

# Return of the Fighting Executive Officer

by 1LT Matthew Rohrbach

The cavalry troop in today's armored brigade combat team (ABCT) represents the eyes and ears of the brigade commander in a formation that remains unmatched in its ability to employ precision armored firepower in the land domain. The troop is uniquely suited to fight for information when conducting reconnaissance and to employ lethal direct and indirect fires during security operations. Yet the executive officer remains ill-equipped to support the troop or assume command due to the platform limitations of the M1068A3 Command Post (CP).

This shortcoming is compounded in the conduct of combined-arms maneuver (CAM), when the troop is routinely hamstrung by the inability of all its M113 family vehicles to keep pace with the Bradley. This is not news to Army leaders, as the Armored Multi-Purpose Vehicle (AMPV) and variants are scheduled to replace the M113 chassis in the 2020s.<sup>1</sup>

However, these pending improvements lead cavalry leaders to ask a fundamental question about the armored troop organizational structure: should a mission-command (MC) vehicle be included in our modified table of organization and equipment (MTOE) for the executive officer? This question must be answered in two distinct time horizons: 1) the Army must decide if the MC-variant AMPV should remain in the cavalry-troop MTOE for the executive officer in the future; 2) while also struggling with the interim inclusion of the M1068 in light of recent changes to squadron structure and limitations the vehicle places on troop maneuver.<sup>2</sup>

While both of these provide ample opportunity for discussion, this article seeks to evaluate the suitability of the M1068 and AMPV in light of the current operational environment and contemporary doctrine, explaining why a transition from MC platforms to any Bradley variant is not only feasible but preferable for cavalry formations.

## Beyond M1068

Since it was fielded in 1960, the M113 and its variants have served as a central component – albeit an antiquated one – of armored formations in every major American conflict since their introduction to the force.<sup>3</sup> Calling any variant of the M113 outdated and in need of replacing comes as a surprise to no one. More than a year ago, the Maneuver Center of Excellence's director of mounted requirements and the Armor Branch historian stated the case plainly: "[The M113] lacks the survivability, mobility and digital-networking capability required for current and future operations."<sup>4</sup>

After the cancellation of the Future Combat Systems Manned Ground Vehicle (2009) and Ground Combat Vehicle (2014), the unveiling of the first AMPV prototype offers a promising platform to replace the M113 family of vehicles.<sup>5</sup> The AMPV will offer modular designs to replace all current M113 chassis vehicles, with the general-purpose, 120mm mortar carrier, medical-evacuation, medical treatment and MC variants scheduled to replace their counterparts in the squadron starting in the 2020s.<sup>6</sup>

While potential changes to the troop MTOE during the platform transition are indiscernible so far in the future, there is little cause to believe that the executive officer will not command the MC AMPV when it is fielded in armored brigades. The new platform will address many of the limitations the M1068 creates for the troop and the executive officer:

- The MC AMPV offers an impressive array of network and communications capabilities to future troop CPs.
- Two 400-watt generators will support the MC technology suite and afford the integration of a DUKE3 system to combat asymmetrical threats.<sup>7</sup>
- Improvements to mobility, which will be inherent in the adoption of a Bradley-chassis vehicle, will allow AMPVs to follow close behind Bradleys and Abrams tanks with little compromise for terrain or speed.
- Crew survivability and force protection will be greatly augmented through increased armor, a steeper front glacis and an improved fire suppression system.
- Based on the AMPV prototype unveiled in December 2016, crews can expect to employ a turret-mounted medium or heavy machinegun, which is a welcome change from defending the CP with personal weapons.

Nevertheless, these platform improvements fail to deliver the necessary platform capabilities for future cavalry-troop executive officers to support the troop and assume command in combat.

