

# Enabling Mission Command through Cavalry Squadron Operations

by MAJ R. Perry White

Cavalry squadrons shape the brigade combat team (BCT) fight. They conduct reconnaissance and security (R&S) to enable adjacent units to seize, retain and exploit the initiative. Effective employment of cavalry squadrons, however, is a highly complex endeavor. To overcome this, commanders must leverage mission command and facilitate shared understanding that enables rapid initiative through clear intent and orders.

GEN David G. Perkins, former commander of U.S. Army Combined Arms Center and now commander of U.S. Army Training and Doctrine Command, addressed the students of the Maneuver Captain's Career Course in April 2014 to discuss mission command and leader development. In his opening comments, GEN Perkins said, "When you are in charge of an organization, it is not about what you do but what you are for."<sup>1</sup> In the Army, we conduct unified land operations (ULO), which describes how we seize, retain and exploit the initiative to gain and maintain a position of relative advantage through simultaneous offensive, defensive and stability operations to prevent or deter conflict, prevail in war and create the conditions for favorable conflict resolution (from Army Doctrinal Publication (ADP) 3-0).

As we discuss mission command and how it pertains to cavalry squadrons, it is important to understand "what we are for."

## What are we for?

Summarized from Field Manual 3-98, R&S operations are essential to effectively execute ULO. BCTs conduct R&S operations to develop the situation and to identify, create and preserve options to seize and exploit the initiative. R&S tasks allow BCTs to achieve positions of relative advantage by confirming or denying initial assumptions of the tactical and operational situation. They reduce uncertainty by allowing the commander to describe, direct, lead and assess operations to make decisions. Cavalry squadrons, along with other brigade information-collection (IC) assets, provide a continuous flow of information that make contact (visual; obstacles; direct; indirect; aircraft; chemical, biological, radiological and nuclear; non-hostile and electronic warfare) with enemy elements under favorable conditions. They identify opportunities, prevent surprises and enable brigades to make timely decisions while providing reaction time and maneuver space to set conditions for future operations.

Further, employment of reconnaissance assets reduces uncertainty, especially when used for reconnaissance push and pulls. A reconnaissance push occurs when commanders have a relatively thorough understanding of the operational environment. In these cases, commanders "push" reconnaissance assets into specific portions of their areas of operation to confirm, deny and validate planning assumptions. A reconnaissance pull occurs when commanders are uncertain of the composition and disposition of enemy forces in their areas of operation, information about terrain is vague and time is limited. In these cases, reconnaissance assets work over a broad area to develop the enemy situation. As they gain an understanding of enemy weaknesses, they then "pull" the main body to positions of tactical advantage.



**Figure 1. A scout competing in the May 2017 Gainey Cup “Best Scout Squad” competition low-crawls through undergrowth at Fort Benning, GA. The biennial Gainey Cup’s competitors are challenged with events centered on essential R&S tactics, techniques and procedures. The Gainey Cup is a good test of reconnaissance “push” and “pull” tasks. (Photo by Markeith Horace, Maneuver Center of Excellence Public Affairs Office)**

## **What is mission command?**

It is the exercise of authority and direction by the commander using mission orders to enable disciplined initiative within the commander’s intent, empowering leaders in conducting ULO.

Mission command guides commanders. To do this, they must leverage its six principles:

- **Build cohesive teams through trust.** *Mutual trust* is shared confidence among commanders, subordinates and partners. Effective commanders build cohesive teams in an environment of mutual trust. Trust flows both ways: leaders to subordinates and subordinates to commanders.
- **Create shared understanding.** *Shared understanding* and purpose form the basis for unity of effort and trust (trust implies expectations that are shared). Commanders and staffs actively build and maintain shared understanding within the force and with unified-action partners by continual collaboration throughout the operations process.
- **Provide clear commander’s intent.** The *commander’s intent* is a clear and concise expression of the purpose of the operation and the desired military endstate that supports mission command, provides focus to the staff and helps subordinate and supporting commanders act to achieve the commander’s desired results without further orders, even when the operation does not unfold as planned (Joint Publication 3-0).
- **Exercise disciplined initiative.** *Disciplined initiative* is action when these conditions apply: 1) absence of orders; 2) existing orders no longer fit the situation; or 3) unforeseen opportunities or threats arise.
- **Use mission orders.** Mission orders are used to assign tasks, allocate resources and issue broad guidance.
- **Accept prudent risks.** Commanders accept *prudent risk* when making decisions because uncertainty exists in all military operations. Prudent risk is a deliberate exposure to potential injury or loss when the commander judges the outcome in terms of mission accomplishment as worth the cost (ADP 6-0). Opportunities come with risks. The willingness to accept prudent risk is often the key to exposing enemy weaknesses.

## **Supporting brigade commander**

How does the cavalry squadron support the brigade commander in mission command? The cavalry squadron is the brigade commander’s primary asset to develop the situation and provide timely information that will refine

subsequent courses of action (CoAs) for the brigade's decisive operation. The cavalry squadron improves situational understanding for the commander by providing a better understand of the tactical, human and political dynamics within an area of operation.

