

Increasing Reconnaissance and Security Proficiency through Leader Experience

by LTC Mark McClellan

Armored brigade combat teams (ABCTs) are balancing reconnaissance and security (R&S) education and training of personnel to ensure that key leaders in R&S positions have the skills and experience to be successful in these positions. A possible method for ABCTs to increase operational experience within their R&S units is to make R&S positions “second time” command or leadership opportunities within the ABCT.

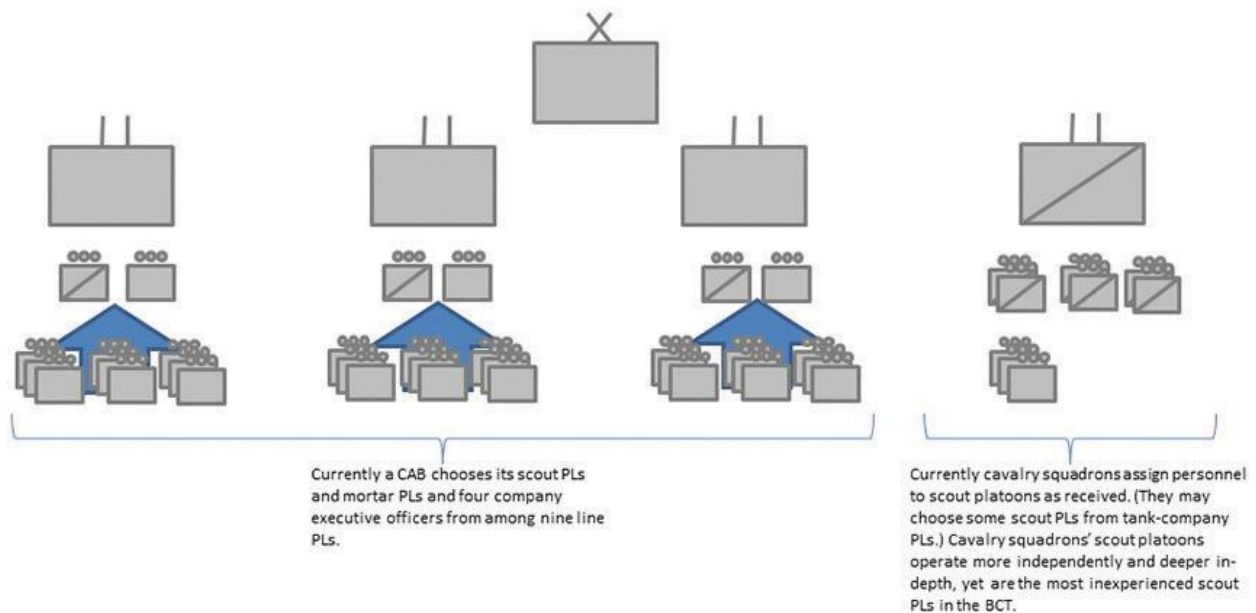
As cavalry-squadron units conduct missions on shortened planning timelines and with greater operational depth, these missions require leaders and staffs who are able to execute troop-leading procedures (TLPs) and the military decision-making process (MDMP) quickly and with less guidance from higher levels. Assigning officers, whether in the Armor or Infantry Branches, who have already served a year in a position in a line unit and who have shown the potential for success in the Army could increase the cavalry squadron’s mission performance.

Scout-platoon leaders

Cavalry-squadron scout platoons operate more independently and deeper in-depth than the combined-arms battalion (CAB) scout platoons. In the decisive-action fight at combat-training centers, squadron scout platoons are deploying 12-24 hours ahead of the brigade combat team (BCT) line battalions. Due to platoon density, though, the squadron scout platoons are the most operationally inexperienced scout-platoon leaders (PLs) in the BCT, as these positions are “first time” positions for the lieutenants. Generally, CABs choose their scout PLs from among nine line PLs. Thus, in an ABCT, three CAB scout PLs are chosen from 27 line PLs. For ABCT cavalry squadrons, cavalry squadrons traditionally choose their scout PLs as they are received from installation reception.

A possible method for ABCTs to increase the operational experience of their scout PLs would be to make scout platoons across the BCT a second PL position. Selection of these leaders would be managed at the BCT level. CABs and the squadron would nominate top-performing maneuver PLs for the BCT scout platoons (the ABCT cavalry squadron has three tank platoons). To align incentives, CAB commanders could still assign their unit’s “top two” lieutenants to their unit’s scout platoon and mortar platoon while nominating their Nos. 3, 4 and 5 lieutenants for consideration for the squadron scout-PL position. The squadron would nominate the top tank-platoon leader within the cavalry squadron’s tank company for the pool. This would create a pool of 10 people to compete for the six remaining squadron scout-PL positions. A method for choosing the next scout platoon’s leaders in the squadron could be a BCT-led R&S field competition to select officers to be assigned to the squadron scout PL positions.