## **Fighting executive officer?**

The executive officer's doctrinal role is inherently flexible but centers on the MC and sustainment warfighting functions (WFF) in both implied and specified duties:<sup>8</sup>

- In conjunction with the troop first sergeant, executive officers manage sustainment operations for the troop.
- Executive officers conduct tactical coordination with attached, higher and follow-on units – a core competency in cavalry-troop operations when conducting a passage of lines.
- Executive officers lead the troop quartering party when establishing a new tactical-assembly area.
- Operating the troop CP with the forward signal noncommissioned officer, the executive officer must compile reports and track developments to report higher and provide the commander current, accurate information so he or she can make sound tactical decisions.

The improvements of the AMPV over the M1068 augment the executive officer's ability to conduct all these operations – yet, while these improvements are necessary, they are not enough.

All current doctrinal references for troop-level mechanized formations identify the first duty of the executive officer as second in command of the unit.<sup>9</sup> Ultimately, this is where current designs for the MC AMPV fall short. MC AMPV designs are limited to crew-served weapon armaments and do not provide the necessary direct-fire capabilities to merit fielding in the armored-cavalry troop when a “5” call sign may need to immediately assume command as the “6” and lead. Indeed, the potential scenarios in which an executive officer may need to assume command of a troop brings with them the distinct probability of the formation being in contact – or with direct-fire contact imminent. Without the M242 Bushmaster – or comparable armament – available to the executive officer's platform, he or she is ill-prepared to assume command.

## **Uniqueness of armored cavalry**

This capabilities gap in succession of command transitions comes at the peril of the troop and the squadron. Perhaps more so than any other BCT, the armored brigade must be prepared to engage threats and adversaries – whether nation-state or non-state actors – who possess mechanized and motorized formations in all geographies.<sup>10</sup> The proliferation of dismounted anti-armor capabilities in the hands of any formation reinforces this reality, and the renewed importance of crew survivability will be vital.<sup>11</sup>

The squadron organizational structure has adapted to the operational environment with the transformation to two 6x36 Bradley platoons troop and the addition of one tank troop. Fourteen more M1A2 Abrams tanks lend the squadron commander a new degree of tactical flexibility, as the tank troop can operate as an organic formation in support of scouts or with tank platoons put under operational control of cavalry-troop commanders. Moreover, with a triangular design for the ABCT, the squadron possesses the ability to pass off contact from one troop to each combined-arms battalion (CAB).<sup>12</sup> These changes – combined with an ability to maintain direct-fire contact and destroy armored and light-armored forces surpassing that of battalion scout platoons – highlight a core competency of the armored-cavalry troop: to fight for information for squadron, battalion and brigade commanders.

Even with the increased lethality of the 13-Bradley cavalry troop, current doctrine and history remind us that cavalry organizations are only as valuable as the information they can provide a commander.<sup>13</sup> Cavalry troops need to not only relay information reports to squadron but also to adjacent units. This is especially true during a passage-of-lines, where cavalry troops will often be required to coordinate directly with another battalion. Likewise, executive officers are better suited to coordinate horizontally for ground medical evacuation or sustainment operations, or to pass off contact internal to the squadron in a platform with redundant and effective communications systems.

These requirements pose a powerful argument to the inclusion of a MC vehicle in the troop – especially during cavalry operations spanning great distances. Indeed, fighting for information is only advantageous should that information lead to a better decision by a commander.

Beyond rapid and accurate reporting, the executive officer is the node for his or her troop's exercise of the MC and sustainment warfighting functions to enable the troop's maneuver and intelligence-collection efforts. Losing frequency modulation (FM) or digital communications in any organization is dangerous, but in the cavalry it can quickly become disastrous.

The M1068 and the AMPV have, and will, provide a reliable delivery platform for reports and orders. Yet in ensuring reliability in MC and sustainment, we sacrifice lethality in an unnecessary tradeoff. In the ABCT, the Army has already solved the problem of intermittent and ineffective communications with higher echelons through the fires warfighting function.

To better understand how the Army has retained constant connectivity between the line-company elements and higher headquarters across great distances, cavalry leaders should look to the M7A3 Bradley fires-support team (BFiST).

