.army.mil/doctrine/DR_pubs/dr_c/pdf/fm3_20x96.pdf.

³ Joe Gould, "U.S. Army: Strykers Need Bigger Gun to Fight Russia," *Defense News*, July 23, 2015.