A benefit of this method is that it would ensure that the squadron and CAB scout PLs are some of the most operationally experienced PLs in the BCT. A possible negative is that this selection method would change the performance level of maneuver-company executive officers, as these officers are generally chosen from the same pool of officers considered for CAB scout-platoon positions. Also, the ABCT would need to ensure that one battalion wasn’t the billpayer for most of the squadron scout platoons, as this would not align the incentives for the CAB with the ABCT.



If all scout platoons were made second-platoon positions, 36 line platoons would compete to fill nine scout platoons, three mortar platoons and 14 executive-officer positions.

Pros: Increased experience in cavalry-squadron scout platoons.

Cons: Reduced experience in line-company executive officers. Pushes senior-lieutenant management to BCT level.

Figure 1. Platoon positions within the BCT.

Cavalry-troop commanders

For the cavalry troops, second-command troop commanders in the BCT could bring a great deal of operational experience to cavalry-squadron operations. Cavalry-troop commanders operate units more in depth and width across the battlefield with reduced planning time, compared with maneuver-company commanders; troop commanders with a year of maneuver company command would have more repetitions of TLPs under their belts and would be more experienced in company-level operations.

A possible method for ABCTs would be to pick their three cavalry-troop commanders from captains who are completing a year of line-company command time in an ABCT CAB. Again, to ensure incentives are aligned, BCTs should ensure that CAB commanders still maintain input in the BCT commander's selection of their unit's headquarters and headquarters company commanders, as these positions require a great deal of operational experience and potential as well.

This selection process would equip troop commanders who have experience training and employing maneuver companies in attack and defense operations. From these experiences, these commanders would be better prepared to command troops answering the BCT commander's priority information requirements in decisive action.

Squadron executive officer and operations officer

The first year in a BCT for a field-grade officer is an eye-opening experience. New maneuver majors in BCTs spend the first year in a position learning how to be a field-grade officer and how to lead MDMP with inexperienced staffs – along with a number of other new tasks and requirements. Adding to those requirements, majors in a BCT cavalry squadron have to execute the MDMP process on a shortened timeline and possibly with a less-defined BCT plan, compared to maneuver majors in a CAB.

A selection method for ABCTs to increase the operational experience of cavalry-squadron executive officers and S-3s would be to assign these positions to some of the more successful majors in the ABCT. The BCT would still

assign its “top two” majors to the BCT executive officer and S-3 positions; the No. 3 and No. 4 majors in the BCT would move over to positions in the cavalry squadron or remain if already assigned there.

This method would ensure that the ABCT cavalry squadron has two majors with at least a year of experience in the BCT. This method does have drawbacks, though. Currently, officers generally move between the S-3 and executive-officer position within the squadron or CAB, except for the two officers who move up to the BCT S-3 and executive-officer positions. This may cause a CAB to have two new field-grade officers after brigade transitions. The brigade commander would have to manage this to ensure that increasing operational experience within the squadron is weighed against the possible excessively disruptive transitions within the CABs.

There is benefit from having a major who has been with the squadron for at least a year, as that officer knows the organization. The current 24-month limit for field-grade key and developmental (KD) service restricts the division’s and brigade’s commanders’ ability to retain experienced majors within the BCTs. Thus, using this selection process may result in two experienced majors who are newly assigned to the squadron. Again, the BCT commander will have to balance requirements for experience vs. benefits from field-grade longevity in units. The Department of the Army should look at relaxing restrictions on major brigade KD service limits for BCT-level and cavalry-squadron majors to ensure that experience is retained within the BCT for those positions. With the 10-year pin-on point for majors, there is time available after KD service for officers to be assigned to broadening assignments, even if serving three years within a BCT.

Timeline and evaluation impacts

These selection methods have impacts for officer and unit timelines. A company- and field-grade officer KD timeline within a BCT is an important consideration for these selection methods. Generally, 12 to 18 months is the maximum amount of time an officer can spend in any one position type. These methods assume transitions at one year.

Human Resource Command manning guidance recommends that company-level commanders be in position for 12-18 months for one command and up to 24 months if given a second command. By increasing the number of second-time commands within an ABCT, units can maintain experienced and high-performing company-level commanders for up to six more months.

Also, very few units can sustain position transitions at a set time. Most unit transitions occur sporadically throughout a year based on the sustained readiness model, officers arriving and leaving the units, and time-in-position milestones. ABCT, squadron and battalion staffs may have to align selection processes as positions open in the squadron and CABs.

Key to the success of this program is ensuring that officers have attended the appropriate R&S functional course for cavalry positions. For scout PLs, this functional course is the Army Reconnaissance Course (ARC). For cavalry troop commanders, this functional course is the Cavalry Leader’s Course (CLC). For squadron field-grade officers, the education is received in Fort Leavenworth’s Command and General Staff Officer’s Course R&S elective, A331-reconnaissance and security. Majors who are attending sister-service, non-resident and fellowships for intermediate-level education requirements can attend CLC as well.