### **Past as prologue: M7A3 BFiST**

Though not without its flaws, the BFiST integrates the coordination of mortar, artillery and air assets to support maneuver at the troop level, even given the dispersed nature of cavalry operations. While providing the mobile, protected firepower of the M3, the platform delivers digital and FM communication with the squadron fires cell and has the capacity to simultaneously conduct FM communications in very-high-frequency bandwidths on four nets. The BFiST also provides an ergonomic workspace for fires planning during troop-leading procedures, allowing its crew the ability to battle-track and generate or process fire missions while conducting reconnaissance-and-security operations.

With a BFiST, the troop commander gains a wingman to maneuver with during operations and is afforded the option of attaching the FiST directly to the troop main effort, or to a platoon in contact, with reassurance that the attached asset will not become a liability due to inadequate platform mobility or survivability. In short, the M7A3 effectively balances the necessities of reliable communication, force protection, mobility and lethality at the troop-level in CAM and wide-area security.

The history of the BFiST is also instructive toward modern-day challenges based on its development history. During Operation Desert Storm, units from 1<sup>st</sup> Cavalry Division moved their FiSTs from the inadequate M981 FiST-V into Bradleys to keep pace with mechanized formations on the offense.<sup>14</sup> Along with the FiST, laser locator-designators were moved from the M981s to M2s in lieu of the tube-launched, optically tracked, wire-guided missile launcher. The new FiST platform provided the necessary mobility to keep FiSTs on pace with maneuvering units over long distances while also affording greater survivability and firepower.

This *ad hoc* solution provided the initial framework for the M7A3 BFiST fielded in 2000.<sup>15</sup> The same pattern of functional imperatives driving tactical ingenuity can, and should, shape the development of a new platform for the armored-cavalry troop executive officer in future operations.

### **Looking ahead**

At a minimum, the armored-cavalry troop executive officer's M1068 should be replaced by a M7A3 BFiST or M3 variant with comparable communications capabilities. Particularly in today's operational environment – where reports from our combat-training centers and conflicts in Eastern Europe indicate the limitations and vulnerabilities of traditional CP employment techniques – cavalry commanders require the flexibility afforded with the firepower and survivability of a Bradley in CP operations.<sup>16</sup> Commanders can effectively deny adversaries the ability to monitor and intercept our communications by positioning their CP parallel to the forward-line-of-troops rather than perpendicular to friendly formations.<sup>17</sup> However, to do so in an unarmed M1068 or insufficiently armed AMPV in such a position requires great tactical risk. These compromises can be avoided with the adoption of a Bradley-based troop CP.

An executive officer in a Bradley augments troop-quartering-party security and no longer limits occupation time to the crawling speed of the M1068. Tactical transitions internal to the troop, and handovers of contact and reconnaissance with CAB scout platoons, will be accelerated with a platform change. During security operations, where at present the executive officer is functionally incapable of applying the concepts of supporting range and distance, the addition of a Bradley variant with main gun and coax will lend more depth and breadth to a

commander's screen. In security operations, keeping an easily identifiable MC platform out of the troop will deny adversaries the ability to sense mobile CPs as high-payoff targets in their counter-reconnaissance efforts.<sup>18</sup>

Even with no engineering modifications to the M7A3, it is preferable to the M1068 due to increased mobility, survivability and firepower. Minor engineering adjustments will continue to improve the platform for executive-officer duties. Remove the stand-alone computer unit and install a Joint Capabilities Release (JCR) with touchscreen interface, and the executive officer has the same digital battle-tracking capabilities as an M1068. Replace the Fires Support Sensor System with an auxiliary power unit, and the mobile CP will be able to conserve fuel and reduce its noise signature in security operations.

The same basic capability requirements would drive the change necessary to move the troop executive officer into the M2A3 or M3A3. Though it would be preferable to engineer the squad-leader display to allow touchscreen JCR capabilities with keyboard, it would not be necessary. Every tank executive officer in the squadron, and every infantry-company executive officer in the brigade, operates from the turret of a fighting vehicle.<sup>19</sup> Armored-cavalry-troop executive officers need not be different.