Cavalry squadrons help visualize operations in the context of mission variables to facilitate decisive operations in time and space with a greater degree of detail, accuracy and fidelity. Cavalry squadrons direct the execution of decisive operations with additional flexibility, adaptability, synchronization and integration that moves the BCT to concentrate strengths against enemy weakness.

Finally, cavalry squadrons assess progress through continuous reconnaissance to help modify existing and/or developing plans to allocate BCT assets based on changing tactical situations.



**Figure 2. Then-SPC Ty Carter conducts reconnaissance from the highest point of Outpost Fritsche in Afghanistan, where he was assigned in late Spring/early Summer 2009 with Blue Platoon, Bravo “Black Knight” Troop, 3<sup>rd</sup> Squadron, 61<sup>st</sup> Cavalry Regiment, 4<sup>th</sup> BCT, 4<sup>th</sup> Infantry Division. Cavalry units assess progress through continuous reconnaissance to help modify existing and/or developing plans to allocate BCT assets based on changing tactical situations. Unfortunately, risks in cavalry employment’s basic principles were underestimated when Carter and his fellow Soldiers rotated in Summer 2009 to Combat Outpost Keating, which sat on low ground in the valley below and was nearly overrun Oct. 3, 2009. (Carter’s actions during that battle resulted in his being awarded the Medal of Honor.) (Photo by retired 1SG Jonathan Hill)**

## **Mission command in R&S tasks**

How does the brigade and cavalry squadron use mission command in conducting R&S tasks? Mission command enables commanders and staffs to counter the inherent uncertainty of military operations. Squadron commanders conduct R&S to protect the force and to seize, retain and exploit the initiative.

The commander sets reconnaissance priorities early since squadrons will precede main-body movement and operate with less time available for troop-leading procedures (TLP). After a brigade receives its initial warning order (warnord) from higher headquarters and publishes Warnord 1, the cavalry squadron has already begun its TLPs. Unlike most battalions, however, the cavalry squadron is operating on a highly accelerated timeline and initiates movement prior to other battalions. Therefore, brigade and squadron staffs must work closely during mission analysis to conduct parallel planning.

More importantly, the relationship and direct dialogue between the brigade and squadron commander is paramount for successful CoA development and to allocate IC assets and other enablers (artillery, aviation) appropriately. Collaboration and dialogue between brigade and squadron is essential in developing shared understanding. After brigade commanders have an understanding of the problem, they can visualize an endstate for the cavalry squadron; describe time, space, resources (initial), purpose and action; and direct the squadron through use of mission orders (Warnord 2, Annex L).

Cavalry squadrons are unique in conducting R&S. They conduct parallel planning with the brigade, operating within broad guidance to conduct missions in front of, on the rear of and on the BCT's flanks.

## **Commander's intent**

How does the commander's intent facilitate mission command? The commander's intent articulates the reason for an operation. It explains the expanded – or, in other words, broader – purpose of an operation and allows subordinates to understand what is expected of them to accomplish a mission. The commander's intent becomes the basis on which staffs and subordinate leaders develop plans and transform them into action.

During the planning process, squadron commanders issue planning guidance before, during and after dialogue with the brigade commander's staff. This is usually in the form of a directed CoA with planning guidance for each warfighting function. Commanders are able to direct a CoA because of their ability to understand the problem, visualize the endstate and describe it to their staff and subordinate commanders. Though staffs may understand the final array of forces on the battlefield, they must refine the CoA, conduct CoA analysis and synchronize assets.

## **Guidance important**

Why is R&S guidance important? Squadron commanders issue R&S guidance to allow subordinate commanders to operate with disciplined initiative. R&S guidance provides focus, operational details and guidelines for engagement, disengagement and displacement of the organization. The commander develops this guidance based on the brigade's mission, timeline and intent. Together, R&S guidance, along with the commander's intent, work to satisfy information requirements and identify opportunities to seize, retain and exploit the initiative.

Though similar, reconnaissance guidance is different from security guidance. Generally speaking, reconnaissance guidance is geared toward offensive operations, while security guidance is used during defensive operations. R&S guidance both help develop the situation to ensure an organization can accomplish its objective. Security guidance requires more details to adequately perform the cavalry squadron's security mission.

What are cavalry squadrons for? Why are they important to the BCT? They conduct R&S to enable brigades to defeat and destroy the enemy. Their operations help commanders seize, retain and exploit the initiative. Central to this is the effective execution of mission command. Collaborative, parallel planning facilitates shared understanding to enable disciplined initiative that culminates in battlefield success for the BCT.

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## **Notes**

<sup>1</sup> Address April 14, 2014; retrieved March 14, 2017, from <https://vimeo.com/91292851>.

## **Acronym Quick-Scan**

ADP – Army doctrinal publication

**BCT** – brigade combat team

**CoA** – course of action

**IBCT** – infantry brigade combat team

**IC** – information collection

**R&S** – reconnaissance and security

**TLP** – troop-leading procedures

**ULO** – unified land operations

**Warnord** – warning order