Another important consideration is the evaluation impacts for officers selected to serve in the ABCT squadron. A squadron made up primarily of PLs who perform in the top 50 percent of officers in the BCT could disadvantage these PLs, as they would be competing against a more competitive pool of officers. Some of these officers would not be “top blocked.” Units would have to weigh the possible operational-effectiveness increase vs. with the possible negative impacts to an officer’s evaluation.

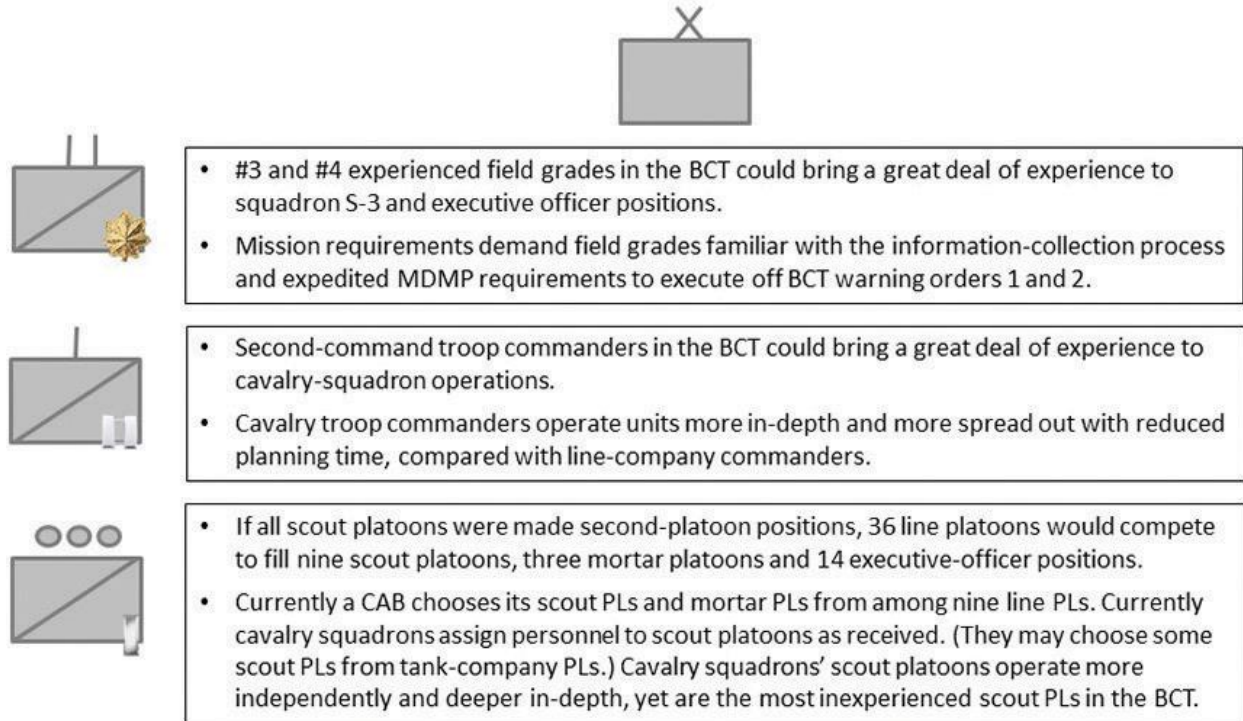


Figure 2. Experience increases R&S proficiency.

Conclusion

Due to realities on the ground, it may not be possible to ensure that every scout platoon and cavalry troop in the cavalry squadron is manned with “second time” officers. Brigades can look to ensure at least one platoon per troop is led by a “second time” officer and at least one cavalry troop is a second command position. Also, BCTs should enforce attendance at ARC and CLC for leaders within their cavalry formations. Another option for BCTs to increase operational experience within cavalry units is to lengthen troop- and platoon-level KD time from 12-18 months to 18-24 months.

In addition to increasing performance within the squadron, ensuring that leaders within ABCTs have operational experience in maneuver line organizations before assuming positions within cavalry organizations will produce maneuver officers with a more diverse set of operational experiences. This will provide the maneuver force with a more broadened and experienced cadre of leaders for future assignments in both cavalry and maneuver formations. A maneuver major who has experience commanding both a maneuver company and a cavalry troop will be better prepared to serve as a field-grade officer within a BCT.

Experienced leaders are only a part of what makes a unit successful in its missions. Training and education in R&S are the other methods to improve cavalry-unit mission performance. As every leader has different capabilities, operational experience in a line battalion doesn't guarantee success in a cavalry organization. Still, for decades, maneuver battalions have been assigning top-performing maneuver PLs into scout-platoon positions based on their performance and potential after service as infantry or tank PLs because experience matters.

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Acronym Quick-Scan

ABCT – armored brigade combat team

ARC – Army Reconnaissance Course

BCT – brigade combat team

CAB – combined-arms battalion

CLC – Cavalry Leader’s Course

KD – key and developmental

MDMP – military decision-making process

PL – platoon leader

R&S – reconnaissance and security

TLP – troop-leading procedures