Ultimately, questions of future design modification would be answered by engineers, not maneuver lieutenants. But without bringing to light the necessary platform capabilities for armored-cavalry-troop executive officers, we risk diminishing our future formations' ability to bring to bear the mobility, firepower and shock effect that make the cavalry lethal. The change from the M1068 will play to the strengths of our mechanized forces and yield great dividends for armored-cavalry troops and our ABCTs. The options available and the minimal adjustments required are cause for encouragement in armored-cavalry formations.

Perhaps most encouraging is that the Army has already solved challenges like this on a limited scale in the recent past. Beyond the adaptation of the BFIST in Operation Desert Storm, but still concerning the fires WFF, the Army fielded the Short-Range Air Defense Bradley in the 1990s and converted to the M6 Linebacker in the early 2000s.<sup>20</sup> While both systems were phased out in the mid-2000s, they proved the M2's adaptability to meet tactical needs.

We have faced this situation before with respect to mission command. In 2003, 4<sup>th</sup> Infantry Division developed and fielded five battle-command on-the-move (BCOTM) Bradleys and sent four to Iraq with markedly successful results.<sup>21</sup> The platform enabled then-MG Ray Odierno to command 4<sup>th</sup> Infantry Division during the Battle of Taji from a redesigned M7A3 and subsequently announce "it is the way ahead" with respect to battle command.<sup>22</sup>

That was nearly 15 years ago. The transformation from BFIST to BCOTM Bradley took less than three months. Armored-cavalry troops are ready for a similar change today.

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## Endnotes

<sup>1</sup> Sydney J. Freedberg Jr., "Tank Goodness, At Last: Army, BAE Roll Out AMPV To Replace 56-Year-Old M113," *Breaking Defense*, Dec. 15, 2016; accessed March 11, 2017 at <http://breakingdefense.com/2016/12/tank-goodness-at-last-army-bae-roll-out-ampv-to-replace-56-year-old-m113/>.

<sup>2</sup> These doctrinal changes are highlighted in Army Technical Publication (ATP) 3-20.96 and the culmination of the ABCT standard scout platoon (SSP) force-design update (FDU). The new squadron K-series MTOE includes the addition of one tank company, and the SSP FDU sets conditions for the squadron to transition all six of its scout platoons to 6x36 Bradley formations. See ATP 3-20.96, *Cavalry Squadron*, Washington, DC, May 2016, and the Armor School's *Thunderbolt Blast*, February-March 2014.

<sup>3</sup> Dr. Robert S. Cameron and COL William T. Nuckols Jr., "Don't Harness an Ox to a Racehorse: Get the M113 Out of the Armored Brigade Combat Team ... Now, Please!" *ARMOR*, January-March 2016.

<sup>4</sup> Ibid.

<sup>5</sup> U.S. Army Acquisition Support Center, "Armored Multi-Purpose Vehicle (AMPV)," 2017; last accessed March 20, 2017 at <http://asc.army.mil/web/portfolio-item/gcs-ampv/>.

<sup>6</sup> Ibid.

<sup>7</sup> AMPV Industry Day, Sterling Heights, MI, April 24, 2012.

<sup>8</sup> ATP 3-20.971, *Cavalry Troop*, Washington, DC, March 2016.

<sup>9</sup> As seen in ATP 3-20.971, Chapter II, and ATP 3-90.1, *Armor and Mechanized Infantry Company Team*, Washington, DC, January 2016.

<sup>10</sup> Field Manual (FM) 3-98, *Reconnaissance and Security Operations*, Washington, DC, July 2015. Also, see ATP 3-20.96, Chapter 2, listing capabilities and limitations of each BCT's squadron.

<sup>11</sup> Scott Stewart, "Anti-Tank Guided Missiles Pose a Serious Threat," *Stratfor*, April 30, 2015; last accessed March 27, 2017 at <https://www.stratfor.com/weekly/anti-tank-guided-missiles-pose-serious-threat>.

<sup>12</sup> SPC Derrick Tribbey, "1<sup>st</sup> ABCT Soldiers reflect on past, future with Triangular Design Ceremony," Dec. 23, 2015; last accessed March 17, 2017 at

[https://www.army.mil/article/160386/1st\\_ABCT\\_Soldiers\\_reflect\\_on\\_past\\_future\\_with\\_Triangular\\_Design\\_Ceremony](https://www.army.mil/article/160386/1st_ABCT_Soldiers_reflect_on_past_future_with_Triangular_Design_Ceremony). How many CABs the squadron in the aggregate passes contact off to is determined by how the squadron is operating in the overall brigade concept. See FM 3-98, Chapter 1, Table 1-1.

<sup>13</sup> For current doctrine, see FM 3-98, Chapter 5, Section 1, Paragraph 5-5: Report all information rapidly and accurately.

Historically, J.E.B. Stuart's employment of Confederate cavalry in the weeks leading to the Battle of Gettysburg is an oft-referenced example of failing to provide the commander with the necessary collected intelligence and information. As a result, Robert E. Lee's Army of Northern Virginia was drawn into battle without the eyes and ears of the force. See Daniel Landsman, "Lee's Cumbersome Cavalry: J.E.B. Stuart's Troubled Ride to Gettysburg," 2014; last accessed March 13, 2017 at <http://www.civilwar.org/battlefields/gettysburg/gettysburg-history-articles/lees-cumbersom.html>.

<sup>14</sup> Nuckols and Cameron.

<sup>15</sup> "M981 Fire-Support Team Vehicle," on-line article last accessed Nov. 25, 2013, at <http://www.flickr.com/photos/34540417@N07/7978083684/>.

<sup>16</sup> CPT Joshua T. Christian, "Mastery of the Fundamentals of Passive Counter-reconnaissance to Survive against a Hybrid Threat," *ARMOR*, July-September 2016.

<sup>17</sup> ATP 6-02.53, *Techniques for Tactical Radio Operations*, January 2016.

<sup>18</sup> That is, to deny all measures taken by an enemy commander to counter reconnaissance and surveillance efforts. See ATP 3-20.97, 4-16.

<sup>19</sup> ATP 3-90.1.

<sup>20</sup> "M6 Bradley Linebacker," *Global Security*, 2017; last accessed March 20, 2017 at <http://www.globalsecurity.org/military/systems/ground/m6.htm>.

<sup>21</sup> Rebecca Morley, "Battle-Command On-The-Move (BCOTM) Bradley," *United Defense*. And, Chief Joseph Kosbar and Rebecca Morley, "Battle Command on the Move," Department of Defense Command and Control Research Program, Fort Monmouth, NJ, 2004; last accessed March 14, 2017 at [http://dodccrp.org/events/2004\\_CCRTS/CD/papers/225.pdf](http://dodccrp.org/events/2004_CCRTS/CD/papers/225.pdf).

<sup>22</sup> Retired LTC Edward J. Erickson and MG Raymond T. Odierno, "The Battle of Taji and Battle Command on the Move," *Military Review*, July-August 2003.

## Acronym Quick-Scan

**ABCT** – armored brigade combat team

**AMPV** – Armored Multi-Purpose Vehicle

**ATP** – Army technical publication

**BCOTM** – battle-command on-the-move

**BCT** – brigade combat team

**BFIST** – Bradley fires-support team

**CAB** – combined-arms battalion

**CAM** – combined-arms maneuver

**CP** – command post

**FDU** – force-design update

**FIST** – fires-support team

**FM** – frequency modulation

**FM** – field manual

**JCR** – Joint Capabilities Release

**MC** – mission command

**MTOE** – modified table of organization and equipment

**SSP** – standard scout platoon

**WFF** – warfighting function